

**“There’s a Sucker Born Every Minute”: An Examination of P.T. Barnum’s  
Methods and Museum Controversy Today.**

by

Leslie Ann Galati

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Auburn University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts

Auburn, Alabama

May 4, 2014

Keywords: museums, controversy, P.T. Barnum, abolition, temperance, dramas  
nineteenth century, Enola Gay

Copyright 2013 by Leslie Ann Galati

Approved by

Adam Jortner, Chair, Assistant Professor of History

Reagan Grimsley, Assistant Professor of History

Aaron Shapiro, Associate Professor of History

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show that P.T. Barnum's methods have been used in contemporary museums when dealing with controversial exhibits. This contention is supported by first exploring P.T. Barnum's production of moral dramas, followed by case studies of the Smithsonian's National Art Museum, National Air and Space Museum's Enola Gay exhibit, Colonial Williamsburg's slave auction, The John Dillinger Museum, Emory University's *Without Sanctuary* exhibit and the University of Southern Mississippi's *Passing the Torch: Documenting the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ku Klux Klan* exhibit. In each instance Barnum's methodology was used to deal with controversy and, in most cases, resulted in the successful run of the exhibition.

## Acknowledgments

First, I want to thank my father. Without him, I never would have had the strength or guidance to see this paper come to fruition. Next, my cheerleaders: my mother and my wonderful fiancé who have never stopped supporting me, encouraging me, and comforting me when times were difficult. Without the support of my family, I would have given up and joined Barnum's circus. Next, I want to thank the professors behind this work: Dr. Adam Jortner, who guided me along the twisted path that was Barnum's past and helped me to make sense of the nineteenth century; Professor Reagan Grimsley, who inspired me to continue towards the archival field; and Dr. Aaron Shapiro, who guided me in the field of public history. Archival Studies and Public History have been my two great passions during my undergraduate and graduate studies and have guided my career choice! Lastly, I want to thank Auburn University for everything it has brought me and taken away from me. I am who I am because of this University and I will always love it. War Eagle!

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1.....	8
Chapter 2.....	29
Chapter 3.....	52
Bibliography.....	80

## **Introduction**

Museums are facing an identity crisis;<sup>1</sup> they are straddling a line between being educational and entertaining. In an attempt to further define themselves and broaden their audiences, some museum professionals have shifted the tone of their exhibitions away from traditional history exhibitions towards “revisionist” history exhibits. These exhibitions brought museum visitors into the discussions historians have over the same artifacts that are on display and the history they represent. Unfortunately, these exhibitions have also created strong emotional responses from politicians, historians, the military, and the public they were designed to educate. Museum professionals in the early 1990s were struggling to make a “controversial” exhibition work. Eventually, museum professionals started to follow a pattern; they outlined the purpose behind the exhibitions, understood their audience’s likes and dislikes, and were not afraid to change the exhibition script. By following this pattern, controversial exhibitions have found success. But, there was one museum professional who followed this pattern long before the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Phineas Taylor Barnum.

“There is a sucker born every minute,” is one of P.T. Barnum’s most famous lines, despite the fact that he never uttered the phrase. Barnum is remembered for a number of things-- for his partnership with James Anthony Bailey, his contribution to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Duncan F. Cameron, “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 61.

“low” culture dime museum and the exhibition of extraordinary individuals or “freaks.” He was the fantastic showman, cheeky and devilish, the “Prince of Humbug” who was never to be taken seriously. This caricature of Barnum’s public figure is one that has remained with his legend through history. Yet, there was more to Barnum than this caricature. Behind it was a complicated man who, from a museum professional’s perspective, had figured out how to handle a controversial exhibit without alienating his audience. In nineteenth century New York, Barnum’s American Museum had become the popular entertainment and amusement venue; many museums modeled themselves after the successful museum. As such, “the word ‘museum’ became a term that defined “a place for some stuffed birds and animals for the exhibition of monsters and for vulgar dramatic performances a mere place of popular entertainment.”<sup>2</sup> Henry Tappan’s lament illustrates a negative view of Barnum’s American Museum that is shared by many museum historians.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Barnum was not only a joker and entrepreneur. He was also a social reformer and an advocate for the moral causes he held dear-- abolition and temperance.

---

<sup>2</sup> Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Bogdan, “The Social Construction of Freaks,” *Freakery: Culture Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. (New York: New York Press, 1996), 23; James W. Cook Jr., “OF Men, Missing Links, and Nondescripts: The Strange Career of P.T. Barnum’s ‘What Is It?’ Exhibition,” *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 139; Eric Fretz, “P.T. Barnum’s Theatrical Selfhood and the Nineteenth Century Culture of Exhibition,” *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 97; Ronald E. Ostman, “Photography and Persuasion: Farm Security Administration Photographs of Circus and Carnival Sideshows, 1935-1942,” *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 122; Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Introduction,” *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University, 1996), 5.

The American Museum was about more than making money in a questionable way. It was also a place of advocacy for P.T. Barnum's moral causes. He campaigned for these causes by performing moral dramas on the American Museum's stage. These performances forced discourse on the controversial topics of abolition and temperance, topics that were being discussed publically, but were still avoidable. Barnum was successful in bringing these exhibitions to the public, without much backlash, because he knew the purpose behind the exhibitions, knew his audience's likes and dislikes, and was not afraid to change the exhibition script, a set of actions that will be called the "Barnum Method."

One of the most famous and successful examples of the Barnum method was his use of W. H. Smith's play *The Drunkard or The Fallen Saved*. This moral drama tells the cautionary tale of Edward Middleton who turns to the bottle when he is falsely accused of a crime. He is saved from his life of inebriated poverty by Arden Rencelaw, a man after Barnum's own heart. Rencelaw brings Middleton back to a life of sobriety, thereby returning him to his lost wealth and former social standing. As in all temperance dramas, *The Drunkard* told the story of the protagonist's fall from grace, the deceit of the antagonist (in this case an evil plotting lawyer), and the protagonist's subsequent redemption. Barnum so easily related to the character of Arden Rencelaw, the moral gentleman of good standing, (a "princely merchant! Noble philanthropist! The poor man's friend! The orphan's benefactor") that others took notice. Each time the play was performed on the American Museum's Lecture Room stage, the actor who portrayed the

“philanthropist [Rencelaw] was made up and dressed to look like Barnum.”<sup>4</sup> *The Drunkard* was “exceedingly well played and it made a great impression.” There was also a temperance pledge in the box office, which, according to Barnum was “signed by thousands during the run of the piece.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Barnum believed that people were changing their opinions and their lives based on popular entertainment in his American Museum; this fueled his production of moral dramas. The Barnum Method used in the production of *The Drunkard* was simple; Barnum wanted to use the moral drama to change his audience’s opinion on drinking. Barnum also understood that many women would automatically attend a moral drama but the rest of the museum would attract her husband and children.<sup>6</sup> Finally, he held control of the moral drama script and continued to run the play for as long as it was profitable. This method is seen in the performances of other moral dramas: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Dred: a Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, *The Octoroon*, *The Drunkard*, *The Last Nail*, *The Bottle*, *Hot Corn*, and *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*.

The Barnum Method has continued to be used by museums to navigate the troubled waters of controversial exhibits without museum professionals or historians realizing they are using it. Where Barnum used the method to promote his advocacy, or his open support of the outlaw of slavery and drink, museums today use it to handle controversy or prolonged public dispute over differing opinions. Examples of such heated public contention and the use of the Barnum Method to resolve them can be seen in the

---

<sup>4</sup> Buford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture*, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1997), 122.

<sup>5</sup> Phineas Taylor Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum Written by Himself* (Buffalo: the Courier Company Printer, 1888), 265

<sup>6</sup> Buford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture*, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1997), 98.



handling of Smithsonian's *The West As America* Exhibition in 1991, Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum's Enola Gay exhibit in 1994, a slave auction at Colonial Williamsburg in 1994, The John Dillinger Museum in 1999, Emory's *Without Sanctuary* exhibit in 2002, and University of Southern Mississippi's *Passing the Torch: Documenting the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ku Klux Klan* in 2011.

Through an examination of Barnum's moral dramas, a collection of failed and successful controversial exhibitions, the opinions of museum scholars, Barnum scholars, newspapers and primary sources, a method of handling a controversial exhibition in museum and library institutions is revealed.

Mike Wallace explains the creation of revisionist history, which gave way for the controversial exhibitions that will be discussed in Chapter Three, as a response to the stagnant history museums of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Theodore Law argues, instead, that museums shifted to become sites of education, that the museum must be connected to the community and therefore tell the entire history of that community.<sup>8</sup> This results in telling the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of our history. Other museum scholars feel that the museum should just be a place of fun and entertainment.<sup>9</sup> Barnum felt that the museum should be all of those things and his American Museum was defined as the family retreat for New Yorkers and all those visiting the "the metropolis" in Frederick Douglass' Paper on August 6, 1852. The American Museum was also

---

<sup>7</sup> Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 116.

<sup>8</sup> Theodore Law, "What is a Museum?" *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 31-32.

<sup>9</sup> Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*, 124.

described as a place of moral education in a number of New York papers; Barnum described his institution as such in his autobiography and Barnum scholars A.H. Saxon and Buford Adams support this idea.<sup>10</sup> Barnum's moral dramas, as discussed in Chapter Two, take his "dime museum" out of a place of pure entertainment and make it a place of activism. When Barnum's actions are compared to those of the selection of exhibitions in Chapter Three, along with the constant desire of the museum to stay relevant, a successful way of handling controversy emerges, one that allows museum professionals to change what needs to be changed when they find themselves under scrutiny, without losing the original spirit of the exhibition. Of course other factors come into play when discussing current museum exhibitions that, do not have the luxury of being for-profit institutions, like Barnum's American Museum; however, the method still remains only with a few more hoops for museum professionals to jump through to see their exhibitions through to fruition.

The examination of all these individual pieces to create the completed puzzle first requires an understanding of Barnum's personal history and a definition of the museum institution, which will take place in Chapter One. Once an understanding of museum history and Barnum has been achieved, it can be applied to Barnum's chosen moral dramas that are examined in Chapter Two. Finally, with an understanding of Barnum's methodology from Chapter Two, an examination of controversial exhibitions from the early 1990s through 2011 demonstrates how Barnum's methodology was applied to the sensitive exhibitions and how that exhibition was received. What is revealed through the

---

<sup>10</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture*, 76, 117, 122; William K. Northall, *Before and Behind the Curtain* (New York: Burgess, 1851), 166.

completed puzzle is that museums that followed Barnum's methodology had successful exhibitions, while those that did not or could not follow the methodology lost the original spirit of their planned exhibition.

## Chapter One

P.T. Barnum “pioneered the modern exhibition of physically anomalous individuals at his American Museum, a popular, inexpensive pleasure palace.”<sup>11</sup> In popular culture, he is remembered for coining a phrase he didn’t say and collaborating with James Anthony Bailey to create the Barnum and Bailey Circus. He is remembered by scholars as performing “a remarkable kind of cultural work in the 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.”<sup>12</sup> The first Barnum scholars remember him as a larger-than-life legend, crafting biographies of his life that read like works of fiction and not fact. Morris Robert Werner was the first Barnum biographer; his work, *P.T. Barnum*, was published in 1923. He believed that it was impossible for Barnum “to tell the truth about himself, and yet he does not avoid impressing the reader with the truth about himself.”<sup>13</sup> Irving Wallace, an author of fiction and non-fiction, wrote of the legendary Barnum in *The Fabulous Showman: The Life and Times of P.T. Barnum*, the same as

---

<sup>11</sup> David A. Gerber, “The ‘Careers’ of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization,” *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 43.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Fretz, “P.T. Barnum’s Theatrical Selfhood and the Nineteenth Century Culture of Exhibition,” *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 97.

<sup>13</sup> Morris Robert Werner, *P.T. Barnum* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1923), vi.

Werner. Without citing a source, Wallace claims that it was Charles Dickens who created the name of the famed exhibition “What Is It?”<sup>14</sup> Neil Harris was the first Barnum scholar to break away from writing about the legend and focus on the man. Harris described Barnum best: he was “neither a good-natured deceiver nor an evil-minded philistine, but an intelligent, complex and well organized entrepreneur whose business involved the myths and values of self-proclaimed democracy.”<sup>15</sup> A.H. Saxon followed Harris and looked at the man and not the legend. His conclusion of Barnum was “a deeply religious man who experienced at mid-life chastening moral regeneration.”<sup>16</sup>

As revealed by his biographers, Barnum is a difficult individual to decipher. What he has left behind in the historical record are multiple editions of an autobiography, a number of other written works, correspondence, and newspaper articles. There must have been more but after two consecutive fires in the American Museum, it is safe to say those were lost to the historical record. This adds to the mystery of Barnum, to the difficulty in completely deciphering his true character. What can be deduced of his character is found through examining his actions and his writings. Those that match must be assumed to provide a glimpse into the heart and mind of the true Barnum.

Barnum’s autobiography shows that fame did not seek him out. Instead, we learn that he went searching for her. When she was found, Barnum claims in an interview for *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, she “smiled upon” him and all his

---

<sup>14</sup> Irving Wallace, *The Fabulous Showman: The Life and Times of P.T. Barnum* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1959), 117.

<sup>15</sup> Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Little Brown and Company 1973), 5.

<sup>16</sup> A.H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 7.

“exertions.”<sup>17</sup> Barnum was born on July 5, 1810, in Bethel, Connecticut. His father died in 1825, when he was fifteen. Consequently, as the eldest of nine children, it was left to Barnum and his mother to pay off his father’s debts.<sup>18</sup> Under the guardianship of his Uncle Alanson Taylor, Barnum moved to a nearby village, Grassy Plains, where he became a store clerk in return for board and six dollars a month.<sup>19</sup> One fateful day in 1828, Barnum escorted “a fair, rosy-cheeked, buxom girl with beautiful white teeth,” named Charity Hallett, on her trip home to Bethel.<sup>20</sup> After a period of courtship, the two were married on November 8, 1829. Barnum attempted to advance himself in the retail business by owning his own shop in Brooklyn. When this did not pan out, the two moved back to Bethel. Barnum then tried his hand at running a boarding house in New York City. Yet it was “clear to my mind that my proper position in this busy world was not yet reached. I had displayed the faculty of getting money as well as getting rid of it,” explains Barnum in his autobiography, “but the business for which I was destined...had not yet come to me.”<sup>21</sup>

It was the American Museum that caused Barnum’s star to rise so high so quickly. This success prepared him for the rest of his life and brought him to a place of purpose. Barnum reflects in his autobiography on how he came to be the proprietor of the American Museum, formerly known as Scudder’s Museum. To become the proprietor of the museum, Barnum first sought out the building’s owner, Francis W. Olmsted, as

---

<sup>17</sup> P.T. Barnum and Interviewer, “Barnum at Home,” *Frederick Douglas’ Paper*, August 6, 1852.

<sup>18</sup> There is conflict with this date, as Barnum states in all his autobiographies that the date was 1825, making him 15 years old. Yet his father’s gravestone says 1828, making him 19. This is pointed out and reflected on by Saxon on page 34 of his *P.T. Barnum*.

<sup>19</sup> Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 12

<sup>20</sup> Phineas Taylor Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum Written by Himself* (Buffalo: the Courier Company Printer, 1888), 25-26

<sup>21</sup> Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, 20.

Barnum did not have enough money to purchase the building and exhibits outright. The two struck a deal; Olmsted would purchase Scudder's American Museum and Barnum would take control of it. Barnum would then pay off the credit he owed Olmsted through the success of his American Museum. The plan almost worked, but Peale's Museum, under the control of the New York Museum Company, entered the bidding war and won. In retaliation, Barnum found or trumped up charges of impropriety against the Directors of the New York Museum Company and published them.<sup>22</sup> Barnum scared away any possible investors and the New York Museum Company terminated their deal.<sup>23</sup> On December 27, 1841, Barnum was introduced as the proprietor of the American Museum.

In explaining the American Museum in a letter to the editor of *The Nation* on August 25, 1865, Barnum discussed the importance of making the museum an attraction.<sup>24</sup> If the museum did not profit, he would be in debt and never be able to produce a living to support his family. In 1843, he purchased the entire contents of Peale's Museum and added them to the collection of the American Museum, with the exception of Peale's Philadelphia collection. In 1850, he then added the Peale collection of Philadelphia, and after that, whatever he found, that he thought curious. With the success of the museum and living below his means, Barnum was able to pay back Olmsted in full. After twelve months, Barnum was in full ownership of the institution. By 1865, the size of the institution had doubled.

---

<sup>22</sup> James W. Cook, Jr., "Of Men, Missing Links, and Nondescripts: The Strange Career of P.T. Barnum's 'What Is It?' Exhibition," *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 114.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-119.

<sup>24</sup> Phineas Taylor Barnum, "Letter to the Editor of *The Nation*," Re-printed in *The Liberator* August 25, 1865.

Barnum attributed the success of his museum to his knack for advertising. His philosophy of advertising was simply that the art of advertisement was not only in print but in life. He once paid a beggar a dollar and a half to walk around the block with a brick. Every few feet, he would put the brick down and pick it back up. This was such a curiosity to the people observing it on the street, that there grew a following behind him. The man was instructed to conclude this task, by walking into the museum. Everyone who witnessed these actions wanted to know what happened next so they paid their entry fee and continued to search for the man throughout the building.<sup>25</sup> “To make [The American Museum] self-supporting,” Barnum explains in a letter to the editor of *The Nation*, “I was obliged to popularize it, and while I still held on to the “million curiosities,” millions of people were only induced to see them because, at the same time, they could see whales, grants [giants], dwarfs, Albinos, dog shows, et cetera.”<sup>26</sup> He did all this and still maintained the museum as a family--friendly institution. He wanted it to be a place that would be praised as “the great family resort of the population of New York, and the adjacent towns and villages as well as an irresistible focus of attraction for everybody from the country who visits the metropolis.”<sup>27</sup> Barnum humbly bragged in a letter to Moses Kimball, a business associate, fellow museum owner, and friend, how his “‘evil star’ has taken the ascendant and I much regret to say, continues to rise higher and

---

<sup>25</sup> Phineas Taylor Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum Written by Himself* (Buffalo: the Courier Company Printer, 1888), 121.

<sup>26</sup> P.T. Barnum, “Letter to the Editor of *The Nation*,” Re-printed in *The Liberator* August 25, 1865.

<sup>27</sup> Reporter, “Barnum at Home,” *Frederick Douglas’ Paper* August 6, 1852.



higher in its destined course.”<sup>28</sup> This quote neatly showcases Barnum’s personality; he was funny, witty, and entertaining. He was also an advocate.

Barnum’s American Museum not only “witnessed different social and cultural struggles,” it also took part in them. He ensured that his institution would become a site of advocacy. The two key issues he championed were abolition and temperance. His method for expressing his views on these controversial issues took the form of “moral dramas” that he had presented as a part of his museum’s public exhibitions. It is important to remember that Barnum’s ultimate goal for his museum, as it related to the public, was to “train the mind of youth to reject as repugnant anything inconsistent with moral and refined tastes.”<sup>29</sup> As far as Barnum was concerned, there was something about the American Museum that made it more than an attraction and place for popular entertainment. He believed it had its own personality and a crusading mission for the public. Barnum promised, “Never to forsake it [or] those who patronize its attractions.”<sup>30</sup> He kept that promise until the second museum building burned in 1868.

To comprehend the significance of abolition productions in the American Museum, one must also comprehend P.T. Barnum’s constantly evolving views on race. The same evolution of thought moved through a group of white, middle-upper class, individuals who felt that slavery was a societal evil and needed to be ended, but in the same breath would argue that they did not believe that those freed men, women, and

---

<sup>28</sup> Letter from P.T. Barnum to Moses Kimball, March 29, 1843. Moses Kimball Letters Received, Boston Athenaeum, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>29</sup> Open letter from P.T. Barnum to the Public prior to the re-opening of the Lecture Room in 1850.

<sup>30</sup> Reporter and P.T. Barnum, “Barnum at Home,” *Frederick Douglas’ Paper* August 6, 1852

children should be elevated to equal status as their white crusaders.<sup>31</sup> The American Colonization Society, defined by Eric Burin, was created in 1816 by an “eclectic group of politicians, lawyers, ministers, and businessmen.”<sup>32</sup> The purpose of the organization was, originally, to promote the “voluntary colonization of free blacks,” but eventually led to a hope to remove all blacks, free and slave alike.<sup>33</sup> The ACS was successful in getting their claim and in 1819 Congress passed The Slave Trade Act, creating the country of Liberia and encouraging the emigration of freed slaves out of the United States and into the newly created country in Africa.

These attitudes shifted in 1830 when William Lloyd Garrison led a radical group of middle-to-upper class individuals in an abolition movement that called for equality as well as freedom.<sup>34</sup> Garrison led an abolition movement with freed slaves, instead of for them. The abolition movement in America took their cues from the successful movement happening across the pond in England. The movement enticed some men but more women into the fight against the societal evils of slavery, something that would inspire women into another movement for their own equality.<sup>35</sup> The first phase of the organizations, according to Drescher, was to “inundate” the southern states with abolitionist literature. When this did not work, those in the movement turned to petition Congress. By the end of the 1830s, “an American legislator claimed that” these petitions had garnered over two million signatures. Unfortunately, this movement did not yield the

---

<sup>31</sup> Eric Burin, “The Slave Trade Act of 1819: A New Look at Colonization and the Politics of Slavery,” *American Nineteenth Century History*, 13, no. 1 (2012), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Mayer, “William Lloyd Garrison: The Undisputed Master of the Cause of Negro Liberation,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 23 (1999), 105.

<sup>35</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 305.

desired results; all forms of antislavery petitioning were barred from Congress and a gag rule put in place to ban even the acknowledgement of petitions received. The movement also “accelerated the development of...proslavery ideology,” a comprehensive defense of the institution and an “effort to gain regional consensus for upholding slavery as a positive good.”<sup>36</sup> This meant that for all those who were petitioning for the freedom of the enslaved, others were petitioning just as strongly to keep those men, women, and children in bondage.

As the abolition movement shifted into the 1840s and 1850s, political emotions on the topic of slavery were reaching a boiling point. The slave-holding majority in the South did not want to lose the profit from bondage and plantations on their economy. In 1820, Congress passed the Missouri Compromise, which allowed Missouri to be a slave state but outlawed it in the remaining territories. This bill was repealed in 1854 with the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This bill made the territories of Nebraska and Kansas states in the Union but also made slavery legal in those newly created states. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 mixed with the earlier Fugitive Slave Law of 1850--which called for the return of all escaped slaves to their plantations and made it illegal for those who harbored escaped slaves--created an emotionally charged atmosphere throughout the northern states.

For many individuals in the fight for abolition the “successive controversies of the 1850s came on so rapidly that they began to overlap with one another.”<sup>37</sup> They became a turning point for many abolition activists, specifically P.T. Barnum. Like his

---

<sup>36</sup> Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 309.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

fellow white abolitionists, Barnum's personal views evolved. This transformation is easily viewed through Barnum's career in show business. Barnum got his first taste of success in show business through the exhibition of a former slave, Joice Heth. At this time in his life, Barnum felt as many others did--supremacy over a woman whose sole purpose, in Barnum's mind, was to make him wealthy. There are numerous reports compiled by Benjamin Reiss, to the mistreatment and exploitation of Heth at the hands of her new owner.

Joice Heth was discovered on July 15, 1835, working for Philadelphia showman R.W. Lindsay. Barnum states in his autobiography that he became the "proprietor" of the elderly former slave who he claimed was George Washington's nurse. Who crafted the hoax, whether it was Lindsay, Barnum or Heth herself, is unknown. One scholar of Barnum felt that Heth "authored herself as much as Barnum created her character."<sup>38</sup> Barnum explains that he received all the documents from Lindsay when he took over the show. The story surrounding the aged woman was of her life as General George Washington's nurse. She would regale audiences with tales of young Washington, as well as sing old hymns. This was all made authentic by her incredibly aged appearance. Heth could barely move, was feeble, and fragile. Barnum described her in great detail, in his autobiography, stating that "the fingers of her left hand were drawn down so as nearly to close it, and were fixed; the nails on that hand were almost four inches long and extended above her wrist." He continued that "her head was covered with thick bush of

---

<sup>38</sup> Eric Fretz, "P.T. Barnum's Theatrical Selfhood and the Nineteenth Century Culture of Exhibition," *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 102.

grey hair; she was toothless and totally blind and her eyes had sunk so deeply in the sockets as to have disappeared altogether.”<sup>39</sup>

Where Barnum goes into great detail of Heth’s appearance, he does not go into detail on his treatment of the former slave, not even to say if she was a free woman or not, under his employment. Scholars have looked into the historical record to see what can be found on Barnum’s treatment of Heth. Benjamin Reiss examines the story of Joice Heth through fictitious literature of the time. In these writings, Heth is seen as not the gentle elderly woman, spinning tales of young George Washington, but as a violent drunk who only goes along with Barnum’s show to feed her addiction.<sup>40</sup> There is an account of Heth’s exhibition as seen through the eyes of medical writer Edward Dixon, who “claimed Heth had not had enough to drink,” during an exhibition and she responded to a question about whether she remembered caring for young George: “No!” She continued to say that “they” made her say that all the time and ended her rant with “gimme drink!”<sup>41</sup> Whether these stories are true or not is, up to the scholar to decide. It is easy to dismiss them and argue that Barnum was young, naïve, and simply giving the public what they wanted to see. However, Heth was not the only example of race that Barnum exhibited throughout his career and through each exhibition, Barnum’s evolving opinions on race can be seen to change.

After Barnum found success as proprietor of the American Museum, he opened up the museum’s lecture room to produce a number of performances and exhibitions. One

---

<sup>39</sup> Phineas Taylor Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum Written by Himself*, 44.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum’s America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 179.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

of the first abolition plays to be produced on the lecture room stage was a dramatization of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1853. The original play was not well received by critics who felt that it was more minstrel show than what Stowe had originally intended. Barnum's version, explains James W. Cook Jr., was "infused" with a more "comic, ridiculing tone."<sup>42</sup> Barnum took the criticisms, changed the production, and invited the critics back for a second viewing. Whatever changes were made pleased his critics and the play continued its run on the theater stage. This production demonstrates that Barnum was still in a racist mindset, although he was showing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it was a version of the story that would please and anger both sides of the debate.

Three years later, Barnum produced another dramatization of Harriet Beecher Stowe's latest novel, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*. On the lecture room stage, *Dred* became a drama, demonstrating the horrors of slavery but the redemption that was possible for those enslaved. This production stayed closer to the spirit of Stowe's work, a true abolition moral drama, and demonstrates that Barnum, along with others in the north-east, were undergoing a shift in their thoughts towards slavery and the civil rights of African Americans.<sup>43</sup> For Barnum, the "enhanced autonomy" of the African American characters speaks loudly to a change that was starting to happen in Barnum, a change that would continue to be documented in the next abolition production of the American Museum, Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon*.

---

<sup>42</sup> James W. Cook Jr., "Of Men, Missing Links, and Nondescripts: The Strange Career of P.T. Barnum's "'What Is It?'" Exhibition," *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garland, ed. Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 150.

<sup>43</sup> Buford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 145.

In 1859, Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* was introduced to New York City Theater, the play was being performed across the city and Barnum had his own production on the American Museum lecture room stage. The play's central character was an "octoroon," or a person who was one-eighth African American, named Zoe. This abolition moral drama was the most sympathetic to the cause and the one that was performed without any changes to the original script. For Barnum, it demonstrated that as of 1860, his mind had really changed on the subject of slavery. He had gone from one who appeared to not have any thoughts against the institution to producing plays that cried "Down with Slavery!"<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately, it is not so easy to claim in one swift breath that Barnum was pro-abolition and also felt that those enslaved shared equality with their white oppressors and saviors. This is best demonstrated through his exhibition of "What is It?" James W. Cook Jr., describes the "Nondescript" exhibition, better known as "What Is It?" as a campaign that "wove such ambiguous physical descriptions into a far more complex package, one equally dependent on 'habits' and 'features.'" Barnum's description of the character was "simply indescribable." The character demonstrated characteristics both 'animal' as well as 'human'" and "'civilized'" as well as "'brutish.'" <sup>45</sup> The exhibition originally starred Harvey Leech, a New York actor, who according to Cook, was "probably Caucasian" but did have the "remarkable" physical feature of unnaturally short legs in proportion to the rest of his normally sized body.<sup>46</sup> The second actor to take on the character of "What Is It?" was William Henry Johnson. Johnson was a "young, African American at a time

---

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson*, Alan S. Downer, ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964), 147-163.

<sup>45</sup> James W. Cook Jr., 140.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

when Northern blacks enjoyed few political or legal protections, and he appears to have suffered from a mental disorder called microcephaly.”<sup>47</sup> Cook describes Johnson as a man who had no autonomy over his life, forced into the only job he could get. Cook ignores that Barnum paid the men and women who were central characters in his exhibitions well enough to afford a lifestyle denied to most.<sup>48</sup> In any case, the fact that “What is it?” was shown at the same time as *The Octoroon* created a contradiction in the American Museum.

One explanation for this contradiction is to argue that Barnum was aware of it and used it to attract both sides of the abolition spectrum. The Museum was an established attraction that drew in all types of people. He produced a series of exhibitions that forced those who would normally ignore the discussion of abolition to come face to face with race and slavery. He performed both of these tasks by producing the moral drama of *The Octoroon* while at the same time forcing his audience to define race. By forcing a close examination of the feelings created from the tragedy of the abolition dramas with a character considered to be the missing link between man and beast, Barnum created a discourse for those individuals who did not believe that slavery was a societal evil and those who did. Barnum was not afraid to construct “public entertainments that aggressively courted sectional controversy,”<sup>49</sup> yet he produced these exhibitions without public backlash. He did this by understanding that the majority of his audience was pro-

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>48</sup> David A. Gerber, “The ‘Careers’ of People Exhibited in Freak Show: The Problem of Volition and Valorization,” *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Human Body*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 51.

<sup>49</sup> James W. Cook Jr., 149.



abolition, bringing with them friends and family who were on the opposite side of the argument.

By the end of his life, Barnum had become a champion of the thirteenth and fifteenth amendment or the abolishment of slavery and right for all men to vote. He believed in these so much that he campaigned for public office, and won in 1865 in Connecticut on the belief that it would be an “honor to be permitted to vote for the then proposed amendment to the Constitution of the United states to abolish slavery forever from the land.”<sup>50</sup> Scholars like A.H. Saxon, James W. Cook Jr., and Benjamin Reiss argue that this came from a place of guilt, an argument that Barnum supports with his speech before Congress in 1865. Barnum explained how he “lived among,” those slave-owning southerners; he not only lived among them, he “owned slaves,” and “did more.” He admits, “I whipped my slaves. I ought to have been whipped a thousand times for this myself. But then I was a Democrat---one of those non-descript Democrats---who are northern men with Southern Principles.”<sup>51</sup> Barnum’s views on race and slavery changed along the same lines as others between 1835 and 1865. Perhaps under the influence of his own abolition dramas and fueled by guilt of past exploitations, Barnum became an activist for the end of slavery and believed in the equality of all men.

Barnum was not lacking in critics during his life. They ranged from Tappan, to the *Times* editor, to others who felt that the final burning of the American Museum in 1868 was the “perfect moment...to execute a kind of ritual cleansing of the city’s cultural

---

<sup>50</sup> Phineas Taylor Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum Written by Himself* (Buffalo: the Courier Company Printer, 1888), 617

<sup>51</sup> A.H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 223.

life-to start from scratch-to rethink the proper goals, functions and forms of New York's 'popular culture.'"<sup>52</sup> Barnum, the showman and advocate, was concerned with how history would remember his name and legacy. In a letter to Theodore Tilton, an orator, abolitionist, and the editor of *The Independent*, Barnum cried that "for 30 years I [have] striven to do good, but (foolishly) stuck my worst side outside, until half the Christian community got to believe that I wore horns and hoof. And now as I have got old, I begin to feel a desire that the present and future generations...show me as I am and God knows that is bad enough."<sup>53</sup>

One hundred or so years prior to the establishment of the American Museum and the Barnum Method, the museum institution began as Cabinets of Curiosity, or, the display of private collections curated by, wealthy, private individuals, who wished to broadcast an image of themselves. Duncan Cameron argues that collection-inspired images may have said of their curator, "look how curious I am and how meticulous and how thorough. Here is my scientific collection which reaffirms my belief in the order of the universe and the laws of nature." Or the collections may have said "Look at this. Look at how I surrounded myself with beautiful things. See what good taste I have, how civilized and cultivated I am." Or the collections may have said, "Oh! I am a man of the world who has traveled much. Look at all the places I have been. Look at all the

---

<sup>52</sup> James W. Cook Jr., *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 73

<sup>53</sup> Letter from P.T. Barnum to Theodore Tilton, May 29, 1865 in *Selected Letters of P.T. Barnum*, A.H. Saxon, ed., comp., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 133-134.

mysterious things I have brought back from my adventures. Yes! I am an adventurer.”<sup>54</sup>

It was this hubris that brought the cabinets of curiosity out of the cabinet and into the public infrastructure.<sup>55</sup>

Once the exhibitions from the cabinets became accessible to the general public, there was a shift in the purpose of the exhibitions. What was originally designed to exhibit an individual’s wealth and culture became to the general public, about exhibiting education, enlightenment, and providing recreation, declaring that the items in exhibition were the public’s collection “and therefore should be meaningful to....the visitor.”<sup>56</sup>

Charles Willson Peale is credited with starting the movement of public museums with the purpose of educating the general public in 1786.<sup>57</sup> Peale “saw his museum as a commercial as well as an educational undertaking; he understood the need to connect his content to his audience’s interest in a lively manner if he expected them to pay the admission fees.”<sup>58</sup> From 1786 through 1841, gradually “the function of the museum moved from an institution benefiting the public good [education] to a money-making device.... [Using] lectures, performers, and experimenters to attract more customers.”<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Duncan F. Cameron, “The Museum, A Temple, or the Forum,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 65.

<sup>55</sup> Rosemarie Garlan Thomson, “Introduction,” *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garlan Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>56</sup> Duncan Cameron, 66.

<sup>57</sup> Edward P. and Mary Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Maryland: Alta Mira Press, 2008) 7.

<sup>58</sup> Harold Skramstad, “An Agenda for Museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 119.

<sup>59</sup> Eric Fretz, “P.T. Barnum’s Theatrical Selfhood and the Nineteenth Century Culture of Exhibition,” *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, Rosemarie Garlan Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 101.

After the American Museum closed, many museums in the United States rose up to take its place; the dime museum was a bona fide machine for attracting an audience but there was still a shift. There was a desire for the museum to give more to the general public than popular amusements; many critics, like Henry Tappan, cried for a change in museum exhibitions. To flee from the “exhibition of monsters” and “vulgar dramatic performances” and instead become what Cameron has termed the museum as “temple.” Defining “what is a museum,” is a topic that has been taken up by many a museum historian, yet a universal definition has evaded them. Mike Wallace provides a definition of the museum as a nurturer of the “myths that provide cultures moral scaffolding.... people attend them as they might a church service---to nourish and undergird their spiritual identity.”<sup>60</sup> While Cameron argues that “attempts to define a museum have been made for almost as long as there have been museums, yet there is no definition to my knowledge that meets with everyone’s satisfaction.”<sup>61</sup> Theodore Law agrees with Cameron, claiming that “one cannot define” the museum “because it has acquired so many different connotations.” Law concludes that the museum, if it must be defined, is “a dynamic force in the cultural life of the community.”<sup>62</sup>

Instead of defining what a museum is, scholars have turned to defining what the universal purpose of a museum is. Robert Sullivan describes the universal purpose of the

---

<sup>60</sup> Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 125.

<sup>61</sup> Duncan F. Cameron, 66.

<sup>62</sup> Theodore Law, “What is a Museum?” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 31.

museum as the “moral educators” of a community.<sup>63</sup> Theodore Law states that the “purpose and the only purpose of museums is education in all its varied aspects from the most scholarly research to the simple arousing of curiosity.”<sup>64</sup> Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler define museums as “hybrids composed of collecting institutions with story-driven and interactive learning and entertainment centers.”<sup>65</sup> These three museum purpose-driven definitions demonstrate how complicated and varied the universal museum institution was and continues to be. Requiring a further definition, to understand, universally, what a museum is by defining what a museum does.

Defining a museum’s purpose is the same as defining a museum’s function, as the purpose drives the function. This allows scholars to continue to attempt to define the museum based on what they feel it should be accomplishing. ““What is a Museum?” is not to be found in words but in the nature of the institutions themselves.”<sup>66</sup> Paul M. Rea, a former director of the Association of American Museums from 1919 to 1921, defined the purpose of a museum to be “the acquisition and preservation of objects, the advancement of knowledge by the study of objects, and the diffusion of knowledge for the enrichment of the life of the people.” Law uses this definition of function to answer the question “what is a museum?”<sup>67</sup> Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler answer the question “what is a museum” by defining what differentiates a museum from a non-museum,

---

<sup>63</sup> Robert Sullivan, “Evaluating the Ethics and Conscience of Museums,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 257.

<sup>64</sup> Theodore Law, 36.

<sup>65</sup> Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler, “Can Museums be All Things to All People?” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 181.

<sup>66</sup> Theodore Law, 31-32.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

“collections of authentic objects and materials, assembled and conserved in accordance with the core purposes of preservation, enlightenment, edification, and education.”<sup>68</sup>

Scholars Edward P. Alexander and Mary Alexander’s *Museums in Motion* use the entire book to define the museum institution as a variety of different institutions that all share a same set of functions. These functions create the universal definition of the museum. The functions, described by Edward P. Alexander and Mary Alexander that a museum must perform are “to collect, to conserve, to exhibit, to interpret, and to serve.”<sup>69</sup> Defining the museum based on the institution’s functions has proved to be the only way for scholars to come to an agreement on what a museum is. The various functions all serve, as J.V. Noble described them, as fingers on a hand. Each finger is “independent but united for common purpose.”<sup>70</sup> Of these different functions, the one repeatedly listed by every scholar, is the function of exhibition.

“Museums are not museums without exhibitions.” The exhibition is what connects the viewer to the museum; it is what draws the museum visitor into the institution. “The act of showing brings with it an inherent dialectic between the intentions of the presenter and the experiences of the spectator.”<sup>71</sup> In focusing on the exhibitions of P.T. Barnum and the controversial exhibitions of the past twenty years, the reader will understand the power of exhibition to both affect social change and to create an emotion. Exhibitions were once only about the presentation and interpretation or “the story or

---

<sup>68</sup> Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler, 181.

<sup>69</sup> Edward P. and Mary Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, viii.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Veach Noble, “Museum Prophecy: The Role of Museums in the 1970s,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 14, no.1 (1971), 69-74.

<sup>71</sup> Kathleen McLean, “Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 193.

perspective that is crafted...by certain people for certain ends” of an object.<sup>72</sup> This saw the museum through Peale and Barnum’s era of education and entertainment, “the nineteenth century culture of exhibition was wide and varied, involving the public display of natural curiosities, technological advances and demonstrations and medicinal/psychological treatments.”<sup>73</sup> Exhibitions have since moved away from interpreting for the viewer to being about “people communicating with each other.”<sup>74</sup> Museum exhibitions of the past twenty years have taken another turn, to not only focusing on creating discourse between museum visitors, but also eliciting strong emotions from them. “An exhibition may present different experiences of one historical event, or the visitor may be immersed in a re-created scene designed to conjure up emotions of a significant place or moment of time.”<sup>75</sup> Gail Anderson could very well be describing the controversy surrounding the Enola Gay exhibition and the Slave Auction at Colonial Williamsburg, but she is celebrating the emotions that these kinds of exhibitions create in visitors, as they should be celebrated. “Museum exhibitions should be designed from the very beginning so that they become the basis for television programs, films, feature articles in magazines, and well-designed highly readable museum publications.”<sup>76</sup> Exhibitions must be sensational and educational, controversial and all encompassing, all

---

<sup>72</sup> Lois H. Silverman, “Making Meaning Together,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 234-235.

<sup>73</sup> Eric Fretz, 97.

<sup>74</sup> Kathleen McLean, “Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 197.

<sup>75</sup> Gail Anderson, “The Role of Public Service: The Evolution of Exhibitions and Programs,” *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*, Gail Anderson, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 189.

<sup>76</sup> Duncan F. Cameron, 72.

at the same time. They must draw in the museum visitor, grab their interest, teach them all sides to a story, and elicit emotion, then send them on their way.

Exhibitions are the life source of all museums, Barnum's included. No matter if they are for profit or non-for profit, exhibition is what draws a crowd. As modern museums struggle to stay relevant, they find new ways to exhibit and new ideas to exhibit. Museum professionals and scholars will also look to the past to find inspiration for the future of museums. In Chapter Two, Barnum demonstrated that exhibitions that elicit emotional responses could be a power for good and societal change. But first, there is a need to understand the importance of Barnum's faith as a major factor in his evolving view of slavery and temperance.



## **Chapter Two**

Phineas Taylor Barnum has shown himself to be a slippery fellow to understand; many scholars have struggled to understand this larger-than-life individual. Barnum left an impression in the historical record. Examining the documents he left behind and then comparing them to the moral dramas that he produced in the American Museum reveals a glimpse into the real Barnum. As stated earlier, of the scholars that have written about him, Neil Harris and A.H. Saxon have created the most complete image of this complicated man. Saxon wrote that Barnum was “a deeply religious man who experienced at mid-life chastening moral regeneration.”<sup>77</sup> Scholars, excluding Saxon, who wish to focus on other factors of Barnum’s life have largely ignored Barnum’s faith. It was Barnum’s faith that inspired his activism inside the American Museum, inspiring Barnum to create an institution that was not only family-friendly, but also an outlet for him to spread a message he believed in. His desire to use the American Museum to “advocate” or support a political and social agenda caused him to develop a method to both maintain the success of the institution and, spread the messages of abolition and temperance to a wider audience. Barnum’s method of understanding the purpose of the exhibition, knowing the likes and dislikes of his audience, and tightly controlling the exhibition of the moral dramas has been used by 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century museum professionals when faced with controversial exhibitions. However, it is interesting to note that this fact has gone unrecognized by them.

---

<sup>77</sup> A.H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 7.

Barnum pursued activism through the American Museum's Lecture Room because of his Universalist faith. "No argument for a harmonious universe can be made save on the basis of Christian theism."<sup>78</sup> Consequently, Universalists believe that all souls are saved and therefore there is no hell. This places them in opposition to traditional Christian beliefs. But this doctrine caused Universalists like Barnum to believe that universal salvation would cause people to "act out of a higher and less purely selfish virtue."<sup>79</sup> In *Why I am a Universalist*, Barnum explained, "We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men."<sup>80</sup> Possessing this ideology, the Universalists began to issue "public resolutions on the matter" of slavery and temperance in the 1840's.<sup>81</sup> Ultimately, it was Barnum's faith that caused him to believe that the only way to demonstrate piety was through "humanitarian and reformist endeavors."<sup>82</sup> Barnum's faith united and ignited his passions for social equality and the betterment of all peoples. It was this faith that influenced Barnum's moral dramas on abolition and temperance and because of that faith Barnum's actions must be examined seriously in promoting these social movements. Truly, Barnum's faith made him an activist.

Barnum was not the only social activist to be inspired by faith. After the spiritual upheaval caused by the Second Great Awakening, people living in the northeastern

---

<sup>78</sup> Barnum, [http://www.pacificuu.org/publ/univ/writings/barnum\\_why.html](http://www.pacificuu.org/publ/univ/writings/barnum_why.html)

<sup>79</sup> Ann Lee Bressler, *The Universalist Movement in America 1770-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 31

<sup>80</sup> P.T. Barnum, *Why I am a Universalist* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1890), 1

<sup>81</sup> Anne Lee Bressler, *The Universalist Movement in America 1770-1880*, 83.

<sup>82</sup> Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 23.

United States felt ordained to right the civil wrongs of society. They believed this task could only be accomplished through the abolition of slavery, the prohibition of alcohol, the creation of public schools, and the building of jails and asylums.<sup>83</sup> The men and women who supported the social reform movement saw these actions as noble and moral.

By the 1840s, the abolitionist or anti-slavery movement was in full swing after resting on the American conscience for almost 200 years. The Temperance Movement, a more recent phenomenon, focused on the expulsion of the societal evil of debauchery, through prohibition. During the life of Barnum's American Museum, the abolition and temperance movements had become popular with the upper and middle classes of New York City. Again, that was due to the moralizing efforts of the Second Great Awakening, which scholar John W. Frick said "wrought radical changes in moral attitudes and outlook and had a profound impact on social reform during the first half of the nineteenth century."<sup>84</sup>

This need for social change was reflected in the literature of the time. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* gave a heart wrenching description of the horrors of slavery throughout the southern states. William H. Smith's *The Drunkard* and T.S. Arthur's *Ten-Nights in a Bar-room* exposed the dangers of "demon rum." Temperance dramas came into their own as a genre during this time period, as the movement gained a greater following and filled theaters with supporters. Enterprising New Yorkers quickly

---

<sup>83</sup> Kyle G Volk, "The Perils of 'Pure Democracy' Minority Rights, Liquor Politics, and Popular Sovereignty in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 29, no. 4 (2009): 641.

<sup>84</sup> John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 27

realized that advocacy in these two movements could be a lucrative undertaking.

However, in the case of Barnum, surprisingly, this was not true.

For Barnum, an active member of both movements, “slavery and temperance wielded a clout in his Lecture Room unrivaled by any other themes.”<sup>85</sup> Barnum saw the primary mission of his American Museum as the upholding of virtue, “portraying its beautiful and certainly happy consequences and as vividly painting the positive and inevitable evil consequence of vice.”<sup>86</sup> He believed the abolition of slavery and the promotion of temperance clearly fell within the bounds of that mission. He championed these causes by turning his American Museum into a site of advocacy. These “moral dramas” promoted a lifestyle that Barnum not only practiced, but also believed everyone should follow.

The vehicle Barnum used to accomplish his mission was the moral drama performed in his “Lecture Room.” (a room in the American Museum that had a stage.) As early as 1850, he placed advertisements in the popular newspapers of New York, dailies like the *New York Daily Tribune*, that announced the performances or attractions occurring around the city. “Barnum’s American Museum” was advertised in every single one from 1850 until the final demise of the museum as an institution in 1868. The advertisements show that one could spend all day in the American Museum and view as many as four different plays. For example, on Friday December 13, 1850, these plays ranged in theme from a “celebrated company of Indian performers” in an “original tragedy entitled ‘The Mohawk’s Revenge’ followed by the “farce of ‘Domestic

---

<sup>85</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 117.

<sup>86</sup> “Barnum’s Lecture Room Reopening,” *New York Tribune*, June 19, 1850, 1.

Economy”” and finally (in the evening) the drama of “Charlotte Temple”<sup>87</sup> and “The Illustrious Stranger.”<sup>88</sup>

With such a great number of plays being performed in a single day, Barnum needed to hire and keep his own company of actors. The Lecture Room, as described by Barnum scholar Neil Harris, was a venue that “for almost two decades... offered a generation of New Yorkers... a rich and heady sampling of American melodrama, exciting and didactic at the same time.”<sup>89</sup>

New York City theater in Barnum’s time was a different breed from that across the “pond.” In London, the wealthy regularly attended the theater. In New York, the rich did not run to the theater; instead, they fled from it. The only appropriate form of entertainment in New York for the upper classes was found in the Opera. Joseph N. Ireland explains that this came from those classes “having voted the theatre a vulgarity and the opera the only entertainment for people of taste.”<sup>90</sup> Consequently, on the stage, playwrights became critical towards “society matrons for neglecting the home and

---

<sup>87</sup> *Charlotte Temple* was a book adapted into a play, published in 1791. It tells the story of Charlotte Temple who was a young girl seduced and impregnated by a British officer who brings her to New York and abandons her. After giving birth she becomes ill and dies. This play is a moral drama, likely edited for Barnum’s audience, but still provides an educated warning to his audience to not have promiscuous sex because you will get pregnant and die.

<sup>88</sup> Attractions, “Friday December 13, 1850,” *New York Daily Tribune*. *The Illustrious Stranger* is an operatic spoof, which provided a light-hearted form of entertainment after the drama of *Charlotte Temple*. The performance of an operatic spoof in Barnum’s Lecture Room shows his attention to popular detail and knowledge that his audience is made up of all classes who enjoy this genre but may not always have the education to understand it.

<sup>89</sup> Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 107.

<sup>90</sup> Tice L. Miller ed. Judith L. Fisher and Stephen Watt, *When They Weren’t Doing Shakespeare: Essays on Nineteenth-Century British and American Theater* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 244.

allowing children to grow up without proper moral teachers.”<sup>91</sup> This idea was reflected in the moral themes that the plays centered around. But it is interesting to note that playwrights were not attempting to teach the morals they felt their audience needed to learn. Instead, they chastised a younger generation simply for their ignorance.

P.T. Barnum capitalized on this newly created niche in the theater district. He was not afraid to moralize and educate his audience of the social evils of the generation. He believed it was his calling to “distill for the great public every species of the popular drama and present them all so completely divested of mental impurity, so perfectly raked off the less of verbal pollution, that the most inexperienced may imbibe them without apprehension, and the most cautious prescribe them with confident hope of intellectual advantage.”<sup>92</sup>

Barnum would not only produce these moral dramas, but he would also censor and rewrite other popular shows of the time and present them in the American Museums’ Lecture Room. “From the fall through the spring Barnum had one of the best repertory companies in the city, performing the latest popular plays with elaborate costumes and stage props.”<sup>93</sup> This included presenting the classics, but with a twist. Barnum advertised, “the dramas introduced in the Lecture Room will never contain a profane expression of vulgar allusion.”<sup>94</sup> He stated in his Letter to the Editor of *The Nation* that he never “permitted vulgar ‘sensation dramas.’” Again he argued, “no vulgar word or gesture and not a profane expression, was ever allowed on my stage. Even in Shakespeare’s plays, I

---

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 247.

<sup>92</sup> P.T. Barnum, “Letter to the Editor,” *The New York Tribune*, June 19, 1850, 1.

<sup>93</sup> Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, 160.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 158

unflinchingly and invariable cut out vulgarity and profanity.”<sup>95</sup> Barnum censored Shakespeare at a time when Shakespeare was revered as classic and sophisticated entertainment. As far as Barnum was concerned, the American Museum Lecture Room was for “catering for public improvement as well as public amusement.”<sup>96</sup>

Barnum would collect the plays for his Lecture Room in different ways. Popular books, the Bible, and classical literature were used but another source was John Nimmo, an associate living in Paris, France. In a letter to John Nimmo, Barnum recounts what plays were being performed: “We are playing religious dramas here and have already got Joseph and his Brethren and the Prodigal Son.” Barnum then requested Nimmo to search out the “several religious or Bible subjects have been dramatized in Paris and played.” If these plays were published and could be purchased “for a frank or two each,” Barnum asked that Nimmo would buy “and send me a copy of each one published.”<sup>97</sup> Other sources of inspiration for plays were from newspapers and current events. During the years of the Civil War, Barnum’s Lecture Room put on the drama of “Anderson, the Patriot Heart of Sumter.” Barnum claimed that the emotion the show would create in the audience would “strike terror to the heart of every traitor, and convince him that the Union must and will be preserved.”<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> P.T. Barnum, “Letter to the Editor of *The Nation*” re-printed by *The Liberator* August 25, 1865.

<sup>96</sup> Letter from P.T. Barnum to Robert Bonner, February 5, 1862 in *Selected Letters of P.T. Barnum*, A.H. Saxon, ed., comp., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 116-117.

<sup>97</sup> Letter from P.T. Barnum to John Nimmo, September 20, 1860 in *Selected Letters of P.T. Barnum*, A.H. Saxon, ed., comp., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 107.

<sup>98</sup> George C.D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, Vol. 7 (NY, 1927-1949), 337-338.

The plays were popular, drawing so many people that after eight years, Barnum had to expand the Lecture Room to fit 3,000 people.<sup>99</sup> Yet, not everyone was pleased. “The moral dramas that were being performed were a threat to the theater,” argued William K. Northall a New York playwright, “there was not a theater in New York that did not teach morality as pure as the museum...Theaters and museums were never intended to be schools of ethics...The stage, to be respected, must be careful not to offend good manners or violate the moral principles...but they have no more to do with the promulgation of ethical doctrines than they have with the teaching of astronomy.”<sup>100</sup> That was not the end of Northall’s criticism of Barnum, his museum, and the Lecture Room moral dramas. He continued. “If the stage be distasteful, in his judgment, to the habits and morals of the audience who visit his establishment, why not eschew them altogether, not wheedle the public into his traps and thus oblige them to patch up their damaged consciences with the paltry excuse that it is the museum and not the play they went to see.”<sup>101</sup> Northall’s complaints prove that Barnum was doing something bigger than just performing plays. He was trying to change a generation, alter their thinking, and educate them to discuss these issues in order to come to their own moral and just conclusions.

Barnum understood that the American Museum was a site for family friendly entertainment, he took that mentality into his censoring of theatrical plays because he wanted men, women, and children to all enjoy the same entertainment. Barnum understood his audience; he understood that women were the ones bringing their families into the institution because the museum advertised itself as a “special place of family

---

<sup>99</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 118.

<sup>100</sup> William K. Northall, *Before and Behind The Curtain*, (New York: Burgess, 1851) 166.

<sup>101</sup> Neil Harris, 107.



amusement.”<sup>102</sup> By targeting women and their families, Barnum was able to create an attraction that all people would want to enter. Once this was established, Barnum added the moral dramas to the American Museum’s lecture room. The museum opened in 1841, but it was not until 1850, with the reopening of the American Museum lecture room, that the first moral dramas were advertised in the New York City newspapers.<sup>103</sup> The American Museum became the equivalent of Disney World; families would make pilgrimages to the institution. This power allowed Barnum to produce moral dramas that would spark discussion on the topics of abolition and temperance amongst individuals who would ignore the public discourse of these two movements. Barnum made it impossible to ignore the topics of abolition and temperance in his museum. He did this through the abolitionist productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Dred: a Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, and *The Octoroon* and his temperance productions of *The Drunkard*, *the Last Nail*, *The Bottle*, *Hot Corn*, and *Ten Nights in a Bar-room*.

It is easily an understatement to say that the debate over slavery and race relations was a sensitive topic throughout the antebellum United States. Yet, many were unconvinced about abolition. While some were involved in anti-slavery organizations that carried the beacon of hope and freedom for those seeking to break out of bondage, there were others who preferred to ignore the issues and continue with a business as usual attitude. This difference of opinion over the life and freedom of a group of exploited individuals made abolition literature crucial to the anti-slavery cause. This literature took the form of novels and moral dramas throughout the early nineteenth century.

Abolitionist plays were popular works on the New York City theater stage. The plays not

---

<sup>102</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 99.

<sup>103</sup> “Barnum’s Lecture Room Reopening,” *New York Tribune*, June 19, 1850, 1.

only dramatized a horrific view of the institution of slavery, but also caused controversy in their description of slaves and slaveholders alike.

“Barnum’s museum established itself as one of the most popular and controversial representers of slavery to a public whose views on the institution were rapidly evolving.”<sup>104</sup> The first moral drama to be dramatized was Harriett Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1853. There were two popular versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* dramatized at the time; one was H.J. Conway’s and the other by playwright George L. Aiken. H. J. Conway followed his dramatization of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with Harriett Beecher Stowe’s *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* in 1856. Another popular abolition drama was *The Octoroon* by Dion Boucicault, first performed in 1859.

Harriet Beecher Stowe was partially inspired to write *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in response to the pro-slavery legislation of the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Law. The Fugitive Slave Law was particularly revolting to her because it made the housing or aiding of fugitive slaves illegal. If caught, there was a punishment of a one thousand dollar fine and jail time.<sup>105</sup> For Stowe, the best response to these and other anti-abolitionist actions was to write a book to attempt to change the social climate in favor of abolition. When later questioned about the writing of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe further explained that the work was also inspired by her personal experiences living in Cincinnati (a border state), a trip to Kentucky, and the memoirs of freed slaves. In later years, she

---

<sup>104</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 129.

<sup>105</sup> Gregg D. Crane, “Dangerous Sentiments: Sympathy, Rights, and Revolution in Stowe’s Antislavery Novels,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51, no. 2 (1996): 176

would argue that it was God who wrote the novel and not herself.<sup>106</sup> While the origin and inspiration of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may be questionable, its effects cannot be denied. Stowe's book went on to become the most popular and successful, of all abolitionist literature, in novel and drama form. The reception of the novel amongst African Americans throughout the abolition movement was a positive one, even with Stowe as a supporter of colonization.<sup>107</sup> Frederick Douglass believed that this work would stir enough emotion among the whites of the North and the South to mobilize change.<sup>108</sup>

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *Life Among the Lowly* tells the story of two slaves, Tom and Harry, who were going to be "sold down river" as a source of quick income for their former benevolent masters. Harry's mother, not wanting to lose her only surviving son, runs away with him, while Tom is successfully sold to a family in New Orleans, who share his Christian faith. After the death of their daughter and her final vision, they pledge to better themselves. Part of that pledge involves giving Tom his freedom. However, the family reneges, and sells Tom to another plantation in rural Louisiana. This plantation is covered in darkness and its owner is vicious. The story concludes with Tom being brutally killed, in a manner resembling the crucifixion and sacrifice of Christ. In the book, Tom is a martyr, some white men are the enemy, and the entire institution of slavery is to blame.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>106</sup> David Levin, "American Fiction as Historical Evidence: Reflections on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Negro American Literature Forum* 5, no. 4 (1971): 133.

<sup>107</sup> Arthur Riss, "Racial Essentialism and Family values in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *American Quarterly* (December, 1994): 515.

<sup>108</sup> Robert S. Levine, "Uncle Tom's Cabin in Frederick Douglass' Paper: An Analysis of Reception," *American Literature* (March 1992): 76.

<sup>109</sup> Harriett Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Barnes and Noble 2005).

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was adapted and dramatized for the stage. Working in a time before enforced copyrights, many literary freedoms were taken with the original work by each playwright. There were a number of "Tom Shows" that took the appearance of musicals, plays, and minstrel shows.<sup>110</sup> The two that survived are H.J. Conway's loose interpretation and Charles Aiken's close adaption. Barnum's Lecture Room decided on H.J. Conway's dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* when the play debuted in 1853.

Conway's play was a diluted version of Stowe's book. While it was pro-abolitionist on the surface, it was actually crafted to avoid offending anti-abolitionist sentiments. It celebrated "white patriarchy" by depicting the white characters as heroes.<sup>111</sup> They are the ones who freed Tom and the other slaves. Instead of George Harris and Liza running away together, they are led by a white man, Drover John.<sup>112</sup> Instead of running away and reuniting with daughter Eliza, Cassy is found still in bondage. In the greatest departure from Stowe's book, Conway has Tom return to the protective arms of his former owner instead of sacrificing himself for Cassy's freedom.<sup>113</sup> So, for the sake of a happy ending and a concession to anti-abolitionists, Conway gutted the story.

In contrast to Conway's interpretation, Aiken's version has Tom sacrifice his life to allow two other slaves to escape. As he lies dying, Tom's final words are of hope in

---

<sup>110</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 131.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-132.

<sup>112</sup> H.J. Conway, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1:4

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

the hereafter. Heaven has come! I've got the victory; the Lord has given it to me! Glory be to His name!"<sup>114</sup>

Why would Barnum, the advocate for abolition, choose Conway's version over Aiken's? Barnum cited his concern for the feelings of the audience. He argued "instead of turning away the audience in tears, the author has wisely consulted dramatic taste by having virtue triumphant at last, and after all its unjust sufferings, miseries and deprivations conducted to happiness by the hand of Him who watches over all."<sup>115</sup> But his advertisements in *The New York Evening Post* of November 19, 1853, reveal the conflicting sentiments of his times. Barnum stated in the advertisement that the play did not "foolishly and unjustly elevate the negro above the white man in intellect or morals," nor did it "represent the polish of the drawing room, and the refinements of the educated white."<sup>116</sup> So, in this way, Barnum dealt with the dilemma of supporting his controversial abolitionist viewpoint without offending his audience.

The opening of Conway's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* met with negative reviews from the *New York Daily Tribune*. "Uncle Tom has been brought out at the museum with a good deal of care as regards scenery and appointments but with no care at all to preserve fidelity to the spirit of the story as told by Mrs. Stowe."<sup>117</sup> There is no clear evidence on how Barnum took this review or what things he chose to change from Conway's version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but, a month later, the *New York Daily Tribune* was asked to return to the American Museum's Lecture Room and review an updated version of the

---

<sup>114</sup> Charles Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 4:4

<sup>115</sup> Barnum, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," *New York Evening Post*, November 19, 1853.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> "Uncle Tom at Barnum's," *New York Daily Tribune*, November 15, 1853.

play. The reporters opened by stating that there were reforms that had been “introduced into the piece” and that the tone of the work had changed, for the better. They continued, “In other respects... a successful effort has been made to make the play conform to the spirit of the original story... Now let him kill Uncle Tom and all will be right.”<sup>118</sup>

However, Barnum would not part with Conway’s ending. Remember, this was the man who censored Shakespeare to make him more family friendly. So, it should not come as a surprise to anyone that he gave *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* a happy ending.

In 1856, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s follow up to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*. Stowe’s second novel tells the story of two North Carolinian slave-owning families. One of the families was the Gordons (Nina the heroine, and her mulatto half-brother, Harry, her father, Colonel Gordon, and Tom) and the other family, the Claytons (Edward the hero, his father Judge Clayton, and his sister Anne). The first legal battle presented is between Nina Gordon and Mr. Baker. Baker has killed Milly, one of Nina’s slaves. Milly, was a personal slave that Nina rented out to Baker to raise money for her failing plantation. Outraged by the loss, Nina hired Edward Clayton, a lawyer who loves her. Edward wins the first case but loses when Baker appeals to the Supreme Court. After the loss, Edward resigns from law and Nina dies from cholera. After Nina’s death, Edward and his sister, Anne, educate their slaves in preparation for their emancipation. After an angry mob attempts to sabotage this effort, the Clayton siblings move to Canada. The second case involves Cora, a slave who was emancipated when she married a plantation owner in Louisiana and a lawyer named Mr. Jekyll. After Cora’s husband’s death, she inherits his plantation and Mr. Jekyll uses the

---

<sup>118</sup> Unsigned, “Uncle Tom at Barnum’s,” *New York Tribune*, December 2, 1853.

law to take it from her and return her to slavery. Meanwhile in the swamps, the title character, Dred, is growing an army of runaway slaves to rise up and start a slave insurrection to assault the white community. Harry, half brother to the deceased Nina, has taken his family there and joined them. After a change of heart, Dred loses his lust for violence and vengeance and leads his runaway army to freedom in the north.<sup>119</sup>

Once again, H.J. Conway was involved in dramatizing a Harriet Beecher Stowe novel. The play premiered in the Lecture Room on October 15, 1856. A review written by the *New York Tribune* described the changes that Conway made to the original work:

By means of omitting many of the characters entirely, changing the individualities of some of those whose names he retained, writing in several new ones names and all, transposing the chronology, leaving out all situations and incidents which didn't suit him, and inventing others which did; by killing some of the persons of the drama before their time, and suffering others, whom Mrs. Stowe remorselessly consigned to an early grave, to live and get married; by discarding the story as developed in the book, and writing a more easily managed one, and by inventing a catastrophe to match, Mr. Conway has produced an entertaining play...he probably considered himself bound to follow, to some slight extent, the course of the story as laid down by Mrs. Stowe.<sup>120</sup>

One of the changes made to the script was to keep Harry in the south to bless the Clayton's philanthropy and lay the "Dreds" of the south permanently to rest: "When education is fully carried into effect, we shall need no more Dreds to protect fugitive slaves, nor read more tales of the Great Swamp."<sup>121</sup> Conway's reworking of the script mimicked an opinion Barnum expressed in 1888, that education or assimilation would "bring them out into the light of civilization; let them and their children come into the genial sunshine of Christianity; teach them industry, self-reliance, and self-respect; let

---

<sup>119</sup> Kevin Cherry, "Dred" <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/stowe2/summary.html> accessed May 9, 2013.

<sup>120</sup> "Dred at the Museum," *New York Tribune*, October 15, 1856.

<sup>121</sup> H.J Conway, *Dred* (New York: J.W. Amerman, 1856) 4:1

them learn what too few white Christians have yet understood, that cleanliness is akin to godliness, and a part of godliness; and the human soul will begin to develop itself.”<sup>122</sup>

There is a difference in the characters of *Dred* when compared to those Conway created for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. “The enhanced autonomy of Conway’s black characters...speaks to a shift in northern racial feeling in the four years since Conway’s *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Most whites remained deeply hostile to political or social equality for blacks, but by 1856, a number of prominent Republicans had begun to fight Democratic encroachments on the civil rights of African Americans.”<sup>123</sup> Although *Dred* did not have the resounding effect *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did, it was a step forward in the progress of anti-slavery thought and indicated growth of support for the movement. The play also demonstrated Barnum’s “ability to present current political and social topics at the American Museum that attracted rather than offended large segments of his audience.”<sup>124</sup> Barnum was able to do this because he always remained true to his basic beliefs, while understanding how not to offend his audience.

On February 6, 1860, Dion Boucicault, an Irish actor turned playwright, debuted his work, *The Octoroon*, in the Lecture Room. The play tells the story of Zoe, an octoroon, living on the Terrebonne plantation in Louisiana. Octoroons were defined as a white person who is one-eighth black. Racial practices at that time required octoroons live under the same laws and prejudices as slaves. The play starts with the return of George Peyton, the nephew of the plantation owner. A corrupt neighboring plantation

---

<sup>122</sup> Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 628.

<sup>123</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 145.

<sup>124</sup> "Dred" at the Museum, *New York Tribune*, October 18, 1856  
<http://chnm.gmu.edu/lostmuseum/lm/249/>, accessed May 9, 2013



owner, Jacob McClosky, warns them that the Terrebonne plantation will be sold and their slaves auctioned off. McClosky looks forward to the opportunity of obtaining Zoe as a mistress when the slaves are auctioned off. In an attempt to save the plantation, George courts an heiress named Dora Sunnyside but finds he is falling for Zoe. In Act II, they admit their love for each other, but Zoe rejects his marriage proposal because as an octoroon, she, by state law, cannot marry a white man. Act III finds George going to propose to Dora, but he does not and once again, admits his love for Zoe. The auction is held and Zoe, to the surprise of everyone, is placed on the auction block. Dora uses her wealth to purchase Zoe but McClosky outbids her. In Act IV, the slaves are placed on a steamship and it is discovered that McClosky has killed a slave named Paul, who carried a letter that would solve the financial problems of Terrebonne. In Act V, the men who have arrested McClosky go to get the authorities, but he escapes and sets the steamship on fire. McClosky is killed in a struggle, Zoe is freed, and Terrebonne is returned to Peyton. When Zoe returns to Terrebonne, she drinks a vial of potion because she cannot marry the man she loves and the play ends with her death.<sup>125</sup> At least this is the show that Americans saw. In England, another version of the play was performed. It had a happier ending with the two star-crossed lovers being married and living happily ever after.<sup>126</sup>

*The Octoroon* is remembered as one of the most successful melodramas of the last half of the nineteenth century and one of the few plays that “ventured to deal with the explosive subject of slavery.” Although it did not have the overall effect of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “none the less, the atmosphere was charged when the New York premiere of *The*

---

<sup>125</sup> Dion Boucicault, “The Octoroon,” *Nineteenth-Century American Plays*, Myron Matlaw, ed. (New York: Applause Theater Book Publishers, 1967).

<sup>126</sup> Myron Matlaw, *Nineteenth-Century American Plays* (New York: Applause Theater Book Publishers, 1967), 99.

*Octoroon* took place.<sup>127</sup> The success of the play was due to Boucicault capitalizing on a controversial topic that would attract large crowds and his “adeptness in presenting such a subject without offending even pro slavery patrons.”<sup>128</sup> Joseph Jefferson, an actor of Barnum’s company, was in *The Octoroon* opening night. He comments on the play in his autobiography: “When Zoe, the loving octoroon, is offered to the highest bidder, and a warm-hearted southern girl offers all her fortune to buy Zoe, and releases her from threatened bondage...the audience cheered for the South, but when again the action revealed that she could be bartered for, and was bought and sold, they cheered for the North, as plainly as though, they had said ‘Down with Slavery!’”<sup>129</sup> Boucicault “craftily” blurred the lines of his play’s politics. Even so, a character he created in response to the hanging of John Brown and other motions to the anti-slavery movement were enough to “outrage” his “southern-sympathizing critics.”<sup>130</sup> This is what made the play, which was far more conservative than George Aiken’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or H.J. Conway’s *Dred*, controversial. It opened four days after Brown’s hanging, an “execution that sent a stunning wave of sympathy rolling across the north for” this man.<sup>131</sup> With that sympathy fresh on an audience’s mind, mixed with the themes of the play, it was a potent combination for changing anti-abolition thoughts into pro-abolition thoughts.

As discussed in Chapter One, Barnum had conflicting and contradicting exhibitions in the American Museum, a defense of this action in the later part of Barnum’s career is that he did so to attract those racist individuals who would ignore

---

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Joseph Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson*, Alan S. Downer, ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press) 147-163.

<sup>130</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 148.

<sup>131</sup> Dion Boucicault, “The Octoroon.”

abolition rhetoric. Further evidence of this defense comes from Barnum's request to have Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave who was liberated by abolitionist in Boston in 1854, speak in the American Museum. From a letter Barnum wrote David K. Hitchcock of Bridgeport, Connecticut in February 1855, Barnum offers Burns "\$500 to go into my museum 5 weeks and there tell his tale to our visitors..."<sup>132</sup> Whether or not Burns agreed to Barnum's offer is unknown, but in the attempted hiring of a liberated slave, Barnum was willing to educate his guests, in his own unique way, to the social and moral evils of slavery. Barnum's actions regarding abolition mirrored his approach towards his other favorite reform movement, temperance.

The temperance movement was "the antebellum crusade against hard liquor" and advocated total abstinence from alcohol.<sup>133</sup> Specifically, "the American Temperance movement during the nineteenth century was a part of a general effort toward the improvement of the worth of human beings through improved morality as well as economic conditions."<sup>134</sup> This movement worked closely with the anti-slavery movement to reach the same goal--improved morality and material wealth for an entire society. Although the two movements worked closely enough to share jargon, the temperance movement, at heart, was different. Alcohol was not inflicting massive levels of actual human bondage nor directly controlling the lives of thousands of individuals. It was more of an internal conflict. For those who championed the movement, many knew

---

<sup>132</sup> Phineas Taylor Barnum to David K. Hitchcock Bridgeport, February 28, 1855 in *Selected Letters of P.T. Barnum*, A.H. Saxon, ed., comp., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 85-86.

<sup>133</sup> Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 72.

<sup>134</sup> Joseph R. Gusfield, "Social Structure and Moral Reform: A Study of the Women's Christian Temperance Union," *American Journal of Sociology* 62, no. 3 (1955): 221.

something of the dangers of drinking because they had experienced them first hand; Barnum certainly had.<sup>135</sup> For them, the prohibition of alcohol was meant to cure the debaucheries that flowed from those who indulged in drink. There was also the issue of class. Those who drank heavily tended to belong to the lower working classes. Those fighting for prohibition were generally “elite evangelicals” who were “being challenged for the control over the...movement by [groups], made up of lower-middle classes.”<sup>136</sup>

By 1850, the movement was well established. While some temperance organizations had come and gone, others were just underway. Organizations like the Washingtonians, started in 1840 in Baltimore Maryland, had ended by 1850. During that same time period, the American Temperance Union and the Sons of Temperance,<sup>137</sup> the group to which P.T. Barnum was a member, joined the ranks of temperance organizations. These various groups would stage the same confessional protests as the anti-slavery movements. Those who had been saved from depravity shared their stories and warned others not to follow in their tracks but to see the light before they were ruined by drink.<sup>138</sup> These organizations effectively infiltrated public opinion and later public entertainment.

In 1867, Barnum wrote, “In the course of my life I have written much for newspapers, on various subjects, and always with earnestness, but in none of these have I

---

<sup>135</sup> Letter From P.T. Barnum to Moses Kimball, August 26, 1845 in *Selected Letters of P.T. Barnum*, A.H. Saxon, ed., comp., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 33-34.

<sup>136</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 121.

<sup>137</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 121.

<sup>138</sup> Michael P. Young, “Confessional Protest: The Religious Birth of U.S. National Social Movements,” *American Sociological Review* 67 (Oct. 2002): 668.

felt so deep an interest as in that of the Temperance Reform.”<sup>139</sup> Barnum described how he became a believer in the temperance movement during a tour with General Tom Thumb at the New York State Fair in Saratoga Springs. Barnum said he “saw so much intoxication among men of wealth and intellect, filling the highest positions in society, that I began to ask myself the question, what guarantee is there that I may not become a drunkard?”<sup>140</sup> Barnum was further inspired after hearing a speech from his friend, Rev. Dr. Elliott Chapin, one of the movement leaders. Although Barnum had already become a member of the temperance movement, he still enjoyed the occasional glass of wine or champagne. After hearing his friend’s speech, Barnum “felt that I had now a duty to perform--to save others as I had been saved, and on the very morning when I signed the pledge, I obtained over twenty signatures in Bridgeport.”<sup>141</sup> From there Barnum “talked temperance to all whom I met and very soon commenced lecturing upon the subject in the adjacent towns and villages. I spent the entire winter and spring of 1851-1852 in lecturing through my native states, always traveling at my own expense, and I was glad to know that I aroused many hundreds perhaps thousands to the importance of the temperance reform.”<sup>142</sup>

He continued to lecture in August of 1853, as he had “lectured in Cleveland, Ohio, Chicago, Illinois, and Kenosha, Wisconsin.” Newspapers would advertise Barnum’s lectures; for example, the *Belmont Chronicle* advertised on April 26, 1866 “in town Phineas T. Barnum Esq. ... of New York arrived this morning... The great showman... will lecture to our people tomorrow (Thursday) evening on Temperance. Mr.

---

<sup>139</sup> Phineas Taylor Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum* 684.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Phineas Taylor Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 687.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

Barnum's fame will, of course, attract an immense crowd and we would advise our friends to secure their seats early."<sup>143</sup> Barnum used his fame to further the message of the temperance movement; he was not afraid to speak on the subject to all those he met and all those who questioned him on it.

A selection of some of the more famous temperance moral dramas Barnum displayed in the American Museum Lecture Room were: *The Drunkard or the Fallen Saved*, *The Drunkards Doom or: The Last Nail*, *The Bottle*, *Hot Corn*, and *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*. Of these, the two most famous are William H. Smith's adaption of *The Drunkard or The Fallen Saved* and William W. Pratt's adaptation of *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*. The moral drama of the temperance movement taught the audience what would happen when drink was indulged and sin ran rampant. *The Drunkard or The Fallen Saved* debuted in the American Museum's Lecture Room in 1849. It was such a popular play that Barnum was forced to expand his Lecture Room to accommodate the growing audience who hungered for moral dramas.

W.H. Smith, the playwright who penned *The Drunkard*, was born William Henry Sedley in North Wales, Britain. Smith ran away from home when he was fourteen, traveled for a time with a theater troupe, then immigrated to the United States. He worked as an actor until 1842 when Moses Kimball, a friend and colleague of P.T. Barnum, hired him to be a stage manager at his Boston Museum. It was during this time that Smith penned *The Drunkard*, presenting it on Kimball's stage for the first time in

---

<sup>143</sup> "Amusements" *Belmont Chronicle*, April 26, 1866.

1844.<sup>144</sup> The play went on to 140 performances in Boston and many more than that in New York. Barnum's American Museum Lecture Room celebrated 100 consecutive showings of the drama in October 1850.<sup>145</sup> As stated earlier in the Introduction, when Barnum recounted his favorite plays, *The Drunkard* was at the top of that list, not only from its overwhelming success monetarily, but its success socially. Again, *The Drunkard* tells the tale of Edward Middleton who falls into a trap set by the villainous lawyer, Cribbs. Middleton leaves his family and becomes a drunkard on the streets of Boston or New York depending on where the play was performed. Middleton and his family are saved from poverty and returned to their former standing through the generosity of the venerable Arden Rencelaw. When the Lecture Room was reopened after its expansion, it was dedicated, with a plaque, to *The Drunkard* and all other moral dramas.<sup>146</sup> *The Drunkard* lasted for sixteen seasons.

In 1852, inspired by the prints of George Cruikshank, T.P. Taylor penned an adaption of *The Bottle* for the London Stage. In the moral drama, mechanic Richard Thornley brings out a bottle and coaxes his wife, Ruth, to "one glass-only one now; just take a glass."<sup>147</sup> This single glass leads the family into ruin. Thornley continues to turn to drink as he loses his job, a child, and all respectability. The play concludes with Thornley striking Ruth with the bottle and killing her. He is then arrested, chained up in a madhouse and by the end of the play, dies. While *The Bottle* achieved success in England, the moral drama did not have the same draw on the New York stage. Taylor's

---

<sup>144</sup> John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 116-119.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>146</sup> Buford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 117.

<sup>147</sup> T.P. Taylor, *The Bottle*, (New York: John Douglas Publisher, 1847), 1:1.

work was performed on Barnum's American Museum's stage on Monday and Tuesday, January 12-13, 1852.

Another moral drama produced on Barnum's American Museum stage in 1852 was H.J. Conway's adaption of Dibdin Pitt's, *The Last Nail*. The moral drama tells the tale of drunkard Adelich Starke. Starke is taken on a dark journey by Olfinger, a half-dwarf, half-fiend being. Olfinger shows Starke a number of coffins with fellow drunkards inside them. Starke is then shown his own coffin with only a single nail remaining. Olfinger warns Starke that if he takes another drink, he will die and he never touches alcohol again. The play was advertised frequently in the *New York Times* Amusements section throughout the fall of 1852.<sup>148</sup> Though audience reviews of these productions are hard to come by, their short duration in the amusement section of the *New York Times* suggests that they were not quite as popular as other temperance works.

Friday, April 14, 1854, the *New York Times* advertised a showing of "the sterling and highly popular play of *Hot Corn*."<sup>149</sup> Penned by reporter Solon Robinson and edited by Horace Greeley, a friend of Barnum's in the temperance movement, the short story first appeared in the December 5, 1853, *New York Tribune* and was circulated throughout the country. *Hot Corn* tells the heart-wrenching tale of Little Katy who has been sent out into the midnight hour to sell hot corn to support her mother's alcoholism. In the newspaper published version of the story, the reader feels sympathy for Little Katy and anger towards her drunken, neglectful, and exploitive mother. The story ends with Little Katy's interaction with a man on the street. He walks off and the reader does not learn

---

<sup>148</sup> "Amusements," *New York Times*, November 9, 1852.

<sup>149</sup> "Amusements," *New York Times*, April 14, 1854.



the fate of Little Katy.<sup>150</sup> In the stage adaption, Little Katy does not sell her ration of corn and upon returning home, is beaten to death by her mother.<sup>151</sup> *Hot Corn* brought on two different examinations of intemperance. The first is the damage that it does to the silent victims, the children of drunkards. The second is making the drunkard in this story a woman, a role traditionally cast to the male or father figure in literature.

Published in 1854, Timothy Shay (T.S.) Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* would be adapted by William W. Pratt in 1858. Arthur was born June 6, 1809, in Newburgh, New York. He was a self-educated man who was remembered as a journalist, as well as, an author. Arthur wrote *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* between 1852 and 1853. Arthur and Pratt's work tells the story of Joe Morgan, a drunkard and former mill worker who drinks at "Sickle and Sheaf" owned by pseudo-villain, Simon Slade. The true villain of the story is "the good people of this world" who complain about drunkards and watch "the poor inebriate die" instead of being that "timely hand [that] might have saved him."<sup>152</sup> At the end of Act II, a fight breaks out between Slade and Morgan. Words are exchanged and Slade responds by throwing a glass that shatters on the head of Morgan's daughter, Mary. "Father! Dear Father! They have killed me!" she cried.<sup>153</sup> His daughter's mortal wound causes Morgan to turn from his drunken ways and return to his respectable job and life. After being assured that her father will never return to the bar-room, Mary dies at the end of Act IV. In Act V, a new drunkard, Frank Slade, appears at the "Sickle and Sheaf." Another fight breaks out and ends with Frank Slade murdering

---

<sup>150</sup> Solon Robinson, "Hot Corn, An Interview," *New York Tribune*, December 5, 1853.

<sup>151</sup> John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 137.

<sup>152</sup> William W. Pratt, "Ten Nights in a Bar-Room," *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas*, Michael Booth, ed. (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc, 1964), 169.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

his father, Simon Slade, with a bottle. The play concludes with a single plea, “our drama’s ended, but the lessons taught are with truthful warnings deeply fraught, so wisely ponder and try while you can.”<sup>154</sup> The work enjoyed a modest run on the stages of New York City and a brief “reprieve from obscurity” in 1866 when Barnum produced the work on the American Museum Lecture Room stage.<sup>155</sup> The play was advertised in the amusement section of the *New York Times*: “Something for old and young to see. Afternoon at 2: Evening at 7 3/4. The thrilling and truthful drama of Ten Nights in a Bar-Room depicting the truthful scenes the History of the inebriate and exhibiting the actualities of Bar-Room Life.”<sup>156</sup>

All temperance plays have a villain. This villain is always the root of evil and brings the protagonist down into their states of inebriation. In *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, the villain is the temptation of alcohol. It is no longer enough to convert the occasional drinker into a teetotaler, now, it was a crusade to close down every bar and end the production of alcohol.

All temperance plays adhere to this central theme: the consumption of alcohol will make an individual lose everything, but once cured, everything lost will be restored.<sup>157</sup> Theater scholar, John W. Frick, believed that of the temperance plays that produced this theme, “*The Drunkard*, *Ten Nights in a Bar-room* and *Hot-Corn* were

---

<sup>154</sup> William W. Pratt, “Ten Nights in a Bar-Room,” 201.

<sup>155</sup> John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 135.

<sup>156</sup> “Amusements,” *The New York Tribune*, October 16, 1866.

<sup>157</sup> Joseph R. Gusfield, “Social Structure and Moral Reform: A Study of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union,” *American Journal of Sociology* 61 (Nov. 1955): 223.

indisputably the most popular, influential and ideologically complex temperance dramas of the era.”<sup>158</sup>

In his examination of P.T. Barnum, John W. Frick concluded “although he was a frequent temperance lecturer...his greatest contribution to the battle against intemperance was likely the use of his Moral Lecture Room as a pulpit from which to disseminate temperance ideology.”<sup>159</sup> These actions extended beyond the production of moral dramas and copies of the teetotalers pledge for the audience to sign after a performance. Barnum insured that the American Museum Lecture Room was devoid of alcohol, as opposed to other theaters that encouraged social drinking. Should an audience member decide to leave for a quick “nip” from the bottle, they would not be permitted back into the museum.<sup>160</sup> In another part of the American Museum, Barnum had a collection of wax figures set up in an exhibit. At times, these figures would be placed in dioramas of famous men, or in John Brown’s case, infamous men. Barnum dedicated one of these tableaux to the consequences of intemperance. The exhibit was entitled *The Drunken Family* and the wax figures were “a representation of a family dressed in rags and living in squalor captured gazing upon the face of a dead little boy.”<sup>161</sup> Adams reflected on Barnum’s first year at the American Museum and his continued temperance agenda. Barnum set aside “three splendid performances for the Benefit of the Parent Washington Temperance Benevolent Society.”<sup>162</sup> Through the temperance moral dramas, the wax

---

<sup>158</sup> John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 142.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>160</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 121; John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform*, 120.

<sup>161</sup> Andrea Stulman Dennet, *Weird and Wonderful*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 55.

<sup>162</sup> Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum*, 121.

exhibit, the fundraisers, and his lectures, Barnum demonstrated more than just a simple advocacy for the temperate lifestyle. His actions clearly demonstrated that he viewed his advocacy as a moral obligation. He used the American Museum's Lecture Room to send a personal message to his audience and the public that a life that was intemperate and tolerant of slavery was morally wrong and in need of major change.

### Chapter Three

“In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s,” explains Mike Wallace, “America’s history museums drowsed happily on the margins of a go-ahead culture, tending their genteel artifacts, perpetuating regnant myths in which African Americans, women, immigrants, and workers figured as supporting actors or not at all.”<sup>163</sup> For institutions that should be targeting and serving their entire community, the museums of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s felt more like the exclusive cabinets of curiosity, all community and history that did not center on white upper-class males was excluded. In an attempt to break away from telling one-sided histories through exhibitions, some visionary and brave museum professionals crafted exhibitions that felt more like a debate between two historians than the stale exhibitions that had come before.<sup>164</sup>

The Smithsonian institutions were among the first to use this type of exhibition strategy in 1994 with the National Museum of American Art’s *The West as America* exhibition. *The West as America* exhibition set out to dissect popular artwork of Western Expansion as historical artifact and from there re-think the tales that the pictures told. The National Air and Space Museum followed with an attempted exhibition of the Enola Gay that not only told the story of the atomic bomb, it showed the historical impact and implications of it, the “dark side” of

---

<sup>163</sup> Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 116.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

aviation.<sup>165</sup> Following the Smithsonian's exhibitions, Colonial Williamsburg decided to produce a slave auction that would force those who attempted to avoid the park's difficult exhibition and discussion of race relations into a conversation. The John Dillinger Museum in Indiana had the delicate task of telling the story of John Dillinger without glorifying his violent and murderous lifestyle. Emory University acquired a collection of lynching photographs and used them in an exhibition to force their community to have a difficult conversation on a dark past most would rather forget. Another university, the University of Southern Mississippi held an exhibition of black and white photographs taken from recent Klu Klux Klan rallies, meetings, and events. The images forced students to take a look at society and realize that racism still exists to fuel these hate groups. The one thing that all of these exhibitions had in common was a methodology of understanding the original purpose of the exhibition, an understanding of the likes and dislikes of their audience, and control of the exhibition script to make changes to the exhibit but without losing the original spirit of the exhibition. The same methodology used by Barnum in his American Museum.

Different Smithsonian institutions attempted to create exhibitions that forced a discourse with their visitors. *The West as America* was a large-scale exhibition, funded not by the government but private money. The exhibition's mission, according to Michael Kimmelman who published a review in the *New York Times*, was to reinterpret the "images of the frontier."<sup>166</sup> The exhibition opened at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art in Washington D.C. on March 15, 1991. William H. Truettner, curator of *The West as America*, put the exhibit

---

<sup>165</sup> Edward T. Kinethal, "The Anatomy of a Controversy," *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, Edward T. Linethal and Tom Engelhardt, eds. (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1996), 17.

<sup>166</sup> Michael Kimmelman, "Art View; Old West, New Twist at the Smithsonian," *New York Times*, May 26, 1991.

together to argue that ideology was the inspiring force behind the exhibition. Alan Wallach described the exhibition in great detail in *Exhibiting Contradictions: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States*. The exhibition was made up of 164 paintings, prints, sculptures, watercolors, and photographs, which “Truettner divided among six thematic sections. The sections titles underscored the idea that what was on display was culturally constructed pictorial rhetoric: Repainting the Past, Picturing Progress, Inventing the Indian, Claiming the West, The Kiss of Enterprise,” and “Doing the ‘Old America.’” The purpose of the exhibition “was that, in conquering the West, palette and paintbrush were as much instruments of domination as Colt revolvers or the Pony Express. *The West as America* thus attempted to instill in the viewer a sense of the works’ utility, the way they addressed often pressing (ideological) needs.”<sup>167</sup>

Although the exhibition was crafted inside an art museum, the artwork was being examined in the context of a historical artifact. Defining the art as an historical artifact allows the Smithsonian’s Museum of American Art exhibition to be examined as an historical exhibition.<sup>168</sup> Tapping into revisionist history, *The West as America* took the stereotypical and patriotic images that Americans grew up seeing in textbooks and stripped away the “adventure tales.”<sup>169</sup> Doing so exposed the truth of the myths, “a brutal story of expansion and conquest, of ruthless efforts to destroy Native American populations and cultures, of the merciless exploitation of industrial and agricultural labor.”<sup>170</sup>

*The New York Times* review, by Kimmelman, of the exhibition highlights the issues of *The West as America*: “the show preaches to visitors in wall texts laden with forced analyses and

---

<sup>167</sup> Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradictions: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 106-107.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

inflammatory observations.”<sup>171</sup> These texts sent the message to visitors that “seeing is not believing.” One of the most debated wall texts argued, “One of the most insidious aspects of white privilege historically has been its unquestioned claim to be standing at world center, measuring culture in terms of difference and distance from itself.”<sup>172</sup> As seen in the selection of text, the exhibition used an authoritative voice to question decades of deep-seated patriotic mythology or history, based on the images created by the artist of the time.<sup>173</sup> Wallach quoted another review of the exhibition that argued that it chastised “nineteenth and early twentieth century American artists who...imagined the settlement of the West in mythic terms that served the interests of their rich white patrons.”<sup>174</sup> The controversy surrounding this exhibition was, officially, ignited by a collection of politicians, historians, and the like who felt that the exhibit was “a perverse, historically inaccurate, destructive exhibit.”<sup>175</sup>

When faced with the controversy and backlash against the exhibition by individuals like Ted Stevens of Alaska, the “panicky” museum staff removed words that were causing the most conflict in the exhibition. In the case of the selection of text used above, the words “white privilege” were removed to make the exhibition more approachable; without changing the entire theme of the exhibition, much like Barnum fixed *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* after negative reviews but kept the happy ending. They followed the Barnum method in understanding their exhibitions original purpose. In this case they presented a different narrative for the famous artwork to come from Western Expansion in hopes of creating a conversation. The museum staff knew that

---

<sup>171</sup> Michael Kimmelman, “Art View; Old West, New Twist at the Smithsonian,” *New York Times* May 26, 1991.

<sup>172</sup> Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradictions*, 108-109.

<sup>173</sup> Alan Wallach, 116.

<sup>174</sup> Michael Kimmelman, “Art View; Old West, New Twist at the Smithsonian,” *New York Times* May 26, 1991.

<sup>175</sup> Alan Wallach, 110.



tourists would be visiting the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art because it is a D.C. attraction and they would likely find the exhibition controversial and engaging. Finally, they controlled the exhibition script by revising the wall texts that were deemed "offensive" without changing the entire theme of the exhibition.<sup>176</sup>

The Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum was the next institution to find a controversial exhibition on their hands. The difference between the National Museum of American Art and the National Air and Space Museum was that the *West as America* made it to the exhibition phase while the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) exhibition did not.

Two decades before the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, the National Air and Space Museum agreed to bring out of storage the Enola Gay (the B-29 bomber that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima) and put it on display. Richard Kohn states that planning for the exhibit began in 1988 with the hiring of Martin Harwit to head the museum. Harwit was described by Kohn as a "respected astrophysicist from Cornell University with a longstanding interest in the history of science." Harwit was also "the first academic and scholar to head the museum."<sup>177</sup> Harwit was hired by Robert McCormick Adams, the Secretary of the Museum, who believed that the National Air and Space Museum had a larger purpose than being a "walking" advertisement for NASA and the Air Force.<sup>178</sup>

With Harwit and Adams at the helm, they believed the Enola Gay exhibition had the purpose of encouraging "visitors to make a thoughtful and balanced re-examination of the atomic

---

<sup>176</sup> Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradictions*, 108-109.

<sup>177</sup> Richard H. Kohn, "History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay Exhibition," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (1995): 1038.

<sup>178</sup> Kohn explains that the creation of the museum was "largely on the promise of what the historian Alex Roland has called "good, old fashioned celebration of American achievement...enshrinement, pure and simple." Kohn goes on to explain that the National Air and Space Museum was "largely a giant advertisement for air and space technology."

bombings in the light of the political and military factors leading to the decision to use the bomb, the human suffering experienced by the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the long-term implications of the events of August 6 and 9, 1945.”<sup>179</sup>

In the beginning, the NASM staff created a 303-page exhibition script of how the museum space would be used. The script, entitled “The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War” was divided into five sections and described in detail by John T. Correll in the *Air Force Magazine*. The first, “A Fight to the Finish” showed the last year of World War II; “The Decision to Drop the Bomb” raised the question of the need to use nuclear weapons against Japan; “The Worlds First Atomic Strike Force” focused on the experience of the bomber pilots; “Cities at War” described ground zeros of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and “The Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki” described the start of the arms race and the Cold War.<sup>180</sup> For the exhibition to be a success in the eyes of the NASM staff, explains David Thelen, the exhibition had to “evoke an exhausted American marine looking forward after the crushing battle of Okinawa.” At the same time, it needed to “evoke a mother searching the rubble of Hiroshima for her daughter and finding a lunch box with carbonized peas and rice inside, the only remains of her vaporized child.”<sup>181</sup>

The NASM staff understood that their Enola Gay exhibit would be considered provocative and address “hot-button issues,”<sup>182</sup> so the staff sought out and consulted a

---

<sup>179</sup>Richard H. Kohn, 1041.

<sup>180</sup> John T. Correll, “The Smithsonian and the Enola Gay,” *An Air Force Association Special Report* (April 2004): 7.

<sup>181</sup> David Thelen, “History after the Enola Gay Controversy: An Introduction,” *The Journal of American History* 82:3 (December 1995): 1035.

<sup>182</sup> Richard H. Kohn, “History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution’s Enola Gay Exhibition,” *The Journal of American History* 82:3 (December 1995): 1045.

“distinguished group of scholars, balanced to include a range of expertise and experience.”<sup>183</sup>

This group included veterans, historians, and military organizations. Once the script was released to these organizations for a final check, something changed. The same organizations that were consulted during the research phase responded that the script was problematic.<sup>184</sup> According to an article written by John T. Correll and published by the Air Force Association in the *Air Force Magazine* in 1994, what the museum had put together was not a critical analysis of the Enola Gay but a “one-sided, antinuclear rant.”<sup>185</sup> Further complaints were made by the *Air Force Magazine*, including that the “curators cast doubt on the prospect of high casualties in an invasion of Japan.” Another major issue for the AFA was how Japan was painted as victim rather than aggressor. Another issue, Mike Wallace revealed, was the emotionally charged images and artifacts from ground zero, “no matter how few their number,” still pack “a wallop.”<sup>186</sup> When the AFA, due to the issues they had with the exhibition scripts, became a roadblock for the exhibition, the NASM staff sought out the American Legion for support but the American Legion shared the same sentiments as the AFA.<sup>187</sup>

Another exhibition script was drafted and presented after the backlash the first received from military groups, veteran’s organizations and media outlets. One of the major changes made to the script was the controversial language that was altered from the original. The first script held within it the line: “For more Americans, this war was fundamentally different than the one waged against Germany and Italy. -It was a war of vengeance. For most Japanese, it was a war to

---

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 1048.

<sup>184</sup> Richard H. Kohn, 1049.

<sup>185</sup> John T. Correll, “The Smithsonian and the Enola Gay,” *An Air Force Association Special Report* (April 2004): 7. This was a special re-printing of the 1994 article with added reflection looking back on the 10 years since the original publishing.

<sup>186</sup> Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 272.

<sup>187</sup> David Thelen, 1032.

defend their unique culture against Western Imperialism.”<sup>188</sup> In the second exhibition script draft, this line was changed to read: “For most Americans, this war was different from the one waged against Germany and Italy: It was a war to defeat a vicious aggressor but also a war to punish Japan for Pearl Harbor and for the brutal treatment of Allied prisoners. For most Japanese, what had begun as a war of Imperial conquest had become a battle to save their nation from destruction.”<sup>189</sup> The changes made to these lines reflect an understanding of their audience and willingness to change the script to reflect that understanding but also maintaining the original spirit of the exhibition. Draft number two did not pass in the eyes of the military/veteran organizations, the media, or twenty-four members of Congress who sent a letter in August 1994 to express their concern for the intended display.<sup>190</sup> In response, a third draft was sent out on August 31, 1994, but again met with backlash because it held onto its original revisionist spirit. Two more drafts followed but to no avail. Pressure continued to grow from organizations like the American Legion who in January 1995 called for the cancellation of the exhibition.<sup>191</sup> The media outlets, explains Mike Wallace, stated, “youthful visitors to the Smithsonian would soon find their grandparents reviled as racists and war criminals.”<sup>192</sup> On January 24, 1995, eighty-one members of congress called for the cancellation of the exhibit, the exhibition had become engulfed in a full--fledged culture war and NASM staff could no longer fight it. On January 30, 1995, the planned exhibition script was cancelled. There was no way that the NASM staff could create a new exhibition that carried out the original purpose and spirit of

---

<sup>188</sup> John T. Correll, 7

<sup>189</sup> John T. Correll, 14.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>191</sup> David Thelen, 1032.

<sup>192</sup> Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 270.

the Enola Gay exhibit and instead only the fuselage was placed in the exhibition space with the simple plaque, “the aircraft speaks for itself in this exhibit.”<sup>193</sup>

In light of the extensive backlash against the NASM, how can Barnum’s methodology apply to this controversial exhibition? Harwit, Adams and their staff of curators understood the original purpose of the exhibition, which was to encourage “visitors to make a thoughtful and balanced re-examination of the atomic bombings in the light of the political and military factors leading to the decision to use the bomb, the human suffering experienced by the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the long term implications of the events of August 6 and 9, 1945.”<sup>194</sup> They did all they could to understand the likes and dislikes of their audience through their consultations with military organizations, veterans organizations, and scholars. Finally, control of the exhibition script to make changes that do not alter the original spirit of the exhibition but make it approachable, this was attempted through the numerous revised drafts of the exhibition script.

The controversy surrounding the Enola Gay exhibition led the way for other exhibitions to follow. Although they did follow the Barnum methodology, they faced a force greater than any method could handle, demonstrating that there are limitations to the Barnum method. Yet, for the Enola Gay, the exhibition faced a rebuke that no museum should face from the government. An exhibition in a public museum institution should be allowed to open without fear for the museum’s continued existence. It was being faced with the threat of losing vital government funding after the continued attacks against the exhibition as a result of a culture war against revisionist history and those who were considered to be returning the United States to a

---

<sup>193</sup> Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 301.

<sup>194</sup> Richard H. Kohn, 1041.

place of negativity that resulted from the Vietnam War, which forced the original Enola Gay exhibition to be scrapped.

On Monday, October 10, 1994, a mock mid-eighteenth century estate auction took place at Colonial Williamsburg. George Washington scholar Henry Wiencek described the auction in *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*. In “keeping with the realism of the program, the ‘interpreters’ (actors portraying various characters in the production) first conducted a tedious mock sale of various items of property.” Once the trinkets were sold off, the next phase of the auction was the sale of four slaves. There was an interpreter portraying the role of the auctioneer who explained, first, how the auction of slaves would work. Next, he explained that these men and women had been previously inspected and finally, that they would move straight to bidding. The first man to win his bid was an interpreter portraying John Ashby, a free black man who was able to purchase his wife. The next interpreter to be auctioned portrayed a carpenter who was sold to pay off a gambling debt. The last two interpreters portrayed a married couple, Daniel and Lucy, who would be sold separately. Lucy’s visible pregnancy added another measure of emotion to the demonstration. This auction placed real faces on history. It displayed the horror that cannot be imagined by reading words on a page.<sup>195</sup>

The Williamsburg slave auction was the culmination of a plan, begun in 1979, to revolutionize the park’s outdoor living history exhibit. Wiencek, explained in his book, the need to “establish in the minds of visitors the fact of an African-American presence at this cradle of American liberty, and they also want to portray the *character* of the African-American

---

<sup>195</sup> Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003)

presence.”<sup>196</sup> The Williamsburg staff wanted visitors to see and understand what slavery would have looked like in a colonial setting. Since it is the mission of Colonial Williamsburg to show all aspects of colonial America, the staff believed that slavery could not be ignored.

In 1989, Carter’s Grove, a section of slave cabins at Williamsburg, opened to the public. “These structures,” states Anders Greenspan, “were important because they gave interpreters the chance to discuss the lives of plantation slaves.”<sup>197</sup> Rex Ellis, who at the time was the assistant director of African-American interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg, explained, “we’re going to have to show rebellion, violence, and racism in a way we have not done at Williamsburg...we need to learn from all parts of history including the uncomfortable parts.”<sup>198</sup> Colonial Williamsburg understood the risks and rewards of opening the slave cabin living history exhibit and interpreting African-American history, something that is not without controversy. There are many Americans who still like to pretend slavery and the hundred years of horrors that followed never happened. Greenspan continued, “this new interpretation inevitably meant coming to terms with the 50 years of racism and discrimination that had prevented this aspect of the town’s life from being portrayed.”<sup>199</sup> Even if this means that visitors feel that discomfort when viewing, in full costume and character, how slavery really looked in a historical setting. “It’s not a safe topic. It ain’t the civil rights movement,” said Ellis, who created the program. “But it’s like

---

<sup>196</sup> Henry Wienczek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 178.

<sup>197</sup> Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia’s Eighteenth-Century Capital*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 158.

<sup>198</sup> Anders Greenspan, 157.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

burying the truth when you don't talk about it... We need to talk about it until we can live with it and deal with it and move on."<sup>200</sup>

The opening of Carter's Grove facilitated a conversation on slavery, but did not trigger the kind of emotional response that some on the staff desired. Christy S. Coleman was the director of the African-American department of Colonial Williamsburg at the time of the auction. She explained in a *New York Times* interview by Michael Janofsky, that she recognized the idea of a slave auction in 1994 was a "very, very sensitive and emotional issue. But it is also very real history." It is a history that knows there are "those who would ... hide this or keep it under the rug"<sup>201</sup> Ignoring this part of Williamsburg was a real concern because the living history exhibit had been avoided by some visitors since 1979 when it opened. It was for that reason efforts to reconstruct the living history site were taken.<sup>202</sup> Unfortunately, the Williamsburg staff got the kind of emotional response to the auction that they had not anticipated.

Wiencek argued that the Colonial Williamsburg educators made a "naïve" decision to conduct the mock slave auction because they were unprepared for the emotional backlash that followed. On the day of the auction, protesters from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the College of William and Mary occupied the site. Salim Khalfani, representing the Virginia Branch of the NAACP, reported, "our phones have been ringing off the hook. The

---

<sup>200</sup> Lori Montgomery, "Portraying History of Slavery is Goal of Disney's America Park," *Reading Eagle* July 10, 1994.

<sup>201</sup> Michael Janofsky, "Mock Auction of Slaves: Education or Outrage?" *New York Times*, October 8, 1994.

<sup>202</sup> Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia's Eighteenth-Century Capital*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 151.



consensus is that people are outraged at what they are doing in Williamsburg.”<sup>203</sup> Curtis Harris, president of the Virginia branch of the SCLC said, “I felt terrible about it. I felt it was a show. It was not authentic history. They just wanted a show.”<sup>204</sup> Williamsburg’s Christy S. Coleman responded emotionally, by saying, “I think today is a very real tragedy. We came to tell the story of our Mothers and our Grandmothers. We wanted to do this voluntarily to teach the evils of slavery.”<sup>205</sup>

Nothing like the slave auction had ever been attempted at Colonial Williamsburg before and nothing like it has been attempted since. The Williamsburg staff’s attempt to use a Barnum-like approach to present a controversial topic resulted in the kind of attention that seemed, to the public, to trivialize the very issue they hoped to promote. The staff followed the Barnum method by understanding the original purpose of the exhibition. Colonial Williamsburg was already an attraction but they needed something that would deal with race in an unavoidable way. They knew the likes and dislikes of their audience. The staff realized that the backlash from their audience and the public was understandable but worth it for the exhibition. All they asked was for people to stay and experience the auction then make a decision. Finally, they held tight control of the exhibition script of the auction. Changing nothing from their original plan and spirit of the exhibition; they allowed their visitors to make their final conclusions after experiencing the exhibition. The staff went into the exhibition with the same confident attitude that Barnum did with his moral dramas, producing these exhibitions for his audience and allowing them to come to their own conclusions.

---

<sup>203</sup> Michael Janofsky, “Mock Auction of Slaves: Education or Outrage?” *New York Times*, October 8, 1994

<sup>204</sup> “‘Slave Auction’ Divides Crowd in Williamsburg,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 11, 1994.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

Local museums can also find their exhibitions the center of controversy. This was the case for the John Dillinger Museum that opened in 1999 as a new piece of the Lake County, Indiana Visitors Center. Dillinger is remembered for his criminal past, robbing banks, fiery shootouts with law enforcement, escaping from prison with a wooden gun and, finally, being shot dead outside the Biograph theatre in Chicago. He has been immortalized and remained relevant through film, as recently as 2009 in *Public Enemies* with Johnny Depp starring as the infamous Dillinger. Already there is a culture of glorification of criminals from the 1930s Depression Era in the United States. They remain legends and heroes while law enforcement is viewed as the villain. It was exactly this mindset, describes Brian Downes, that created a sense of controversy around the Dillinger collection---a collection that has had controversy surrounding it since its curation by Dillinger historian Joe Pinkston, whose critics, suspect that his collection “glorifies a killer.”<sup>206</sup> The collection is described on the museum’s website and consists of Dillinger’s personal effects: the blood-stained trousers he wore the night of his death, the wooden pistol, correspondence with family and friends, and even his “old baseball shoes.”<sup>207</sup> The Lake County Convention and Visitors Bureau purchased the Dillinger collection from Joe Pinkston’s estate in 1997, after his death.<sup>208</sup>

Speros Batistatos, the president and CEO of the Lake County Convention and Visitors Bureau, “had this museum designed to be both child-friendly and pedagogical.”<sup>209</sup> The museum’s website advertises itself as an “interactive museum,” that “illustrates the life and times

---

<sup>206</sup> Brian Downes, “Dillinger Museum Harbors Collection,” *Chicago Tribune* March 13, 1994.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.,.

<sup>208</sup> The John Dillinger Museum, “About the Museum,” *The John Dillinger Museum* (accessed September 25, 2013) <http://www.dillingermuseum.com/about.html>

<sup>209</sup> Heather R. Perry, “History Lessons: Selling the John Dillinger Museum,” *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in Americas Changing Communities*, Amy K. Levin, ed. (Lanham, Maryland: ALTAMIRA Press, 2007), 133.

of John Dillinger and other gangsters during the 1930s Depression Era and shows advancements made in crime fighting technology during the first thirty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>210</sup> The museum exhibitions were designed by ICON Exhibits out of Fort Wayne, Indiana to concentrate on the theme that “crime does not pay.” This message was expressed through exhibitions focusing on the famous artifacts of Dillinger’s life stages. These stages included growing up in Mooresville, Indiana. At this point in the exhibition patrons were encouraged to attempt to pick up a sack of grains, while there was an old fashioned radio playing the popular songs from Dillinger’s childhood. His peak years were illustrated using his getaway car “riddled with bullet holes” and the “carved wooden gun he used when bluffing his way out of...Lake County Jail.” Finally, the exhibitions concluded with Dillinger’s death. “As patrons walked into the room, they stood before the recreated façade” of the movie theater in downtown Chicago. “Motion detectors...triggered the sound of gunshots...screams and sirens quickly followed,” when a button was pressed a “light flashed up and a life-sized wax figure of an already dead Dillinger was revealed face down upon the sidewalk before the theatre.” This gave the visitor the experience of actually being “present the night ...Dillinger was gunned down by police.”<sup>211</sup>

When it was first announced that the Lake County Convention and Visitors Bureau was bringing the John Dillinger museum to life, there were protests in the community against such an action. Those behind the planning of the exhibitions carefully avoided anything that would even remotely glorify Dillinger and his criminal career. To win over the community support for the local museum careful attention was paid to the “intense image management, careful exhibit design, and a strict pedagogical makeover for the freshly dubbed ‘Historical Adventure.’” The

---

<sup>210</sup> The John Dillinger Museum, “About the Museum,” *The John Dillinger Museum* (accessed September 25, 2013) <http://www.dillingermuseum.com/about.html>.

<sup>211</sup> Heather R. Perry, 129-134.

next stage was to win over the local law enforcement to support the museum. This was successful performed through the placement of a “police memorial at the entrance of the museum,” in remembrance of “each and every Lake County law enforcer slain in the line of duty.”<sup>212</sup> The Dillinger museum was then endorsed by Lake County Sheriff John Buncich, “We are pleased that the museum will honor all law enforcement officials who lost their lives protecting and serving Lake County and its residents.”<sup>213</sup> The museum was so successful in changing the community’s opinion that Shawn Platt, the vice president of Communications at the Lake County Convention and Visitor Bureau was awarded the Bronze Award from the Hospitality, Sales, and Marketing Association International for 2000.<sup>214</sup>

The Dillinger Museum took on the controversy that surrounded the exhibitions of Dillinger’s life and artifacts head on, did what they needed to do in the community to bring focus away from the glorified life of the mobster, to the real life consequences that are reaped from a life of crime and paid tribute to the community’s fallen heroes who died at the hands of these gangsters. The Dillinger museum followed the Barnum method by understanding the original purpose of the exhibition, to present John Dillinger in a historical context and not as a glorified gangster. Next, knowing the likes and dislikes of their audience allowed the museum staff to create an exhibition that made all who entered comfortable,-including law enforcement. Finally, tightly controlling the exhibition script and willingly altering the exhibition, without changing the original spirit, made the exhibition approachable. The museum did not need to alter the exhibition as they focused on dealing with Dillinger in a historical context without the glorification that has come with the gangster legend. The Dillinger museum seemingly channeled

---

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>213</sup> Rich Bird, “Sheriff Blesses Dillinger Museum,” *The Times of Northwest Indiana* July 23, 1999.

<sup>214</sup> Heather R. Perry, 132.

Barnum in their ability to win over the community to the purpose of the local institution. They did this without having to change what their exhibition was about---namely, a look into the life of their native son. Barnum adopted this attitude when presenting his temperance moral dramas, making them family friendly, entertaining, and thoughtful to all who experienced them. This same approach was also successfully used by Emory University in 2002.

From May 1 through December 31, 2002, Emory University, in connection with the Martin Luther King Jr. Historical Site, displayed a collection of images organized by James Allen and John Littlefield.<sup>215</sup> The exhibit, entitled *Without Sanctuary*, was wildly controversial because the images were photographs of the lynchings of African-Americans from the mid-nineteenth into the twentieth century. This exhibit shares the same sense of controversy as the Colonial Williamsburg Slave Auction. It is controversial to Americans, black and white, who do not want to remember a dark past. During the planning stages for the exhibit, Emory's advisory committee held six forums, three by invitation only and three open to the public, the results of these forums were posted on Emory's website. Emory carefully tested the waters of the communities to see if this exhibit would "foster understanding and healing, or would it exacerbate racial tensions around Emory and Atlanta." Those who attended the public forums felt strongly that Emory should "show the photographs. Let the truth, however dark and appalling, come out. The truth will heal."<sup>216</sup> The reasons presented against this exhibit focused on Emory's reputation as an "elitist, predominantly white institution" in the city of Atlanta and fear that "young black children looking at these images could feel nothing but hatred and fear of

---

<sup>215</sup> Michael Terrazas, "Lynching Exhibit Opens May 1," *Emory Report*, April 29, 2002.

<sup>216</sup> Emory, "History, Horror, Healing: Faculty Deliberations on Lynching Photography Examine Racial and Historical Understanding," *Emory University*, April/May 2001, accessed June 1, 2013, [http://www.emory.edu/ACAD\\_EXCHANGE/2001/aprmay/horror.html](http://www.emory.edu/ACAD_EXCHANGE/2001/aprmay/horror.html).

white Americans.”<sup>217</sup> Steeled by a feeling that the potential for something good coming from the exhibit outweighed the potential for bad, Emory proceeded. The exhibit was deemed a success, because over fifty thousand people visited the exhibit within the first two months.<sup>218</sup>

Entering into the Martin Luther King Jr. Historical Site on Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, visitors first see a wall scripted with Martin Luther King Jr.’s words: “It is no longer a choice, my friends, between violence and non-violence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence.”<sup>219</sup> This quote juxtaposed with what the visitor experiences inside the exhibit proves the truth of King’s words. Inside the exhibit, Billie Holiday mournfully croons *Strange Fruit* (the lyrics are printed on the walls). The music sets the tone of the exhibit; visitors speak with hushed voices that are appropriate, respectful, and reflective. Scholar Grace Elizabeth Hale’s review of the exhibit in the December 2002 issue of *The Journal of American History*, questioned its hushed tones asking why there is no “screaming and outrage?”<sup>220</sup> While scholars can debate what should be the correct tone of the exhibit, the public, by its response, really showed how scholars can often lose sight of the forest because of the trees. The public’s almost reverential treatment of the exhibit proved its efficacy. The exhibit proceeded, from start to finish, on schedule without interruption or incident. The Emory staff followed the Barnum method by understanding the original purpose of the exhibition. They exhibited lynching photographs to acknowledge a dark past most would rather avoid. Emory held forums to hear from the public before putting the exhibition together in order to understand the audience’s likes and dislikes. Recognizing that having the exhibition on their campus would deter their message, they searched for a location

---

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, “Review of “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America; Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen and John Littlefield,” *Journal of American History* 89, no. 3 (2002): 990

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, 990.

more appropriate to hold the exhibition. Finally, they tightly controlled the exhibition script, altering it if needed but not changing the original spirit of the exhibition. Nothing in the exhibition was changed; everything was designed in the exhibition to remember those men and women who had lost their lives because of their race. The exhibition showed the dark past, how far we have come as a society, but also, how far we still have to go.

Just as *Without Sanctuary* was an exhibition that looked controversy in the eye by encouraging visitors to step out of their comfort zone and confront America's dark past, *Passing the Torch: Documenting the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ku Klux Klan* opened the eyes of those who believed that the Ku Klux Klan no longer existed. Photographer James Edward Bates asked visitors to step out of their comfort zone and confront a horrifying reality. The exhibition took place at the University of Southern Mississippi in the Cook Library from April 13 through May 30, 2011. The exhibition presented a collection of black and white photographs that were captured by Bates over thirteen years. The motivation behind the project came from Bates' desire to find "a deeper understanding of why members joined the ranks of the Ku Klux Klan," Bates "was interested to know more about their beliefs and backgrounds."<sup>221</sup>

The idea that this exhibition was a controversial one is not surprising. Yet, it demonstrates that openly controversial exhibits can and will work if the staff is willing to both bravely reveal the true nature of the controversy in the exhibition, while simultaneously explaining to the community the importance of viewing the images to understand their point and their implications. Bates was also quick to explain, to journalist Jeff Daley, that the exhibition was not "presented with the intention of promoting the beliefs of the Ku Klux Klan." He

---

<sup>221</sup> Jeff Daley, "Exhibit Documenting 21<sup>st</sup> Century KKK to Go On Display at USM," *WDAM Channel 7*, April 14, 2011.

continued to explain, to the university's newspaper, that the exhibition was "a straight piece of documentary work that represent many visits to Klan events, both public and private." Bates hoped "that the viewer [would] take the time to digest the images of the exhibit and allow emotions and meaningful thought to emerge...that meaningful conversations will follow regarding the state of race issues within our nation, within our communities, and more specifically, within our own lives."<sup>222</sup> Bates' wish was granted as local news agencies interviewed students who experienced the controversial exhibition. Brad Kirkham, who was a twenty-year-old African American, remarked that he "learned something new today, because [he] didn't know [the KKK] still existed...it woke [his] eyes up and [his] ears up to...the racism that's still hidden in America."<sup>223</sup>

Due to the controversial nature of the exhibition, Bates had trouble bringing the exhibit to life in the United States. He had already received international recognition, Bates' described the project and it's success in a proposal for a grant from the New Orleans Photo Alliance. "First shown in 2003 at the Visa pour l'image photojournalism festival in Perpignan, France, the project has also been exhibited in London, Scotland, and has appeared in numerous publications abroad."<sup>224</sup> The University of Southern Mississippi accepted the exhibition on their campus, not only because an alumnus created it, but also because those in charge felt the message of the exhibition was an important one to the community. The University believed that this exhibition needed to be seen. Christopher Campbell, Director of the School of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern Mississippi said that objections to the exhibition were dealt with up front. To those who questioned "why do we even gotta be exposed to this stuff?"

---

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Rhonda Miller, "Photo Exhibit of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ku Klux Klan Stirs Emotions at University of Southern Mississippi," *Mississippi Broadcasting News*, April 16, 2011.

<sup>224</sup> James Edward Bates, "Passing the Torch Proposal," *New Orleans Photo Alliance*, 2013.



Campbell and his staff replied that “We’re not going to end racism and racial animosity and the existence of hate groups if we pretend they don’t exist.”<sup>225</sup> In another article Campbell states, “the faculty was very impressed with the work and believes that it represents an opportunity to generate important conversations.”<sup>226</sup>

What backlash the university did experience in their decision to allow the exhibition to be held in the university library did not remain because of the way the staff actively handled complaints before the exhibition started. They followed the Barnum method in doing so. They understood the original purpose of the exhibition, to acknowledge that hate groups still exist and that our country continues to struggle with race relations. They understood the likes and dislikes of their audience; the staff knew that their audience would not leave happily from the exhibit but that it would facilitate conversation among them. Finally, they maintained tight control of the exhibition script by allowing Bates to repeat the same exhibition that has given him international acclaim.

This thesis has defined a methodology often used by museum exhibitions, one that started with P.T. Barnum in his American Museum but was also echoed by contemporaries, such as Mike Wallace. Barnum was able to employ this methodology more readily than our contemporary museums because he did not have to consult with anyone when making his exhibition decisions. Yet, our contemporary institutions, in spite of the fact that they must consult with others, use a methodology similar to Barnum’s when faced with controversial issues. This fact has been repeatedly demonstrated in exhibitions that this paper has discussed.

---

<sup>225</sup> Rhonda Miller, “Photo Exhibit of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ku Klux Klan Stirs Emotions at University of Southern Mississippi,” *Mississippi Broadcasting News*, April 16, 2011.

<sup>226</sup> Chris Campbell, “Alum to Exhibit 21<sup>st</sup> Century KKK Photos at Southern Miss April 18-May 30,” *Southern Miss Now*, March 31, 2011.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art *The West as America* exhibition, the National Air and Space Museum's Enola Gay exhibition, the John Dillinger Museum, Emory's *Without Sanctuary* exhibition and The University of Southern Mississippi's *Passing the Torch: Documenting the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ku Klux Klan* exhibition all have proved to support this contention. What all these institutions learned, when it came to controversy--in Wallace's words--was to "take responsibility for" their "own defense." Museums (and libraries) must recognize in advance who is an exhibition's ally and who is an exhibition's enemy. They then must have a "contingency plan for enlisting the former and fending off the later."<sup>227</sup> This very "Barnum-esque" idea that Wallace offered to museums resembles the Barnum methodology that has been outlined by this work. It, also, shows how museums have been unknowingly ignored Barnum as a possible educator when dealing with exhibitions that were deemed controversial.

"Barnum was a complex individual; he was "neither a good-natured deceiver nor an evil-minded philistine... [He was an] intelligent, complex, and well organized entrepreneur whose business involved the myths and values of self-proclaimed democracy."<sup>228</sup> He made major advances in museum institutions; he brought a love for this form of entertainment to the public. While he may not have focused on the educational aspects of a museum, he did focus on providing exhibitions that would entertain his visitors, leave them thinking, and wanting more. He forced his visitors to have conversations over the things that they saw. The Lecture Room of the American Museum provided a useful forum for these important issues, like race, social behavior, and faith. He had no fear editing Shakespeare and other plays because he knew the family values of his day and wanted to insure that nothing (like a perception of

---

<sup>227</sup> Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 308.

<sup>228</sup> Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Little Brown and Company 1973), 5.

profanity) would stand in the way of his messages.<sup>229</sup> The messages of abolition and temperance were controversial topics that the public was aware of but would often choose to ignore, Barnum's exhibitions made them difficult to avoid. By focusing attention on abolition and temperance through the use of his methodology, Barnum has earned a place of respect in Museum History beyond being the creator of the "dime museum" and a phrase about "suckers" he never uttered.

---

<sup>229</sup> P.T. Barnum "Letter to the Editor of *The Nation*," re-printed in *The Liberator* August 25, 1865.

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary Sources**

Aiken, Charles. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Accessed May 8, 2013

<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/scripts/schp.html>.

Barnum, Phineas Taylor. *Struggles and Triumphs: or, Forty Years Recollections*. Buffalo: the Courier Company Printer, 1888.

Barnum, Phineas Taylor. *Why I am a Universalist*. Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1890.

Barnum, Phineas Taylor. "Letter to the Editor of *The Nation*." Re-printed in *The Liberator*, August 25, 1865.

Barnum, Phineas Taylor. *Selected Letters of P.T. Barnum*. Edited by A.H. Saxon. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Bates, James Edward. "Passing the Torch Proposal." *New Orleans Photo Alliance Grant*, 2013.

Conway, H.J. *Dred*. New York: J.W. Amerman, 1856.

Conway, H.J. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Accessed May 8, 2013.

<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/scripts/schp.html>

Emory. "History, Horror, Healing: Faculty Deliberations on Lynching Photography Examine Racial and Historical Understanding." *Emory University*, April/May 2001. Accessed June 1, 2013. [http://www.emory.edu/ACAD\\_EXCHANGE/2001/aprmay/horror.html](http://www.emory.edu/ACAD_EXCHANGE/2001/aprmay/horror.html).

Hale, Grace Elizabeth. "Review of "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America; Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen and John Littlefield." *Journal of American History* 89, no. 3 (December 2002): 989-994.

Jefferson, Joseph. *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson*. Edited by Alan S. Downer. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

The John Dillinger Museum. "About the Museum." *The John Dillinger Museum* (accessed September 25, 2013) <http://www.dillingermuseum.com/about.html>.

Northall, William K. *Before and Behind The Curtain or Fifteen Years among the Theatres of New York*. New York: W.F. Burgess, 1851.

Taylor, T.P. *The Bottle*. New York: John Douglas Publisher, 1847.

### **Newspapers**

*Baltimore Sun*

*Belmont Chronicle*

*Chicago Tribune*

*Emory Report*

*Frederick Douglas' Paper*

*Mississippi Broadcasting News*.

*New York Daily Tribune*.

*New York Evening Post*

*New York Times*

*New York Tribune*

*Reading Eagle*

*Times of Northwest Indiana.*

### **Secondary Sources**

Ackerman Jr., Alan L. *The Portable Theater: American Literature & the Nineteenth-Century Stage*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Adams, Bluford. *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Alexander, Edward P. and Mary Alexander. *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*. New York: AltaMira Press, 2008.

Anderson, Gail, ed. *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004.

Arthur, Timothy Shay. *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room and What I Saw There*. Edited by Donald A. Koch. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964.

Bender, Thomas, ed. *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolition as a Problem in Historical Interpretation*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1992.

Bennet, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Bolt, Christine and Seymour Drescher, eds. *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey*. Kent, England: Dawson Publishers, 1980.

Booth, Michael, ed. *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas*. New York: Benjamin Bloom, Inc., 1964.

- Boswell, David and Jessica Evens, ed. *Representing the Nation: A Reader Histories, Heritage, and Museums*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Bressler, Ann Lee. *The Universalist Movement in America 1770-1880*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Burin, Eric. "The Slave Trade Act of 1819: A New Look at Colonization and the Politics of Slavery." *American Nineteenth Century History* 13, no. 1 (2012): 1-14.
- Cameron, Duncan F. "The Museum, A Temple or Forum?" *Curator: The Museum Journal* 14, no. 1 (1971): 11-24.
- Cherry, Kevin. "Dred." Accessed May 9, 2013.  
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/stowe2/summary.html>
- Cook Jr., James W. *The Arts of Deception: Playing With Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Cook Jr., James W. *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader: Nothing Else Like It in the Universe*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005.
- Correll, John T. "Smithsonian and the Enola Gay." *Air Force Association Special Report*, March 15, 1994. Accessed May 29, 2013. <http://www.afa.org/media/enolagay/03-001.asp>.
- Crane, Gregg D. "Dangerous Sentiments: Sympathy, Rights, and Revolution in Stowe's Antislavery Novels." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51, no. 2 (1996): 176-204.
- Dennet, Andrea Stulman. *Weird and Wonderful*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
- Drescher, Seymour. *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.

- Fischer, Judith and Stephen Watt, eds. *When They Weren't Doing Shakespeare: Essays on Nineteenth-Century British and American Theatre*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989.
- Frick, John W. *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Gilman, Benjamin Ives. "The Museum Past, Present, and Future." *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* 5, no. 27 (1907): 42-47.
- Greenspan, Anders. *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia's Eighteenth-Century Capital*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Gusfield, Joseph R. "Social Structure and Moral Reform: A Study of the Women's Christian Temperance Union." *American Journal of Sociology* 61, no 3 (1955): 221-232.
- Harris, Neil. "Museums and Controversy: Some Introductory Reflections." *Journal of American History* 81 (December 1995): 1102-1110.
- Harris, Neil. *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973.
- Hixon, Donald L. and Don A. Hennessee. *Nineteenth-Century American Drama: A Finding Guide*. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1977.
- Johnson, Paul E. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York 1815-1937*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.
- Karp, Ivan, Christine Millen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, ed. *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.
- Kohn, Richard H. "History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay Exhibition." *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (1995): 1036-1063.
- Matlaw, Myron. *Nineteenth-Century American Plays*. New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1967.



- Mattingly, Carol. *Well-Tempered Women: Nineteenth-Century Temperance Rhetoric*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998.
- Mayer, Henry. "William Lloyd Garrison: The Undisputed Master of the Cause of Negro Liberation." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 23 (1999): 105-109.
- Mintz, Steven. *Moralists and Modernizers: American's Pre-Civil War Reformers*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Odell, George C.D. *Annals of the New York Stage*. Volume 7. New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-1949.
- Parker, Arthur C. *A Museum for History Museums*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1935.
- Perry, Heather R. "History Lessons: Selling the John Dillinger Museum." In *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in Americas Changing Communities*, edited by Amy K. Levin, 127-42. Lanham, Maryland: ALTAMIRA Press, 2007.
- Reiss, Benjamin. *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Root, Harvey W. *The Unknown Barnum*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1927.
- Saxon, A.H. *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.
- Sherman, Daniel J. and Irit Rogoff, ed. *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- Smith, William. *The Drunkard*. Boston, Massachusetts: Literature House/Gregg Press, 1972.
- Stowe, Harriett Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005.
- Thelen, David. "History after the Enola Gay Controversy: An Introduction." *The Journal of American History* 82, no 3 ( 1995): 1029-1035.
- Thomson, Rosemarie Garland, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. New York: New York University Press, 1996.

- Wallace, Irving. *The Fabulous Showman: The Life and Times of P.T. Barnum*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishing, 1959.
- Wallace, Mike. *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.
- Wallach, Alan. *Exhibition Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.
- Weil, Stephen. *Making Museums Matter*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002.
- Werner, Morris Albert. *P.T. Barnum*. London: Jonathan Cape Publishing, 1923.
- Wiencek, Henry. *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux Publishing, 2003.
- Wilmeth, Don B. and Tice L. Miller, ed. *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Winchell, N.H. "Museums and Their Purposes." *Science* 18, no. 442 (1891): 43
- Young, Michael P. "Confessional Protest: The Religious Birth of U.S. National Social Movements." *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 5 (2002): 660-668.