

Hello everyone, my name is Emma Baillargeon and today I am going to be presenting to you about the concepts of the marking of bodies in a society and the traps of visibility.

I was first introduced to these concepts when reading the book “Freaks Talk Back” by Joshua Gamson. Gamson in this book talks about the visibility that people of marginal groups strive for and the way in which they obtain a voice through talk shows and thrash TV.

I have always had an interest in the side shows of traveling circuses and freak shows of the early 1900’s. When looking at Gamson and comparing what he has said to my interest in the side show, I realized that the people of little stature in these side shows have had the visibility that other marginal groups have been striving for all along.

I then began to look at the television show Little People, Big World. For those of you that don’t know, Little People Big World is a television show that follows the lives of the Rolloff family. The difference between the Rolloff family and any other family is the fact that, as you can see here, 3 of their members are of smaller stature. The show has been on the learning channel for 5 seasons now, so it has been quiet successful.

As mentioned previously, little people have had a history in the side shows and gained visibility by allowing themselves to be used for public consumption. This public consumption made their bodies into that of a spectacle. People consumed them and they became nothing more than an object. They were labeled as freaks and oddities because of their differences and the way they were presented in the public sphere.

Their bodies were marked because as Michael Warner puts it in *The Mass Public and the Mass Subject*, “the bourgeois public sphere has been structured from the outset by a logic of abstraction that provides a privilege for the unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, THE NORMAL.” Essentially, because they were out of the normal, they weren’t able to hide behind an unmarked body and speak freely in public. They were freaks and not given an empowering visibility that marginal groups strive for.

Larsen and Haller state in *The Case of Freaks: Public reception of Real Disability* that “How the culture categorizes people with disabilities illustrates some of the dominant values in society- power, prestige, influence, and attractiveness: The disabled person represents some kind of challenge to the taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to be human. The disabled person is seen as a “problem” at the level of everyday intercourse and makes for uncertainty about moral worth as judged by the criteria that provide certainty about position, prestige and power.” “Little People, Big World” essentially is bringing to light that taken-for-granted assumption and allowing people to see that even though they are marked they are just like everyone else, normal even; it is in that respect that it is educational.

Gamson states that most marginal groups believe if you expose the reality to people it will in turn be accepted. When looking at Little People Big World I began to question whether or not the television show was being used for educational purposes and if it was

actually viewed this way or if it had fallen back into the trap of the negative visibility that little people have always had.

Recently, the father on the television show, Matt, was charged with a DUI. When looking into this case, I found on a celebrity gossip website, TMZ.com, comments that people had posted about the incident. Some comments people left were:

→Poor guy probably only had one drink! I wonder how alcohol affects them?

→I have seen the show; he is a super big hearted guy that loves his family, what a coward cop to go after him. He also is handicapped & uses crutches & braces just to walk, so of course he cannot walk a straight line... He does not look trashed in his picture

→I am a very big fan of this big hearted little man. Hang in there Matt. You made a mistake and there is no doubt in my mind that you will turn this into something positive as you have done with so many things in your life.

→Alcoholism is a disease and little people can be affected just like any average size person or people with disabilities. Please give the guy a break. He is very kind and generous and a great Dad.

→ I am shocked about this. If I know Matt, which I don't actually but watch the show all the time, he WILL put this into his show. He is all about little people being just like regular people. This just goes to show that anyone can make a mistake. I hope he is able to use this as a learning experience for his children. He has opened up their lives to the world, so it's going to be news, so he's going to have to deal with it.

→Such a nice guy, always trying to do the best he can for his family. They lead a good life with good morals and standards, and not preachy. Which sets them apart from some on the tv. They are easy to relate to, during fun travels, hard work, rough spots, a messy house, and then a group effort to square it all together. Despite being little people, their struggles and dreams are so universal.

There were only two comments I found that related to his stature in a negative fashion.

→You get drunk on an ounce of Tequila...?
HAHAHA.....Oooopmpa- Loompa.....I've got a secret for you.....

→How tall is this Shrimp? 42"

This leads me to believe that the show has done its job in an educational sense to show that little people are just as normal as everyone else, minus a few inches here and there.

To conclude, little people have never had the opportunity and the privileges of being the unmarked or the invisible. They have been condemned to visibility and denied all of the privileges that come along with being visible in a mass public sphere. Their bodies have

always been looked at in a negative fashion and they have always been in the public sphere but in a detrimental way. What little people big world has done is taken that visibility and used it and manipulated in a way that allows people to understand and learn that even though they are different, it doesn't mean that they are freaks or to be gawked at. This family must be careful though because they can always be pulled back into that historical negativity if they do not watch out.