The Giraffe-Neck Woman: Picturing Exotic and Scientific Otherness in an American Circus Poster

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The poster (figure 1) advertises one of the many exhibitions available for Americans to view at the Hagenbeck-Wallace circus. According to the poster this particular attraction was the “Giraffe-Neck Woman from Burma,” named “Princess Mu Kaun.” She was a Padaung woman and practiced the tradition of neck stretching, wherein brass coils are wrapped around the neck to give the illusion of elongation by pushing the shoulders down. Carl Hagenbeck, a prominent German “ethnographic showman” and creator of the tierpark refused to “exhibit” Padaung women in his shows because he found their appearance too “extreme,” and too similar to “freak shows,” which were predicated on (perceived) extreme abnormality. Such “freak shows,” however, were a popular circus attraction in the United States in the mid nineteenth to mid twentieth-centuries. Pascal Blanchard, an historian of colonialism, claims that like the European ethnographic exhibition, the American freak show operated on essentially the same basis, where the “underlying connection between visual pleasure in exoticism and/or strangeness, and the (at least superficial) aim of acquiring knowledge” were influential forces in these productions. Both kinds of displays of human beings (the freak show and the ethnographic showcase) made the Other available for the entertainment, inspection, and consumption of the western gaze. The visibility of the Padaung neck stretching practice and its strangeness to western people, coupled with the Padaung woman’s status as female and as non-white, marked her with manifold levels of Otherness. Art historian Elizabeth Edwards argues “layers and facets of imaging reveal the making not of the Other, but of many shifting Others within the complexity of the colonial imagination.” This poster uses various techniques to illustrate the Padaung woman as a passive object, drawing on western conventions and ideologies about femininity, exoticness, and “science” to construct the Other.

This poster consists mainly of reds, pinks and oranges, with some blue, set against a plain (now faded) yellow background. This bold colour scheme catches the viewers’ eyes and draws them in. Large block letters take up the majority of the top third of the poster, while two images of a

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4 Eric Ames, Carl Hagenbeck’s Empire of Entertainments (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 3. The tierpark was a cross between a zoo and a theme park at which both animals and human were exhibited. ‘Ethnographic performances’ and ‘native villages’ were some of the human exhibitions regularly on show at the tierpark.
7 In this context, the ‘Other’ or ‘Otherness’ refers to the perceived strangeness or abnormality of individuals or groups who are non-western, non-white, and/or non-male (including but not limited to female), from a western white male perspective.
Padaung woman, supposedly “Princess Mu Kaun,” are pictured below. The words at the top read:

Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus
Presents the Most Startling Discovery of the Century
Princess Mu Kaun Royal Padaung
Giraffe-Neck Woman from Burma

Beneath these words, on the left, the Padaung woman’s entire body is depicted standing in a neutral pose, facing the viewer. Brass rings coil around her long neck, as well as parts of her arms and legs. Her arms and feet are bare and her body is draped in a billowy pink dress. Both this frontal image and the larger profile image beside it illustrate the Padaung woman with long elegant earrings and her hair done up in a large elaborate shape above her head. In the profile view of the woman, only her shoulders, neck, and head are shown, emphasizing her most outstanding feature and her most prominent marker of Otherness— her neck and the brass rings that envelope it. Directly beside the neck of the profile image, outlined by a small rectangle, read the words: “positively appearing in main performances of the big show.” All of these seemingly banal and obvious visual elements of the poster work with and against each other to evoke many possible interpretations of the Other, whether as a scientific object or an exoticized construction of femininity.

First, the scientific Other is created in this image through the arrangement of the composition and the visual and formal techniques used to illustrate the woman. According to historian Benjamin Reiss, by the mid nineteenth-century “science became the dominant discourse for interpreting the ‘freak’s’ body.” The scientific Other is produced when the individual marked as Other becomes an object of “scientific” study; he or she ceases to be a rational, thinking, feeling individual and becomes a physical object to be studied and analyzed. Pascal Blanchard discusses how non-western people were thought of as “specimens,” and would be “studied in their natural environment before being transported and exhibited in the west.” The scientific Other becomes like some previously unknown organism belonging to the natural world, a “specimen” to be picked apart and scrutinized by civilized, “rational” westerners. The concept of the Other as an object of scientific study was perpetuated by physical anthropologists who “sought to establish racial hierarchy,” using pseudoscience as evidence for their racial and political agendas.

Edwards claims “photographic imagery of the Other drew its visual dialects from on one hand, the exotic, and on the other hand, the scientific.” The same can be true of

13 Edwards, “Photography and the Making of the Other,” 244.
non-photographic images produced for the same purpose. The arrangement of the two pictures of the woman, with one frontal view and one profile view, along with her blank stare and the plain shallow background, evoke the familiar structure of the booking photograph, or “mug shot.” The anthropologist T.H. Huxley also used this visual arrangement in his attempt to photograph and categorize “human types.” Both kinds of photographs are and were meant to document and make available to western society the appearance of individuals who are labelled as non-members or outsiders. According to Edwards, “the frontal pose, the pairing of full face and profile...framed the objectifying reading of the images.” This type of arrangement is designed to make almost every feature of the Padaung woman’s physical appearance visible to the viewer, indicating that her main purpose is to be observed. Her emotionless facial expression and stiff neutral pose further the objectification by removing any indication or expression of her own thoughts, and focusing the attention only on her outward physical features.

While all of these devices function to present the Padaung woman in a semi-scientific, objectifying manner, a number of other factors work to sensationalize her appearance and present her as an exotic Other. The exotic Other is marked by his or her strangeness and mysteriousness to the Western audience, which is often exaggerated and sometimes partially or completely fabricated through his or her appearance, dress, and behaviour. If compared to photographs of the Padaung women, it is apparent that the length of the neck has been very much exaggerated in the poster. Altering the Padaung woman’s appearance in the image clearly contradicts the other visual devices that convey ideas of scientific documentation of her physical features. The exaggeration and stylization of her neck draws attention to what the circus organizers and poster designers evidently believed to be her most interesting and important feature and makes her appearance seem more dramatic and extraordinary to viewers. Another way in which this woman’s appearance seems to have been modified is in her apparel. If compared to photographs taken at around the same time, the Padaung women are wearing shoes and loose fitting, knee or calf length gowns with elbow or wrist length sleeves. In the poster, however, the woman appears bare-armed and barefoot. Historian Janet Davis argues that “sexually-focused constructions of female gender” dominated representations of “women of colour” in the circus, who were often portrayed as “sexually-charged veiled mysteries.” The Padaung woman’s dress has been modified in the poster to reveal more skin, which suggests a more erotic reading of the image, however her neck remains fully covered, which reinforces the sense of mystery. Her red lips and flushed cheeks further convey a sense of sexualized hyper-femininity and idealized beauty. Therefore, by visually emphasising both her “strangeness” and sexuality, this poster displays the Padaung woman as an exotic Other.

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15 Edwards, “Photography and the Making of the Other,” 244.
16 Bogdan, “When the Exotic Becomes a Show,” 90.
18 Davis, 127.
Furthermore, the text in this image works to construct various notions of the Other. The text functions to raise the Padaung woman’s status and place her within the context of civilization and culture with the title of “Princess,” yet it simultaneously lowers her status and excludes her from culture and civilization by comparing her with an animal (labelling her the “Giraffe-Neck Woman”) and objectifying her (referring to her as a “discovery”). Davis discusses how circuses “tapped into public curiosity about foreign lands, and about the relationship between human beings and animals.”

This blatant labeling of the woman as “giraffe-necked” invites the viewer to imagine that she has some sort of close connection or relation to the animal world, even if no giraffe is actually pictured in the image. The use of the word “discovery” reinforces the objectifying, scientific way of viewing non-western people. This word choice implies that, like an artifact, her significance is centered on her “discovery” by, and availability to, the west and western audiences. This wording takes all agency away from her and places it in the hands of her western “discoverers.”

Conversely, the use of the term “Princess” in this poster creates ideas about femininity and the woman’s place in, and relationship to, culture. According to Robert Bogdan, titles such as “Princess,” “Captain,” “Queen,” and other such royal or prestigious military titles were given to humans on display in order to “aggrandize” their status, while Tanfer Emin Tunc argues that “pseudo-titles” such as these were used to “blur the boundaries between high and low culture, suggesting a sort of perverse aristocracy that would naturally be denigrated by democratic Americans.” Whatever the intention of using words such as “princess” and “giraffe,” they stand in opposition and produce associations in the mind of the viewer, and influence the way the image is read. While the terms “discovery” and “giraffe” reinforce the dominant reading of non-western people as specimens or as animalistic, the term “princess” would add a quality of fascination and allure to an otherwise customary way of thinking about the Other. The title “Princess” also evokes romanticized and idealized notions of femininity, and therefore would further encourage the reading of the female Other as sensational, exotic, and abnormally beautiful.

Historians Katherine Adams and Michael Kleene note that “the fundamental opposition in the minds of those viewing these posters must have been between the freak status conveyed by the brass coils and the exaggerated beauty of the women, with their china-doll features, their striking earrings.” Posters such as this needed to shock and seize the viewers’ attention and address their curiosity and appetite for the new and unusual by presenting an extraordinary, examinable object. If this method failed to entice the viewer, the beauty and allure of the mysterious feminine Other would. Whichever way the poster is interpreted, scientifically or exotically, the Padaung woman is passive and lacks agency—in both the poster and the actual

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19 Davis, 122.
circus, where, according to Davis, she “was displayed under that big top during intermission between acts.” Therefore, just as “Princess Mu Kaun” and other Padaung women were marked as Other in multiple ways to the western gaze, the images used to represent them also produced their Otherness through many, often seemingly contradictory, visual conventions and conceptual approaches.

22 Davis, 128. Emphasis added.