
Dagnosław Demski and Dominika Czarnecka, eds. 2021.
Staged Otherness. Ethnic Shows in Central and Eastern Europe: 1850–1939.
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The volume edited by Demski and Czarnecka, although hefty, provides a coherent perspective of a multifarious reality that for a few decades before and after the year 1900 attracted a consistent audience from cities across Central and Eastern Europe, i.e., the theatrical performances of various exotic ethnic groups mainly from Africa, North and South America, or remote regions of Europe (e.g., groups of Sámi or Tartars). Beyond the book's ethnically-connoted subject, adjacent topics such as entertainment consumption of the new Central and Eastern European urban elites, or the deconstruction of the pejorative imaginary, or the pejorative Other, through which these new elites were perceived by Western Europe, come to develop it and give it consistency (pp. 1–44). The volume is, in fact, the result of an international research project funded by the Polish National Science Centre (p. ix).

The volume has a well-defined theoretical framework presented in its introduction, the three topics mentioned above, ethnicity, entertainment production, including advertising in the press of the time (pp. 4–6, 16–18), and the deconstruction of the Other (pp. 8–13), being contextualized through an accurate bibliography. The theoretical analysis in the book's introduction is complemented and excellently illustrated by a series of events related to the tours of these

exotic groups around Central and Eastern European regions. The first performance of this kind, that of the "Nubian Caravans," which took place at the Wrocław Zoo in 1876, is singled out. The following year the same group performed in Vienna, where they sparked a real "Nubian craze" (p. 25). These were followed by performances of very diverse exotic groups such as Zulus, Samoyed, Sioux, Sinhalese, etc. (pp. 26 ff.). However, this was only the beginning of a long-standing phenomenon that underwent important changes. For example, the staging of the Other through these performances acquired new dimensions and was perceived differently after the First World War due to an increase of knowledge of these cultures through the development of networks of ethnographic museums, which also included "exotic" collections (pp. 14–15).

The volume is structured into three sections following the theoretical framework developed in its introduction. The first section focuses on the organizational and recruitment pathways of the actors who performed in these shows in the specific contexts of the different areas in Central and Eastern Europe. There was a whole network of entrepreneurs related to the entertainment industry who recruited these groups based on both the tastes and motivations of the audience, as well as the availability of the members of these groups,

themselves extremely open to performing in these shows. The four chapters of the section illustrate this with concrete cases. The first two chapters have Carl Hagenbeck (1844–1913) as their central figure. The chapter authored by Hilke Thode-Arora presents the case of the Hagenbecks' impresario companies. Starting from a documentary fund of over 5,000 letters, memoirs, diaries, and administrative records, Thode-Arora restores the activity of these companies, placing Carl Hagenbeck, the most illustrious and successful representative of the family, in the foreground. Bodhari Warsame's chapter follows the phenomenon of "ethnic shows" over a long period, 1885–1930, this time focusing on Somali troupes. It was the same Carl Hagenbeck who first brought Somalis to Europe to perform in ethnographic shows (p. 79). During his long journeys to Africa where he had contacts, Hagenbeck was drawn to this population group because of their intelligence and sense of dignity, which he also emphasized in performances, trying to dispel the common Romantic image of the primitive savage, but also because of their "strangeness" and "authenticity"—the former meaning "strange but not too strange" for the tastes of his audience (p. 86). Warsame also brings up various collaborators of Hagenbeck, including Hersi Egeh, a native Somali, who was engaged both in the recruitment actions undertaken by Hagenbeck and the organization of various European tours. The other two chapters of the section bring to the fore, alongside the entrepreneurs of this type of entertainment, the figures of those who performed in these shows. Markéta Křížová gives an account of Cherwish, a member of the Chamacoco (Ishir) tribe of the Zamuco language family that inhabited Northern Paraguay, who was brought by Vojtěch Frič (1882–1942) to participate in the International Congress of Americanists in Vienna and stayed on for two years (1908 and 1909) in Europe, becoming the protagonist of several performances and conferences organized by Frič. In his chapter Evgeny

Savitsky writes about the 1882 Samoyed Exhibition in Vienna organized by Alexey Kalintsov, a member of a family of wealthy merchants from Arkhangelsk. Friedrich Müller and Josef Szombathy, the former a professor at the University of Vienna and the latter an archaeologist and anthropologist at the Vienna Museum of Natural History, were intrigued by the Samoyeds' presence in Vienna and, with Kalyntsov's consent, conducted anthropological and linguistic studies of the five members of the group. The most interesting was their leader Wasko/Vasily Kanyukov, who died the following year in Vienna shortly before returning to Russia. In a way similar to Křížová's chapter, the resistance of the performers in these ethnic shows is analyzed, and the complex relationships of mutual influence and ambiguity between them and their audience and the entrepreneurs of the shows, respectively, are highlighted.

The second section of the volume focuses on the process of building the European public's image of the ethnic Other. The three chapters show that while there was no single recipe for how these shows were organized, both entrepreneurs and performers continuously sought to arouse the cultural curiosity of the audience and, in the process, deliver meanings to the members of the audience and even have them participate in the performance. The stake of the first chapter in the section, written by Demski, one of the volume's editors, is rather theoretical, namely: "the problem is connected with analyzing a situation in which elements originating from one culture are presented in the context of a different culture" (p. 169). However, the originality of ethnic shows did not consist only in inserting the elements of a culture into another context, which would bring them closer to museum exhibitions, but in the theatricality of how they achieved this, in their performative dimension. In this sense, ethnic shows are exotic "ethno-dramas" with specific techniques and effects. Czarnecka's chapter also focuses on the notion of staging



exoticism, but it is less theoretical in doing so, as it draws on “excerpts from the Polish-language press issued between 1880 and 1914” (p. 203). The image circulated in the press of that period relative to ethnic performances is strongly contrasting with modern ways of controlling the corporeality that urban audiences cultivated at the time. Ballroom dances, for example, more widespread in the urban areas, or the control of the body through the practice of sports contrasted sharply with the dynamic movements, apparently uncontrolled but full of force, and the expressiveness of the performers in the ethnic shows. The last chapter in the section belongs to Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska, and it is based on media reports of ethnic shows, the period covered being the first four decades of the twentieth century, and the geographical area, Upper Silesia, a border region of Germany with a rich ethnic mosaic (p. 239). The author points out that despite the region’s relative territorial and political marginalization, as well as ethnic fragmentation, the travelling circuses that almost always included ethnic shows created a subjective egalitarianism that united the population of the province and somehow helped it to emancipate itself culturally and politically.

In the last section of the volume over the course of five chapters, the conduct of ethnic shows is examined in several local Central and Eastern European contexts. Two of the chapters, Andreja Mesarič’s and Jezebel Kopania’s, are closely related to earlier chapters in the volume, such as Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska’s chapter, emphasizing the contrast between the representation of the Other in ethnic performances and the construction of regional and later national collective identities. While Mesarič focuses on Slovenian identity in late nineteenth-century Austro-Hungarian Empire, suggestively titling her chapter “Racialized Performance and the Construction of Slovene Whiteness,” Kopania examines the emancipatory

function of ethnic performances connected with an interest in rural, traditional culture in dismembered Poland starting with the late nineteenth century. With a stronger theoretical approach, Timea Barabas’s chapter proposes an analysis of Edward Said’s concept of “nesting Orientalism,” based on Buffalo Bill’s performances created in the 1910s in the multiethnic regions of Banat and Transylvania of present-day Romania. The analysis of the reception in the press of the time shows that the ethnic groups differed in how they perceived these performances, with the Romanians having a positive perception of the Wild West, significantly different from that of ethnic Hungarians and Germans. The remaining two chapters by Maria Leskinen and István Sántha cover different periods in Russian history—narrower, the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, for Leskinen, and broader, from the end of the eighteenth century to the interwar period, for Sántha—but share a similar rather descriptive approach. Interestingly both identify primarily the sensationalist character of staging the Other, and less the building function for collective identities. The chapter authored by Sántha is illustrative in this respect as it connects the “freak” effects that ethnic performances had in late eighteenth-century Sankt Petersburg and the staging of shamanism associated with the so-called superstition and cultural backwardness of interwar Soviet Russia.

The volume edited by Demski and Czarnecka attracts attention through the variety of case studies brought up, as well as the accuracy of the facts and contexts described. But therein lies its weakness too. The narrative is superfluous as the limitation in many chapters to data from the press of the time gives the impression of redundancy. The scope of the theoretical framework outlined in the book’s introduction exceeds the set of data, so that the volume reads more like a book of cultural history and less like a contribution to the theoretical literature in the field.

