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# Introduction: Attitudes toward the Other

By Matthew Isaac Cohen

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In societies around the globe, puppets and other performing objects, such as masks and cantastorias, are used to represent and stage the Other—various ethnicities and races considered different from the dominant group. Such dramatizations of alterity routinely involve caricature and exaggeration. The transformative capacities of performing objects—which allow any practitioner to enact anything or anybody—grant them unique power to realize exotic fantasies, to inscribe and reinforce racial stereotypes and ethnic misrepresentations, but also to transcend received categories and struggle against modes of oppression such as colonialism, often through parody.

The road to the Holocaust was paved by anti-Semitic puppets, showing, for example, Jews transforming to pigs, inculcating into German children an image of the racist insult *Judensau* (Blumenthal 2005, 94). America's most popular living puppeteer, ventriloquist Jeff Dunham, is famed for his demeaning José Jalapeño and Achmed the Dead Terrorist figures and other characters who spout racist remarks. Turkish *karagöz* is replete with caricatures of the diverse population of cosmopolitan Istanbul, with offensive portraits of haggling Jews, stupid Arabs, and others. Beyond such racist imagery, puppetry and allied forms frequently reflect a particular society's unstated, subtle, yet systemic and pervasive racism and bias, which is often not even recognized or acknowledged by the practitioners engaging in it (Populoh 2019).

Practitioners have also bravely challenged systemic racism. Masks and puppets representing Vietnamese women made repeat appearances in Bread and Puppet Theater's anti-war political spectacles in the 1960s and 1970s, providing human form to the abstractions of collateral damage. In his solo street show, *Puns and Doedie—Puppets against Apartheid* (1981–1986), South African puppeteer Gary Friedman satirized the racist Apartheid regime and raised awareness of the social attitudes that underpinned it. More recently, a “fluorescence” of African American artists have turned to puppets, masks, crankies, and other performing objects to resist objectification of the Black body, counter the grotesque ways that African Americans have been portrayed, take back their own identities, complexify dominant narratives, and address sensitive issues through humor (Bland et al. 2020).

The papers presented here were presented originally at the online symposium *Representing Alterity through Puppetry and Performing Objects*, which brought together twenty-one scholars from nine countries for an intense two days of presentations, discussions, and debates on April 9–10, 2021. Speakers were asked to consider how puppetry, mask performance, cantastoria, and other types of performing objects globally problematize representations of the Other, excavate systemic racism in performing objects, and demonstrate the capacities of puppetry and allied arts to challenge racism and xenophobia in order to fashion just, diverse, and inclusive societies. How are ethnic and racial Others represented in global traditions of puppet and mask theatre? How do puppets and performing objects enable Exoticism, Orientalism, and Othering? What is the relation between racist and xenophobic discourse in society and the representation of alterity with performing objects? How do puppets, masks, and performing objects operate as a means for cross-cultural understanding, generating empathy, and communicating with Others? How might puppets, masks, and performing objects challenge systemic racism, prejudice, and colonialism?

Presenters emphasized how traditional puppet and mask theaters often espoused a complex mix of attitudes towards the Other. A typical device in *karagöz* and other shadow theatres of the Islamicate world is the “alterity revue,” in which a succession of differently different characters—distinguished by race, ethnicity, physical qualities, mental abnormalities, sexual persuasion, language use, religious background, dialect—parade across the screen, both a celebration of diversity and a quick-and-dirty parody of everyone different from the mainstream (Carlson). Questions arise on how to update this tradition to be respectful and sensitive to present-day issues, including discrimination against refugees (Ümit 2021). In the *opera dei pupi* of Sicily, love trumps the us-against-them mindset when an Amazon queen falls in love with a Christian knight (Cavallo). Overseas invaders are mostly stock baddies in Javanese shadow puppet theater, but there are good overseas characters, including the noble Kartala, the protagonist Panji’s half-brother, who has black skin, curly hair, and a tall and muscular body because he is of Papuan descent on his mother’s side (Wiratama et al; see also Foley). While string puppet plays created by Han puppeteers have typically portrayed the snake gods of Southern China’s indigenous people as demons and thus make the defeat, displacement, and killing of non-Han people palatable, there are also plays that show the snake gods as objects of veneration (Chen). Similarly, traditional puppet theater in 19th-century China operated as a way to domesticate Europeans. Taking on diverse roles

such as servants or devils in hell, Europeans were depicted as frightening, ugly, and strong, defusing to a degree the threat Europeans posed to China's symbolic order (Ruizendaal 2021). In the Italian mask theater of *commedia dell'arte*, actors could take on different local accents, either celebrating a locality or parodying it depending upon their audience and site of performance (Crick).

In Euro-American modernity, puppetry provided a cultural space where minorities could be heard, if not seen. African American ventriloquist John W. Cooper's tag line "a negro is in it" proudly heralded his arrival onstage. Cooper's puppeteering allowed him to insinuate himself into places where he ostensibly did not belong (Richards). Mamulengo's puppeteers, who hailed from Brazil's lower classes, maintained their art as a form of perpetual rebellion (Ilari). American puppeteer Forman Brown was closeted but encoded metaphors of sexuality in his plays. Similarly, American puppeteer Ralph Chessé was of Black descent but passed as white; puppetry gave him the possibility of representing Black subjects in a manner he could not do in everyday life (Fisler). More egregious were the séances of 19th-century American spiritualists in which white women operated as batteries for Black and Native American spirits. Through voicing Others and manipulation of objects, these spiritualists constructed mythic whiteness and justified slavery and discrimination while suppressing Black and Native American shamanistic as "primitive" (Rickard). Puppetry's capacities for caricature and parody made it a natural medium for propaganda in France and Germany during World War I (Plassard). An ongoing problem for Germany's many museums with sizeable puppet collections is how to display and provide access to the innumerable puppets giving negative depictions of imagined Turks, imaged Africans, imagined African Americans, and imagined multicultural Germans (Condee).

Contemporary puppetry and object play continue to deal with the cultural baggage of histories of Othering while also capitalizing on the capacity of performing objects to narrate more nuanced stories about identity than might be possible in human-centered performances. The inclusion of so-called *bunraku* puppetry in Anthony Minghella's production of the opera *Madam Butterfly* extends a vision of the Orient as constructed by white Western nations rather than challenge it (Poster-Su). The lynching of effigies and chairs in the United States since Barack Obama's election in 2008 are not just recapitulations of images from mass media but reinscriptions of color lines and reminders of the fatal consequences for exercising political power (Burton 2021).

In contrast, puppetry for a refugee artist gives new possibilities for visibility, emphasizes fragmented identity, resists stereotypes, and generates empathy from host countries (Abed). Slovak folk puppetry and object performances once happily parodied Jews and Romani people, but today Slovak puppet artists create work that is actively anti-racist by dramatizing discrimination against Romani people (Hledíková). African American artist Kara Walker's silhouettes and shadow puppet plays challenge viewers to remember slavery and contemporary racism; they force viewers to bear witness. Drawn into the conceptual space of the shadow, a world both contained and porous, white supremacy is undermined and Black discourse uplifted (Anderson and Hayley 2021). Cross-cultural collaborations throw up conceptual challenges—as there will be differences of understandings about how performing objects function and what they mean—but also offer opportunities for two-way exchange of knowledge and transgressing received categories (Emigh). In contemporary European puppet plays by diasporic artists such as Kossi Efoui, objects bear witness to absence while affirming presence, rewriting myth to establish dialogue across cultures. Puppets are invested with magic. The object becomes a fetish, a double of the physically absent (Di Fazio).

Drawing on comments made by Kathy Foley at the symposium's conclusion, this collection of papers function collectively as a moment for unpacking baggage in the puppet chest, prodding it and thinking about what it is about, while also inevitably looking at our shared cultural moment. To advance the field of puppets, masks, and performing objects, reparation is required—including better representations, rewritten histories, new contextualizations. We hope that readers of the essays will continue this work.

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