Staged Otherness

Dagnosław Demski, Dominika Czarnecka

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The cultural phenomenon of exhibiting non-European people in front of the European audience in the nineteenth and twentieth century was concentrated in the metropolises in the western part of the continent. Nevertheless, traveling ethnic troupes and temporary exhibitions of non-European humans took place also in territories located to the east of the Oder river and Austria. The contributors to this edited volume present practices of ethnographic shows in Russia, Poland, Czechia, Slovenia, Hungary, Germany, Romania, and Austria and discuss the reactions of local audiences. The essays offer critical arguments to rethink narratives of cultural encounters in the context of ethnic shows. By demonstrating the many ways in which the western models and customs were reshaped, developed, and contested in Central and Eastern European contexts, the authors argue that the dominant way of characterizing these performances as human zoos is too narrow.

The contributors had to tackle the difficult task of finding traces other than faint copies of official press releases by the tour organizers. The original source material was drawn from local archives, museums, and newspapers of the discussed period. A unique feature of the volume is the rich amount of images that complement every single case study of ethnic shows.

"The authors problematize the very concept of 'ethnic' shows, with many of the contributors arguing that the dominant way of characterizing these performances as 'human zoos' is too narrow. The book fills in a gap (nearly a tabula rasa) in the scholarly literature about traveling 'ethnic' shows across Central Europe. Each author speaks through her/his voice, but the voices are those of a well-schooled choir."

— Robert W. Rydell, Professor of History and Director of the American Studies Program, Montana State University

"Staged Otherness makes a valuable contribution to scholarship in the field of ethnic shows. It includes many case studies that have never been at the center of academic attention. Furthermore, the book makes archival material accessible to scholars worldwide and offers critical arguments to rethink narratives of cultural encounters in the context of ethnic shows."

— Andrea Zittlau, Lecturer and Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Rostock

About the Editors

Dagnosław Demski is an associate professor at the Centre for Ethnology and Contemporary Anthropology at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw.

Dominika Czarnecka is an assistant professor at the Centre for Ethnology and Contemporary Anthropology at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw.