Staged Otherness

Dagnosław Demski, Dominika Czarnecka

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Demski, Dagnosław and Dominika Czarnecka.
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The present book is the result of several years of research efforts undertaken by many people, as well as numerous meetings and discussions focused around ethnic (ethnographic) shows in Central and Eastern Europe in 1850–1939. It may be regarded as a standalone work, a description and proposed interpretation of the phenomenon in the region. At the same time, however, it is not a closed system. It has, from the very beginning, been designed as a source of data and, perhaps primarily, as an attempt at indicating the perspectives and interpretive directions that apply to the context of Central and Eastern Europe, and finally, as an inspiration for future research on non-European people’s performances in that part of the continent.

The publication is the first comprehensive overview of ethnic shows in Central and Eastern Europe. It includes information and many visual materials that have never previously been published in academic works; it also constitutes an important step toward a deeper understanding of ethnic shows, a phenomenon that took over the collective imagination of all Europeans in the latter half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century, but has hitherto been described and interpreted mainly by scholars from Western Europe and the United States. Instead of trying to “close” the subject of ethnic shows, the present publication aims at opening the way to further development of the study of this cultural phenomenon, with consideration of regional and local contexts.

The publication is not a closed system also in the sense that it may be read alongside the articles in special issues of academic periodicals published as part of the same research project (Acta Ethnographica Hungarica, vol. 64, no. 1, 2019; East Central Europe, vol. 47, nos. 2–3, 2020). These special issues contain texts by many authors not featured in the present publication and provide new information; they may be regarded not as a supplement to the
present work, but rather as a means to broaden the scope of possible contexts and interpretations.

Finally, the “open system” nature of the present book may be associated with the “feeling of something unfinished” Frantz Fanon described in his famous essay *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) in the context of the heroic efforts to grasp and define the nature of reality. Admitting that an analysis of the facts may prove insufficient if it does not take into account the historical and social reality, and that even a single phenomenon may be viewed from numerous perspectives which stem from differences in the circumstances experienced by various social, ethnic, and national groups, one should also bear in mind that the metaphor of “something incomplete” may manifest itself in many ways.

Reading the chapters of the present book, one may perhaps gain the impression that the many answers provided by the authors generated an equal number of further questions that remain unanswered. New research questions arise in the background: questions that resist neglect and beg scholarly attention. Thus, instead of restating what has already been said in the present book, let us focus our attention on the possible directions of future study.

The motif of peripherality is mentioned in several chapters of this book, yet none of them explore it to the full. In the context of ethnic shows in Central and Eastern Europe, this concept appears both complex and deserving careful analysis. On the one hand, looking from the perspective of the colonial empires of the day, the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe was regarded as the geopolitical periphery of the continent (it is, incidentally, a valid question whether this legacy of the past has any repercussions today, and, if so, what they might be). On the other hand, when one delves deeper, it becomes clear that Central and Eastern Europe as a region also had its own peripheries—determined by the geographical, political, or social context, and invariably defined in relation to the center(s). It seems insufficient to analyze ethnic shows that took place in such areas using only criteria which developed in centers of power. It would therefore be worthwhile to focus future research on those aspects of the phenomenon in question that were characteristic for peripheral regions as such and examine it from this perspective.

The book contains several chapters based on an actor-centered approach. The quest for more information revealing the relations, aims, and actions
of the social actors involved (in one way or another) in ethnic shows is an
important task, promising in the context of understanding the phenomenon
from the perspective of specifically situated individuals. As far as Central
and Eastern Europe is concerned, little is known about the local impresarios
and the owners of the institutions that invited groups of non-European peo-
ple to perform, or even about the spectators that came to see these shows. It
would be interesting to know whether, for instance, the ethnic background
or nationality of Central and Eastern European impresarios had any impact
(and if so, of what kind) on their relations with or conduct toward non-
European performers. The concept of indigenous agency deserves particular
attention here, as it remains under-explored in the study of ethnic shows. At
the current stage of research, searching for (non)extant archival material or
museum sources no longer seems sufficient; it is increasingly necessary to try
to hear “voices from the other side,” even indirectly, through the oral stories
told by the descendants of the people who performed in Europe. Here the
cooperation and involvement of local scholars, for which the present publi-
cation has attempted to lay the foundations, will be of profound importance,
as will their interpretations of the phenomenon.

The “feeling of something unfinished” may also appear in connection
with the issue of the local population’s (broadly understood) resistance to
the images of “exotic” Others. In this context, it seems imperative to search
for the underlying causes of this resistance and its consequences. The topic of
resistance ought to be studied in perspective, which would, for example, con-
sider instances of specific performances being boycotted by members of non-
dominant nations (as a form of a political manifestation), the actions of spe-
cific individuals and collectives that were against the organization of shows
with non-European people, or the attempts at circumventing the laws and
limitations, undertaken by impresarios and institutions hosting the shows.

Another subject that merits further study is the involvement of Central
and Eastern European scholars in ethnic shows staged in the region, and their
actions related to non-European performers. It would be interesting to find
out how far academic narratives produced in Central and Eastern Europe cor-
responded to those circulating in Western Europe at the time, and whether
(and if so, to what degree) these narratives had any influence on and visibility
in academic circles and in popular science. Similarly worth exploring are the
conflicts, rivalries, and perhaps instances of cooperation between local schol-
ars and the developing entertainment industry. The fact that ethnic shows were not discussed in twentieth-century historiography in the region also constitutes an interesting topic, if of a slightly different nature, as does the issue of ideological entanglement and other problems modern-day academics face when conducting relevant studies in a given region of Europe. At the present stage of research, the latter issue has only been mentioned in relation to Russia, yet there is much to indicate that it would not be groundless to bring it up in the context of other parts of the region.

Although studies of the “exotic” troupes performing in Europe conducted by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars often stemmed from the need to verify the “authenticity” of Others, this was not the only reason to engage in such research. The deliberate falsification of non-European people’s identity (the notion of “exchangeable savages”; local actors pretending to be black people; etc.) is another notion that the present publication alludes to, but does not explore in detail. It would be interesting to see future works not only point to specific examples of such practices employed in the region, but also present them in a broader context, such as (in the case of “exchangeable savages”) the reactions of local authorities and communities or the official penalties imposed for such deceit in given areas. The topic of actors impersonating Others ought to be analyzed in the context of dramatization in ethnic shows, which became more important with each passing decade, and the gradual introduction of new media, such as the cinema. It could also be explored on the basis of surviving visual material.

The issue of visual material produced, modified, and distributed in Central and Eastern Europe, and its critical analysis, constitutes one of the greatest challenges scholars interested in ethnic shows will have to face in the future. Despite numerous obstacles and limitations, all authors featured in the present publication supplemented their texts with images; yet most of these materials were not subjected to visual analysis or interpretation. The introduction of extensive captions to some of the photographs can only mitigate the “feeling of something unfinished” to a small degree. Possible directions for future research in this context include the exploration of visual motifs invented in Western Europe and frequently reproduced in Central and Eastern Europe in the form of leaflets, posters, and postcards. Visual materials produced in the region merit careful analysis, as they might (but do not necessarily have to) contain elements specific and characteristic of
that part of the world. Texts accompanying these images (and the languages in which they were published) are also an interesting topic to study. As far as analyzing visual material is concerned, the category of “incompleteness” proves to be of some importance, as it could be applied to the “hidden interior” found in old photographs. Furthermore, it may be worthwhile to trace the history of visual materials associated with ethnic shows in the context of their institutional circulation (for instance, how they were moved between archives or archival collections, and how these moves were justified; or how their descriptions changed throughout the decades).

Lastly, aside from all potential directions for future study, one should not forget the ever-present need to work toward reconstructing the itineraries of “exotic” troupes touring Central and Eastern Europe (a task which is likely to take many years) and initiating academic investigation in those countries of the region where the subject of ethnic shows has not yet been tackled (e.g., Ukraine, Lithuania, Estonia, Belarus).

The list of issues presented here is by no means exhaustive; indeed, it also evokes the “feeling of something unfinished,” and is thus open to new possibilities.