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Black and Blackface in the Performing Object: Bullock, Chessé, Paris, the Jubilee Singers, and the Burdens of ... Everything

by Ben Fisler

This commentary is one attempt to address an ongoing challenge in puppet history, the realities of Black representation, ranging from the most grotesque exaggerations to near pictorial realism, and the inadequacy of history studies so far to develop a meaningful way to speak about race in puppetry arts. Many scholars, myself included, have tried to reach a taxonomy of Black identity representation in puppetry that is dismissive of neither the impact of racial stereotyping going all the way back to Punch's "Moor," nor the practicalities of folk art and puppet construction, nor the possibility of positive racial representation in a medium that has a history of clearly racist images, boldly exotic cultural appropriations, and detailed doll partners to African American ventriloquists.

Noting a few key puppeteers of the pre-World War II American theater, I focus on examples that are defining or particularly enigmatic in their portrayals of race as a subject, and provide lenses into the associated challenges. Examples include more well-known entries, such as William John Bullock's Royal Marionettes or Frank Paris's Josephine Baker, alongside the Jubilee Singers, a company of eight African American puppeteers and an orchestra from the Colored Musicians Union, whose work showcases the burdens of blackface and the struggle to present socially acceptable but racially positive tales in the environment of the 1930s. Others, such as Ralph Chessé, the mixed-race puppeteer who never publicly revealed himself as anything but White, owed much of their puppetry and artwork to subjects of Black culture they never claimed as their own. These examples are enigmatic: African American artists participating in tales of Black characters by White authors, or in more exoticized depictions of Black cultural subjects. At the same time, we see artists creating corporeal objects to perform them that are

themselves expressions of both blackface in puppetry, and the contradictions inherent in attempting to render human bodies in wood and fabric, positioned historically at a high point of American racial oppression. Such enigmas provide a rich window into what the concept of the performing object means for the expression of race for artists, scholars, and educators.

It is also my hope herein to avoid the pitfall of striving toward an all-encompassing taxonomy, but rather to suggest options in terms of how researchers might speak of race in puppetry, and look toward the possibility of advancing research in an area that continues to receive very little attention. If that is what I intend to cover, then the next question, which is perhaps even more significant if I am to place myself in this research, is *why*. Why study this material? Why talk about it in terms of racial representation? Indeed, why do I want to talk about this at all?

Why do you want to talk about this?

Answer 1: Because they asked me.

I had the honor of being invited to present at the *Living Objects* symposium at the Ballard Institute Museum of Puppetry in February 2019. John Bell invited me, a Ph.D. in theater and performance studies, community college theater professor, actor, designer, and arts administrator, whose published work in this decade has consisted mainly of journalistic reviews and encyclopedia entries. Thus, I found myself looking back at what initially seemed like the scholarship of a distant youth, while preparing to speak at a festival in the company of such noted scholars/innovators as Paulette Richards, artists such as Nehprii Amenii, and companies such as The Brewery Troupe. All the while, I was immersed in the Ballard Institute's exhibition, which featured a cornucopia of objects and productions directly connected to the work I had tried to shed light upon more than a decade before.

Upon entering the exhibit, meeting John Bell after years of admiring his work, and hearing the first words of my fellow panelists, the relationship of the northern fantasy of minstrelsy to the fascination with otherness, the presentation of non-minstrel Black characters, and the challenges of how to address these related concepts in 2019 came immediately back to the fore. The attendees viewed the kitschy, yet poignant, series

Black Moses Barbie (tributes to Harriet Tubman created by Pierre Bennu) and the high-art film *Hitori* by Ninja Puppet Productions. They heard Amber West's notes on how Bullock's minstrel marionettes "encapsulated the contradictions of minstrelsy, a form that was widely and diversely practiced, sometimes to justify institutionalized racism and other times to critique it,"¹ and Richards's comments on Jim Henson's Kermit as capturing a lesser-known history of greenface (realities of Black lives reflected by frog characters in everything from Kermit's free, if isolated, life in the swamp, to comparisons between Louis Armstrong's mouth and that of a bullfrog).

While surrounded by clear examples of puppets constructed to suggest a racial identity, from Nate Puppets's ventriloquist dolls to Bruce Cannon's marionettes of *Harlem River Drive*, the conference also addressed, somewhat ironically, the notion that puppetry is inherently unraced. Heidi Louise Cooper, though not present, was invoked. In her dissertation, Cooper notes that "the desire to claim puppets as unraced is a reflection of the discomfort which many puppeteers feel when trying to represent human diversity while often working in a folk medium with a history of racist images."² The *Living Objects* symposium challenged myopic readings of puppetry as unraced by showcasing the unfortunate history of racist images in object performance, alongside efforts to render positive images and diverse stories in puppetry.

Why do you want to talk about this??

Answer 2: Because it happened.

Historical scholarship sheds light on the present by emphasizing the roots of that present in the past. Providing lenses into that past inevitably raises far more questions than answers. Black and blackface representation in puppetry is a special kind of conundrum. It is impossible to look at Bullock's Royal Marionettes, Paris's Baker, Chessé's Brutus, or the Jubilee Singers' objects, without seeing them in the context of a long history of racist memorabilia. As David Pilgrim, the curator of the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University, observes about his work collecting for the archive:

¹ Amber West, "Blackface Minstrelsy in American Puppetry," *Puppetry International* 30 (Fall & Winter 2011). <http://www.unima-usa.org/blackface-minstrelsy-in-american-puppetry>

² Heidi Louise Cooper, "Making Faces, Making Race: the Problem of Representing Race in American Puppetry" (Diss. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2007), 8.

“[A] card offends me, but I collected it and 4,000 similar items that portray [B]lacks as Coons, Toms, Sambos, Mammies, Picaninnies, and other dehumanizing racial caricatures. I collect this garbage because I believe, and know to be true, that items of intolerance can be used to teach tolerance.”³ As historical scholarship sheds light on the roots of the present in the past, the past becomes problematic; the research inevitably uncovers and recuperates material that we might prefer were otherwise lost forever.

However, when it comes to American popular entertainment and black representation in culture, we cannot help but start with minstrelsy, and hear the uncomfortable mantra that minstrelsy was the first truly American form of popular entertainment. In puppetry, we often trace this representation back to William John Bullock’s Royal Marionettes: grotesque variations on the image of blackface created by a touring company from England (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Douglas Hayward. *D'Arc Christy Minstrel Marionettes*. Copied from John Phillips, “The Origin and Progress of W. J. Bullock’s Royal Marionettes,” *Puppetry Yearbook* 4 (1998): 160.⁴

³ David Pilgrim, “The Garbage Man: Why I Collect Racist Objects,” *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia* (Big Rapids, MI: Ferris State University, 2007/2012): <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/collect.htm>

⁴ British scholar John Phillips in his article in *Puppetry Yearbook* 4, chronicles the transfer of Lambert D’Arc’s marionette company to William John Bullock. D’Arc was a Parisian waxworker who established a marionette company in 1869 Dublin, originated the company, and then sold it to Bullock. Phillips makes a strong case for D’Arc as the progenitor of the figures that would later achieve international fame as Bullock’s Royal Marionettes. In Phillips’s revised history, D’Arc organized a band of operators. He rehearsed through February for a marionette show that a contemporary described as “the largest and

Bullock's company traveled to the United States in the second half of 1873, opening first at a now-lost auditorium called Robinson Hall on Union Square, New York City. The *New York Herald* carried an advertisement describing a "wonderful performance of the Original Christy Minstrels."⁵ The contradictory aesthetics of Bullock's Royal Marionettes, and minstrelsy's oddly circuitous journey from human performance in the United States, to marionette minstrelsy in the United Kingdom, and later marionette minstrelsy in the United States, began a lengthy tradition of blackface puppetry in the United States, beginning with a wide variety of marionette minstrel shows, but rapidly disseminating into many sorts of puppetry and many genres of puppet plays.

Records compiled by the Puppeteers of America from 1934 to 1939 show an impressive aggregate of plays with Black or blackface characters. In 1934 alone, dozens of companies and individual puppeteers presented a diverse menu of plays, including *Robinson Crusoe*, *Little Black Sambo*, *The Emperor Jones*, *Casper among the Savages*, and *Aladdin*. From the Indianapolis Tabernacle Presbyterian Church, to the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, to private stages throughout the country, thousands of spectators viewed diverse racialized fare. Nearly twenty-five percent of the companies depended on such puppets for their livelihood.⁶

best made ... we have ever seen" (146). It played successfully through the following months. Proprietor Bullock then offered an adequate sum to purchase the entire production, with marionettes, stage, and operators. Phillips finds no definitive reason for the sale, other than a few inconclusive references to two competing waxwork companies managed by James Shaw and John Springthorpe. Phillips believes this suggests that D'Arc may have returned to Ireland to rescue a withering exhibition (147-48). Whether D'Arc returned to Dublin for financial or personal reasons, it is reasonable to assert that the Royal Marionettes were in Bullock's hands after late April 1872.

⁵ Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theater in America: A History, 1524-1948* (New York: Plays, Inc., 1949), 163. Quotation from the *New York Herald* (8 September 1873).

⁶ Estimated from records in Paul McPharlin, *Puppetry: A Yearbook of Puppets and Marionettes* (Detroit: Puppeteers of America, 1934), 80-94. Kay's Marionettes adapted *Aladdin* (1934). George Berden, Peggy Bridge, Harry Ferris, Grace Gilden Macduff, Charles Mack, the Proctor Marionettes, and W. Norris Wentworth staged plays titled *Punch and Judy*. The Ep-Wep Puppeteers, the Roy Elbert Marionettes, and the University of Washington Puppeteers staged *Robinson Crusoe*. Harrisburg's Community Theater Puppeteers produced *Cannibal Gold*. Richard R. Casady presented a piece titled *Casper among the Savages*. The Marionette Guild of New York presented *The Emperor Jones*. John Bastick Hanna showed *The Marionette Follies of 1934*. George R. New created *In the Sultan's Palace*. The Maycourt Club produced the *Clown Revue*, and Stanley Thompson produced *The Clown Circus*. Ruth Trappan created *Juke's Jungle*. Harry Fowler, Sue Hastings, Edith and Romaine Proctor, and Clara Sipherd produced school productions of *Little Black Sambo*.

Among these were the Jubilee Singers of the Buffalo Historical Marionettes, the only recorded pre-World War II African American marionette company. As Peter Rachleff summarizes in his 2013 history:

[They] were eight African Americans, five men and three women, who, in reference to the famous Fisk chorus, called themselves the “Jubilee Singers.” They performed a repertoire of puppet plays, all with historical inflections and musical dimensions (which included an orchestra recruited from the popular “Colored Musicians Union”), for audiences of school children, nursing home residents, and hospital patients, from outdoor parks to the chapel in Attica Prison.⁷

Rachleff argues that the Jubilee Singers “challenged the dominant racial tropes in the popular culture of the 1930s and developed relationships among the immigrant and African American populations,” and observes how “they evolved within the fulcrum of the Great Depression, the new industrial labor movement, African American struggles for racial and economic justice, and New Deal politics.”⁸ While it would be hard to disagree with the importance of the Jubilee Singers in the history of both puppetry and African American artists of the theater, the extant images of their work suggest that the puppeteers adopted the distorted forms of blackface established in the marionettes of Bullock nearly seventy years before, for such productions as *Little Black Sambo* (see Figure 2).

Around the same time, two puppeteers, Ralph Chessé and Frank Paris, attempted to render in wood and paint near-photographic depictions of living African American artists. Chessé created a marionette version of Provincetown Playhouse actor Charles Gilpin, Jr. for his adaptations of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* (first performed in 1928 and restaged regularly through the 1930s), and Frank Paris built a Josephine Baker marionette for his 1937 production *Stars on Strings*.

⁷ Peter Rachleff, “The Jubilee Singers of the Buffalo Historical Marionettes: Representing Race,” *Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History* (Buffalo: ASAALH, 2013). http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p35336_index.html

⁸ Rachleff, “Jubilee Singers.”

Census records from the early 1800s list the Chessé family as Black, a fact that was lost as the rise of Jim Crow compelled some of the family to identify with their French, rather than Creole, ancestry. By Ralph's time, his family had been passing so successfully that he likely did not know of this element in his ancestry. At the same



Fig. 2. *Little Black Sambo*. Photograph by the Federal Theater Project (Washington, DC: National Archives, 1936).

time, he owed much of his art and puppetry to Black subjects he never claimed publicly as his own.⁹

⁹ There was a controversy with the California African American Museum some twelve years ago that touches on this. Bruce Chessé wanted to exhibit his father's work there, and was ultimately rejected on the basis that Ralph defined himself throughout his life as a White man. Out of respect for his identity, the



Fig. 3a. Front and side views of Brutus from Ralph Chessé's production of *The Emperor Jones*. Photograph by the author. From the Detroit Institute of the Arts Collection (Detroit: DIA, 2003).

Chessé justified his Brutus puppet as a chance to create an actor surrogate for his high-art ambitions (see Figures 3a and 3b). For *Jones*, Chessé not only used Gilpin, the co-founder of the Lafayette Players and recipient of the NAACP Spingarn Medal (see Figure 4), as a template for the object, but incorporated a reading of “The Congo,” a folkloric poem by populist poet Vachel Lindsay, into the play. Chessé considered his work to be in kinship with Edward Gordon Craig, writing “I intended to make an

judges believed it wouldn't be appropriate to exhibit it at CAAM. There was understandable frustration among Bruce's colleagues, and both John Bell and I contributed to the objections with consideration of the phenomenon of passing, which in Ralph's case appears to have been both external and internal, and the question of how an individual's identity can be conflicted in public and private life.

instrument of the theater, a surrogate which would serve my purpose as an actor. [...] The marionette can take its place in the theater with the best.”¹⁰



Fig. 3b. Alternate version of “Brutus” from Ralph Chessé’s *The Emperor Jones*. Photograph by the author. From the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry *Living Objects: African American Puppetry* exhibition (Storrs, CT: University of Connecticut, 2019).

¹⁰ Ralph Chessé, *The Marionette Actor* (Fairfax: George Mason University, 1987), xi; Chessé quotes Gordon Craig’s *On the Art of the Theater* extensively in his argument.



Fig. 4. Charles Gilpin as Brutus Jones. Copied from: "Eugene O'Neill 1888-1953."
The Life and Times of Joseph Howarth. Los Angeles: Joseph Culliton.
Accessed 25 April 2019. http://www.josephhaworth.com/eugene_o%27neill.htm.

Frank Paris was the most visible success of the 1920s and '30s nightclub puppeteers. He claimed to have read one of Tony Sarg's magazine articles before launching a career that spanned the Great Depression, World War II, and the Golden Age of Television.¹¹ In New York City alone, he appeared at the Radio City Music Hall, the Palace Theater, the Roxy, and the Strand.¹² By 1939, he had produced three full



Fig. 5. Front and side views of Josephine Baker from Frank Paris's *Stars on Strings*. Photographs by the author. From the Detroit Institute of the Arts Collection (Detroit: DIA, 2003).

professional marionette varieties: *The Lost Ruby* (1931), *Bimba the Pirate* (1932), and *Stars on Strings* (1937). His characters included portrait puppets of Carmen Miranda and Josephine Baker (see Figure 5).

¹¹ Chessé, *Marionette Actor*, 452. Later references pinpoint the magazine article as "How to Make and Pull the Strings" (1927).

¹² Milton R. Stern, "Puppets and Marionettes: A Workshop," *Publicity Notice* (New York: New York University, 1957): 1.

It would be difficult to argue that these images do not represent a more human, and thus potentially more positive, portrayal of Black bodies in puppetry than the grotesques of minstrelsy. These appear to be exaggerations of certain aspects of each personality, such as the hard brow of Brutus or the slender legs of Baker, but not the clownish, racist distortions of minstrelsy.

Why do you want to talk about this???

Answer 3: Because we still don't know how.

Thanks to the pioneering work shared at *Living Objects: African American Puppetry*, and the contributions of Paulette Richards, John Bell, Amber West, and Heidi Louise Cooper to the study of race in puppetry, the research is beginning to develop in this area. It is likely that the world of both academic research and puppetry arts will leave behind the problematic notion that puppetry is unraced and heed Cooper's call to acknowledge that all "representations of humanity, including puppets [...] read in terms of race" and to "recognize this fact of representation and incorporate it responsibly into one's art work [rather] than try to de-racialize the medium."¹³ Cooper, using a variety of techniques, addressed the way that characters reflect, refine, and in some cases flatly reject or hide racial stereotypes completely.

On the other hand, many artists and scholars might continue to celebrate the accomplishments of the puppeteers of pre-World War II America, and simultaneously apologize for and dismiss the more grotesque examples of blackface as burdens of the past. Chessé's innovations in control bar techniques, Paris's detailed facial construction, the Jubilee Singers' community advocacy and networking, and even Bullock's entrepreneurship are worth noting in any history of American puppetry.

Certainly, many of these artists likely did not believe they were participating in representations of racial identity, but they contributed to the images and stories of pre-World War II society, and left a legacy for the post-war world. The Buffalo Historic Marionettes gravitated toward nostalgia, and chose safe subjects from popular culture with images of bodies that the audiences would accept. Chessé, in his son's words, "was

¹³ Cooper, "Making Faces," 8.

first an actor, and puppetry allowed him to play roles his 5'2" frame wouldn't allow him to dream of playing. It also allowed him to live vicariously in those character[s,] designing all aspects of production. It gave him a safe zone created in an ideal image."¹⁴ The enigma of Chessé's identity in contrast to his interest in African American representation manifested in his production gestures toward an imagined—albeit imagined by Eugene O'Neill and interpreted by Chessé—high-art authenticity.

Does Chessé's work attempt ownership of the other's body? Or does it engage with a character he deeply wanted to play, which might have reconnected him with his ancestry, and later would connect his son with that ancestry? Is there a difference between what Frank Paris did with Josephine Baker and what Chessé does with his subjects? There certainly is a difference between what Chessé did and what Bullock did, and even, as it would appear given the multitude of racist images prevalent at the time, a difference between what Chessé did with Brutus and what so much of the culture did with depictions of Black bodies.

I agree with Cooper that it is irresponsible to promote the notion that puppets are raceless (there is a reason for the existence of the Jim Crow Museum). However, I also agree with West's critique of my methodology: that it is at best an overstatement to assert that any depiction of a Black character in puppetry is intrinsically blackface, even if all objects participate in traditions that bind them inextricably to the origins of the Black puppet in Bullock's grotesque.¹⁵ Hopefully, the *Living Objects* symposium will set the stage for a theoretical model that takes into account the object, the context of the object, and the identity and perspective of the puppeteer.

The theoretical model I attempted nearly fifteen years ago used Bert O. States's application of phenomenology to theater studies to integrate in incremental steps immediate observations on the puppet, and associated observations of the puppet throughout the artistic genre and the history of similar images. The disadvantage of phenomenology is that the examination is somewhat trapped in the context. The Royal Marionettes are disturbing and offensive, partly because of the way they grotesque the representation of Black bodies in marionette form (one might note that they are so

¹⁴ Bruce Chessé, email to the author (25 July 2010).

¹⁵ Discussed in West, "Blackface Minstrelsy."

distorted as not even to be recognizable as human bodies at all); but even more so because of the way Bullock's commodification of racist imagery for his own material gain represents the historical commodification of imaginary Black bodies in blackface specifically, and in antiquated art generally.¹⁶

West cited my investigation as oversimplifying the relationship between the artist and the object in my zeal to explain how the object's reality is not merely an extension of the artist's perspective, but part of a tradition that contains its own signifiers. The phenomenological examination of an object as both immediate creation and part of the signifiers of a tradition doesn't account for the relationship between the puppeteer and the puppet. West questioned my choice to use Chessé's Emperor Jones "as an instance of blackface puppetry and to suggest that any exaggeration of human features (particularly racial features) in puppetry examines as evidence of adherence to (or, as resulting from the legacy of) blackface minstrelsy."¹⁷

Perhaps the contrast between blackface puppet and Black character puppet is one that must be made, even as the burdens of blackface in all puppetry depicting racial groups are identified and addressed. Maintaining this contrast is easier when dealing with Bullock, but harder with Chessé, partly because of his own identity, now revealed to be of mixed African/European ancestry; and partly because of his efforts to represent faithfully the African American actor Gilpin as a marionette. The question of the burdens has to be considered—but where should the examination proceed, once the burdens and the contrasts are acknowledged?

A useful metaphor for the puppet as an identity construct is the mask. Masking in psychology is the hiding of one's personality, but in art it is the creation of a new personality that ostensibly offers a clean slate in the literal or metaphorical "new face." Marshall McLuhan calls this an extension; Hana Kim argues that, "in the case of the theater, masks serve as extensions of the personality."¹⁸ A mask can be an attempt at understanding or its obstruction. As Kim summarizes, "Masks create a separation not

¹⁶ See my dissertation: "The Phenomenology of Racialism: Blackface Puppetry in American Theater, 1872-1939" (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, 2005).

¹⁷ West, "Blackface Minstrelsy."

¹⁸ Hana Kim, "Mask," *Chicago School of Media Theory Online* (Winter, 2007): <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/mask/>

only between subjects but also alienates [*sic*] the self from the self as well. It produces psychological effects in both the person wearing it and the person viewing it. Masks have the power to forge a new identity as a face conveniently placed outside of the original face which is the primary source of recognition.”¹⁹ While it is too soon for any all-encompassing taxonomy, research can use the concepts of phenomenological objects, which carry with them both immediate perceptions—“this object is Josephine Baker”—apperceptions—“I saw her live when I was a kid!” “Who’s that?” “I saw the movie!” “She looks a lot like this other puppet I worked on.” “She reminds me of Lucy in *Avenue Q*”—and the concept of the mask.

This will inevitably raise many questions. By carving Baker, is Paris asserting ownership of Baker, as a doll or keepsake? By performing her at nightclubs, is Paris ridiculing her, celebrating her, or perhaps longing to become her, in a way his natural human form would never allow?

How is any puppeteer who engages in creations indicative of racial identity not only shaping a physical object, but developing a relationship with a character? In Cooper’s words: “Within the world of the performance, the Puppeteer has enormous power over the puppet. The nature of this relationship will change based on the context, the performer, and the puppet.”²⁰ What can be discovered by looking at Bullock’s minstrelsy and his grotesque T. D. Rice marionettes? What may be revealed in Chessé’s high art of puppetry (including his Gilpin recreation) as a dramatic form? What will the phenomenon of the Jubilee Singers, who found themselves in times of both changing racial climate and ongoing popularity of minstrelsy, even on the eve of the Second World War, reveal about the burdens of blackface in a world advancing toward modernity? Or, to conclude with a reflection from Cooper’s study: “What does it mean to watch a White puppeteer pulling the strings of a Black puppet? If the puppet is constructed to emphasize its similarities to dolls and playthings, what does that say of the figure within the context of the production? Even an ennobled puppet raises questions. What if the puppet is an idol? [...] [T]hese associations linger in the background.”²¹

¹⁹ Kim, “Mask.”

²⁰ Cooper, “Making Faces,” 28.

²¹ Cooper, “Making Faces,” 28.