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by Paulette Richards

“I’ll stay on lock down all day if I can keep my mask,” pleaded one of the participants in my Storytelling class at the DeKalb County Jail. The masks ranged from symbolic professions of religious faith, to totem animals, to self-portraits depicting the wearers as kings or blunt-smoking gang members. The maskers danced, sang songs, and spouted spontaneous rap verse. I had received clearance to bring string, crayons, and paper plates with pre-cut eyeholes for the mask-making exercise, but once the security officers saw the masks come to life in performance, they ruled that the inmates could not keep them.

This heart-rending episode illustrates the power of performing objects to disrupt dehumanizing views of blackness and echoes the suppression of African American figurative representation and object performance under slavery. Orlando Patterson’s comparative study of slavery described the loss of identity that enslaved people experienced as a “social death.” The enslaved were disconnected from the experience of their ancestors and from the symbolic processes their communities used to give meaning to the stages of human experience. Masks and figurative sculptures were integral parts of such rituals in traditional African societies, but slaveholders in the US banned the creation of African performing objects. Thus, connections to the material culture of African object performance did not survive in the US. Indeed, in some sense, to inhabit a black body in the United States is to experience being perceived as a puppet, a thing that is somehow animate but often lacks agency.

Patterson’s critics argue that enslaved people nevertheless managed to recreate community in some form amongst themselves. Critical Race theorists such as Patricia J. Williams and Tara J. Yosso attest to the cultural wealth communities of color possess even when they are economically disadvantaged, and have identified linguistic capital, particularly storytelling, as a means of transmitting experiential knowledge. By the 1830s, however, “Ethiopian Delineators” like “Daddy” Rice and E. P. Christie had

plundered this cultural wealth to create the most influential form of popular entertainment in the United States—the minstrel show.

In *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott describes the practice of whites darkening their faces and performing caricatures of African American music, dance, and linguistic style as “racial ventriloquism.” An analogous phenomenon arose in the plantation school of American literature which, by framing narratives only from the point of view of white protagonists and forcing black characters to speak in ersatz dialect, sought to create an idealized pastoral image of the antebellum South.

John Edgar Wideman described the struggles African American writers faced in bringing an authentic black voice to print in opposition to the strictures of this “frame and dialect” model. Thus Paul Lawrence Dunbar, who, at the turn of the twentieth century received more praise for his dialect verse than for his poems in Standard English, lamented, “We wear the mask that grins and lies.” African American performers like the gifted comedian Bert Williams were similarly forced to don the minstrel mask and apply burnt cork to their faces in order to take their turn on stage.

Blackface minstrelsy was so pervasive that, Benjamin Fisler estimates, in 1934 25% of American puppeteers depended on blackface puppets for their livelihood. Since school shows were the bread and butter of many puppet companies, minstrel style puppets inculcated generations of American school children with stereotypical images of African Americans. Meanwhile, African Americans themselves had little power to deflect these caricatures, because traditional African techniques for creating and performing puppets were lost. As a result, stereotypical caricatures such as minstrel puppets, rather than figurative representations created by African Americans themselves, came to represent blackness in American object performance traditions. African American object performers nonetheless worked to re-integrate visual and vocal self-representation. Not all African American object performers use ventriloquism techniques to “throw voice,” but by animating objects as characters in dramatic narratives, they open a particularly rich space for mediating double consciousness.

W. E. B. Du Bois eloquently described “double-consciousness” as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the

tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” Double consciousness is not just discomfort with “the skin I’m in”; it is an ever-present awareness of the violence dark skin can trigger. In 1903, when Du Bois first articulated the concept of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folks*, eighty-four black lives ended in public lynchings (<https://www.famous-trials.com/sheriffshipp/1084-lynchingsyear>). Kirk Wayne Fuoss has argued that lynchings are performance-saturated events. He “posits the concept of a ‘performance complex’ to describe the entire web of performance woven in and around lynchings,” and asserts that these executions are cultural performances. Reflecting on “Spectacle Lynching and Textual Responses” in a 2017 article, Wendy Harding points out that “In another photograph, the spectators have placed a hat on the victim’s head. With his neck broken by the rope, the man looks like a comically pathetic marionette hanging from a string.”

In *Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet*, Steve Tillis argues that puppets invite an ontological “double vision.” The audience can see puppets either as inanimate objects or as living beings. For Tillis, this double vision is a pleasurable experience. Yet the ritualized objectification of black bodies on the minstrel stage and at the end of the lynch rope complicates the work of performers who seek to share the cultural wealth of African American experience.

Du Bois fully recognized the power of the stage for combating stereotypes, and called for African Americans to produce theater that is “for us, by us, about us, and near us.” Object performance may be a particularly powerful means of resurrection from social death. John Bell notes, in *American Puppet Modernism*, that object performance differs from acting and dance because “in object performance, performer and spectator are both focused on the object, not on each other.” In this context, the “living object” becomes part of a community that affirms its agency—at least for the duration of the performance. Thus African American object performers can define a character’s voice and image and induce audiences to accept the character as a living agent even though all parties involved know the object is not alive. If audiences can accept the agency of a black puppet, perhaps when they leave the performance space they can more readily recognize the humanity and agency of black people.

African figurative sculpture and object performance were suppressed in the United States precisely because they challenged the objectification of African Americans as chattel slaves. Direct connections with the material practices of object performance in African societies were all but obliterated; however, the elements of African storytelling performance survived. Cycles of tales, such as the Brer Rabbit and Anansi stories, crossed the Atlantic in the bowels of the slave ships. The practice of using these tales for the moral education of youth flourished from porches in the slave quarters and to barbershops in urban enclaves. Performers layered music, dance, and poetic eloquence into their stories and used call-and-response interactions to engage audiences throughout the New World just as they had in Africa. African American artists bring all these elements to object performance.

Pandora Gastelum describes the work she creates from the strands of her multi-ethnic identity as “exultant, prismatic, and complex.” These terms effectively describe not just her personal practice, but African American puppetry as a whole. The artists in the *Living Objects* exhibit enthusiastically affirm their love for puppetry, the joy they find in performance, and the importance of play. Thus, African American puppetry is exultant even when it addresses painful themes such as the legacy of slavery or ongoing violence against black lives.

African American object performance is prismatic in that many facets make up the perspectives African American artists reflect in their work. Some have trained primarily in Western traditions, and appreciate puppetry as a space where they can play any role, regardless of race, ethnicity or gender. Others feel a strong connection with a distinctly African lineage of object performance. Some see themselves as American first and foremost, while recognizing that African cultural influences are an inextricable part of American-ness. Thus, the question of what constitutes African American puppetry is extremely complex.

If there is a distinct lineage of African American puppetry, where do we find its African roots? Do African American puppets have to represent the phenotypical features of African American people? And since African American people are a rainbow of skin tones, hair textures, and facial features, how can visual elements alone identify a puppet as “black”? Indeed, can an animal character or an abstract object be classified as an

African American puppet? Is a puppet made by an African American artist but performed only by artists who are not African American a “black” puppet? Is a puppet manipulated or voiced by an African American performer a “black puppet” even if the character is not presented as “black”? Is an African American puppet character performed in a non-stereotypical way by puppeteers who are not African American a “black” puppet?

Regardless of how they define African American puppetry, most of the artists in this exhibit have keenly felt the absence of role models, and therefore stress the importance of African American youth having the opportunity to see African American performers in this field. Many are committed educators, actively transmitting their art to the next generation. Are they creating a new lineage of African American puppetry in this role, or does their work first and foremost advance the development of American puppetry even when they perform primarily for African American audiences?

Studying the limited number of artists and objects included in this exhibit cannot yield any definitive answers to these questions. Yet gathering together these complex, prismatic, and exultant perspectives opens a space for reflection on how object performance nurtures the human spirit.

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