


2023

## Introduction: Puppets Have Always Performed Others

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### Recommended Citation

Bell, John, "Introduction: Puppets Have Always Performed Others" (2023). *Representing Alterity through Puppetry and Performing Objects*. Edited by John Bell, Matthew Isaac Cohen, and Jungmin Song. [https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/ballinst\\_alterity/17](https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/ballinst_alterity/17)

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# Introduction: Puppets Have Always Performed Others

By John Bell

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The Ballard Institute's 2019 *Living Objects: African American Puppetry* exhibition, symposium, and festival drew attention to some salient aspects of material performances of race and racism, specifically in regard to African American experience, diaspora, the historical effects of chattel slavery, and the continuing presence of blackface minstrelsy in US culture, particularly in puppets and performing object culture. Dr. Jungmin Song's 2021 Ballard Institute exhibition *Puppetry's Racial Reckoning* extended such concerns by looking at the Ballard Institute's own difficult connections to representations of race and ethnicity as well as a broader and more complicated array of international contexts. The 2021 symposium, *Representing Alterity through Puppetry and Performing Objects*, conceived and produced by Dr. Song, Dr. Matthew Cohen, Emily Wicks, and myself, was an effort to continue such investigations with a wider geographic and conceptual range. I believe that the essays and video presentations here, as well as the digital record of Dr. Song's *Puppetry's Racial Reckoning* exhibition, point both to the valuable insights material performance studies can offer and to the necessity of continuing such studies in order to better understand our human condition.

Our continuing fascination with puppets, masks, and other performing objects has to do with their ubiquity worldwide: from the 26,000-year-old ivory articulated figure in the Moravian Museum in Brno, Czech Republic, to the vast array of *wayang* figures our colleague Matthew Cohen is studying at the Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection of Indonesian Puppets at Yale University, to the revelatory research Paulette Richards is conducting for her forthcoming book *Object Performance in the Black Atlantic*. Global practices of communicating with sculpted, cut-out, projected, repurposed, or found objects mark an important area of human culture because they are at the same time both commonplace and revelatory.

Puppets have always been power instruments that confound logic with their "magic" presence, a cultural function constantly shifting toward shamanist and ritual behavior. Euro-American cultural practices in the 19th and 20th centuries found some solace in trying to tame and categorize puppetry as commercial entertainment, especially for children, but the increasingly

global scope of cultural studies, and the desires of artists and scholars to look beyond the limits of functional art imposed by Enlightenment rationality have forced us to recognize that puppets and material performances are always *doing* things in and with the societies in which they perform. In this way, they function as a kind of collective unconscious, constantly revealing central social beliefs—such as attitudes to race, gender, ethnicity, and other differences—that may not be articulated consciously or proudly.

Part of puppetry's allure and plasticity is its essential nature as the performance of an Other. Unlike acting, which asks us to temporarily assume another identity, or visual art, which allows us to create a work and then walk away from it, puppetry requires us to create another being, and then animate that Other with our own hands. The doll or puppet already exists as its own entity, and we add movement and maybe voice, enabling it to become its own thing. Puppeteers routinely perform different genders, different ages, different beings (gods, animals, and spirits), and, of course, other races and ethnicities. How puppets perform those alterities reveals in plain sight deep recesses of collective and individual social consciousness, and thus offers us rich, complicated, and often troubling areas of research. My own unaware viewing of 1930s and 40s cartoons as a child in 1950s suburbia poured into me—among other things—streams of racist images from the long US love of reductive minstrel stereotypes, as well as 1940s war propaganda featuring yellowface Japanese villains and European fascists. No one ever explained to me how and why these cel animations functioned as powerful material culture—they were just there, judged utterly fit by local television stations and my community to serve as deep cultural education, which I have been trying to figure out ever since.

The various topics covered by the papers here also mark complicated and often troubling object performances of Others. I am grateful for the various ways that our symposium participants have been researching these instances of profound puppet and object performance so we can better understand cultures and histories around the world and so our own puppet and object rituals and performances to come might lead to better understanding, appreciation, and celebration of alterity.