

The Indian in the Museum: Henry David Thoreau, Okah Tubbee, and Authentic Manhood.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

PAUL GILMORE The Indian in the Museum: Henry David Thoreau, Okah Tubbee, and Authentic Manhood ? the February 27, 1843, edition of the New York Herald, P. T Barnum advertised his American Museum as a "combination OF UNEQUALLED AND UNPRECEDENTED ATTRACTIONS." An "Ethiopian Extravaganza" and "the Indian chiefs, warriors, and squaws" headline the list of attractions Barnum provides to back up his claim. These Indians, the ad assures, are "no miserable, degraded halfbreeds, but the Wild Warriors of the Far West," and thus, "however high curiosity may be raised, the anticipation cannot come up to the reality."

Barnum promises his patrons not only the "reality" of undegraded, wild Indians, but also delineations of "Ethiopian" songs and behavior. Such a combination of attractions was, despite Barnum's boast, far from unique. In the 1840s and 1850s, popular museums often featured representations of Native Americans and African Americans together. Promotions such as the following were, in fact, fairly common: "the greatest wonder of the age, choc-chu-tub bee, an Indian Chief of the Choctaw tribe . . . in conjunction with those Sable Sons of Apollo, the original Ethiopian and Virginia serenaders" (Philadelphia Public Ledger and Transcript). From the opening of Peck's Museum in Philadelphia in 1786, popular museums in the United States had featured both displays of materials "from . . . the Indian, African, or other savage people" (qtd. Sellers 46) and exhibits of living persons identified as either black or Arizona Quarterly Volume 54, Number 2, Summer 1998 Copyright © 1998 by Arizona Board of Regents ISSN 0004-1610 20 Paul Gilmore Indian. Whether it was through white men in black (or less often red) face, "actual" African Americans or Native Americans, or various collected artifacts and objects on display, early American museums constructed both blacks and Indians as "primitive" others, located somewhere in the natural order between the rest of "brute creation" on display and white audience members.¹ The museum produced racial distinctions not simply between undifferentiated blacks or Indians and white audience members, but also between Indians and blacks. Although museums represented Indians and blacks in complex, multivalent ways, they tended to make a core distinction between the two races. Museum minstrel shows, with their "authentic" plantation ditties and low comedy performed by white men in blackface, primarily depicted blacks as sentimentally child-like Sambos who were content to dance and sing on Southern plantations.² Museum displays revealed Indians—represented neither by "degraded halfbreeds" nor by whites in face paint, but by "wild" Indians uncorrupted by white culture—as stoically vanishing in the advance of a white civilization to which they would not submit. The antebellum museum differentiated blacks and Indians from each other foremost by their relationship to (white) civilization—blacks were happy as subordinate members, capable of limited assimilation, while inimitable and immutable Indians refused such subordination. The antebellum museum not only mapped race along a gender axis—blacks represented effeminate submission, Indians manly resistance—but also became a site for the inculcation of gender ideals among a new white constituency. These museums defined themselves against the almost exclusively male haunts of the theater and the minstrel hall. Although theaters and minstrel halls attracted white men across a class spectrum, middle-class reformers often disparaged them as institutions of iniquity. In response, popular museums portrayed themselves as places of rationalized and moral amusement where women and children of the rising bourgeoisie could safely be entertained and educated. As Richard Butsch has pointed out, through such things as matinee shows, special seating, and special admittance policies, mid-century museums opened up a consumption-oriented public sphere marked as particularly feminine.³ While mid-century middle class manhood has been characterized as spiritually focused upon the ideal of self-restrained familial provider, this spiritual ideal was constantly in tension with the idea that men needed to recover a more physical, "authentic" manhood supposedly exemplified by the lives of "primitive" peoples.⁴ These tensions become highlighted in the popular museum's contradictory impulses towards a more "feminine" sentimentalism and a more "masculine" depiction of nature's life-and-death struggles. Gendered representations of black and Indian bodies both displayed and helped the museum to resolve these tensions. Examining representations...

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