In 1883 G. A. Farini, the great Canadian impresario, unveiled his latest discovery, “Krao, the Missing Link,” at the Westminster Aquarium in London. Krao was a seven-year-old girl from what Victorians called Indochina whose small dark-skinned body was covered in soft, brown hair. Farini exhibited her for seven months as “A Living Proof of Darwin’s Theory of the Descent of Man,” the missing link between man and monkey. She then appeared in France, Germany, and the United States. Indeed, Krao was a staple of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century international freak show circuit, performing with Barnum and Bailey, then Ringling Brothers, and later their combined circuses, until her death in 1926 from influenza. This paper argues that Krao’s popularity as a sideshow exhibit, and thus her importance to the historical study of the Victorian freak show, stemmed from her relationship to late nineteenth-century preoccupations with Darwinism, imperialism, and the sexuality of the “primitive” body.

Krao made her first public appearance in January of 1883 at the Westminster Aquarium in London, although she had been shown to members of the press during the 1882 Christmas season. “The Aq,” as it was affectionately known, had been built in 1876 as part of London’s expanding entertainment industry. A pleasure palace within easy reach
of Charing Cross, the Aquarium boasted a theater, concerts, variety shows, freak acts, temporary exhibits of extraordinary marine animals such as a whale, a walrus, and a manatee (which Farini advertised as a “mermaid”), and of course fish. Despite the venue’s name, the fish were an afterthought, as they were few in number and apparently far from the main attraction. According to one contemporary, the fish were “on view for some time; in fact, I think that one or two lingered on to the very end twenty-seven years later.” “I have always wondered,” he continued, “whether anyone went to look at them and if the water was ever changed!” Despite the lack of fish, “the attractions of the place soon began to be very ‘fishy’ indeed,” as the Aquarium became known as a promenade for prostitutes. In 1889 the London County Council’s Theatre and Music Hall Licensing Committee debated denying the venue an operating license precisely because of numerous complaints that it was little more than a convenient central location for the soliciting of sex. The following year it was involved in a scandal over sexually provocative posters advertising the scantily clad gymnast Zaeo. The Aquarium was thus a pleasure palace masquerading as a site of scientific and educational interest. It was, therefore, the perfect place for Krao, a sideshow freak whose appeal stemmed both from her claim to be “a perfect specimen of the step between man and monkey” and from the erotics of her hairy, “primitive,” body.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, popular understandings of evolutionary theory structured audiences’ approach to the freak show, as the anomalous bodies on display were often interpreted as “steps on the evolutionary ladder” or “throwbacks” to earlier forms. The liminal being that bridged the animal and human worlds was a trope of the display of human oddities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as acts such as the Bear Lady, the Tiger Lady, and the Elephant Man make clear. After the publication of *Origin of Species* in 1859, these half-animal, half-human characters “became easily defined as ‘missing links’” in an “increasingly fluid chain of being.” Farini’s use of the scientific discourse of evolution to frame his exhibition of Krao was only the most explicit attempt by a variety of freak show entrepreneurs to capitalize on widespread interest in Darwinian theory. But significantly, it also served to legitimize Krao’s exhibition and to attract audience members who might not otherwise attend this type of show.

The use of scientific language enabled both Farini and the popular press that reported on this attraction to distance themselves from what was toward the end of the nineteenth century increasingly coming to
be seen, at least by middle-class morality mongers, as an indecent and prurient form of entertainment. In order to attract the widest audience, with the deepest pockets possible, Farini stressed that this was no “freak of nature” and encouraged the press to promote her as an educational exhibit in much the same way that “ethnological types” were advertised, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{11} “There are many who condemn, perhaps with justice, the taste which takes the form of looking upon ‘freaks of nature,’” reported the \textit{Morning Post}, but Krao “does not come within that unwholesome category, because her peculiarities are hereditary.”\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, the press and the showman repeatedly stressed that Krao was not “offensive” or “repulsive” but a “fascinating” “specimen” of interest to the “ethnologist” and “naturalist” alike and thus not only an acceptable but also an edifying form of entertainment.

While a scientific discourse was strategically employed to circumvent accusations of impropriety, this hirsute child did in fact serve as a focal point for public discussions of Darwinian theory, revealing that the freak show operated as an important space for the popularization of scientific debates. Whether Krao was more human than monkey, part of a separate race or a member of a transitional species, or merely a true “freak of nature” preoccupied accounts of her exhibition in the 1880s. Indeed, Farini structured the show as a scientific demonstration, the “Living Proof of Darwin’s Theory of the Descent of Man.” Throughout the promotional pamphlet that accompanied her exhibition, Farini upheld Krao as a scientific “specimen.” Krao, Farini argued, “transcends in scientific importance and general interest any creature that has yet been seen in Europe.”\textsuperscript{13} He maintained, in fact, that the Siamese monarchy had eventually allowed her to leave the country in order to assist “Europeans in their researches in connection with the theory of the Descent of Man.”\textsuperscript{14} Krao, he claimed, was the “keystone to the arch” that the many builders of evolutionary theory had labored to construct, explicitly placing himself in the illustrious company of evolutionary theorists such as Ernst Haeckel, Alfred Russel Wallace, and Charles Darwin.\textsuperscript{15} Many years later Farini told a reporter that he had “saturated” himself with Darwin in order to be able to “talk to the most learned scientist of them all.”\textsuperscript{16} The \textit{Sporting and Dramatic News} further aggrandized Farini’s self-proclaimed scientific achievements: “There stood the great Farini,” it maintained, “he who had done with a Cook’s tourist ticket and an agent, in a few months, more than poor Darwin had achieved with the aid of all the animal world in a lifetime.”\textsuperscript{17} Farini
did not fail to capitalize on this quote, placing a version of it on the back of the pamphlet. He also issued a carte de visite that, borrowing from the conventions of spirit photography, featured an apparition of Darwin floating above an especially simian depiction of Krao. Darwin himself, this photographic souvenir implied, bore witness to this great discovery and marveled at Farini’s scientific triumph even from beyond the grave.\textsuperscript{18}

Darwin’s \textit{Origin of Species} merely alluded to the application of the principle of natural selection to the study of human evolution. However, “Darwin’s Bulldog,” Thomas Huxley, had by the 1860s fully expanded the theory to situate man’s place in nature nearer the apes than the angels. By the time of the publication of \textit{The Descent of Man} in 1871, Darwin’s name was indelibly associated with “the ape theory.”\textsuperscript{19} Caricatures of Darwin-as-monkey proliferated in the popular press as scientific debates quickly found currency within the wider cultural milieu. One of the key ways in which Darwinian principles were more broadly understood was through the concept of the missing link. Critiques of Darwinian evolution had centered on the fact that no species between man and monkey had been identified. In the popular imagination this missing link would be proof of the theory of human evolution. In the second half of the nineteenth century the missing link began to appear as a character in popular fiction, although it was largely the subject of satire and was often discredited, as the man-monkey invariably turned out to be either entirely man, entirely monkey, or a monkey sitting on a man.\textsuperscript{20} Beginning in the 1860s P. T. Barnum exhibited an African American man in a fur suit as the “missing link” or “Man Monkey.” “Zip,” as he was later known, however, received greatest fame not primarily as a missing link but as a “nondescript,” as Barnum marketed this act under the title “What is It?”\textsuperscript{21} In the 1870s a hairy fourteen-year-old microcephalic girl was also exhibited in France as “Darwin’s Missing Link.”\textsuperscript{22} It was Farini, however, who most successfully capitalized on popular interpretations of Darwinian theory by promoting Krao as the missing link. Indeed, she continued to market herself as “the original missing link” throughout her career, suggesting both that she was the first widely popular act of this nature and that others had piggybacked on her success.\textsuperscript{23}

Krao’s pamphlet advertised her as the crucial, but heretofore elusive, piece of the evolutionary puzzle. It began: “The usual argument against the truth of the Darwinian theory, that Man and Monkey had a common origin, has always been that no animal has hitherto been
discovered in the transition state between ‘Monkey’ and ‘Man.’ This ‘Missing Link’ is now supplied in the person of KRAO, a perfect specimen of the step between man and monkey.”24 In order to accentuate Krao’s status as missing link, Farini underscored her simian characteristics: her nose was level with the rest of her face, her cheeks contained pouches in which she could store food, she shot out her lip like a chimpanzee when pouty, her joints were flexible, she turned the soles of her feet up when sitting down, she had the rudiments of a tail, and of course was covered in hair. Farini excerpted quotes from the popular press that stressed these monkeylike attributes, such as the Standard’s report that “she has a double row of teeth on the upper jaw; that she can, in the hollow of her cheeks, stow away food to be eaten when required as the monkey does in his ‘pouches,’ and that the fingers and toes bend backwards and forwards to the same extent and with equal ease.”25 Farini had clearly lectured to the press at a special viewing of Krao on her simian qualities. He then deliberately chose quotations for the front and back of Krao’s promotional pamphlet that parroted his contention that Krao was half human, half monkey, although which half was which was clearly a matter of debate. “The lower portion of the body is more like that of a monkey,” maintained the Daily Chronicle, while the Evening News reported that her “face presents an aspect singularly akin to that of the gorilla, but with a humanised expression.”26 Other reports drew attention to her resemblance to Pongo, a gorilla that Farini had previously exhibited at the Aquarium, and gestured to her similarities to the “lower order of animals whose pranks are a never failing source of delight to visitors at the Zoological Gardens.”27

The images that accompanied Krao’s 1883 exhibition stressed her simian characteristics. The illustration that adorned the cover of her souvenir pamphlet represented Krao as a small monkeylike child, naked except for copious amounts of body hair, indeed much more hair than contemporary photographs of her indicate that she actually possessed. Alternatively, she was seen in a promotional photograph clinging to her adoptive father, naked with hairy arms and legs wrapped around him in a simian embrace. A cartoon of this photograph was reproduced in the Sporting News with the caption “Linked Sweetness,” stressing Krao’s “winsome ways” but implying that she was as much animal as human. Beside this cartoon appeared another that depicted Krao in her “bib and tucker.” Here the artist exaggerated her lips to stress her status as a “talking monkey,” accentuating her racial otherness, which contrary to the “Linked Sweetness” image rendered Krao grotesque.28 As Z. S.
Strother has argued in relationship to the representations of Sara Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus,” Krao’s body clearly “did not speak for itself,” and thus her souvenir pamphlet guided the eye to seek out her simian qualities. The unofficial images that surrounded her appearance at the Aquarium thus also helped to structure the public’s consumption of Krao as “the missing link.”

Krao’s reputation, like that of many other freaks, rested on her authenticity. It was, therefore, essential for Farini to engage with scientific “experts,” although how much of their interest in her was purely scientific, and the precise nature of their expertise in the authentication of missing links, are open to question. Farini commenced Krao’s souvenir pamphlet with a conversation between himself and Francis Buckland, a well-known naturalist, who was also a personal friend. Unabashedly interested in “curiosities of natural history,” Buckland was nonetheless a respectable scientist. His presence in the narrative helped position Krao as a legitimate subject of scientific study. During a visit to Dublin in 1883, Farini arranged for Krao to be exhibited at a private gathering of local intellectuals including Trinity College professors, doctors, veterinarians, members of the Royal Society, and select representatives of the press. She was presented in her undergarments and was examined and touched by the audience, who were encouraged to verify her status as missing link. Well trained by Farini, she greeted each visitor with a “How d’you do, Sir?” By conducting these private viewings for selected distinguished guests apart from her regular public exhibitions, Farini sought to construct Krao as “worthy of [both] public attention and careful scientific examination.”

Much of the “scientific” discussion of Krao focused on the proposition that she came from a hairy family, and indeed a hairy species. She was not a freak, the press reported, no “lusus naturae such as bearded women, spotted dogs, or giantesses.” Rather, argued Bell’s Life in London, “she is a regular production in the regular order of Nature.” This was not merely an attempt to distance her from the freak show, which occupied the moral borderlands of popular entertainment, but also to emphasize her scientific importance. If she were a freak, a true anomaly, then she could not be considered a missing link, which by definition was a member of a transitional species. Accentuating her hairy family, therefore, was essential to protecting her status. Krao’s pamphlet spent a great deal of time on her capture and on the hairiness of her parents, who did not accompany her to England. Krao’s father had apparently died of cholera two weeks before they left, but as an accompanying
woodcut revealed, his “whole body was completely covered with a thick hairy coat, exactly like that of the anthropoid apes.” By constructing Krao as the missing link, with a hereditary condition, common not only to her family but to a tribe, and indeed a species, Farini suggested that she was a subject not for pathologists and teratologists, who were concerned with diseases or congenital anomalies, but rather for the anthropologist.

In an article entitled “Krao, The ‘Human Monkey,’” which appeared in the scientific journal *Nature* in January of 1883, A. H. Keane, the English traveler and anthropologist, reported on Farini’s discovery. Without fully endorsing the showman’s claims, Keane nevertheless underscored Krao’s “prognathism,” her protruding lips, and her other apparently apelike characteristics, proclaiming that “apart from her history” one might feel inclined to regard “this specimen merely as a ‘sport’ or lusus naturae, possessed rather of a pathological than of a strictly anthropological interest.” But if the pamphlet about her is indeed true, he continued, then she is of “exceptional scientific importance.” A few months later, however, *Nature* published a letter from a resident of Bangkok shedding light on Krao’s personal history. Krao, the author declared, was a Siamese child who came from ordinary parents. “Krao” was not the sound her parents made when calling her, as Farini had claimed, but rather meant “whiskers,” her nickname. She was no more flexible than any other Siamese person, the letter writer maintained, and “beyond her abnormal hairiness presents no peculiarity.” The child was looked upon at home “as even a greater natural curiosity than she is considered to be in England,” declared the correspondent; in fact, her parents had also exhibited her to paying customers before selling her outright.

While Keane corroborated these particulars, Farini of course ignored and suppressed them, continuing to quote Keane’s original observations on the back of Krao’s pamphlet. Indeed, as was to be expected, he only included quotes that emphasized her monkeylike nature, conveniently expunging material that clearly indicated that neither the scientific community nor the popular press was convinced of her authenticity. Both the *British Medical Journal* and *Scientific American* concluded that she was merely a case of “hypertrichopherosis (superabundance of hair).” Indeed, the *BMJ* noted that all her physical peculiarities were common “amongst the yellow coloured races found inhabiting the eastern parts of India.” The *Daily News* maintained that “Anatomists and anthropologists must decide whether Krao is in any degree structurally
allied to the ape. The ordinary observer is not likely to discover that
she is.”39 She shows “far too much intelligence to please the out-and-out
Darwinite,” suggested the London Figaro, while the Morning Advertiser
maintained that the true link that needed to be found was the one that
connected Krao “with the monkey-world.”40 In fact, while Krao was
certainly a curiosity, some were clearly disappointed with the exhibition.
“I had steeled myself to behold something very Darwinian,” reported
Land and Water, “picturing a gorilla-like half-animal being” but instead
finding “a bright little girl.”41

Despite her dubious authenticity, Krao’s exhibit was undoubtedly
a popular and financial success. She was, according to another per-
former, “immensely popular for years.”42 A contemporary showman
recalled that Krao “was showing at the time when Darwin’s theory was
in the news so enormous crowds for a long time [were] the order of the
day.”43 Whether or not freak show audiences were convinced of Farini’s
claims about Krao, they were clearly attracted by the link to Darwinian
theory. Krao’s exhibition was successful, therefore, because she literally
embodied popular interpretations of evolutionary theory, reflecting back
to the freak show audience its own understanding of the processes of
human evolution and encouraging these spectators to participate in the
advancement of scientific knowledge. At the same time, as we shall see,
Krao reinforced British beliefs about the distance between their own
civilized and evolved bodies, and primitive “others.”

If the pamphlet sold at Krao’s exhibition framed the show as sci-
etific and educational, leading to a better understanding of evolutionary
theory, it also situated Krao as part of a triumphant narrative of British
imperialism. Evolutionary theory and imperialism were linked by what
Anne McClintock has called “anachronistic space.” Colonized people
were, according to this trope, mired in “a permanently anterior time
within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic
humans, atavistic . . . the living embodiment of the archaic ‘prima-
tive.’”44 Colonial subjects thus represented lower branches of the mono-
genetic family tree, both less physically and less culturally evolved. The
imperial element of Krao’s story enhanced the scientific positioning of
her as an intermediary life form, for where else would the missing link be
found but in the underexplored and undeveloped regions on the edges
of the empire.

The dramatic tale of Krao’s capture was part of a pervasive late
nineteenth-century narrative that figured imperialism as an adventure
that tested men’s mettle. While this part of Southeast Asia was not
yet part of the British empire, Krao’s capture in Laos and the complex negotiations with the Laotian, Burmese, and Siamese monarchies over her removal reads like an imperial adventure novel, a genre that reached its apotheosis with H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) and *She* (1887). While Krao was likely born in Siam, she was, according to her souvenir pamphlet, captured in Laos. Farini’s freak hunters had been dispatched to Southeast Asia, for rumors abounded that tallied men could be found in the region. In addition, it was known that King Theebaw of Burma kept a “hairy family” at his court (who also hit the freak show circuit in the late 1880s, appearing in London in 1886 and in Paris the following year). Southeast Asia, or Indochina as it was commonly called in the late nineteenth century, sat at the edge of empire. The British, contesting French colonial expansion in the region, had been actively encroaching into this territory since the Anglo-Burmese war of 1826. Britain annexed the port of Rangoon in 1852, converted the Straits Settlement into a Crown colony in 1867, and formally absorbed Burma into the British empire in 1885. While India had been effectively domesticated by the 1880s, Indochina figured in the British imagination as a mysterious and savage outpost of empire that few could in fact locate on a map. Indeed, the press coverage of Krao suggests widespread confusion about where exactly Laos lay.

By 1883, a tense moment in British-Burmese relations over the balance of power in the region, the Victorian press had begun to depict the Burmese as uncivilized, corrupt, and barbaric. Krao’s pamphlet contributed to this rhetoric. It was into this “country of bribery and corruption” ruled by a “bloodthirsty and treacherous sovereign” home to “wild tribes” of “robbers and murderers” that Farini plunged his audience.

The *Strand* magazine noted in 1897 that a “whole library of entertaining facts might be written about the romance of freak-hunting and curiosity-finding for the side-shows of the world.” Farini’s “costly expedition to Northern Siam in search of ‘Krao, the Missing Link,’” it continued, “reads like one of Jules Verne’s wildest flights.” Even years after her debut, Krao was clearly still selling the same souvenir pamphlet at her shows. The narrative of her capture was so appealing to freak show audiences, and survived for at least two decades, because it tapped into late nineteenth-century taste for imperial adventures. Indeed, Farini had clearly modeled Krao’s pamphlet not only on imperial fiction but also on the story of “The Wild Men of Borneo.” From the 1850s the diminutive Barney and Hiram Davis toured the United States and Europe as Waino and Plutaino, “The Wild Men of Borneo.”
When P. T. Barnum exhibited them in the 1870s, he sold a pamphlet at the show that detailed their exciting capture off the “rocky coast of the Island of Borneo.” It theorized that these “savage” brothers came from Siam or Burma and were “hardly more elevated in social standing than ourang-outangs.” These freak show “true life histories” were thus highly formulaic and both borrowed from and informed not only each other but also fictional and nonfictional imperial adventure stories that circulated widely throughout Victorian culture.

Like Haggard’s exotic tales, the story of Krao’s capture is rife with adventure. Edward Sachs, the first of Farini’s explorers, is bound hand and foot by his supposed guides and left hanging upside down from a tree to be “torn to pieces by wild beasts.” He outwits the natives by “extending his powerful muscles to their fullest extent” before he is bound, so that the ropes loosen as his muscles relax. By the “superhuman effort of his powerful muscles” he escapes and returns to Mandalay to surprise his betayers. Sachs, however, like many an imperial explorer, contracts both smallpox and dysentery and is forced to give up the search. The quest for the missing link was then taken up by Carl Bock, who had already procured a walrus and a group of Laplanders for Farini in the Arctic, another site of nineteenth-century adventure stories. Bock was already engaged in an equally “onerous journey” through “some of the most difficult regions of Borneo, amid the ‘head hunters,’ and the cannibals” (which resulted in his sensational *The Head-Hunters of Borneo* [1881]) when he agreed to take up the search for the missing link. The “dangerous journey” into Laos “surrounded by tigers and bears, by leopards and panthers, by elephants and rhinoceri, by snakes and crocodiles” results in the successful capture of Krao and her parents. But when he tries to leave Laos with his treasure, the king detains him. Bock is held as a “virtual prisoner” for months until he threatens the Laotian monarch with the wrath of the king of Siam, who had, apparently, sanctioned the search for the missing link. The trials and tribulations of Sachs and Bock are typical of the imperial adventure genre. They penetrate the dark jungles of distant conquerable lands, survive the attacks of savage tribes, suffer tropical diseases, hunt for treasure, and outwit foreign rulers. Their superior physical strength and European intellect and rationality trump the weak and superstitious natives, and in the end their courage and persistence are rewarded. Krao’s appeal was thus due in part to her pamphlet’s success in catering to the desires of the audience for these tales from dark continents.

Not only did the story of her capture fit perfectly into the genre of
imperial fiction, but Krao also served as a human trophy of imperial expansion, a synecdoche of Indochina, parts of which were on the verge of being absorbed into the British empire. Like the “Burmese Imperial State Carriage and Throne Studded with 20,000 precious stones Captured in the Present Indian War,” which was exhibited at the Egyptian Hall in 1825 in the midst of the first Anglo-Burmese war, the British public could consume Krao as a prize, a souvenir of imperial conquest, for with her hairy naked body and monkeylike nature, Krao was emblematic of all that was wild, lawless, and savage in the lands at the edge of empire. To emphasize her savagery, Farini circulated portraits of Krao that underscored not only her simian characteristics but also her essential primitiveness. Even when clothed in the trappings of middle-class respectability, Krao was placed in a natural and explicitly savage environment, either leaning against rocks or perched on the stump of a tree. The most explicitly “wild child” image of her was made around 1884. This souvenir carte de visite produced in Liverpool depicted Krao in a jungle setting. Here she is completely naked, which accentuates her hairy body. Her hair surrounds her face like a lion’s mane (a trope of other hirsute freak performers), and her right leg is raised to rest upon a rock in order to better expose her flat, hairy, and thus primitive feet. This image was reproduced in Britain as a woodcut and was used as part of the promotional material for her 1887 reappearance at the Aquarium. But here, significantly, the artist introduced a small beaded loincloth for the sake of modesty (figure 6.1).

However, just as Krao epitomized the primitive nature of colonial subjects, so too was she quickly domesticated by the media, who underscored how easily she had been civilized since her arrival in Britain. Her pamphlet and the press reports of her exhibition return repeatedly to the success of the civilizing process, for this wild monkey-child was regularly held up as a well-behaved, charming little girl. If Krao’s pamphlet figured the Indochinese as wild and savage—the tribe of hairy people to which Krao supposedly belonged lived in a state “as low and as bestial as the beasts of the field” —her capture was construed as a rescue, for she was saved from this savage life and civilized. When Bock declared to Prince Kromolat of Burma that Krao would be “far better cared for in Europe [by Farini] than she possibly could [be] in the wild country” that was her home, the prince replied that he had indeed heard of “the Great Showman” and at once acquiesced to her removal “on condition that she should be formally adopted by Mr. Bock, on behalf of Mr. Farini, as his adopted daughter.” While the fictitious prince’s admiration for Farini was inserted into the story to aggrandize the showman,
it also served to underscore the dominant imperial ideology that figured colonial peoples as grateful recipients of Western culture.

The final phrase of Krao’s pamphlet asserted that this “daughter of a tribe of hairy men and women, Now makes her appearance before the civilised world.” But much of the media coverage of her exhibition also focused on the success of Krao’s own process of civilization. Her ability to speak English was often noted, as were her good manners. Like an
appropriately grateful immigrant, Krao was apparently so taken with her new home that she announced her “intention of residing in England.” Argued the anthropologist A. H. Keane, Krao recognized her own good fortune and had “so far adapted herself to civilised ways, that the mere threat to be sent back to her own people is always sufficient to suppress any symptoms of unruly conduct.” Similarly, her parents had, according to her souvenir pamphlet, been equally “anxious” to leave their native land and accompany Bock back to England. Ironically, the freak show, seen by many to be voyeuristic, prurient, and immoral, was in this context cast as a civilizing force. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has similarly argued in relationship to the “nondescript” hirsute attraction Julia Pastrana, her “exploitation becomes a salvation; her colonization becomes a conversion; and her display becomes a testimony.”

Krao’s formal adoption by Farini confirmed that she could not only be successfully transplanted but also transformed into a little English girl. Krao’s adoption officially anglicized and domesticated her, and her adaptability to her new father was often noted. She appears “to be happy enough in her new position,” remarked the Daily News, “and to regard her papa, as she calls Mr. Farini, with feelings of affection.” Other journalists maintained that she appeared “much attached” to Farini, “her kind foster parent,” and indeed she bore the surname Farini throughout her life. Not only did her adoption normalize and Westernize Krao by locating her within a Victorian family unit (making her, as one newspaper noted, not only “hair apparent, but heir apparent”) but also several newspaper reports highlighted the fact that she had been vaccinated. If by the 1880s all British children were compelled to be vaccinated, they were also required to be educated. The London Figaro noted that before long the “Board School officers will be looking up Miss Krao” and will likely “insist [on] her passing her standard like any other young lady of colour located in this country.” By advertising her vaccination, and the possibility of her education, Farini accentuated Krao’s admittance into British society through the rites and rituals of Western childhood.

As part of this discourse of successful civilization, Farini often clothed Krao in the dress and elegant black boots of a middle-class girl, although her costume always left her hairy arms and legs exposed. In one souvenir photograph she is garbed in an elaborate hat and ruffled dress, resembling the clothes of a Victorian fashion doll. These “civilized” images of Krao served as the basis of an illustration that appeared in American papers when she first crossed the Atlantic. In the Peru
Republican in 1885, a well-groomed and neatly dressed Krao was depicted sitting beside a younger and decidedly more simian version of herself, adapted from the image that first appeared on her promotional pamphlet. The illustration suggests the distance she has traveled from savage to civilized in the space of a mere two years. If Krao was a trophy of empire, she was therefore also an object lesson in imperial relations. Her representation as a charming child, happily adapting to English life, underscored Britain’s role as a civilizing force and its ability to turn even the most primitive peoples into good British subjects.

The Darwinian and Social Darwinian messages of Krao’s exhibition are clear; indeed, her success stemmed in large part from Farini’s ability to cast Krao as an educational act rather than as a freak. However, it is hard to ignore that at least part of Krao’s appeal, particularly in the decades around the turn of the century, derived from the implicit sexuality of her partially exposed hirsute body. While she was not primarily an erotic performer, Krao’s body could be, and clearly was, read as sexually available. The very act of displaying one’s body publicly rendered the female performer, regardless of the content and nature of the performance, a sexual object. Thus many female freaks, particularly bearded women, who were also transgressing gender boundaries, attempted to underscore their femininity, and thus to contain their sexuality, by promoting themselves as wives and mothers—models of heterosexual, procreative, middle-class domesticity. However, Krao’s act required her to exhibit more of her body than bearded ladies, whose difference was manifest only above the neck. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century Krao was regularly depicted reclining in a jungle setting, like other hirsute acts, in the highly eroticized pose of an odalisque. Her costume, a version of which she wore throughout her career, was similar to those preferred by female acrobats (like the scandalous Zaeo) whose performances were structured to allow male viewers to see as much of the female body as possible, and whose aerial feats permitted the audience to look up at their spread legs from a strategic vantage point. By evoking both the female acrobat and the odalisque in her promotional materials, Krao’s promoters used sex to sell her act.

However, it was not merely the erotic poses and skimpy costumes but in fact the hairiness of her body itself that suggested Krao’s sexual availability. Since at least the Renaissance, the hairy female body had been associated with animalistic lust. By the nineteenth century hirsuteness had become a marker of the primitive or savage body, which was in turn bound up in notions of unbridled, perverse, and pathological...
That Krao grew hair where “normal” women did not titilated audiences in ways similar to the half-woman/half-man whose gender bending also suggested a polyvalent and thus excessive sexuality. In her early twenties Krao had not only cultivated a great mane of hair but was also sporting a full beard and mustache. By exposing female body and facial hair for all to see, Krao made visible that which generally went unseen: her body hair and her beard evoked pubic hair, a preoccupation of Victorian pornography, and thus she permitted male audience members access to an erotic, if not necessarily feminine, aspect of the sexualized female body.

The eroticization of Krao found its fullest expression in France in 1886. The French media transformed the previously innocuous carte de visite of a nine-year-old Krao in her jungle setting into an image of a considerably older, sexually aggressive, and sexually available young woman. This illustration, which appeared on a poster advertising her exhibition in a private room at the café-concert the Alcazar d’Été (a competitor of the Folies-Bergère, where King Theebaw’s “sacred hairy family” was exhibited in 1887), had clearly been adapted from the British woodcut seen in figure 6.1, but its tone and meaning had changed. Instead of confronting the viewer with a direct and passive stare, more animal than human, Krao looks over her left shoulder and grins suggestively at her viewers in a coquettish come-on. Her legs and thighs are considerably more curvaceous, and she rises up on her toes to exaggerate the curved arches of her feet. Similarly, a picture of a nude Krao seated on the lap of a scientist was significantly altered in a French cartoon to emphasize the lasciviousness of the scientist and the sexual availability of what was now clearly a young woman.

The French overtly sexualized Krao, even at this very early stage of her career, revealing heightened anxieties, as Diana Snigurowicz has argued, over the sexual connotations of female hirsuteness, which suggested bestiality, zoophilia, and interspecies breeding. For the British, the erotic nature of Krao’s act seems to have been more implicit. The media coverage of Krao’s exhibition in Britain, in contrast to her publicity materials, emphasized not her bestial qualities but her humanity and, indeed, her femininity. There was little question that Krao was in fact a young girl with more human than simian characteristics. Most newspapers reported that she had “lovely” or “lustrous” eyes. Even her own pamphlet drew attention to what was obviously seen as her best feature: “How many a fair lady will envy Krao those full and sparkling eyes! How their dark luster would be set off on a fair skin!” This
remark implied that despite the existence of “several British subjects who are uglier than Krao,” she could never be truly beautiful as her dark skin (hairy or not), the clearest marker of her racial difference, precluded this. Nonetheless, as the newspapers all indicated, she showed “truly feminine delight” in the clothes and jewelry and satin slippers she was provided with. This feminization of Krao suggested that she was not only flirtatious but possibly available. Maintained one reporter, this “pretty little girl” exhibited “the elementary coquettishness of her sex,” asserting her “fair sex through and through her hirsute appearance.”

Indeed, Punch suggested knowingly that she was ready to receive company: “Entrance without knocking, ask for the Hairy Belle,” a sentiment that Farini clearly endorsed, for he placed this quote on the promotional pamphlet itself.

Krao’s evening appearances at the Star of Erin music hall in Dublin in 1883, even more than her daytime exhibition to learned professionals in her underclothes, underscored the erotic readings of her body. According to Shane Peacock, Farini’s biographer, “Each night the lights were dimmed, primitive music played and she slowly emerged onto the stage . . . in a short blue dress with red stockings and shoes, her side turned to the crowd and her face partially covered. . . . When she came fully into the footlights and dramatically lifted her head to the audience there was always an audible gasp. . . . But once again her most striking characteristic was her personality—she was a charming, charismatic performer who enjoyed being on stage.” The music hall, as opposed to the pseudoscientific setting of the Aquarium, encouraged Krao to perform her freakish bodily difference in dramatic and sexually provocative ways that explicitly located her as “primitive” Other. Her performance, complete with music, lighting, and costume, prefigured that of Josephine Baker, who self-consciously manipulated the discourses of primitive sexuality to market herself as an exotic, and therefore erotic, act.

When Krao returned to Britain in 1887 the Aquarium program maintained that “Old friends will be astonished at her development,” hinting at her body’s maturity. Seven years later the English Mechanic reported that while on exhibit in Germany, Krao had received a marriage proposal, a not uncommon phenomenon for sideshow freaks, which she had refused because “she had learned too much independence during her wild life in the woods.” However, it was not until the turn of the century that Krao’s sexuality generated concern in Britain. In 1899, when Krao reappeared at the Aquarium, an irate member of the public
wrote to the London County Council to complain about her exhibition. The shocked correspondent maintained that in the “interest of decency” the act should be withdrawn. “The revolting inference in the attraction” is that the public should “behold the result of copulation between a woman and one of the most filthy beasts.” Such an exhibition, it continued, might lead to the logical next step: an exhibition of the woman and the monkey, the “authors of the horror exhibited.”

While the LCC investigated and found “nothing whatever in the exhibition or the costume of the woman that could call for any remark whatever,” Krao clearly elicited anxieties over bestiality. This letter writer misunderstood Krao’s claim to be half-woman, half-monkey, as she continued throughout her adult career to advertise and promote herself as “the missing link,” not as a product of interbreeding. This misreading nonetheless reveals the sexual fantasies and anxieties suggested by both Darwinism and imperialism, for sexual unions between man and monkey, it has been argued, were both implicit in Darwin’s theory and part of “pornotropic” fantasies dating back to the early modern period.

Krao’s sexuality, while not the primary focus of the act, thus served to enhance the dominant imperial and sociobiological message of her exhibition. For in the late nineteenth century the discourses of evolution, imperialism, and primitive sexuality were deeply imbricated as Britain justified colonialism by promoting it as a civilizing mission. Her long-term success, evidenced by the fact that she was one of the highest paid freaks in the Ringling Brothers lineup, was thus due to her ability literally to embody the relationship between primitive sexuality, imperial ideology, and Darwinian theory. For by displaying her hairy body, Krao reinforced the profound difference between evolved British bodies and “primitive” Others. Her hirsuteness, and thus essential savagery, reassured the British public, across the class spectrum, of its racial, national, and imperial superiority. At the same time she continued to serve as proof of the success of the civilizing process. As “the best-liked of freaks,” who “never complained,” Krao was, according to “the fat lady,” her longtime friend, destined straight for the ultimate rewards of Christian civilization: “If any one has gone to heaven,” she proclaimed, “that woman has.”

Audiences across the United Kingdom thus swarmed to see “Krao, the Missing Link” because she provided the British public with perfect proof of their supreme status on what her pamphlet called “the Darwinian chain of evolution” that joined “molecule to man.”
Notes


2. Throughout this essay I will be employing the nineteenth-century terms for the countries that make up the region we know today as Southeast Asia. I am using Victorian terminology because I am interested in British fantasies about the countries known today as Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar.


5. Ibid., 297.


11. For the conventions of ethnological display see Lindfors.


15. Ibid., 14.


18. Many thanks to Shane Peacock for sharing this image with me.


25. Ibid., ii.

26. Ibid., ii–iii.
32. *Krao*, ii.
34. *Krao*, 11.
46. In 1883 the *British Medical Journal* suggested that Laos was part of Burma; in 1894, once Laos had been absorbed into French Indochina, the *English Mechanic* nonetheless maintained that it was part of Siam.
52. Ibid., 7.
53. Ibid., 9, 11.
55. *Krao*, 7.
56. Ibid., 12.
57. Ibid., 14.
60. Krao, 11.
61. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Narratives of Deviance and Delight: Star-
ing at Julia Pastrana, the ‘Extraordinary Lady,’” in Beyond the Binary: Reconstruct-
ing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context, ed. Timothy B. Powell (New Brunswic-
k, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 94.
63. Bell’s Life in London, January 6, 1883, 7; Land and Water, January 6, 1883,
14.
64. Land and Water, January 6, 1883, 14.
66. The London Figaro, January 6, 1883, 4.
67. Peacock, Great Farini, 289.
68. The Peru Republican, April 24, 1885.
70. Mary E. Fissell, “Hairy Women and Naked Truths: Gender and the Poli-
tics of Knowledge in Aristotle’s Masterpiece,” William and Mary Quarterly 60, no. 1
71. Sander Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of
Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature,” in
“Race,” Writing and Difference, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 1986); George W. Stocking, Jr., Victorian Anthropology (New York:
Free Press, 1987).
72. These images are reproduced in Sabine Lenk, ed., Grüße aus Viktoria: Film-
Ansichten aus der Ferne (Basel: Stroemfeld, 2002), 48, and Diana Snigurowicz,
“Spectacles of Monstrosity and the Embodiment of Identity in France, 1829–1914”
(Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago), 455–56.
73. Snigurowicz, “Sex, Simians, and Spectacle,” 78.
74. Krao, 12.
76. The Times, January 2, 1883, 9; Daily News, January 1, 1883, 2.
77. Land and Water, January 6, 1883, 14.
78. Krao, ii.
80. Royal Aquarium Programme, April 30, 1887.
81. English Mechanic and World of Science, December 28, 1894, 429.
82. Unsigned letter to Clerk of London County Council, December 22, 1899.
London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/MIN/10, 891.
83. Inspection of Places of Public Entertainment Report, Royal Aquarium, Jan-
uary 2, 1900. London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/MIN/10, 891.
84. Snigurowicz, “Sex, Simians, and Spectacle,” 67; McClintock, 22; Londa
85. According to contract documents Krao was paid $50 for the 1916 season, as
much as Frank Lentini, the spectacular three-legged boy. Many thanks to Fred D.
Pfening for sharing his collection of contracts with me.
86. New York Times, April 19, 1926.
87. The Broad Arrow, January 6, 1883, 22.