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## Embracing Complexity in Performing the Other

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# Embracing Complexity in Performing the Other

*by Valeska Maria Populoh*

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I am very honored to be included in this conversation and to be at an event that is not only celebrating the work of African American puppeteers, but also holding space for important dialogue and community building.

By way of introduction, I offer that I am presenting from my position as an artist, puppeteer, cultural organizer, and educator, not as a scholar. I am presenting from my perspective as a white, anti-racist woman living in Baltimore who has been radically shaped by the highly racialized politics of that city and by relationships with communities actively engaged in equity and social justice work. My reflections today come from a place of humility and sincere curiosity about how to navigate complex, and at times highly combustible, issues about representation, appropriation, and racial identity in the realm of puppetry.

I will share three experiences (or “scenarios”) from the last three years that have challenged and catalyzed my thinking about white people performing Black puppets, and conclude with a few questions that I hope to engage in this room and in other spaces of this festival weekend.

In my own anti-racist training, I have been encouraged to study the past, to become literate about the history of race in America, and to recognize the way this past structures our contemporary reality. Minstrelsy and blackface are being addressed at this conference, and so are the roots of stereotypical, essentializing, and debasing depictions of Black people by white folks as well as the way in which Blackness has been appropriated and consumed as entertainment. So, when I first seriously started contemplating the question, “What does it mean for a white person to perform a Black puppet?”, I had to consider this past. I have also been encouraged to think about power: who has it, who does not, who gets to make decisions, who benefits, and who does not.

**Scenario 1:**

In the spring of 2015, I was working as the curator of The Puppet Slamwich at Black Cherry Puppet Theater. During this time, I was also collaborating with a community of cultural organizers seeking to address issues of racial equity in Baltimore. I was deeply impacted by the movement initiated by Black Lives Matter, and events unfolding around the Baltimore Uprising. Black Cherry served as a place of gathering for our community, and so I was encouraged to think about our space. Who feels welcome? Who does not? Who is represented on our stage and in our audience? Who is not? And so, just months after the Uprising, I received an email from a puppeteer I had met at the National Puppetry Festival. He was coming through Maryland to visit family, and wanted to perform at our slam. I asked him to tell me a bit about the acts he planned to present, as I would with all performers, and he replied that he would be bringing two marionettes.



Fig. 1. Bessie Smith (1936). Photograph by Carl Van Vechten. Image in the public domain and held by the Library of Congress.

The marionettes he planned to perform included representations of a white (Italian American) swing and jazz singer popular during the 1930s and '40s, and an African American blues singer from the same era. Our city was roiling. Discussions about race and power were inflamed. Artists were being taken to task for appropriating Black imagery and culture. I reached out to the puppeteer via email and asked him if he had time to talk on the phone. I shared with him my concern that our audience might not warmly receive a white man manipulating a Black female puppet, and that I wanted to make sure his experience at our slam was positive. He responded that he was grateful that I had shared this concern with him, and that he had never been asked to consider these dynamics in his performance. He chose to come to Baltimore with two white marionettes instead. Sharing this story with a Black feminist performance artist from another city a few months later, I was asked to consider whether I had made the right call. Did I censor this puppeteer? Did I center whiteness even more on our stage by pushing a white artist to bring two white puppets? Did I disable the possibility of important dialogue that might have been produced by the performance of an African American puppet by a white man? Did I rob audience members of the opportunity to hear the powerful voice of a legendary jazz singer, and perhaps thus learn about her for the first time?

**Scenario 2:**

In August 2016, I spent ten days at Bread and Puppet Theater in Glover, Vermont. One afternoon, an important task some of us were asked to carry out was to re-touch some of the large Black puppets that were to be used in a performance later that week. As we were repainting these puppets, a discussion ensued among old company members, apprentices, and volunteers about the issue of white folks performing Black puppets and masks. "Puppetry by its very nature is about the magic and power created by performing other people, other identities," was one of the arguments. One of the apprentices replied, "But how can we perform Black identity as white people?" "These puppets make it possible for us to present stories about pressing political issues to our audiences here in Vermont, which is, unfortunately, predominantly white," countered another. "Is it not valuable to be able to bring these stories here?"

Later that week, visiting artists from Haiti, affiliated with Fos Mayonet, a puppetry collective in Jacmel, used these puppets to present a performance that celebrated the anniversary of the Slave Rebellion in their country in 1791 (see Figure 1). The puppets were performed by non-Black volunteers. Does the context of the story matter, and whether the intent behind the performance is to educate and raise awareness about issues related to racial justice and Black liberation? Does the performance of Black puppets by non-Black performers have a different resonance when the bodies of the puppeteers are not visible? How does the role of the storyteller and the story being told affect our experience of this scene?



Fig. 2. Francklin Louis Jean and puppeteers from Fos Mayonet performing a commemoration of the 1791 slave rebellion in Haiti, at Bread and Puppet in Glover, Vermont. Photo by John Bell.

**Scenario 3:**

Last November, I was in New York City for a workshop and realized that I happened to be in town at the same time as Nephrii Amenii's production of *Food for the Gods* at La MaMa (see Fig. 2). I was able to get rush tickets (because the show was sold out). After seeing the show, I waited to congratulate Nephrii, and by the time I got this chance (because there were a LOT of fans), I was one of the last people in the theater. We quickly stumbled into a lengthy conversation about the show and Nephrii was eager to have someone with whom to unpack and process the show.



Fig. 3. A scene from Nephrii Amenii's *Food for the Gods* at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club. Photo courtesy Valeska Maria Populoh.

Nephrii asked me if there was anything in particular that really struck me about the performance, and I shared that I was very aware about the casting choices. I was curious to hear Nephrii talk about her choice to cast non-Black puppeteers to manipulate and “bring to life” the masks and hands of the Black men around the dinner table. Nephrii shared her thought process behind this decision. She talked about how she wanted the narrative of Black death and suffering not to be carried alone by Black performers in the

show. That we, as non-Black and particularly white people, are deeply implicated in this story and thus have the responsibility to participate in the telling and carrying of that burden.

Nehprie and I connected later over Skype and email to continue this dialogue, talking about the questions related to race, representation, and power that might be worth contemplating when creating a piece of puppet theater. We have started a document to record these questions, and are hoping that participants from the *Living Objects* festival and symposium, as well as other practitioners, can contribute.

I will conclude with just some of the questions that I bring here today:

- What is the difference between performing blackface and performing a Black puppet as a white person?
- Are there situations in which it is appropriate (or even critical) for a white person to perform a Black mask or puppet?
- How does the context of the performance affect the way the performance is understood and read by an audience?
- How do we navigate these questions as artists? As directors? As curators of slams and puppetry performances who bear the responsibility to create inclusive and welcoming spaces for our audiences and performers?

This symposium and festival certainly feels like an important moment of gathering together practitioners and scholars to reflect on these questions, engage in dialogue about the complex relationships between white puppeteers and Black puppets, and bring these conversations back to our respective communities.