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Freaks on Periphery: De-colonizing Disability History

Drawing from contemporary disability history discourse, the presentation interrogates three different historical examples of exhibiting the so called „siamese twins“ in the Euro-American freakshow tradition at the end of the 19th century. The purpose is to discuss the international dimension of the freakshow discourse, as well as its local specificities, with focus on the previously unquestioned region of Middle- and East- Europe.

The presentation aims particularly on the less-known case of the so called „conjoined twins“ Rosa and Josefa Blazek (1877-1922), sisters from the South-Bohemian hamlet Skrejsov, who toured the world with their freakshow programme, having much success representing the Czech culture at the World's Collumbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Their fame culminated around the year 1910, when they delivered a baby-boy called František. This event aroused much attention and initiated a large public debate about the sexuality and maternity of that not-normative body.

Throughout my presentation the case of these freak-ish mothers Rosa and Josepha will be compared with two (four?) of their better-known contemporaries: the Italian brothers Giacomo and Giovanni Battista Tocci (1875-1940), who also became fathers at the end of their lives, and the extremely popular Afro-american siblings Millie and Christine McCoy (1851-1912), who were exhibited as the „Two-headed Nightingale“ both in the US and Europe. In fact both of these performers visited Prague (and also Vienna) at the end of the 19th century and thus might have met on several occasions.

Nevertheless, my comparison aims at the different ways the „other“ body was produced through elaborated staging and various forms of representation (texts, photos, images). By introducing three different cases of presumably the same „type“ of bodily „otherness“ from three different regions, I intend to show both intertextual connections between Euro-American freakshow culture as well as the peculiarities of its local forms, particularly in the region of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. Finally, the analysis will concentrate on the question how the discourses of race, nationality and class-specific femininity / masculinity inter-mingled to produce three common, yet at the same time different cases of the „other“ body.

The notion of periphery, mentioned in the title of my presentation, points into two different directions here. Firstly, the freaks such as Josefa and Rose Blazek or Tocci brothers (leaving behind the racial case of McCoys) appeared literally in the peripheral regions of the 19th century European national states (South Bohemia, Piemont region), thus testified and to certain measure legitimized the power-relations between the center and the periphery in the course of the formation of these new national states.

Secondly, the Middle- and East- European freakshow tradition appears rather under-represented in contemporary (disability) history discourse. My goal is therefore to remove Middle-European freakshow from its peripheral position and give it the critical attention it deserves.