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Ralph Chessé and Forman Brown: When Carving the Other is Carving the Self

By Ben Fisler

Abstract: The puppet by its nature is a figure of alterity, existing as the dynamic exchange between human being and performing object. To Paul Piris (2012), performers enter the fictional world of the puppets as their own others. This creates ambiguity in performance and discloses the human being in relation to the object. The performer's identity invariably contributes to identity in such mimetic acts as construction and performance. So, what happens when the puppeteer's identity is a mask of its own, and the objects engage the puppeteer's ambiguous relationship to race or sexuality?

This chapter explores the puppet as a disruptive figure of alterity, in an ongoing effort to recuperate the identities of two notable American puppeteers, Forman Brown and Ralph Chessé. It will address how their respective sexuality and ethnicity may have informed their work. Though having distinct meanings within the context of alterity, race and sexuality are particularly analogous in these cases. Brown was a gay man encoding metaphors of sexual identity as other in his plays. Chessé was a man of mixed race who publicly identified as white, while often showcasing black subjects. Brown was closeted in public, while in a lifelong relationship with fellow puppeteer, Richard Brandon. The Chessé family, listed historically as mulatto, chose to identify as white, an effort in which Chessé actively engaged, never acknowledging his own genetic connections to subjects he chose to represent, even reflecting in interviews of his depiction of black subjects as interest in the other. Brown's life was code switching between public and private spheres, Chessé's was one of denial in both, aided by literal whitewashing in the 1924 census.

Both artists engaged in distinct forms of what Michael Taussig calls responsivity, a process where mimesis yields into the other. Brown's *Noah's Ark* featured a male couple, two Dodo birds whose inability to produce offspring doomed the species. Chessé created paintings for the San Francisco Museum of Art and is especially noted among puppeteers for his adaptation of *The Emperor Jones*. Both artists demonstrate alterity as an ambiguous concept that disrupts itself. Their shows point to the objects as both exotic (the element of alterity that says "they are different from me") and incorporated (the element that says "they are like me"), as their hidden identities blurred the boundaries between self and other.

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, identity, gay, closeted

The puppet intrinsically is a figure of alterity, existing as dynamic exchange between human being and performing object. To Paul Piris (2012), performers enter the fictional world of the puppets as their own others. This creates ambiguity in performance and discloses the human being in relation to the object. The performer's identity invariably contributes to the object's identity in such mimetic acts as construction and performance. While Piris is specifically interested in performances where the puppet and the manipulator are both characters in the play, the creator of the puppet—as builder, manipulator, voice, or a combination—is revealed in any work of puppetry, with the puppets serving as performative aspects for their creators.

So, what happens when the puppeteer's identity is its own disguise or façade, and the objects engage the puppeteer's ambiguous relationship to that identity? What additional ambiguities are created in performance when puppeteers' own characters either contribute to their public personas, deviate from them, or even challenge them directly? Who, in these cases, is the Other? In cases of racial identity, which is passing, the puppet or the puppeteer? In cases of gender or sexual identity, which is in the closet, the maker/manipulator or the performing object?

My goal here is to explore the puppet as a disruptive figure in the construction of identity. The puppet furthers the phenomenon of exchange promoted by Michael Taussig in *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), where individuals both adopt the culture and/or nature of the Other (mimesis) and distance themselves from the Other (alterity). In the work of puppeteers whose identity is itself a disguise, that exchange plays out in the creative work of puppetry. The puppet, in these cases, is constructed and performed by the puppeteer to represent a perceived Other, while ironically revealing the aspect of the puppeteer that is being disguised or distorted in the puppeteer's own life.

Drawing on Taussig's observations, this essay is intended as a contribution to an ongoing effort to recuperate awareness of the hidden identities of two notable American puppeteers. Those puppeteers are Forman Brown, one of the main figures in the Yale Puppeteers and the highly popular Turnabout Theatre, and Ralph Chessé, the chief puppeteer for *The Wonderful World of Brother Buzz*, the longest sustaining children's television program in San Francisco (1952–1969), and the director of the WPA puppetry units in LA, Oakland, and San Francisco.

Forman Brown is being recuperated due primarily to his contributions to LGBTQ literature through his novel *Better Angel* (see Figure 1). Brown first published *Better Angel* in 1933 under the pseudonym Richard Meeker. The novel was republished in 1983, reportedly without

Brown's knowledge. After Brown discovered the 1983 release, he republished the novel again in 1990 with his own foreword, revealing himself at long last as Richard Meeker, and confessing that the novel was semi-autobiographical. The 1990 print was Brown's formal outing of himself, as well as his partner in work and life, Richard Brandon, who had died in 1985.¹

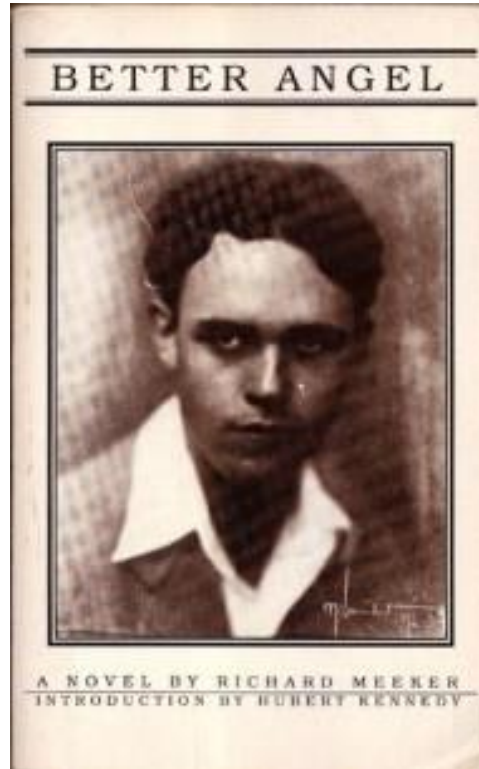


Figure 1. Cover of *Better Angel* (1933).

Chessé's son Bruce Chessé has been engaged in recuperating his family's identity for decades. I have occasionally had the opportunity to cross paths with him and get direct input on what he has uncovered about his father, and their family lineage, which was historically mixed-race African American and Caucasian American, although the family chose to identify as white for most of the 20th century.²

¹ At the moment, there are only a few instances of *Better Angel* being cited by anyone not already talking about Brown the puppeteer. He is listed as "an important early gay novelist" in his Wikipedia entry and referenced in Anthony Slide's *Lost Gay Novels* (2003) and Drewey Wayne Gunn's *Gay American Novels* (2016). The 2020 Kindle edition produced by the Los Angeles Public Library includes a forward by John F. Szabo, who summarizes the history of the novel, its republication by Alyson Publications in 1983, and its subsequent 1990 republication with Brown's epilogue acknowledging himself as Richard Meeker and identifying the characters of Kurt, Derry, and David as himself, Harry Burnett, and Richard Brandon.

² Ralph Chessé is cited in the task list for Black Lunch Table, a now 16-year recuperative project created to "mobilize the creation and improvement of a specific set of Wikipedia articles that pertain to the lives and works of Black artists."

With both Chessé and Brown being closeted in some form for most or all their lives, their major writings, Chessé's *The Marionette Actor* and Brown's *Punch's Progress* (reprinted as *Small Wonder* in 1980), are entirely focused on the goals and techniques of puppet theater (see Figures 2 and 3). Both promoted themselves as artists foremost, creating work that had the potential to transform the public's view of puppetry, Chessé with work that was as rich and serious as any high-art theater, and Brown with shows that were like miniatures of the burgeoning musical comedies of the time.



Figures 2 and 3. Ralph Chessé Poses with 2 of his Television Puppets (left). Harry Burnett, Forman Brown, and Richard Brandon (right).

From Chessé's perspective, his work in the Federal Theatre Project improved on the art of puppetry:

[It] gave me a chance to show that marionettes can be very high-class adult entertainment. We could go into the classics, which is something others hadn't done; they were still doing fairy tales for children ... the variety shows I did were adult productions. The Federal Theatre was sponsoring a whole new program in theatre, and marionettes had to get out of the rut. (O'Connor and Brown 1980, 24)

Imagining other puppeteers as lowbrow permitted Chessé to imagine his own work as a superior creation. Chessé (1987) conceived his work in kinship with Edward Gordon Craig, when he wrote "I intended to make an instrument of the theatre, a surrogate which would serve my purpose as an actor" (xi).³ He is careful to couch the essence of his puppets in motivational language, assuring his reader that "the marionette can take its place in the theatre with the best of these actors and make a contribution to theatre form which only it can provide" (xi).

³ Chessé quotes Gordon Craig's *On the Art of the Theatre* extensively in his argument.

Chessé had trained as an amateur actor, studied painting at the Art Institute of Chicago, and experimented with puppetry performance (sans construction) in a set design class with Blanding Sloan of San Francisco. However, it was not until a brief residence in New York City, where he witnessed Remo Bufano's *Orlando Furioso*, that he conceived a marionette production of his own. Chessé envisioned a technique that would make his marionettes uniquely impressive, and he touted his enterprise in *The Marionette Actor*, where he rejected what he viewed as the crude focus on the head of the puppet and the creation of "tall, slender, proportional objects" (11). So enamored of his creations was Chessé that he celebrated the marionette as though it were a separate entity, as if he were Pygmalion and the object was so beloved that he gave it life, calling the puppet "man's soul and man's conscience, [who] proclaims his virtues and attacks his vices yet remains free of all contamination" (12).

Brown likewise appears to have been interested in the puppet as a substitute for the human actor, much in the tradition of Craig's ubermarionette. However, where other puppeteers have evoked Craig for the puppet to serve aesthetic purposes that live actors could not, Brown imagined the puppet as a performer very like the human actor. In his first history of the Yale Puppeteers, *Punch's Progress* (1936), Brown described his puppets as beings with their own psychology (6). While presenting a throne room scene, one of the puppeteers tangled a Prime Minister marionette with its Queen marionette. Brown describes independent action on the puppet's part:

The Prime Minister, quite regal in his way, in a sweeping gesture of Prime-Ministerial elegance, caught the queen's right foot and pulled her gently but firmly from her throne. Imagine the Queen's position! And the Prime Minister's! But the court took no notice. Even the King was unmoved, and the prime minister, without even so much as an apology, continued his peroration to the end of the scene hanging resolutely to the queen's ankle. The show, however, despite this strange interlude of puppet psychology (a psychology, let me say, that no scientist has yet studied) was a success. (6-7)

Though the comment is more likely fanciful hyperbole than evidence of a belief in the puppet as an independent agent of behavior, Brown's view of the mishaps in performance as creating problems not for the human artists, but for the fictional characters themselves, is part of an ongoing theme in his work.

Brown creates puppets that talk back to their creators or challenge them directly in performance. In his take on the Harriet Beecher Stowe novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which Brown titled *Uncle Tom's Hebb'n*, Topsy and Eva mock the stereotypes associating Blackness with immorality, assert that Eva's "virtue's a figment, under her pigment," and then turn the criticism directly at

their own creators (Brown 1933, 156). The puppets admonish the audience to never trust a favorite writer, as “he may be an awful blighter, as to telling things he mighta’ had he been more truthful” (Brown 1933, 157).

Brown’s company also created near-photographically realistic “portrait puppets” of various famous persons. In the 1920s, the company produced marionettes of George Arliss, playing statesman Benjamin Disraeli (see Figure 4), and Albert Einstein (see Figure 5). So detailed were these images that both the actor and the scientist actually posed for photographs with their puppet doppelgängers. This presents another angle of treating the puppet as an independent being, highlighting recognition (“It’s me,” says Einstein) but also otherness (“That is Einstein, not my sculpture,” says the artist).



Figures 4 and 5. “Two Disraelis—George Arliss and his Marionette Portrait” (left) and “Albert Einstein with Puppet” (right).

Both Chessé and Brown asserted themselves as art makers, Chessé working toward achievement that could lift the entire artform and Brown working toward creations that have the appearance of individuality. Though both excluded discussion of their own familial or cultural identities from their writings, their respective sexuality and ethnicity, unsurprisingly, were encoded in and/or motivated their puppetry. Chessé explored a variety of African American and

other diasporic subjects in his puppetry and artwork and revealed himself in various portraitures. Brown encoded references to his identity and experiences throughout his plays.

Though having distinct meanings within the context of both mimesis and alterity, and theory in general, race and sexuality are particularly analogous in these cases. Brown was a closeted gay man encoding metaphors of sexual identity in his plays. Chessé was a man of mixed race who publicly identified as white while often showcasing Black subjects. Brown was closeted in public while in a lifelong relationship with fellow puppeteer Richard Brandon. The Chessé family, listed historically as mulatto, chose to identify as white, an effort in which Chessé actively engaged, never acknowledging his own genetic connections to subjects he chose to represent. He would often assert in interviews that he depicted Black subjects due to his interest in communities of his youth or memories of his travels as a Merchant Marine. Brown's life was code-switching between public and private spheres; Chessé's was one of denial in both, aided by literal whitewashing in the 1924 census.

Both artists engaged in distinct forms of what Michael Taussig calls *responsivity*, a process whereby mimesis yields into the other. Brown's *Mister Noah* featured a male couple, two Dodo birds, whose inability to produce offspring doomed the species. Chessé created a large body of paintings featuring Black subjects and is especially noted among puppeteers for his adaptation of *The Emperor Jones*. In presenting a puppet as a construction of an Other, whether a foreign body, as in the case of Brutus Jones, or a lost exotic species, as in the case of Dodos, the puppeteers reveal their own kinship with that perceived Other, showcasing elements of their own identities that they hid from some or all of the world. Brown's and Chessé's shows point to the objects as both exotic (the element of alterity that says "they are different from me") and incorporated (the element that says "they are like me") as their hidden identities blur the boundaries between self and Other.

The story of how we get from a mixed-race Chessé family, to self-identifying white puppeteer Ralph, to his son Bruce's efforts to recuperate the family lineage, begins hundreds of years ago with the Louisiana creole Chessés. As Bruce discovered, the Chessés were listed as Black in 1900, mulatto in 1920, and white in 1924. As Bruce put it, even though his father left behind 900 works of art, much of which represented Black subjects related to his upbringing, the family bloodline was rarely discussed and possibly never mentioned by Ralph (email message to author, July 10, 2007).

John Bell, the acclaimed puppeteer and theater historian, and one of the organizers of the Representing Alterity symposium, corresponded with Bruce on this exact point, as did I. While I inferred from Bruce that he may not have known his actual ethnic identity, Bell read from the correspondence that he did. In preparation for the symposium, I asked Bruce outright, and his response was especially telling:

Ralph was in denial but his father never told his 5 children that there [sic] great grandmother was a black slave born in Cuba. Ralph was terrified of being identified as black. He was the most fearful man I have ever known. His denial in contrast to what his paintings have to say about being black is an exercise in contradiction and demonstrates the innumerable conflict that haunted him. He would not have been able to endure what he saw negros ensured [sic] on a daily basis.... He was a very complex man whose art took precedence over everything in his life. That was where he could live sustainably.” (email message to author, February 19, 2021)

His son’s assertions here speak volumes about an artist who ultimately knew his ancestry but aggressively hid or denied it as a defense mechanism. In her comments on my presentation at the symposium, Paulette Richards observed: “Given his Phenotype, Black persons would see him as passing.... He’d have a hard time being in denial within himself” (April 9, 2021). So, in essence, he had to know his family’s background even if he never spoke of it to anyone, even his own son.⁴

Adding to the conundrum of recuperating Chessé’s heritage is the fact that since his death, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the California African American Museum both rejected exhibitions and purchases of his art on the basis that Chessé didn’t identify as an African American. In rejecting the *Discovering Chessé* exhibition after working with Bruce to develop it for nearly two years, Charmaine Jefferson, the executive director of CAAM, stated: “What is abundantly clear is that Ralph Chessé did not see himself as “the Negro” of which he painted. His lack of multi-racial identification refutes every premise of the exhibition ... that Chessé was an artist grappling with issues of racial heritage, or that he was seeking to portray a personal African American heritage in his work.”⁵ Jefferson’s point is that Chessé “only spoke of himself as French creole” and treated all his Black aesthetic subjects as “them.” John Bell, Alan Cook, and I all noted, in support of Bruce’s exhibition, that rather than rejecting the showcase on the basis that its now-deceased artist

⁴ Bruce commented to me that their grandmother once told the entire family about their genealogy, but still Ralph never mentioned it.

⁵ See appendix for the full text of the letter from CAAM to Bruce Chessé (dated July 10, 2007).

identified as white, investigating why he identified as white when his family line was mixed race could raise even more interesting questions of identity and the phenomenon of passing in American history.

Chessé was very much in the closet as a mixed-race artist. His interest in Black subjects was stated as an interest in the mosaic of New Orleans life or the folklore of America. At the same time, partly because he saw himself as a true artist, his *Emperor Jones* is a noted event in the history of puppet theater. Engaging with his high artistic principles, he created a sophisticated work of theater. He incorporated a reading of “The Congo,” a folkloric poem by populist poet Vachael Lindsay, into his version of the drama. Moreover, he chose the living African American actor, Charles Gilpin (who had won the NAACP Spingarn medal for his performance in the play) as a template for the object (see Figures 6 and 7 below).



Figures 6 and 7. “Charles Gilpin as Brutus Jones” (left) and “Front view of Brutus from Ralph Chessé’s *The Emperor Jones*” (right).

This essay will not examine closely the phenomenological details of Chessé's puppet, which I cover in other places, or the dated nature of this play by a white playwright, which others address better than I in other places.⁶ There are problematic elements of exaggeration and exoticism in the carving and in the play that other the character, even if one accepts the proposition that Chessé was trying to create high art, and accepts the assertion that, for its time, *The Emperor Jones* was one of the most sophisticated productions of mainstream puppet theater to feature a Black character.

Chessé was a puppeteer who denied publicly, and, according to his son, never privately discussed, what would have been known to the family, and yet he strived toward high-art representations of Black characters. He focused several scenes in his mural for the Coit Tower WPA art project on characters identified as Black in both representation and title, and many of his other works either explicitly or implicitly represent Black figures. Even biblical subjects like David and Elijah are portrayed as such.

Within Chessé's extant works there is an unexpected point where he seemed to reveal the very conundrum of his identity, with elements of concealment, passing, and revealing presented in turn. It is what appears in an apparent self-portrait showing the artist with his signature beret but with a darker complexion than he appears to have in his pose with the *Brother Buzz* puppets (see Figure 8). In a related photograph, we see Chessé's hair, which has characteristics of his heritage, tight curled and suggestive of a concerted effort to comb it straight (see Figure 9). The two images together suggest an individual who literally concealed evidence of his family lineage under the cap of an artist but who surreptitiously revealed his ancestry through his choice to paint his own skin tone darker than photographs might preserve. The image may suggest that he at some time struggled with his own choice to deny his ancestry.

⁶ For examination of the puppet's phenomenological characteristics within the context of racial representation in American puppet theatre, see Ben Fisler, *The Phenomenology of Racialism: Blackface Puppetry in American Theatre, 1872-1939* (College Park: University of Maryland, 2005). For examination of the Eugene O'Neil play's shortcomings in terms of representation, see: E. Quita Craig, *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era: Beyond the Formal Horizons* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1980).



Figures 8 and 9. “Portrait by Ralph Chessé” (left) and “Ralph Alexander Chessé” (right).

With Brown, we have a puppeteer who seemed to have struggled significantly less with his identity as a gay man. *Better Angel* suggests that he was comfortable with being who he was from a very young age, though, at times, in the novel, his avatar Kurt fears that his secret will be revealed. Kurt is concerned that his long-suffering friend Chloe, who, being in love with him and refusing to believe Kurt is “like them” (meaning Derry and David, who surround themselves with pretty boys), will out him to the world (180). At other times, he asserts that he is a “Pagan,” and that his “parents were always queer” (172). The character Tony tries to convince him to pretend to be straight and have a relationship with Chloe while arguing against the negative label “perverted” and asserting “queer” as the preferred term (177–80). Brown may have understood that keeping his sexuality a secret from the public sphere could be achieved while still having a life-long relationship with his partner. His plays, however, reveal his sexuality to anyone cued into the code.

The smoking gun is his *Mister Noah* (1933) play and the Dodo birds’ song “I’m a Boy and I’m a Boy.” Evidence in other plays may not be as definitive, but the code is there, in small or large part, suggesting elements of gay life, embedded with figures of otherness: exotic animals, indigenous islanders, or ancient Romans. While there are efforts to recuperate the queer identities of many artists who lived at times when the closet was a necessary tool of survival, Brown is unique among closeted writers. Not only did he write a gay novel, but he also publicly acknowledged that

the novel was about him and his real-life coming of age many years after the novel had already been recognized as a positive portrait of a young gay man.

Mister Noah is a musical comedy take on the story of Noah, loosely based on scripture, which Brown notes a preacher once called “slightly blasphemous” (Brown 1980, 117). It begins with the day Noah is loading the Ark, continues through the flood, and ends with the Ark’s arrival at Ellis Island. The Dodo Birds, both males, attempt to warn Noah that he’s making a mistake putting them on the Ark: “Oh please don’t send us sir aboard your yacht, for what you think we are, we’re really not!” (Brown 1933, 99). Later, on the boat, they say, “We want to explain ... it’s very difficult you see, we’re not really married, we can’t be” (103). The song laments the end of the species, with language that suggests a world where the option of partnering with women is impossible:

Oh I’m a male and I’m a male, we’re nothing more than friends. I quake and quail and I grow pale, considering our ends. There’ll be no more Dodo daddies singing ‘neath the trees, and no more Dodo ladies to sit upon their knees. For I’m a boy and I’m a boy, the fact can’t be dismissed. There’ll be no more dapper female flappers begging to be kissed. I’m glad I left home when I did, and failed to do as I was bid, and sowed our wild oats when we did—Just think what we’d have missed. (105)

After suggesting sexual liberation and the possibility of male/male relationships, even if these dodos aren’t open to such a coupling, Brown sets the final scene on Ellis Island. There, an immigration officer touches on the project of passing, including in the oath of citizenship: “Will they swear to abide by the constitution, suspect the Jap and mistrust the Rooshian?” Noah offers an enthusiastic yes, even promising they “join the WCTU” (Women’s Christian Temperance Union) (113). In the final moments of the play, the Dodos are happy: “We think we’re going to like New Yawk ... we’ve no occasion to feel so blue ... there’s lots of other queer birds here too” (113). In this moment, they harken back to the use of the term in *Better Angel* and assert that their new lifestyle, as eternal bachelors, is part of the mosaic of the big city and exotic animal life, both establishing the code and othering the representative.

Passing is also referenced in *My Man Friday*, Brown’s take on Robinson Crusoe. The character of Zuzu asserts that “Friday is [hers] Saturday night,” referencing the conflict between the public professional identity that Brown cultivated for self-preservation and the private relationship he cultivated and maintained with Brandon for his entire life (129). As in the Daniel Defoe novel, Native culture ultimately defeats the structures of capitalism, but in Brown’s play it is done without violence with Crusoe becoming a saxophonist and bandleader for the island.

While the Dodos are the most blatant reveal in Brown's extant plays, elements of his comedy *Caesar Julius* mirror Tony's suggestion in *Better Angel* that one can pretend to be with a woman as a cover. In the play, Aphasia, Caesar's wife, suspects him of infidelity.⁷ Caesar is attending a bath, where his wife tries to check on his infidelity, expecting to find Cleopatra. Instead, she finds him there with someone named Broun (possibly a variation on Brown) and two other male correspondents. She then apologizes, affirming her own denial (45–88). Of course, the historical Caesar was known for his infidelity, which at least the historical Calpurnia is known for tolerating. In this case, it appears to reflect back on Kurt's relationship with Chloe and her denial of his identity.

Taking the novel and the coded plays, as well as Brown's willingness late in his life to identify the individuals upon whom he based the main characters in his novel, one cannot help but wonder how many times Brown candidly revealed himself. He may have told a friend, or even a female-identifying admirer, that he was Kurt, or that he and Brandon were the Dodos, or Caesar and Broun at the bathhouse, in order to reveal to a confidant what it was not safe to reveal to the wider world. Brown's Kurt and his puppets provided the mouthpiece for a truth the mid-20th century society knew existed but would never accept as normal. The dynamic is in the vein of what cultural theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha (1987) refers to as the "inappropriate other," an occupant of a space both inside and outside of cultural norms. In this case, the Dodos, Zuzu, and Broun, and Kurt, Derry, David, and Tony, create the space that is both inside and outside of culture norms, allowing his identity to be the subject, distanced from himself in the fictionalized other of a puppet or a literary character.

Forman was closeted but not in denial. In many ways, his life, like his novel, is a story of a gay life with a happy ending. In *Better Angel*, Kurt struggles with the consequences of accepting his truth, ultimately solving any existential crisis by choosing a stable relationship that can coexist with a society that doesn't accept its nature, as long as that nature is kept private. Brown negotiated a long and healthy career, and a long and healthy marriage (in all but the legal sense), at a time when both were a considerable challenge to queer persons. At the same time, he encoded his work with references to his truth, making the knowledge of it available to those able to see the signifiers, and keeping a safe distance through otherness for the homophobic society at large.

⁷ Caesar's actual historical wives included Cornelia, Pompeia, and Calpurnia; Aphasia means communication problems typically caused by brain trauma. The pun name appears to underline the extent of her obliviousness toward her husband.

Chessé appears to have been in some level of denial in both public and private as well, rhetorically and artistically maintaining the separation between his white self and the Black other. Yet he created work that showcased the very other he vigorously denied being and even seems to have occasionally risked crossing a line in his imagery that might have revealed his mixed-race heritage. As a figure of alterity, who, as Chessé tells it, is the artist's soul and conscience, the puppet can take upon itself the aspects of the artist that are otherwise concealed. The performing object in these cases turns its head back to face its own creator, or turns its face outward to the world, whispering quietly, "I am what he will not say," or singing out loudly, "I am what the world will not let him say."

Appendix: Full text of letter to Bruce Chessé from CAAM, July 10, 2007

Mr. Bruce Chessé
Chessé Arts Ltd.
P.O. Box 15203
Portland, OR 97293

Re: Cancellation of the *Discovering Chessé* Exhibition

Dear Mr. Chessé,

As you know, the California African American Museum (CAAM) is an institution with a mission to research, collect and preserve African American culture. Part of that mission is to focus on the exceptional work of African American artists, and specifically how their contributions have and do influence the American and world experience. With such a mission, CAAM must consider the work of potential exhibitions as an extension of our voice. What we say, who we endorse and how we mount and promote artists undergoes great scrutiny, internally and externally. It has been a long and arduous effort on the part of our curatorial team trying to get at the heart and soul of the *Discovering Chessé* exhibition as originally premised. It is after much discussion and with a sense of loss that I write to share with you that CAAM will not be presenting the *Discovering Chessé* exhibition. We are simultaneously notifying the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) that we have reached the unfortunate conclusion that we no longer have a basis for continuing our efforts to present this exhibition. The following explains our reasons for this decision.

In submitting our initial application to the NEA's American Masters program, our early suppositions were based on preliminary reviews of art work, and several conversations with you which left us with the impression that Ralph Chessé was not only a strong artist, but a man whose African American ancestry could be found reflected in his art. As we shared our written descriptions with you, it could be seen that we at CAAM were of the understanding that his paintings, sculptures, and even some of his marionettes were inspired by that ancestry. We speculated that his work might have been influenced by the complex social issues that he may have encountered as a light-skinned Black man born in 1900 New Orleans. It was upon these premises that our grant application was submitted to the NEA. However, subsequent and more extensive discussions with you and in our review of the records have found that in the case of Ralph Chessé there is scant evidence in his paintings, sculpture or marionettes that confirms that he was unsure of his identity or that he was in fact struggling with issues of race or seeking to portray his ancestry as African American in his work. While he may have utilized "Negro subject matter" in *some* of his work, it was only that "subject matter."

Although the census records you provided do indicate that Ralph Chessé had blood relatives identified as "colored", Ralph Chessé was not so identified in the records. Of course, we realize that the lack of any such identification is not dispositive for these same census records can also be used to confirm that Chessé was at least multi-racial. The problem is that there is equally strong evidence that Ralph Chessé did not see himself as multi-racial or colored. Even on the official www.Chesseartsltd.com website you have written, "As happens in many mixed families, some identified with the French white culture and some identified with the black culture and strengthened those genes. Chessés fought in black regiments during the civil war. Jim Crow split families and those that could pass as white did so for reasons, unknown to me. My fathers [sic] family chose to identify with their French heritage

and all married Caucasians.” Frankly, from our research we have to agree with your conclusion. We could find no evidence that Ralph Chessé ever referred to himself or his family members as being colored or Negro. The use of the word “Creole” for him was strictly linked to the old definition as being of French European descent. By your own admission, it was not something talked about in your family except that your father routinely identified himself as French Creole, exclusively, a descendent of French settlers in New Orleans.

In his own writings, Ralph Chessé only spoke of himself as French Creole. He even spoke of the personality of his younger sister, Leslie Chessé in European terms, as a “throw back to our Irish ancestry...” [*The Marionette Actor*, by Ralph_Chessé, p. 29]. When he wrote about his work depicting Negroes, Ralph Chessé never appears to identify himself as being a member of the race about which he was painting. It was simply “subject matter.” You shared with us, the 1944 letter Ralph Chessé wrote to Grace Morley, the founder of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art asking Dr. Morley to consider his work for an exhibition. While Ralph Chessé explained to Dr. Morley that the subject of his submitted paintings “are Negro,” he also refers to his subjects as “them.” In no way did Ralph Chessé ever suggest that he was one of “them” or that the Negro as a subject of his paintings is anything other than an early recollection of a South that was full of “rich color and simple primitive qualities” offering “vast material for interpretation.” Without getting into a critical analysis of Ralph Chessés paradigm of the Negro as a source for exploring primitivism, what is abundantly clear is that Ralph Chessé did not see himself as “the Negro” of which he painted. His lack of multi-racial identification refutes every premise of the exhibition that we had proposed to the NEA, that Chessé was an artist grappling with issues of racial heritage, or that he was seeking to portray a personal African American heritage in his work.

We are not disputing the quality of the paintings we reviewed, but rather making clear that within our museum context and mission, our early supposition that Ralph Chessés art reflected his attempt to come to terms with his African American identity was not accurate. Even if we were to define Ralph Chessé as being African American according to the old “one drop of black blood” rule, for CAAM this matter ultimately boils down to an issue of moral integrity for our institution: Whether it was appropriate, and important enough, within the context of the show we had proposed to the NEA, to strip Ralph Chessé of his right to self-identification. Black racial identity has been historically defined by whites, and, too often solely for the purpose of imposing some restrictive negative condition. The right of self-definition was routinely denied Americans of Black African descent. We are not blind to the realities that race and racism play in our society nor are we suggesting that there is not a place for discussion and analysis of the issues of racial identity in our museum. Quite the contrary, we believe strongly that race will continue to be for many years to come an extremely important topic requiring extensive analysis and presentation, but this is not the right circumstance for that discussion. In this instance, to go forward with *Discovering Chessé* as a visual arts exhibition about the work of an African American artist, would mean that the California African American Museum would have to actively choose to perpetuate the practice of imposing an unwanted racial classification on Ralph Chessé for the purpose of having him identified as an African American. This is not a position that we are willing to take. No matter what interpretation can be made of the census records, it is clearer that Ralph Chessé was not unsure of his racial identity or struggling with issues of race in his artistic presentations. Ralph Chessé made a choice. He may have been multi-racial, but even your confirmation that his death certificate listed him as Caucasian is evidence of how he chose to be identified. It was not as an African American. Under these circumstances we feel we have a moral obligation to stand by Ralph Chessés right to self-identification, and in this case to be French

Creole if that is what he wanted to be. That having been said, it became impossible to continue the *Discovering Chessé* exhibition under our NEA grant and thus, we have removed the show from our exhibition calendar.

We are prepared to send your art work back to you. You will find attached a list of the works of Ralph Chessé that are currently in our possession. We have packed and prepared these works to be returned to you via insured and climate controlled ground transportation. You will be contacted by our Registrar, Drew Talley on or before July 16, 2007, who will call to confirm the address to which the works will be returned and to set up a delivery date. Should you wish to speak to me directly prior to that date, you may feel free to contact me at (213) 744-7513 or via email at cjefferson@caamuseum.org.

Please know that this has not been an easy decision for us and thank you for the interest you have shown in the California African American Museum. We have come to know you personally and respect your devotion to the memory of your father and to the power of his art. We understand that this decision will be a disappointment for you as well. I wish it could be different, but we are confident that Ralph Chessés work will find a place for others to discover its importance in other venues with less stringent processes of representation.

With deep respect,

Charmaine Jefferson
Executive Director, California African American Museum
Executive Vice President, Friends, the Foundation of the California African American Museum

Cc: Dr. Jill Moniz, Program Manager, Visual Arts Curator
Dr. Christopher Jimenez y West, History Curator

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About the Author

Ben Fisler is the Arts Coordinator and Associate Professor of Theatre at Harford Community College. His article, “Black and Blackface in the Performing Object: Bullock, Chessé, Paris, the Jubilee Singers, and the Burdens of . . . Everything” was part of the 2019 *Living Objects Symposium* and the resulting collection *Living Objects: African American Puppetry Essays*. Other publications appear in *The Puppetry Yearbook*, *Theatre Journal*, *Performance, Religion, and Spirituality*, and *Research in Drama Education*. Ben coordinates responses on behalf of KCACTF Region II, reviews productions throughout the mid-Atlantic for DC MetroArts, and acts professionally with companies such as Prince George’s Shakespeare in The Parks and the Chesapeake Shakespeare Company, recently playing Sir Peter Teazle in *The School for Scandal*.