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Little People Big World:

The entrapment of marked bodies and visibility

Introduction:

Visibility in the public sphere is a main goal for any marginal group that has been suppressed and unwelcome by the mass public. Getting ones views across is something everyone strives for because everyone wants the chance to be heard, not ignored. The public sphere is a highly competitive space especially for those who historically have not been able to participate freely without contest or being subjected to scrutiny for their ideas. Throughout history the minorities or marginal groups of society have had to fight an uphill battle to get their voices and opinions heard. This fight for visibility has transcended into today's society and is still an ongoing battle for people on the fringes of public visibility and space.

In order for one to gain this visibility that is so deeply desired, minorities must strip themselves of all characteristics to fit the privileged body. This type of stripping ones self down or abstracting from ones body can be explained by Warner as the "marking of bodies". One group that has been marked throughout history due to occupations they were forced to take up due to no other work are little people. There is an interesting paradox that follows little people in today's society. They have always been condemned to visibility in the public sphere, but they have not been able to use that

visibility to gain any ground. They have been marginal and the visibility has always been negative. Today, little people have been able to harness that eternal visibility and are attempting to pave their way through the public sphere and make their voices heard.

This paper will be focusing on the nonconformity of Little People and how their bodies, being marked, should have taken the visibility away from them but, due to historical negative connotations of their use for public consumption, they have been condemned to visibility. The family I will be focusing on is the Roloff family which has a television show on the Learning Channel. I will examine how they take the visibility they have been marked with and use in an educational format to change the public discourses surrounding little people. I ultimately would like to ask if the mass media has given the Roloff family a medium for education and a voice to the body that was always seen. Not only will I be looking at the television show as a whole but I will focus on some of the public discourse surrounding a DUI case that Matt Roloff was recently involved in.

According to the local television news reports: "On June 19, 2007, Roloff was driving his wife's vehicle when he was pulled over by Washington County Sheriff's Deputy Allen Pastori. He had failed to drive within a lane while turning out of a parking lot of a bar. Roloff claimed that he had difficulty controlling the vehicle, as his wife had shorter legs and therefore had different pedal and brake extensions designed for dwarfs. Pastori claimed that Roloff smelled of alcohol and failed a Horizontal Gaze Nystagmus sobriety test. Roloff admitted to drinking one beer earlier in the day. He was arrested and charged with DUI" (KPTV). This sparked some interesting public discourse I will examine which was found on a celebrity gossip website TMZ.com.

This is an important subject to study because it can allow us to look into the concepts of condemned visibility and pay attention to the discourse surrounding the DUI case. It can key us into whether or not the television show had an effect on how the public viewed this incident and whether or not the television show's pedagogical fashion allowed people to further understand Matt Roloff or pass him off as just another drunk celebrity.

History:

Little people have had a history being employed in the side shows and circuses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In that time period there were not a lot of job options for little people. They were forced to sell their bodies to the public and market themselves as human oddities in order to make a living. They were put on display for the entertainment of the general public thus, allowing themselves to be used for public consumption. This public consumption made their bodies into that of a spectacle and ultimately objectified them. They were considered lower class due to their stature and "many little people worked on stage and screen, but they were not accorded full status performers. Their talents were treated as secondary to their stature" (Bogdan, 163).

They were labeled as freaks and oddities because of their differences and the way they were presented in the public sphere. They have been shown off in circuses, museums, represented negatively in films, books and every other type of media as a spectacle. They are looked at and categorized only by their disability and not by what they truly are. In that day, little people were not given many opportunities and were most often forced to work the stage as Bogdan states, "At the height of freak show popularity, exhibition was the most common occupation for dwarfs—although apparently not by

choice, for as late as 1934 most non-amusement world jobs were closed to them” (Bogdan, 165). With such little opportunities, sometimes the only way to make a living was through being used as a spectacle.

Discrimination was not limited to the category of little people either, “hypopituitary dwarfs (commonly referred to as midgets), who tend to be well proportioned and physically attractive, were cast as lofty. Achondroplastic dwarfs, whose head and limbs tend to be out of proportion to their trunk, were cast in the exotic mode” (Bogdan, 112). This visibility that was cast not only on the physical attributes of little people, but the spot light on the more unattractive type of dwarfism forced these human beings onto an eternal stage and condemned them to visibility.

Everyone wants to be heard in the public sphere, but when a body is condemned to the public and stripped of the benefits, all they want to do is hide their bodies. Dan Kennedy, a writer for Slate Magazine articulates: “Dwarfs have never been allowed to just *be*; every little person is intimately familiar with the supremely unpleasant experience of being the subject of scrutiny” (Slate). Allowing their bodies to be used for mass consumption has never allowed Little People to “hide” behind invisibility; they were given exposure, but not a voice. The positions in which they were placed never allowed them to speak in the public sphere, but always be present in it. They were denied the access to invisibility in which one can go about their daily lives without being watched or scrutinized for their behavior. They were always gawked and “they were called “human curiosities” and appeared on platforms for people to stare at. For the most part these little people were aggrandized and said to be something that was much further than what they really were; people” (Bogdan, 121). The fact that they were not treated as

people and condemned to the public light without a voice made for some extreme hardships and a long battle for people of their stature to overcome.

In the past few years, the Learning Channel has created a reality television show based the daily lives of the Roloff family. The difference between this particular family and any other one that would be on a television show is the fact that three of the members of the family have dwarfism and three do not. Amy, Matt and their son Zach, have dwarfism where as their other children, Jeremy, Jacob and Molly do not. The show simply follows the everyday lives of this family on their farm. It is not filled with high drama and is pretty low key. It has been on the air now for five seasons, so it has been quite successful and has gained some great reviews.

What the Roloff family is articulating in their television show is that a family can have three people of little stature and three of 'normal' height and function as everyone else does. They run their own farm, hold events there and go through the ups and downs that every "normal" family runs into. The Learning Channel has had the television show on for five seasons now and it has quite the following. Thousands of people show up to the Roloff family farm every year to see the pumpkin patches and attend the events that the family puts on. One of the reviews include: "The heart of the show lies in observing the Roloff's at home, the tone is both relaxed and reaffirming: The Roloff's obstacles matter less than their clear-eyed ability to look beyond them" (People Magazine). The atmosphere around the television show is a positive one. They are living their lives and simply allowing the nation to see.

Concepts:

The concept of a marked body in society comes from Michael Warner's article "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject." In this article he articulates that "the bourgeois public sphere has been structured from the outset by logic of abstraction that provides a privilege for the unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, THE NORMAL" (Warner 383). Essentially, anyone that wishes to participate and be visible in the public sphere must either abstract themselves to the level of a white, middle class male, or not have a voice at all. Habermas believed that in the ideal public sphere, "a body of 'private persons' could assemble to discuss matters of 'public concern' or 'common interests'" (Fraser, 110), but Warner proves this wrong by saying that "the bourgeois public sphere is a frame of reference in which it is supposed that all particularities have the same status" yet, "differences in such realms to have come coded as the difference between the unmarked and the marked" (Warner 383).

The marking of bodies and this biased public sphere is detrimental to the inner workings of society and public opinion as a whole, but has remained unchanged and essentially not allowed ideas of marginal groups to flow freely. Self abstraction allows oneself to speak in the public sphere yet it does not allow one to bring what makes up their identity into the conversation. Warner believes that abstraction is necessary for marginal groups but is domination because they have access to the public sphere but they have to deny themselves and in turn become dominated.

An important concept to look at that relates to the marking of bodies and being recognizable in the public sphere is visibility. Joshua Gamson articulates: "For people whose life experience is so heavily tilted toward invisibility, whose nonconformity, even

when it loose very much like conformity, discredits them and disenfranchises them, day time TV talk shows are a big shot of visibility and media accreditation. It looks, for a moment, like you own this place” (Gamson, 5). This visibility comes at a high price though. Does one expose themselves in any way possible to break down those barriers and risk being discredited or do they stay in the shadows of society? Although day time television may not seem like the classiest way to gain visibility for a marginal group, Gamson describes television spots as, “not only of visibility but of the subsequent redrawing of the lines between the normal and the abnormal” (Gamson 5).

Being condemned to visibility is another story though. One someone is condemned to visibility, they are not allowed what other marginal groups have taken for granted. They are subjected to jokes and looked at as freaks every day. They are not allowed to live their lives outside of that microscope and worse, they are not even given a voice in the public sphere that they have been condemned to. Gamson articulates that people believe that with visibility comes a process of access and participation in the public sphere yet the history has punished and banished little people into a visible arena with no access and no participation. The boundaries are being broken down and transformed into something new to our culture today. Private has become public and that visibility is being harnessed to educate.

Their small stature has been looked at as a disability and that disability historically was taken as being a freak of nature because in some cases, they were not given a chance or able to perform jobs that the rest of society was able to accomplish. 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”(Larsen and Haller, 169) . They gain no benefits from being in the public sphere and due to the very nature of their physical bodies, they literally have no escape.

Analysis:

As stated previously, visibility is something that many people in marginal groups strive for. An important question to ask though is if this visibility is used in a positive way or are the Roloff’s just being exploited for the ratings by the television networks? The literature surrounding little people today is that of empowerment:

Against a backdrop of negative stereotypes, where dwarfs are butts of easy jokes and regularly cast as carnival clowns or sidekicks, a new wave of image-conscious media is out to portray little people as just that: ordinary people who live regular lives, minus a few inches here and there. The types of acting roles available to little people today are a big improvement on the past. Although many types of dwarfism cause physical disabilities that hamper everyday activities, most people are able to live long, fulfilling lives. (Levy)

The question then may not be are the television producers using them or are they using the television producers to educate the public? Then, with the negative setting taken out of way these marked bodies are represented, the decorum is not called into question.

This concept is important but still does not answer the question of whether or not the historical depiction of little people still resonates in one's mind even though times have changed and the world is a much different place.

Gamson states that, "defenders both within and outside the television industry argue that talk shows are democracy at work- flawed democracy but democracy nonetheless- giving voice to the socially marginalized and ordinary folks, providing rowdy commonsense counterpoints to elite authority in mass mediated culture" (Gamson, 6). This is where "Little People, Big World" comes into play. Although, instead of the exposure of day time talk TV, Little People Big World is formatted in the style of bringing American into their homes and by doing so the Roloff's brings the private into the public sphere. Now, we are able to go into the home of the little people in question and judge the way they live their lives and how their family functions. America is brought into the private space of the home to see the ins and outs of this family that is trying to prove that little people are as normal as everyday folks. They are furthering democracy by exposing their lives in a pedagogical sense and allowing people to gain from their experiences and the exposure they have learned to harness so well. "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.

With Matt's DUI case looming in the background of the new season coming out, TMZ ran a story about the DUI case and people were allowed to comment about how they felt on the subject. The discourse surrounding the case is not something I expected to see when looking into a celebrity DUI case. I expected to see comments relating to his

body and how little people should not be able to drive or making fun of him due to the fact that he just happens to be a little person. These previous assumptions I held came from pessimism and the cynical attitude I hold about society and the ignorant assumptions people have about someone who is different from them. The comments I found proved my cynicism wrong:

“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!” and another is quoted saying: “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. (TMZ.com)

These comments are actually endearing and these people actually care for the welfare of Matt Roloff and they do not even know him minus what they see on the television show. Their visibility from the television show has given the public an understanding of who they are as people and taken that negative light off of little people as freaks. This can be shown through the fact that the comments stemming from Matt’s DUI case are not negative about his stature but concerned by the way he was treated by police officers how he has a huge heart. It is very unlikely that if something like this happened in the time period where little people were looked at by freaks, that there would be any positivity coming from the public.

When looking into the marked body’s aspect of this television show, I believe that from the ratings and positive feedback from viewers such as, “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.” This allows us to see that he is viewed in a certain light and been able to take that condemned visibility and show that little people are just like everyone else despite the negative connotation that has followed them for over a century. People were more concerned with if the DUI test was correct or with his well being. 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. There is no self abstraction here because Matt is not forced to pull away from that little person that he is, instead, people empathize with him because they believe that he has a disability. There is a very strange line that this family walks due to the nature of the DUI case and the television show. By being marked both physically and in the sense that Warner sets up for us, they are using the television networks to harness that visibility but not having to abstract themselves in order to speak. This contradicts the nature of the research that a marginal group that has been objectified must pull away from that and reduce themselves to the normal. The Roloff family is changing the dynamics of what the public views as normal. The discourses around the show prove this because they are not focused on stature at all, but more on the family and what a typical conversation about one’s DUI case might be.

From the television show, one could gather what Matt Roloff held true to himself. He believed in his family and worked hard to make sure they were taken care of. Had he not been able to have the opportunity to articulate this on the television show and just been an actor that was a Little Person, the comments might have been a little different.

The Roloff family manipulated that marked body and that visibility and was able to show that they were everyday people; they were able to turn something negative into a positive. This carried over to his DUI case and the people having watched the show knew what he stood for and knew that if Matt made a mistake he would try and make it into a learning experience.

The strange paradox that follows the Roloff family is that they are marked bodies and should be a marginal group of society, yet their visibility casts them in the light of freaks. This paradox has been ripped apart by the recent television show Little People Big World. They used their bodies and their eternal visibility to show that they are just the same as everyone else, even in the light of a DUI case. They are a fully functioning family and just because they don't have a few inches does not mean they deserve to be treated any differently.

Little people have never had the opportunity and the privileges of being the unmarked or the invisible. 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. They were condemned to visibility. 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.