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Exhibiting Blackface Puppets from the German Imaginary

By William Condee

Abstract: German puppet collections have extensive holdings of blackface puppets that are built on grotesquely racist stereotypes. The collections now face the problem of how—and whether—to display these puppets, made more acute because all the museums are being extensively renovated.

I examine these puppets within four broad contexts:
- The Imagined Turk: 18th-century puppets represented caricatures of “Turks,” based on anxiety about the Ottoman Empire, as a form of xenophobic misrepresentation that reinforces notions of exoticism and Orientalism, with Blackness standing in for the ethnic Other.
- The Imagined African: 19th-century puppets caricatured Africans, based on Germany’s colonization efforts, that demean the purported subjects as children, savages, or animals.
- The Imagined African American: Late 19th- and early 20th-century puppets redeployed American racist imagery, especially following tours by African American artists, which often purport to celebrate the subjects while reinforcing implicit bias.
- The Imagined Multicultural Germany: Puppets during the post–World War II era, while still based on racial stereotypes, deemphasized grotesque features in an effort to present a more sympathetic image.

I found that these collections are considering a range of strategies for these puppets:
- They should be displayed like other puppets, including labels with their “historic” names (a German racial slur), based on the idea that a museum should display history.
- They should be put in storage and not displayed, given their grotesque racism and violent history.
- They should be displayed in a separate area in which the history and culture can be contextualized through didactic material.
- They should be displayed in a special exhibition, on, for example, puppetry and race.

I conclude that curators are grappling with the future of these puppets in full light of their racist traditions, though the danger of reinscribing the discourse of systemic racism in German culture remains.

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, blackface, German, museum studies
This project started with a seemingly simple question. Why are there so many blackface puppets in Germany? Curators at major collections also wondered. Kathi Loch, project manager for the new Saxon Folk Art Museum and Puppet Theater Collection under development in Dresden, said she was “surprised to discover these puppets in the collection,” and she “didn’t expect them to be so important for the practice of puppetry” (2019). Similarly, Mascha Erbelding, Head of Collections at the Munich Puppet Museum, “didn’t realize we have so many black puppets” (2019). The reasons for these puppets, I discovered, are complex and multifaceted.

First, I want to acknowledge my position. I cannot speak for the puppeteers, who are some of the great men of German puppetry, and I am not necessarily accusing them of racism. I also certainly cannot speak for those who have been harmed by these puppets. To offer just one example, I cannot represent the reactions of those who viewed a blackface puppet in Berlin that had been struck so often that it has a scar and metal plate on its head (Framenau 2021). And it is not my role to recommend how—or whether—these puppets should be displayed. I do want to thank the people at the puppet collections, acknowledge their thoughtful approaches to these issues, and note that they brought these problematic puppets to my attention.

During three months in 2019, I conducted research at five major collections (Bad Kreuznach, Berlin, Dresden, Lübeck, and Munich), interviewing curators, viewing collections on display and in storage, and examining archives. All these collections have extensive holdings of blackface puppets built on racist stereotypes. The collections now face the problem of how—and whether—to display these puppets, made more acute because the museums are being renovated, moving to new spaces, or changing their permanent exhibitions.

I could find no research on this subject before my trip to Germany, which surprised me. German curators also recognized the problem of this scholarly void. The valuable work on race and puppetry by other scholars has been very helpful, but it is important here to examine race and its depiction in a German context.

On the most basic level, these puppets exist in puppet collections because there was a demand for them—they were characters in scripts, and they were popular with audiences (Loch 2019). According to Lars Rebehn (2019), curator of the Dresden Puppet Theater Collection, prior to the late 19th century, a marionette player might have had only one black head that could be used for different theatrical roles. But with more competition among puppeteers, they needed multiple, more differentiated, blackface puppets.
These puppets are a problem for these museums and for their visitors, in that these images perpetuate racist stereotypes. While puppetry often relies on exaggerated features, it is important to distinguish between exaggerations, which may illuminate truths obscured by quotidian reality, and stereotypes, which are almost always wrong and often harmful. As Erbelding noted, “If you’re always showing these stereotypes, it doesn’t matter which text accompanies it, it’s always reproducing these stereotypes.” She asked, “Do we really want to show these stereotypes again?”

Several collections have received negative comments from visitors about the puppets and how they are presented, and they are already taking steps to change how these puppets are displayed. Erbelding recounted the story of a traditional performance they hosted with a blackface puppet who spoke poorly and could neither read nor write. She asked the puppeteer to use a white puppet instead, but not necessarily to change the text. According to Erbelding, “We can’t do that anymore—we have to substitute or find other roles.” In this chapter, I analyze the issues surrounding whether and how to exhibit these puppets, including the use of racial slurs, and then propose a loose taxonomy for the puppets.

**Exhibition**

One of the many problems is what to call these puppets. Many, especially those from the 19th and early 20th centuries, are labeled with German racial slurs. Everyone agrees the words are racist, but what to do about them is more complex. As an example of how this issue can veer off course, at the KOLK 17 museum and puppet theater in Lübeck, a well-intentioned former staffer was shocked to discover a common racial slur in the database. As a substitution, they chose instead to use the descriptor “African.” They did recognize the problem and tried to devise a solution, but, as Antonia Napp (2019), the museum’s director, pointed out, the puppets are not from Africa and nor do they represent Africans.

Another problem is that the slur may not always be accurate. When going through puppets in storage at the Munich Puppet Museum, I noted similar—even seemingly identical—puppets with different names on their tags. Erbelding pointed out that different people over the course of time had applied the labels, with what might or might not be the original name. If the original name is unknown, Erbelding felt they had no obligation to use those words: “For a lot of puppets we don’t know what they were called. We can presume how they performed onstage, but we really don’t know, and we can’t find out.” Similarly, Loch said that, for the new Dresden museum, the labels “can very well be changed if they contain racist terms.” At KOLK 17, according to Sonja
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Riehn (2019), the scientific research assistant, for those cases in which the predecessor museum’s staff used a racial slur, they replaced it with “Nx.”

In this chapter, I use the word “blackface” for these puppets for several reasons. The puppets are black, and one could use lower-case “black” as a descriptor, but I do not believe the word for a color captures the racial complexity of these puppets. I also do not feel that upper-case “Black” is appropriate because these puppets are not expressions of or reflective of the Black experience. Therefore, I employ the American term “blackface,” based on Eric Lott’s (1993) description of blackface minstrelsy as “less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure” (6). These objects were created by, used by, and performed for white people. They are expressions of white anxieties and fantasies regarding people of African descent. As evidence of literal blackfacing, Rebehn described how puppeteers would often use a puppet with what would be considered conventional European features, with white or pink skin, but then paint the visible skin—face, arms, and legs—black.

This issue of naming is an area of active and ongoing discussion at these collections, and everyone recognized that the racial slur is a dangerous term that should not be used in a contemporary context. As Erbelding stated, “It’s clearly racist now…. You can’t just say [racial slur]—it’s impossible because everything is connected with it—the Nazis—everything is connected.” No one I interviewed promoted using the racial slur devoid of context or explanation. Some, however, justified its use, provided it could be explained and contextualized. For example, Rebehn said he uses the term “when it is the historical name of the puppet. Also, you have to be able to further describe the object by external characteristics.” He argued that the word is “only a description” and was concerned with issues that he called “political correctness”: “Who says what is politically correct? The next problem is that it keeps changing.” Loch also felt the term should be used, but in quotation marks and with context. She felt that she would never use substitute terms, such as Schwarze Puppe, “unless that is the original term.”

Others believe the term should be avoided completely. Marcus Dorner (2019), director of the museum in Bad Kreuznach, simply avoids labels or names for any puppets in that portion of the exhibition: “We just say ‘Puppets from everywhere.’” Erbelding reframed the issue of obligation for the Munich museum: “We have the obligation not to use [the racial slurs], even if this is the ‘original title.'” Uwe Framenau, director of the Puppet Theater Museum Berlin, was emphatic:
“There is no argument to support” using the racial slur. “You don’t do it, even in a program,” or in a historical context, or in quotation marks. “Some things have to die out.”

Beyond the name, the fundamental problem is how these puppets should be exhibited, and even whether they should be displayed at all. Erbelding placed this problem in a broader museum studies context: “All museums have objects that have problems.” Puppet museums, however, “are late to this discussion.” Erbelding focused on fundamental curatorial questions: “How do we want to present them? Do we want to present them? … What can you still show? What should you hide, and why should you hide it? … Who should talk about this?” (She noted that she did not have answers to these questions.)

Several curators framed this issue in terms of storytelling: What story is the exhibit telling? Erbelding asks whether an exhibition should attempt to tell the entire story of puppetry, or instead consider what other stories they could tell. Loch emphasized that the new Dresden permanent exhibition would be not “so much a museum of objects, but of stories.” As she explained, “The objects are the remains of a very complex cultural technique of a certain time and certain historical context. We are not just showing works of art. We are going to show objects which stand for certain aspects of a historical process or developmental phenomenon.” Turning to blackface puppets specifically, she noted, “We will tell something about what it was used for, what it was made for, what stories were told with this puppet.” The reason blackface puppets existed, then, and should be exhibited, according to Loch, is, “They are needed for the stories that are being told.”

Some curators contend that certain puppets should not be exhibited under any circumstances. Given Germany’s history, several said they would not display puppets that depict anti-Semitic stereotypes. As Erbelding explained, “Over the last seventy years, we have been talking about the Holocaust … So, there’s a kind of awareness.” Discourse about race, racism, and African Germans, however, “is only coming to culture much later.” There is, therefore, more difference of opinion about displaying blackface puppets. In Munich, Erbelding “wouldn’t show” puppets with extremely racist imagery: “We wouldn’t even add them to our online collection.”

While all the curators agreed that their exhibitions should employ didactics to provide context, there are differences about their extent and purpose. Some, like Loch, maintain, “If you deliver the context, you can show everything.” For the new exhibition in Dresden, Loch said that blackface puppets “can be part of the permanent exhibition, but we have to ask how to present
them, and, in what context, and what explanation.” Similarly, Rebehn said he didn’t think the Dresden collection had any puppets that were too racist to display, because “if it’s too racist, I have the possibility to say, ‘This is the theme—racism.’” Rebehn is a strong proponent of letting people make up their own minds: If someone is a racist, “you can’t change his ideas in one small exhibit.” But for people with open minds, “they can have the chance to get new ideas…. Everyone has the right to their own opinions.” Rebehn is concerned with what he referred to as censorship: “The problem is, who has the right to say what is OK and what is not? … Who says what is allowed and what is forbidden? The person with the loudest voice, or the best organized person? I unfortunately miss democratic opinion making…. If you want to do research, you need this information.” There is, of course, a difference between a scholar engaging in research and a child visiting an exhibition.

Erbelding, however, sees a changing situation, to which curators must respond. In the 20th century, as she explained regarding the Munich museum’s puppet exhibition developed in the 1980s, the approach was simply to display the material: “There’s no need to explain racism—it’s clear…. Everyone can see that and have their own ideas.” In the 21st century, however, one “can’t be sure that the visitor will be aware of this problem and will discuss it and have the right questions.” This change creates a greater curatorial need “to explain these things and to show what you are thinking about.”

Museums are planning changes to their exhibitions. Dorner noted that he had displayed blackface puppets in Bad Kreuznach without commentary, but following our conversation, “I would not show it in that way now.” He plans to provide commentary or pick other examples that are less overtly racist. Rebehn believes that particularly controversial puppets should not necessarily be shown in exhibitions for children, as it is difficult to convey the contexts to them. Loch similarly felt that blackface puppets might not be immediately visible, and that a spectator might have to read something before viewing them, such as opening a curtain or looking through a peephole, ensuring that visitors “get the context first and then look at the puppets.” Erbelding believes that in Munich these puppets should be displayed only if the curators have “something to say about this issue” and if they had “a reason to show them.” For example, she is considering replacing the display of Casperl unter den Wilden (Kasper among the Savages) with another scene “because we don’t have the possibility to explain the context in the current exhibition.” In the future, African Germans “should be asked and represented,” and for a special exhibition she would invite a Black co-curator. KOLK 17 addressed issues of racism and colonization in a 2020 online exhibition entitled “Colonialism and
Puppetry—Untangling the Strings,” which acknowledged that “racist discourses have particularly often imbedded [sic] themselves in our puppets.” The museum also sponsored a symposium in 2021, in association with another online exhibition, entitled “Who’s Talking? On Performing Objects and Their Voices,” bringing together artists and scholars to discuss “questions in the field of museum work and transculturality.” As further evidence of this rapidly changing climate, some curators described to me how their views had changed from our interviews in 2019 to the time of writing this chapter in 2021.

Everyone bemoaned the lack of curatorial research that is required to contextualize these puppets. According to Loch, “It’s a pity that there is no research,” because she does want to display blackface puppets as part of their permanent exhibition, as well as a possible special exhibit: “For me, black puppets are one of those complex themes” that she would like to explore in depth “to reveal those complex contexts: Why do these puppets exist? What were they used for? What kind of view toward foreigners is hidden in those puppets?” The problem, however, is that “to do that, you need solid research, and as long as we don’t have that research, we can’t do this special exhibition.”

Ultimately, the curators believed that blackface puppets should be displayed because they are part of German history. As Erbelding pointed out, if they were excluded entirely, “then you only have white puppets, and that can’t be the answer.”

The Imaginary

These puppets also have important features in common. They are German, and they are, to the best available knowledge, created by white people. And while there are visual differences among these puppets, one could often be switched for another. For example, one black head in Dresden has small holes in the head so horns could be inserted and the puppet used as a devil. Despite the distinctions among the puppets, however, the black coloration is, consistently, a reification of the Other. As Loch noted, these puppets “stand for foreign people, for alien people.” The key question is, “How is Otherness depicted, and how does a given culture—time and place—depict Otherness?” The nature of the Other, who is represented as the Other, and how they are represented, however, changes over time. These puppets, then, participate in multiple discourses of difference and Otherness.

I identify four themes among these puppets. These themes are not mutually exclusive—some puppets embody characteristics of several themes. In addition, these themes do not account
for all blackface puppets, such as black puppets that depict devils. These themes are the Imagined Turk, the Imagined African, the Imagined African American, and the Imagined Multicultural German. While it may be obvious, this needs to be stated: These puppets were not, to take the first example, made by Turkish people, and they do not depict Turkish people. I am borrowing Sartre’s use of “imaginary,” a term that has become important in sociology. John Thompson (1984) describes the social imaginary as “the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world, the dimension through which human beings create their ways of living together and their ways of representing their collective life” (6).

*The Imagined Turk*

Many blackface puppets from the 17th and 18th centuries are expressions of the Imagined Turk. This image is conflated with a racial slur for people who might come from many places along the Mediterranean coast. This wide range of people is conflated in the German Imaginary with black as a manifestation of the Other. What these puppets have in common is a perception of a foreign threat: strange and exotic. The differences among the puppets, according to Erbelding, would come down to hats and the rest of the costume.

Figure 1. (2019). Examples of glove puppets exhibiting the Imagined Turk, from the Munich Puppet Theater Collection. Photo by William Condee.
Edward Said’s (1978) formulation of Orientalism is of course helpful here, and particularly applicable is his observation that the “experience of Arabs and Islam ... for almost a thousand years stood for the Orient” (17). Anxiety about the Imagined Turk is based on fear of and fascination with the Ottoman Empire, as Said observes: “the ‘Ottoman peril’ lurked alongside Europe to represent, for the whole of Christian civilization, a constant danger” (59). These puppets, according to Rebehn, represent in a historical context the fight against the enemy, and the goal of bringing them onstage in puppet shows was to “control them, see them as ridiculous, and defeat them.” By the 19th century, with the threat from the Ottoman Empire receding, these puppets were “only seen as funny, not dangerous.”

**The Imagined African**

Puppets of the Imagined African, which again are not African, are based on German encounters with Africa during the 19th century. Germany came late to colonization in Africa, with official colonies not established until 1884. Germans did explore Africa earlier in the century, which led to pre-colonial fascination and anxiety. This led to the development of the *Völkerschau* by Carl Hagenbeck, beginning in 1874. Humans who were considered exotic were displayed in what was essentially a zoo, and what Erbelding refers to as an “ethnological interest in the Other” influenced marionette performances.
The most notorious example is from *Casperl unter den Wilden* (*Kasper among the Savages*), by Franz Pocci, one of the most influential German puppeteers of the 19th century. Kasper is, of course, a traditional German puppet, and, in this case, he ends up on an island populated by blackface characters dressed in grass skirts, who speak a kind of Germanic gibberish, and who want to eat Kasper. Kasper’s role is ambiguous, and the play presents degrees of Otherness: While Kasper is traditionally perceived as an outsider, in this play, he also represents white Germans, and is therefore superior to the Imagined Africans, who represent the ultimate Other. Magdalena Schnitzer (2013) argues that the “colonialist Kasper” fulfills a civilizing function, with the play making the case for German colonization (47–48).
Another example of the Imagined African shows changes in the depiction of race during the 20th century. Max Jacob, the famous puppeteer who founded the Hohnsteiner Handpuppenspiele, used a puppet with a racist name associated with people of African descent from the 1920s until about 1960. This was one of a quartet of puppets that were clearly emblematic of the Other: It wasn’t clear where they were from, but they were clearly foreign. They spoke German badly, they wore grass skirts, and their faces had stereotypical racist features. They were meant to be laughed at—the butt of humor. Jacob, who had good relations with Nazi officials, was able to keep performing during WWII. During this time, Jean Loup Temporal, who was French, was forced into labor by the Germans and was assigned to the Hohnsteiner. After the war, Temporal created his own puppet shows in France, and he adapted Jacob’s puppet into his own character Samba. Samba functioned like Seppel, from the Kasper tradition, as a sympathetic character for children to relate to, and certainly not a butt of humor. According to Markus Dorner, Samba’s costume is “normal for a boy who comes from a former French colony and now lives in France.” While his features are not as grotesquely exaggerated, racism here takes the form of exoticism.
The Imagined African American

Puppets of the Imagined African American were popular beginning in the late 19th century. These puppets often depicted singers, dancers, and sports figures—especially following European tours by African Americans—and the Munich collection includes such puppets as Josephine Baker, Louis Armstrong, and boxers that might be American.

Several issues lie behind these puppets. One is that the African Americans who inspired the puppets often toured, or even settled, in Europe because of rampant discrimination, segregation, job discrimination, and lynchings in the US. Second, the roles for the puppets—entertainment and sports—played into racist stereotypes for people of African descent: the spurious notion that somehow they are naturally gifted at music, dance, and sports. Third, the puppets tend to place great emphasis on the Black body, evidencing the love and theft that Lott discusses in his book on blackface minstrelsy. It is also noteworthy that many of these puppets laugh, and as I note in the next section, having a sense of humor is one of the tropes of “romantic racialism” made in racist associations with African Americans.

Figure 4. Marionettes labeled “Dean and Johnson.” KOLK 17 collection, Lübeck. Photo courtesy of KOLK 17.
The KOLK 17 museum in Lübeck has multiple marionettes from the famed Schichtl family troupe of southern Germany, dating from around 1900. Two of these puppets are labeled “Dean” and “Johnson,” presumably referring to Dora Dean and Charles E. Johnson, the famous African American vaudeville performers, who toured Europe in the early 20th century. The original puppets used heads similar to those used for white puppets, but with blackened skin. The puppet representing the male dancer was lost, so the Schichtls created a new figure that is described as “a ‘real’ black man with big lips” (Riehn 2019). Both, of course, are forms of blackface: In one case, the skin of a white puppet has been blackened, and, in the other, grotesque stereotypes have been employed.

Figure 5. Marionette puppets used for performing the “Straussenszene” (“Ostrich Scene”). KOLK 17 collection, Lübeck. Photo courtesy of KOLK 17.

Many puppets employ racist associations of laughter and music with African Americans. A puppet in the Lübeck collection, made by Xaver Schichtl sometime after 1923, shows how these themes intersect. The puppet is described as looking like a parody of African Americans from the late 19th century, with a top hat and white gloves but also wearing a grass skirt and carrying a
In a 1990 performance, the puppet “laughs terribly, shakes himself in dance movements to jazz music and makes bubbling sounds,” accompanied by the song “Tiger Rag.” In addition, the character danced with an ostrich puppet, adding to the sense of exoticism (Riehn 2019). This complex puppet evokes many racist stereotypes: the exotic African Other, the blackface minstrel, and associations of African Americans with music, dance, and humor, or what Riehn describes as a “‘fusion’ of influences from ‘Minstrel Shows’ and ‘Völkerschauen,’” the human zoos popular at the turn of the 20th century (2021, 170).

Puppets in the Dresden collection, for a play called Liebesidyll in Kairo (Love Idyll in Cairo), include a woman who laughs and a man who plays a horn and also laughs, both with their lips moving. According to Rebehn, these laughing puppets were very popular at the beginning of the 20th century. After WWII, however, they were banned in the Soviet occupation zone as racist. It was not possible, however, to redesign the scene with new figures. According to Rebehn, the main reason for using black marionettes was that otherwise the audience would not have seen the movements of the lips and eyes; only the contrast between black and white made this possible. Another way of looking at it, however, would emphasize the white spectators laughing at Black
bodies. In addition, the blackface puppets employ racist stereotypes of facial features and the fallacy of so-called natural abilities, in this case music and humor.

The final example of the Imagined African American is more recent, from the great German puppeteer, Albrecht Roser. He created puppets of two female figures, Bauchtänzer (belly dancers), one white and one black, which he performed with in the 1960s and 70s. These puppets depicted near-naked bodies with emphasis on their breasts and buttocks. According to Dorner, Roser did not consider these puppets to be a problem; his focus was on their technical wizardry. The puppets, however, do present a problem not only in regard to race, but also gender, especially
in the way Roser used them. He stood with his hands in his pockets, swaying back and forth, causing the puppet to undulate in front of him. The audience, then, saw a white man casually ogling a nearly naked Black body as it danced for him. Or as Dorner described, “He looked like a German looking at a Black servant.”

**The Imagined Multicultural Germany**

The last theme is the Imagined Multicultural German, and I use the word “multicultural” with full awareness of its problems. These puppets appeared in Germany after WWII in the context of NATO and the Cold War. They still employ racist stereotypes but try to present what the creators might have considered “positive” images of race. In that sense, they are manifestations of what George M. Fredrickson (1971) describes as “romantic racialism” in *The Black Image in the White Mind*. Romantic racialism, which Fredrickson clearly identifies as racist, attributed “positive” stereotypes to Blacks: child-like, innocent, good-natured, passive, and spiritual (101–9). Rebehn observes that these puppets, “which today we would rather judge as racist, implicitly promoted the ideals of a multiracial, multiethnic Germany, and international understanding between different cultures.” Framenau refers to this approach as “friendly” or “everyday” racism.

![Figure 8.](image-url) Older (*left*) and newer (*right*) versions of the glove puppet “Jimmy.” Puppeteer: Walter Büttner/Der Heidekasper. Puppets from the archive of the Museum of Puppet Theater Culture, Bad Kreuznach. Photo by William Condee.
The transformation of Jimmy, as performed by the great puppeteer Walter Büttner, displays this Imagined Multicultural German. Büttner performed in the glove-puppet tradition beginning around 1929, but the Nazis prohibited him from performing during the 1930s because of his associations with Communists. He was then drafted into the military, captured by the Americans, and placed in a POW camp in Alabama where he presumably encountered African Americans. After returning to Germany, Büttner resumed performing and developed the character Jimmy, a blackface puppet based on Seppel, Kasper’s sidekick. Jimmy is clumsy, makes mistakes, is child-like, speaks German badly, and is suggestive of a foreigner. Given that Jimmy is kind, well-meaning, and sympathetic, it is entirely likely that Büttner did not consider himself or the puppet to be racist. The early depiction of Jimmy, from 1950, clearly relies on racist stereotypes of people of African descent, and, by the 1970s, this puppet was widely perceived as racist. In 1980, then, Büttner had another version of Jimmy made. Dorner imagines the puppetmaker thinking, “How can I make a Jimmy puppet for today?” and the features are indeed not as exaggerated. Büttner performed with this puppet until his death in 1990, and while some still perceived it as a problem, Dorner thinks that audiences forgave him: “It’s an old-fashioned puppet, and he’s an old puppeteer from another time.”

East Germany also used puppets of the Imagined Multicultural German. A program in the Dresden archive depicts a play called *Attentat in Weltraum (Assassination in Space)*, performed in Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz) in 1960, which features a blackface puppet also named Jimmy, who is presented as a good person, a technician who wears working-class clothes, but who also is a victim of the capitalist system. So, on the one hand, the blackface puppet is presented in a seemingly positive light, but, on the other hand, he is in a subservient position and is presented as a victim.

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1 Rebehn.
Figure 9. Flyer for performance of *Attentat im Weltraum* (Assassination in Space). Puppet Theater Collection, Dresden.
The most famous Imagined Multicultural German puppet is Jim Knopf, based on the children’s novel *Jim Knopf und Lukas der Lokomotivführer* (*Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver*) published in 1960. This story was adapted by the Augsburger Puppenkiste for film and television and was widely watched by German children. The story has remained in the German imagination to the point that the latest film version was released in October 2020. Jim is represented as having black skin, but there are no overt references to African descent. In the story, he arrives by post to a tiny island. Jim’s blackness, then, is a manifestation of his Otherness: He is from “somewhere else, a strange, foreign kid.” The issue of race is not directly addressed, to the point that when I spoke with a German friend who had grown up watching Jim Knopf, she was surprised I was including him in this study: “I didn’t even realize that he’s Black.” According to Dorner, the show was not considered racist through the 1960s and 70s, but it has certainly been controversial since the late-20th century, and the question of racism in Jim Knopf is currently the subject of ongoing debate in Germany. The awareness that human blackface for whites is wrong under any circumstances has come later to Germany than the US (where it does still remain a problem), and Jim Knopf has been caught up in that. In 2013, for the popular German game show “Wetten, ... dass?” (“Bet...that?”) two hundred people, including the mayor of Augsburg and his wife, showed up as Jim Knopf—in blackface (Álvarez).

Figure 10. Marionette puppet depicting Jim Knopf, Augsburger Puppenkiste. Photo from the archive of the Museum of Puppet Theater Culture, Bad Kreuznach.
Conclusion

However these puppets are exhibited in German museums, the issues are important because offensive puppets may alienate, or even harm, visitors, and the puppets can continue to operate as engines of racism. In addition, while one can speak of an obligation to history as a reason to display these puppets or to use racist labels, that approach raises other questions: What other obligations does one have? Why is one showing these particular puppets, as opposed to others? And if one does show them: What is the context? What story is one telling? The value of a special exhibit, for example, is that it neither hides nor normalizes these puppets. Instead, one can put a spotlight on them, their history, and their context.

The puppets are never neutral and will always raise issues and tell stories, and visitors will learn some message. The issue, therefore, is not one of suppressing or censoring. The puppets can always be made available for scholars. In addition, for research purposes, establishing a clear record of the object’s provenance is critical, documenting what is known, as well as what is not known. Curators also have the opportunity to avoid showing offensive material, to omit descriptors that may be offensive and/or inaccurate, and to address controversial issues directly. For example, one can refer to the existence of an original title without using it, making clear that the name was excluded and explaining why.2

These puppets could be displayed when and where appropriate—in the right context, in the right way, and at the right time. Museums can then be intentional about what visitors take away from the exhibit. Throughout, the prevailing values should be sensitivity, honesty, and transparency.

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References


About the Author

William T. F. Condee (J. Richard Hamilton Professor Emeritus of Humanities, Ohio University) is the author of Coal and Culture: The Opera House in Appalachia (2005) and Theatrical Space: A Guide for Directors and Designers (1995). He has published articles on Southeast Asian puppetry in Puppetry International, Studies in Theatre and Performance and Asian Journal of University Education. Articles on other subjects appeared in Theatre Survey, Theatre Topics, and Theatre Annual. He has co-authored work (with Thomas Irmer) on German theater in A History of German Theatre (2008) and Theatre Journal. His most recent work on nonmaterial performance has appeared in Imagined Theatres and TDR: The Drama Review, co-authored with Barry Rountree. Condee has been a Kohei Miura Visiting Professor at Chubu, Fulbright Senior Specialist at University of Leipzig and University of Malaya, and has lectured at universities including East China Normal, Tsinghua, Nanjing, Dankook, and Hindu Dharma Institute (Bali).