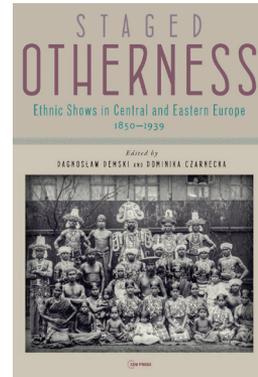


# BOOK REVIEW

## STAGED OTHERNESS AND PERFORMED IDENTITY

**Dagnosław Demski & Dominika Czarnecka. *Staged Otherness: Ethnic Shows in Central and Eastern Europe, 1850–1939*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2021. 460 pp.**



This edited volume brings together 13 research papers that describe the development and significance of ethnic shows in Central and Eastern Europe from 1850 until 1939. While each paper offers a slightly different take on the details on what constitutes an “ethnic show”, collectively, the papers approach ethnic shows as theatrical performances that display cultural qualities of an ethnographic group. Ethnic shows featured members of the ethnographic community performing cultural practices like horse riding exhibition, a dancing troupe, music group, craft-making exhibition. Ethnic shows differed from their contemporary “freak show” and “human zoo” exhibitions in that ethnic shows provided the audience with theatrical aspects of cultural practices while retaining an aura of ethnographic credibility. In this sense, ethnic shows represent an early instance of the meeting of science and entertainment.

The collection contextualizes the development of ethnic shows in relation to an emerging globalized industrial modernity in Central and Eastern Europe, in particular the role that ideas associated with “empire”, “nation”, and “culture” played in designing and promoting the shows. The entrepreneurs who developed the ethnic show expanded on an already existing network of exotic animal trade – which included Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Scandinavia – to recruit performers from these locations to tour Europe for paying audiences. This business model relied on industrial mobility infrastructure like trains and transoceanic shipping lanes, an established print media network (e.g., newspapers and posters), and on a public discourse on Otherness that framed the performances as exotic. Ethnic shows were a product of and contributed to an experience of modernity alongside increasing urbanization, tourism, the development of museums, zoos, the world fair, cinema, and the emergence of new fields of research like ethnology and anthropology.

The collection is divided into three parts which address (1) the power dynamics at stake in organizing this form of entertainment, (2) its politics of authenticity, and

(3) the role the shows played in constructing narratives of local identity. I will address each theme in turn.

The papers that are grouped in part 1 of the book are concerned with the question of agency of the performers of ethnic shows. While the sustainability of the ethnic show required a structural context which necessarily disempowered, exploited, and at times ridiculed the performers, the authors of this section paint a more complex picture of the relationship between the performers and their promoters. For instance, Warsame (chapter 3) describes Somali performers who professionalized their acts through extensive touring and developed their own ethnic show careers. The performers also drew the interest of anthropologists and ethnologists who were interested in engaging the performers with their research questions. While some performers were open to these kinds of collaborations, others actively resisted and frustrated the overtures of anthropologists to study them. Collectively, the papers show that the power dynamics at stake in these relationships were multi-directional and inconsistent.

The papers in part 2 describe the ways in which promoters of ethnic shows, as well as journalists who covered them, placed a high value on ethnographic authenticity. The papers examine the promotion materials and reviews of the shows and show how promoters and journalists would reference colonial and imperial language, couched in a language of scientific rationality and classification, in their description of the shows. However, a recurrent argument of the papers is the suggestion that notions of ethnographic authenticity were more related to the construction of European exoticism, rather than a presentation of an unmediated cultural expression. The papers consider, for example, the contradiction at stake when there is a demand for exoticness that is framed in a familiar, non-threatening way, which ultimately results in the reproduction of well-known exotic tropes, rather than educating the audience on cultural relativism.

The papers that make up part 3 describe ethnic shows in relation to nation-building discourses in Central and Eastern Europe during the early 20th century. The context of this argument acknowledges that ethnic shows in cities like Riga, Vienna, Warsaw, and St. Petersburg were a Western European import, which, in turn, were developed in a context of Western empire building. While the shows in Central and Eastern Europe retained the format and tone of their Western European counterparts, the local ideological context that framed the shows was slightly different. Latvia, Poland, and Slovenia, for example, did not possess overseas colonies. From this position, the discursive agenda of the shows was more directed towards outlining the terms of their new nationhood. In this regard, the shows' take on race and culture was not predicated on a theory of empire, but was more directed towards describing an ethnographic Other in relation to the nation, the local. This approach presents an alternative to the view of a unified European experience and offers up a more complex story. For example, local reviews of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* tour of Banat and Transylvania display a suspicious attitude towards

Native American performers, but describe an attraction to the American cowboy. These narratives suggest a position that is subservient towards the West, while maintaining a sense of repulsion towards the non-European Other. The reviews and promotional materials of ethnic shows provide interesting insights into notions of domination and submission, advanced and backward, Self and Other, which were instrumental in the development of modern ideas of the nation in Eastern and Central Europe.

This collection contributes to existing research on ethnic shows by focusing on the Central and Eastern European network, which, according to the authors, has hitherto been neglected and under-studied. In my reading, the research material on the Central and Eastern European network interrogates some of the binary oppositions that have historically dominated the field. It interrogates, for example, questions of power relations between Europe and non-Europeans, the relationship between empire and nation, culture and race, and elaborates on ideas of cultural authenticity and performance. I would suggest that this collection would be of interest to researchers of ethnic shows, museum studies, Eastern European nation building, and postcolonial studies.

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