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Janet M. Davis. *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xviii + 329 pp. $49.95 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-8078-2724-6; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5399-3.

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Seeing the Elephant in Progressive-Era America

Today, circuses are usually performed in in-door arenas; there is little advance public fanfare or even notice, and audiences consist largely of children, their parents and a few nostalgia buffs. What little newspaper coverage there is, is likely to be centered on the less-than-ideal treatment of the circus animals. Indeed, one must be very young or well into middle-age to associate anything magical or adventuresome with the idea of "running off with the circus."

Yet, there was a time when the advent of a circus or Wild West show heralded the excited disruption of daily life in small rural communities and large cities alike. Schools and workplaces closed, and people eagerly gathered to see the tents go up, the animals and performers parade through town, and the wonderful acts unfold. Conducted in giant, canvas "big tops," accompanied by side-shows, animal menageries, and ethnic congresses, and advertised for weeks in advance, turn-of-the-century circuses, especially the giants like Barnum and Bailey which traveled across the country by rail, were a cherished American institution. They reached the zenith of their popularity around 1900 when almost one hundred circuses toured the United States, thirty-eight of which were railroad circuses, several touring from coast to coast each year. The 1920s and 1930s saw their decline, however, as movies, radio, and later television–more easily accessible–successfully drew audiences away from the big top.

Colorful as it was, is it useful to revisit this institution? Cultural historian Janet M. Davis makes a convincing argument for the relevance of such an endeavor. Suggesting that circuses, while containing certain timeless elements, are historically constructed, she defines them as representative of time and place, "a dazzling mirror of larger historical processes" (p. xii). The heyday of the turn-of-the-century circus coincided with America's search for order (as coined by Robert Weibe), an unstable period characterized by industrialization and the growth of corporate America, nation-building and empire, immigration and urbanization, as well as shifting gender roles and definitions of race. As reflective of the Progressive era, circuses are then an intriguing tool with which to expand our understanding of this seminal period in American history. Drawing upon a large body of materials relating to circuses–daily route books, memoirs of circus people, newspaper editorials, novels about the circus, music, photographs, posters, and programs–Davis carefully builds her case. She grounds her analysis in the theory of contested terrain: that class conflict can be found in aspects of popular culture, but she takes the idea further into areas of gender, race, and sexuality. In example after example, Davis clearly shows that normative thinking about "gender, race, labor, sexuality, monopoly formation, nationalism and empire" in the Progressive era was exemplified by the circus (p. xiii). Further, she contends that through reinforcing norms, circuses helped to construct notions of race, gender, and sexuality, etc. At the same time, she argues that one can site conflict over such norms as well as their subversion within circuses.

As created by entrepreneurs–many of whom were conservative Republicans supportive of late-nineteenth-century imperialism and corporate capitalism–circuses were structured around "normative tropes about labor, racial inequality, separate spheres and American hegemony" (p. 25). Yet such tropes could be subverted by the circus itself. For instance, circuses contributed to the consolidation of ideas about white identity through exhibitions featuring "people of color working as 'missing links,' 'savages,' and 'ape girls'" (p. 27). At one level they can be seen to fall into the same category with aspects of high culture such as literature, paintings, travel memoirs, etc. which Edward Said argues illustrate how Western imperialists reinforced imperialism through representations of the Other. Yet, because circus acts and dis-

plays were live performances wherein the performer met and interacted with the audience, they could serve to renegotiate and subvert racial norms.

Conversely, more obvious subversions might themselves be reconstructed. For instance, many female circus performers appeared to challenge social expectations of women, especially white, middle-class women. Athletic, scantily dressed, free from household chores, often earning more money than did male performers, circus women hardly exemplified turn-of-the century womanly ideals. But circus publicists emphasized that behind the scenes, female circus stars were domestic paragons: happily married women who liked to cook and sew. Thus, female circus performers reinforced gender stereotypes even as they challenged them. Although many female and male performers dressed in close-fitting leotards and tights which blurred sexual identities, lesser female performers such as the ballet girls whose performances stressed their sexuality were made-up and costumed so that they would appear "oriental." Depending upon their role, performers' dress might therefore subvert or strengthen sexual stereotypes, especially about the Other and the purity of white, middle-class women.

Of particular interest to H-West readers is Davis's treatment of Wild West shows. She suggests that the shows were much like circuses, serving to both assert and subvert norms. For instance, while Buffalo Bill Cody and others worked to make their shows authentic celebrations of "the West," the nostalgic tone of such performances supported notions about closing frontiers and vanishing Native Americans. Yet, subversion of stereotypes could occur as when two little boys were surprised to the point of tears to find, upon meeting them, that "Wild West Indians" spoke perfectly good English (p. 184).

Arguably, *The Circus Age* is more persuasive in maintaining that circuses, as reflective of Progressive-era America, reinforced developing norms. It is less so in its contention that circuses could subvert norms. By their very nature, circuses were extraordinary events. They came and they went, and circus goers returned home. Whatever subversion people experienced during the circus, more familiar thinking would reassert itself. Certainly, subversions of such norms could and did occur; I am just not convinced that circuses were "contested terrain." This quibble aside, Davis has written an outstanding book which makes an important addition to Progressive-era history, east and west.

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