the Mellon Resident
to Martin L. Levitt,
ful as well to Susan
uld also like to thank
arland Thomson for
holarship from Sweet

SEVEN

P. T. Barnum's Theatrical Selfhood and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Exhibition

ERIC FRETZ

Source: Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

P. T. Barnum performed a remarkable kind of cultural work in nineteenth-century America. He orchestrated performances and exhibitions, produced narratives and advertisements for public consumption and debate, and achieved a public role as the nineteenth century's greatest showman. From his initial foray into the popular entertainment world of New York City in the early 1830s until his death in 1891, Barnum firmly held his position as the public manager of nineteenth-century American popular culture.

In 1834 Barnum moved his wife and child to New York City in order to fulfill his dream of owning a public exhibition: "I had long fancied that I could succeed if I could only get hold of a public exhibition."[1] The nineteenth-century culture of exhibition was wide and varied, involving the public display of natural curiosities, technological advances and demonstrations, and medical/psychological treatments. Cultural phenomena such as mesmerism, phrenology, animal magnetism, and the art of daguerreotyping were all displayed on the exhibition stage of nineteenth-century America. The public lectures and lyceums that became popular during the 1830s and the grand revival traditions of the same decade also contributed to the larger exhibition culture of the period. Barnum participated in and used all these aspects of the culture of exhibition—he gave lectures (his most famous was entitled "The Philosophy of Humbug"), exhibited mesmerized subjects in his "Lecture Room" and even addressed congregations of America's churches.[2]

Barnum's participation in the mid-nineteenth-century exhibition culture represents a fundamental shift in the way Americans perceived the individual within the public sphere. According to Jay Fliegelman, Revolutionary Americans considered the public adornment of the private man or woman a nefarious threat to the new republic. Reacting against the Enlightenment's formalized and hierarchical use of language, the Revolutionary leaders set out to discover and employ a natural language that would reveal the true motivation of the speaker and mitigate, even preclude, the duplicitous representation of self. In the Revolutionary period, the "unadorned public man" who was free from the ostentations and chimeras of affected public life became the ideal.[3]

By the mid-nineteenth century the ideal of the unadorned private man had given way to the reality of the public confidence man, or painted woman, who concealed or transformed his or her private nature in the construction of a public identity.[4] Barnum, and the antebellum exhibition culture in which he participated, celebrated the individual's ability to stylize a public persona and assert these artificially constructed identities into the public sphere. Barnum exhibited both himself and his freaks as commodities in an era of exhibitionism that privileged appearance over essence. When Barnum exhibited himself in his autobiography and his freaks and dwarfs on the public stage, he was challenging the American public to accept the pliant and adorned nature of self; Barnum displayed theatrical Selfhood to the public—and they bought it.

In his autobiography, as well as his life, Barnum worked out the problem of selfhood on the debit and credit sheets of his financial records. For Barnum, it does not matter that "things are not what they seem."[5] "Not knowing" or the inability to distinguish illusion from reality is no longer an epistemological conundrum posing a threat to the republic and the good order of society. The gulf between public and private perception, or between reality and illusion, seems less threatening when someone like Barnum—a public figure who strove for middle-class respectability—is orchestrating the public perception of the self. By mid-century, this theatricality of self had become a normal part of American life that entertained, diverted, and challenged the masses. The performing selves that Barnum displayed for the public gaze—whether they were the different Barnums of his autobiography or the many human exhibitions he displayed throughout his career as a showman—were gleefully applauded and consumed. Barnum recasts the problem of self-representation of the post-Revolutionary period by turning the problem into an entertainment for the masses.

Re-Making the Autobiographical Self

P. T. Barnum fashioned an autobiographical self that surreptitiously celebrated theatrical selfhood. Barnum was only forty-five when he wrote the first of three versions of his autobiography. Published in 1855, *The Life of P. T. Barnum, Written by Himself* promptly sold 160,000 copies in the States.[6] Pirated editions soon appeared in Germany, France, Holland, and Sweden. Never happy with the 1855 version, Barnum considered the first autobiography to be a form of advertisement, explaining that it was designed "for the purpose, principally, of advancing my interests as proprietor of the American Museum."[7] When the sales of *Life* started to decline, Barnum destroyed the plates, intent on publishing another version of his life. The second autobiography, updated, altered, and renamed *Struggles and Triumphs: Or, Forty Years' Recollections of P. T. Barnum,* was published in 1869. Half a million copies were in print by 1882, and by 1888 the figure had reached one million. The final version of Barnum's life appeared in 1889, two years before his death, under the same name as the 1869 version.[8]

If any book of the nineteenth century is worth considering for its circulation within the culture, it is surely the three versions of Barnum's autobiography. Each version has a tenor and tone of its own, and each constructs a different Barnum as well as reflecting the changing cultural climates of mid-century America. The 1855 edition is anecdotal, primarily concentrating on Barnum's early life. Spontaneous, artless, and full of the "confessions" of the narrator, Barnum's *Life* has all the stylistic attributes of autobiography. The first hundred pages read like the tale of a Yankee trickster and work to establish Barnum as a born jokester

who, as "The Prince of Humbugs" and "The Prince of Showman," is merely acting out his innate talents. Barnum's first autobiography incorporates aspects of the picaresque novel, instructional literature, and Yankee trickster/Southwestern humor tales, all told in an authorial voice that explicates, narrates, and even confesses the actions and events of the life of P. T. Barnum. *Life* is a cornucopia of American literary traditions; the shadows of Ben Franklin, Stephen Burroughs, and Jonathan Edwards and the legends of Mike Fink and Davy Crockett are lurking within its anecdotal, bombastic, and didactic rhetoric. The apparent lack of narrative direction and the homely metaphors and anecdotes give *Life* its native charm. Yet the linear progression of a self that moves from a small-town wag to a big-shot showman who occupies and manipulates the public mind of the nineteenth-century becomes the strongest selling point of this most American of books.

Barnum trimmed down the anecdotes for the 1869 version, spending more time on Tom Thumb and the Jenny Lind enterprise, but the book was still a formidable affair, running over seven hundred pages (the 1855 version is just over four hundred). The 1869 version appeared in a dazzling number of different editions—small print, large print, abridged editions, and both cheap and expensive styles of the autobiography inundated the American and English reading public. Moreover, Barnum persisted in making unprecedented autobiographical moves by continuing to write chapters and tacking them on to new editions of the 1869 version. In 1884 Barnum waived the copyright contingencies and announced that the autobiography was open for publication by any interested party. Throughout the 1880s, Barnum nearly gave the book away during his circus performances—paying spectators received complimentary copies of the book, and the showman remarked that the crowds leaving his bigtop looked "as if they were coming out of a circulation library."[9]

Barnum exhibits a dynamic sense of selfhood in his autobiographies; with each new version, he creates a new P. T. Barnum, replacing and adding on to the former. The 1855 version uncovers the inherent subjectivity of writing a life by flamboyantly flaunting that life's malleability in the face of the reader. The revisions of Barnum's autobiography demonstrate a malleable self that transforms itself with the passage of time and the continual (re)act of writing. Barnum's notion of a dynamic self, illustrated in each rewriting of the autobiography, exposes the elusiveness of essential self-identity. With the subsequent publications of the autobiography, Barnum validated a sense of stylized selfhood in American culture. The autobiographical act corrals experience, forming a public self; in this way, autobiography becomes an achievement of self-construction and the rhetorical shaping of a public persona.

Despite the confessional tone and the occasional attempts to reveal a private self, Barnum's autobiographies remain highly stylized narrative constructions and, consequently, incline toward fiction. Less than "self biography" and tending more toward the fictive invention of self, Barnum's *Life* becomes a "hopelessly subjective" autobiographical fiction.[10] Thomas Couser finds this problematical, complaining that the *Life* "very nearly makes an autobiography out of practical jokes, and a joke out of autobiography." Ultimately, argues Couser, the "effect of his prolific production and circulation of different accounts of his life during the second half of the nineteenth century was to undermine the authority of his own autobiography and, by implication, that of the genre as a whole."[11] Possibly. But Barnum was never one to be overly concerned with authority, and, like his contemporary, Walt Whitman—who published the first of nine editions of *his* autobiography in 1855—Barnum multiplied the autobiographical moment as an act of self-advertisement.

In the emerging market economy of mid-century America, the creation and manipulation of self determined success. Closing his autobiography with a section titled "Rules for Success in Business," the showman encourages fortune hunters and speculators to "put on the *appearance* of business and the reality will follow" (*Life,* 396). For some critics Barnum's book is a dark derivation of Franklin's autobiography and suggests the potentially subversive elements of American democracy.[12] Yet a quick survey of the public reception of *Life* (and the subsequent versions) reveals that many nineteenth-century Americans distinguished Barnum's book as a model of American virtue, piety, and ingenuity.[13] As the reviews suggest, Barnum's book did the kind of cultural work that confirmed the values of a mid-nineteenth-century market economy as it spread across space and time. Read as a handbook for survival in a burgeoning market economy, the text, which glorified dynamic selfhood as it exhibited its central figure, established the general acceptance of theatrical selfhood in a socially and economically turbulent time. "To Barnum's admirers," explains Neil Harris, "his autobiography was simply a road map of the route to success,"[14] and George Bryan reminds us that the autobiography was used as a manual for common business sense.[15] John Fitch, a contemporary of Barnum, told the showman: "I know every line in your book . . . and I have conducted my business on the principles laid down in your published 'Rules for Money-Making.' I find them correct principles; and [I] thank you for publishing your autobiography, and to tell you that to act of yours *[sic]* I attribute my present position in life."[16] Harris reports an American lecturer who reasoned that he knew "of no book which is better adapted to become a thoroughly instructive and agreeable guide through life,"[17] and Bryan reprints advertisements for *Struggles and Triumphs* declaring "Every young man should read it." Furthermore, that other instructor of young men, Horace Greeley, explained (this is according to Barnum) that the book and the lecture on the Art of Money-Getting "was worth a hundred-dollar greenback to a beginner life."[18] A. S. Saxon notes that Barnum boasted (in an unpublished letter dated 13 March 1855) that his publisher had received over one thousand auspicious reviews of *Life* since its publication in December of the preceding year. Saxon reprints a "fair example" of one of those reviews:

> THE MORAL OF BARNUM'S BOOK. If this book be not *superficially* read, it is easy to see that, under a cloak of fun, jokes and good humor, the author intends to teach and press home the lesson that mere humbugs and deceptions generally fail, and that money acquired in immoral occupations takes to itself wings and flies away. . . . Thus he shows . . . his "humbugs" were no source of direct profit to him, but were used merely as advertisements, to attract public attention to himself, and to gain public support for his real and substantial exhibitions, such as his Museum, Tom Thumb in England, and Jenny Lind.[19]

In his encouragement of the reader to take Barnum's book seriously and engage it on a deeper level of meaning (a level similar, perhaps, to the way nineteenth-century readers would have been encouraged to read the Bible), the writer of this article suggests the comfort that American culture, by 1855, had with individuals engaging in plots of mistaken identity and games of duplicity, arguing that the public hoaxes were all for the "greater good" of Barnum's "real" and "substantial" (could this be thick irony?) public displays.

Stylization of Public Selves and an Antebellum Culture of Exhibition

In his autobiography, Barnum invented his life and made it palpable for middle-class consumption. But *Life* is primarily made up of accounts of Barnum's attempts to theatricalize the lives of others. Indeed, Barnum made a name for himself by stylizing the lives of others and packaging them for public consumption.

Barnum was working in a tradition of public exhibition whose development from the post-Revolutionary period to the mid-nineteenth century we might pause to adumbrate. Before the Revolution, traveling showmen roamed the colonies exhibiting natural curiosities for profit.[20] But by 1850, when Barnum introduced Jenny Lind to America, "exhibiting" had become a formalized extravaganza yielding high profits and intense public fervor.

Barnum's most famous predecessor in the area of public exhibitions was Charles Willson Peale, the eccentric developer of America's first museum of indigenous artifacts and natural history. Peale's museum, which he opened in Philadelphia in 1784 and passionately developed until he retired in 1810, was a product of an Enlightenment mind that believed in the essential perfection of the natural order. For Peale, humans who copied and learned from Nature led happy, righteous lives, and he exhibited Nature in order to teach and instruct: "I love the study of Nature," he once said, "for it teacheth benevolence."[21]

After Peale retired, he gave the museum management to his sons, Rembrandt and Reubens, post-Enlightenment subjects who found it impossible to maintain the didactic mission of the museum. The exhibition of Nature gradually gave way to public demand for fantastic and exotic displays and performances. Gradually, the function of the museum moved from an institution benefiting the public good to a money-making device as Reubens, late in the first decade of the nineteenth century, began to use lecturers, performers, and experimenters to attract more customers.[22] By 1817, Reubens conceded that the museum could only survive by pursuing profits, so he added catchpenny shows and a pandean band (a one-man musical show). By 1838, three years prior to the opening of Barnum's American Museum, Peale's museum was displaying Negro bands, Yankee impersonators, Hungarian minstrels, and musical ladies. Tom Thumb appeared on the Museum stage in 1845. The museum stayed on this course until Barnum purchased it in 1850.

The spectacular and bizarre captured the imaginations of early nineteenth-century Americans,[23] and Barnum capitalized on this captivation by stylizing the public display of others. By the mid-1840s, Barnum's American Museum was in full swing, attracting audiences who were able to view freaks of all sorts. From the Bearded Lady to the "Nova Scotia Giantess," from the Leopard-Skinned Boy to Zalumma Agra, the famous "Circassian Girl," and from the Chinese family to the Albino family—if they were deformed, exotic, disproportioned in any way, or simply inclined to be transformed into one of Barnum's freaks (he exhibited a "Yankee Man" at one point), the great showman would put them on the stage of his "Lecture Room" for the inspection of the masses.

"Freak shows," or the exploitation of human strangeness, was a theatrical performance grounded in the disguise of the (mostly) nonwhite subject. Blacks acted out aboriginal roles, often being represented as "missing links"; Native Americans performed rituals and dances that confirmed their primordial type; and Gypsies and Bohemians (usually women) were represented as lusty, exotic beauties. The "freaks" would perform according to their public roles: sartorial significations suggested their foreignness, and their stage presence would

correspond to stereotypical roles—Native Americans would whoop and chant, "savage" blacks would grunt, and Asians would affect a demure and sedate demeanor.[24]

Ironically, as the freak shows were entertaining the urban masses, criminal penitentiaries and insane asylums—institutional homes for humans with "aberrational" tendencies—were becoming an integral part of the American reform culture. America was the site of the world's first penitentiary system; the French government sent Alexis de Tocqueville to America in 1832 to observe the new penitentiary system. Prior to the rise of the asylum the poor and the insane were assimilated into the community. By the 1830s, a Lockean way of viewing human behavior demonstrated that society itself was corrupt, and a burgeoning reform tradition gradually developed the idea that criminals and the insane could be reformed of their problems by removing them from the social (dis)order. The implication was that separation from the social milieu and a good dose of moral reform would rejuvenate rational behavior.[25] Reformers carted aberrants away, sequestering them behind institutional walls while showmen like Barnum paraded "defective" individuals before the wondering and paying public gaze. As far as we know, Barnum did not search out his "freaks" from neighboring asylums or penitentiaries. Yet the irony of a society that has made room for human aberrations in the forum of a culture of exhibition and, at the same time, demanded the removal of social pariahs, illustrates one of the paradoxes of the tension-filled nineteenth century.

When Barnum exhibited Otherness on the nineteenth-century stage, he ceded authorial control to the human aberrations he chose to display. Consider Barnum's initial foray into the exhibition culture of antebellum America. In 1835, the "Prince of Humbugs" began his career as a showman by becoming a slaveholder. Keen on the public demand for the exhibition of race and difference on the public stage, Barnum made every possible effort to supply the public need.[26] He purchased Joice Heth, the alleged 161-year-old woman who was displayed before the public as George Washington's nursemaid, in June of 1835 and began to exhibit her at Niblo's in New York City in August. Shortly before he purchased Heth, Barnum visited Scudder's Museum (which he would purchase six years later) to bargain on the purchase of a Hydro-Oxygen Microscope that the owner guaranteed would "secure its owner an independence" if the invention were exhibited throughout the country (*Life*, 144). The two-thousand-dollar price tag was more than Barnum was able to pay, though. Shortly thereafter Barnum discovered Heth and does not seem to have had much trouble talking her owner down from the three-thousand-dollar asking price to one thousand: it was more profitable in antebellum America to exhibit fantastic African Americans than it was to offer close-up glimpses of nature through a microscope. On a pragmatic level, Barnum certainly made the right choice in choosing Heth over the microscope. The fantastic claim of her age and the mythical connection to Washington was ripe for the spectacular imagination of the 1830s. Barnum only enjoyed Heth's services for seven months; she died on 19 February 1836. A public autopsy revealed her age to be no more than eighty years, and Barnum came under public suspicion for his blatant humbuggery. He managed to make Heth the subject of public controversy and to profit considerably from her exhibitions. Indeed, Joice Heth became the first of a multitude of subjects that Barnum exhibited and stylized for public consumption. Yet, Heth authored herself as much as Barnum created her character. The dynamics between Barnum's manipulation of Heth and her presentation of her public self makes this incident important here.

According to Barnum's description, Heth was a wonder to look at: He says he was

"favorably struck with the appearance of the old woman" who "might almost . . . have been called a thousand years old" (*Life,* 148). Toothless, blind, and nearly completely paralyzed, her eyes "were so deeply sunken in their sockets that the eyeballs seemed to have disappeared altogether." Her decrepit hand bent inward and the fingernails projected beyond her wrist. Rounding out the picture, Barnum tells us, "The nails upon her large toes also had grown to the thickness of nearly a quarter of an inch" (*Life,* 148–49).

Heth mixed her grotesque features with a fine sense of histrionics when she passed herself off as George Washington's nursemaid: She was "sociable" and talked "incessantly" to her public viewers. Heth performed on her own volition; unlike Tom Thumb, her successor in the world of Barnum's exhibitions, she did not rely on Barnum for any prompting or training (*Life,* 148). She sang hymns, spoke of the first president as "dear little George," and proudly claimed to be present at his birth. " 'In fact,' said Joice, and it was a favorite expression of hers, 'I raised him.' " Appealing to the piety of her viewers, Heth moved from anecdotes of Washington's childhood to religious subjects, "for she claimed to be a member of the Baptist Church," which "rendered her exhibition an extremely interesting one" (*Life,* 149).

Joice Heth, ultimately, had the last laugh on P. T. Barnum. Throughout his career, Barnum submitted that he was astonished when the physicians who examined her corpse discovered that Joice was no more than eighty years old. It is important that Barnum maintains his innocence in this alleged humbug. In his *Life,* he willingly reveals previous public deceptions. He happily confessed to his organization of the Great Buffalo Hunt hoax of 1843—an event in Hoboken, New Jersey, that attracted spectators by advertising a frontier simulation of a wild buffalo hunt, complete with real cowboys and Indians. The event never reached the level of simulation that Barnum advertised because the seven hundred buffalo, terrified by the crowd, headed straight for the nearest swamp upon being released from their cages. Moreover, Barnum freely admitted his participation in the Woolly Horse hoax of 1848 when he purchased an odd-looking horse from an Indiana native and passed it off to the public as one of the animals that General Fremont had brought back from his expedition to the Rocky Mountains. As any reader of the autobiography can see, Barnum was not averse to uncovering former deceptions, but by maintaining his ignorance of Joice Heth's age, he admits that he has been duped by the histrionics of the clever old woman. In his *Life,* Barnum was still asserting his innocence in the Heth hoax, arguing that he bought her in *"perfect good faith,"* and that he was duped by a *"forged bill of sale* purporting to have been made by the *father* of George Washington." Barnum argues that he "honestly *believed*" the false document and laments the fact that he "has ever since borne the stigma of *originating* that imposture" (155, italics in original). The uncomfortable situation of owning an African American and profiting from her performances does not seem to have affected Barnum's conscience. It probably hurt Barnum more to admit his unwitting role in the falsification of Joice Heth's character because, by doing so, he was admitting that she duped him. Heth, not Barnum, displayed the most crafty sense of showmanship in the Joice Heth affair. Throughout the autobiography, Barnum goes to painstaking lengths to prove to the reader that no one can outsmart him, yet Joice Heth out-theatricalizes "The Prince of Humbugs" at the start of his illustrious career. She performed her role so well that it was only death that could uncover her mask of deception.

With Joice Heth, Barnum used blackness as an integral part of the national past; he stylized a public performance that marked the ironies of a nation that subscribed to the

notions of the Declaration of Independence yet institutionalized African American slavery. Barnum was colorblind only when it came to exhibiting human aberrations on the public stage. White, brown, black, or red; man, woman, or child—Barnum was satisfied if he could profitably present any "body" into the public sphere. However, as we saw in the Joice Heth episode, the bodies that Barnum exhibited were not selfless and will-less mannequins. And it is their assertion of self as it conflicts with Barnum's presentation of them that makes Barnum's participation in the exhibition culture interesting.

Following the Joice Heth affair, Barnum continued to receive dividends from his investments in black culture. In a curious incident in *Life*, Barnum performed race on the public stage when he assumed the role of an African American by blacking his face and participating in the American minstrel tradition—a cultural practice that struck to the heart of race relations in antebellum America. In the spring of 1836 Barnum was managing a traveling circus. On a jaunt through South Carolina a minstrel singer named Sanford flew the company, leaving Barnum with a problem.

> I had advertised Negro songs; no one of my company was competent to fill [Sanford's] place; but being determined not to disappoint the audience, *I blacked myself thoroughly*, and sung the songs advertised, namely, "Zip Coon," "Gittin up Stairs," and "The Raccoon Hunt, or Sitting on a Rail." It was decidedly "a hard push," but the audience supposed the singer was Sanford, and, to my surprise, my singing was applauded, and in two of the songs I was encored! (*Life*, 189, emphasis in original)

Blacking himself and performing black culture represent Barnum's ultimate attempt to stylize and control the black body. Perhaps he learned a lesson from the Joice Heth affair and realized the black subject's ability to stylize a self that undermined Barnum's own cultural authority. The nineteenth century's consummate showman rarely appeared onstage in a costume other than his own self. Barnum orchestrated his own life and the lives of others, but his stage was the *theatrum mundi*. It is curious, then, that when Barnum does assume another character it is done by blacking his face and improvising a minstrel act. His rationalization for blacking up—that no one in the company was "competent" enough to perform—seems disingenuous. Barnum simply delighted in the prospect of the performance. His comment about the "competence" required in minstrelsy suggests both the professionalization and the specialization of the practice. What, then, made Barnum qualified to perform the minstrel routine? The minstrel show was a performance of blackness based on a white invention, and as Barnum demonstrates here it was used as a cultural commodity. Here, Barnum reaps the rewards of reification through his investment in black culture. Mimicry required study and observation, and the minstrel singers who confused the empirical boundaries between black and white entered into black culture in order to present it (in a highly artificial, distorted manner) to their white audiences were engaging in some form of cultural exchange.[27]

Barnum concludes this foray into nineteenth-century issues of race with a final anecdote: "After singing my negro *[sic]* songs one evening, and just as I had pulled my coat off in the 'dressing room' of the tent, I heard a slight disturbance outside the canvas. Rushing to the spot, and finding a person disputing with my men, I took their part, and spoke my mind to him very freely" (*Life*, 189). Barnum did not simply fill in for Sanford for one night, and he makes no mention of searching for another minstrel singer. Indeed, he had found the minstrel

he was looking for in himself, and the subtle reference to continuing performances ("After singing my negro songs one evening") is intriguing; Barnum has performed the songs on a number of occasions, and, moreover, he has made them *his;* that is, he has taken stock in his "negro songs" and made a repertoire from them. In the preceding passage, Barnum never tells us what the disturbance was about; indeed, when he emerged from the tent disguised as a black man and began haranguing the stranger, a new problem quickly arose: "He instantly drew his pistol, exclaiming, 'You Black scoundrel! dare you use such language to a white man?' and proceeded deliberately to cock it. I saw that he supposed me to be a negro *[sic],* and might perhaps blow my brains out. Quick as thought I rolled up my shirt sleeves, and replied, 'I am as white as *you* are, sir.' He absolutely dropped the pistol with fright! (*Life,* 189). The psychosexual overtones of this passage (the gun as phallus, and the imagery associated with the man "deliberately" cocking his pistol) are examples of the white male's latent fear of miscegenation and the homoerotic fascination of the black body that Leslie Fiedler first noticed in 1948.[28] Moreover, this incident is of interest to us for the way it demonstrates the lack of control Barnum (or anyone who "blacked up") had over the role they were performing. Whites mistook the minstrel singers for "real" African Americans. Eric Lott remarks, "When, in the decades before the Civil War, northern white men 'blacked up' and imitated what they supposed was black dialect, music, and dance, some people, without derision, heard Negroes singing." Barnum's anecdote demonstrates that this racial conflation occurred offstage as easily as it did under the footlights.[29]

It is probably too easy to chastise Barnum for "not moralizing on race at this opportune narrative moment," and treating "it as a contingent phenomenon, allowing the incident to stand as a practical joke that nearly backfired."[30] Barnum's views on slavery were characteristic of many Northern Democrats. On the one hand, he could write the following to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in April of 1855: "I have spent months on the cotton plantations of Mississippi, where I have seen more than one 'Legree' "; on the other hand, he could argue for the continuing enslavement of blacks on the grounds that emancipation would put them in an inferior position to the whites.[31] It was no accident that Barnum omitted this incident from the 1869 version of the autobiography. The racial "problems" relating to black slavery in antebellum America that were lost on Barnum in the 1855 version are considerably absent from the 1869 version, as were the blackfacing episodes. The Joice Heth affair remained a sore spot for Barnum, and he continued to talk about it in the subsequent versions of his autobiography, but without the aplomb he exhibited in *Life.*

Conclusion: Negotiating Theatrical Selves in the Public Sphere

The exhibition culture of the nineteenth century was a site of cultural exchange and conflict, and the public display of theatrical selfhood both confirmed and implicitly challenged middle-class values. The public selves on display became ideological mirrors that reflected the values of a developing American middle class by confirming notions of success, otherness, and, in some instances, blackness. Hegemonic and peripheral voices mingled in the sites of public pleasure created by public exhibitions. The exhibition textualized the public self and highlighted the subjectivity of the exhibit. Like the act of writing autobiography, the exhibition defied official closure. To exhibit is to hold something up for question, to deny its totalizing teleology. Audiences and performers struggled to make meaning of the self on display, but

neither the seer nor the seen were able to control the interpretation of bodies. Cultural meaning is the result of negotiation between the audience's and the performer's interpretation of the public self. "Culture is neither autonomous nor an externally determined field," remarks Richard Johnson, "but a site of social differences and struggles."[32] Yet the reflecting mirrors were distorted—like the funhouse mirrors at a carnival. The freaks on display disturbed the audience's interpretation and established authorial autonomy through their public performances.

P. T. Barnum validated theatrical selfhood in nineteenth-century America. Even after Joice Heth's death, Barnum (with Levi Lyman's help) shamelessly continued the charade by starting a rumor that Heth was not really dead but alive and well in Hebron, Connecticut, and that the woman's body on whom the doctors performed their autopsy was one "Aunt Nelly," whose dead body was brought as a stand-in for Heth. Similarly, each of Barnum's many editions (additions) to his *Life,* is a narrative display of a temporal slice of an ever-changing P. T. Barnum. Barnum as much as admitted this in the preface to *Struggles and Triumphs:* "If my pages are as plentifully sprinkled with 'I's' as was the chief ornament of Hood's peacock, 'who thought he had the eyes of Europe on his tail,' I can only say, that the 'I's' are essential to the story I have told. It has been my purpose to narrate, not the life of another, but that career in which I was the principal actor."[33]

Barnum's use of the image of a peacock with ornamentation illustrates how far selfhood had come in American discourse since the Revolution. Fliegelman terminates his study of an American culture of performance with the culmination of the Revolution, when the unadorned public man proudly exhibits his private self in the public square. Barnum, however, becomes an example of the *adorned* public man of the mid-nineteenth century—a man of varying social selves who stylizes his life, as well as the public lives of others, to become the quintessential public man of the age.

NOTES

1. P. T. Barnum, *The Life of P. T. Barnum, Written by Himself* (New York: Redfield, 1855), 143. Hereafter cited in the text as *Life.*

2. See David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America* (New York: Knopf, 1995), for a discussion of nineteenth-century pseudosciences. On public oratory, see Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); Donald Scott, "The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of American History* 66 (1980): 791–809. For a discussion of enthusiastic religion, see Whitney Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950). For a discussion of Barnum's political activities in the early 1830s and his reactions against "hysterical Christianity," see A. H. Saxon, *P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 40.

3. Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

4. See Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); and Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

5. The allusion is to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life," a popular nineteenth-century poem published in *Knickerbocker* in 1838.

6. Carl Bode, introduction to *Struggles and Triumphs; or Forty Years' Recollections of P. T. Barnum* by P. T. Barnum (New York: Penguin, 1981), 19.

7. George Bryan, introduction to *Struggles and Triumphs: or, The Life of P. T. Barnum, Written by Himself* (New York: Knopf, 1927), xviii.

8. For a detailed printing history of Barnum's autobiographies, see Raymond Toole-Stott, *Circus and the Allied Arts* (Derby: Harpur, 1971), 4:9719–41.

9. Bryan, introduction to *Struggles and Triumphs,* xx.

10. William Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), xiii; Thomas Couser, *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 66.

11. Couser, *Altered Egos,* 53–54.

12. Ibid., 53.

13. The book had detractors. See Neil Harris, *Humbug* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), 224–31.

14. Ibid., 224.

15. Bryan, introduction to *Struggles and Triumphs,* xxx.

16. Quoted in ibid., xxx.

17. Harris, *Humbug,* 224.

18. Quoted in Bryan, introduction to *Struggles and Triumphs,* xxxi.

19. Saxon, *P. T. Barnum,* 12.

20. Brooks McNamara, " 'A Congress of Wonders': The Rise and Fall of the Dime Museum," *Emerson Society Quarterly* 20 (1974): 218.

21. Quoted in Charles Sellers, *Mr. Peale's Museum: Charles Willson Peale and the First Popular Museum in Natural Science and Art* (New York: Norton, 1980), 15.

22. See ibid., Chap. 6.

23. Constance Rourke, *Trumpets of Jubilee: Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lyman Beecher, Horace Greeley, P. T. Barnum* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), 291.

24. Robert Bogdan, "The Exhibition of Humans with Differences for Amusement and Profit," *Policy Studies Journal* 15 (1987): 537, 540.

25. See David Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

26. On the representation of African Americans and Native Americans on the American stage, see Richard Moody, *America Takes the Stage: Romanticism in American Drama and Theatre, 1750–1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), especially Chap. 2.

27. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 39. The critical response to the minstrel tradition, a highly popular nineteenth-century entertainment, has exposed the phenomena as a racist attempt by white culture to lampoon black culture, and so it was. Yet, despite its mockery, as Lott argues, the minstrel tradition was the first white recognition of black culture, and the first American cultural practice to establish avenues of exchange between black and white culture. Whites commodified blackness by investing their interests in black culture (learning dialects and songs, aping gestures and mannerisms) and then selling transmogrified versions of blackness to white audiences.

28. See Leslie Fiedler, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey," in *The Fiedler Reader* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), 3–12.

29. Lott, *Love and Theft,* 57, 17.

30. Couser, *Altered Egos,* 57.

31. P. T. Barnum, *Selected Letters of P. T. Barnum,* ed. A. H. Saxon (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 86.

32. Richard Johnson, "What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?" *Social Text* 16 (1986): 39.

33. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs,* 46.