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# Dr. Janet Davis in the Washington Post and at the Smithsonian

by

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Congratulations to Dr. Janet Davis, who

**AMS :: ATX** is a blog dedicated to representing the many activities and interests of the department of American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Together with the department's Twitter feed, this blog exists to serve the AMS and Austin communities by acting as a hub for up-to-date information on events and opportunities at UT and beyond.



recently had a short history of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey circus published by **Zócalo Public Square**, which was then picked up by the **Smithsonian**. We've included an excerpt, below.

*“When Barnum and Bailey’s ‘Greatest Show on Earth’ rolled into American towns in the 1880s, daily life abruptly stopped. Months before the show arrived, an advance team saturated the surrounding region with brilliantly colored lithographs of the extraordinary: elephants, bearded ladies, clowns, tigers, acrobats and trick riders.*

*On ‘Circus Day,’ huge crowds gathered to observe the predawn arrival of “herds and droves” of camels, zebras, and other exotic animals—the spoils of European colonialism. Families witnessed the raising of a tented city across nine acres, and a morning parade that made its way down Main Street, advertising the circus as a wondrous array of captivating performers and beasts from around the world.*

*For isolated American audiences, the sprawling circus collapsed the entire globe into a pungent, thrilling, educational sensorium of sound, smell and color, right outside their doorsteps. What townspeople couldn’t have recognized, however, was that their beloved Big Top was also fast becoming a projection of American culture and power. The American three-ring circus came of age at precisely the same historical*



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*moment as the U.S. itself.*

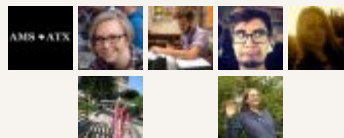
*Three-ring circuses like Barnum and Bailey's were a product of the same Gilded Age historical forces that transformed a fledgling new republic into a modern industrial society and rising world power. The extraordinary success of the giant three-ring circus gave rise to other forms of exportable American giantism, such as amusement parks, department stores, and shopping malls."*

Dr. Davis followed that up last week with a second op-ed, **published at the Washington Post**. We have another excerpt, below:

*Since Ringling Bros. announced its closure in January and the Big Apple Circus filed for bankruptcy last year, cultural observers have issued grim prognostications about the death of the American circus. "Without sugarcoating it, let's accept the fact that the circus will not survive our generation unless the state comes to its rescue," journalist Preetam Kaushik wrote for the Huffington Post. Author Naomi Schaefer Riley opined on "what the death of the circus means for today's kids."*

*The advance postmortem is nothing new. On July 16, 1956, Ringling Bros. performed its last show under a canvas tent, deciding to move to indoor arenas to reduce its labor force and transportation costs. The New York Times observed, "The big top, furlled forever, started its funeral ride*

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today.”

*But the impending death of the circus has been greatly exaggerated. Although the biggest productions have had trouble attracting the large audiences they need to support themselves, smaller circuses are flourishing. Cirque du Soleil, the highly profitable Montreal-based one-ring show, is expanding in the United States. Other one-ring shows, such as Circus Flora and the Culpepper & Merriweather Circus, are still going strong. As a bellwether of the future, youth circuses are booming. According to the American Youth Circus Organization, there are 250 circus education programs nationwide, with growth projected at 10 new programs per year.*

It's been a busy few months for Dr. Davis, who earlier this year published an op-ed on CNN.com. You can read it [here](#).

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