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RACE, GENDER, AND DISABILITY IN PUPPETRY AND MATERIAL PERFORMANCE



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Race, Gender, and Disability in Puppetry and Material Performance investigates and expands the multifaceted *how* and *what* of puppetry and material performance.

This engaging collection explores how puppetry and material performance challenge and transform representations of race, gender, and disability through the powerful medium of object and effigy forms. The book also examines gender roles within puppetry and how puppetry addresses societal anxieties about the other and bodies traditionally excluded from normative spaces. Part 1: *Reframing Puppetry Through Race, Gender, and Disability* establishes a theoretical foundation for understanding puppetry as a site of intervention—whether in political protests, theatrical productions, or educational contexts. Part 2: *Negotiating Identities* builds on this foundation by examining how puppetry operates as a tool for reshaping identities and expanding representation. Part 3: *Performances of the Other* emphasizes how puppetry challenges established norms of embodiment and inclusion, offering possibilities for cultural reclamation and the redefinition of marginalized identities. Featuring nineteen chapters by leading experts, this collection illustrates how puppetry can challenge conventions, articulate nuanced identities, and illuminate complexities of race, gender, and disability.

Race, Gender, and Disability in Puppetry and Material Performance is ideal for students of theatre and performance studies, theatre artists, scholars, and anyone seeking a deeper understanding of puppetry and material performance.

Paulette Richards is an independent researcher and co-curator of the *Living Objects: African American Puppetry* exhibit at the University of Connecticut's Ballard Institute and Museum with Dr. John Bell.

Hazel Briar is an independent scholar with a PhD in theatre historiography from the University of Minnesota, USA. Her research examines performances of the dead, considering practices involving spiritualism and matter.

Alissa Mello is an award-winning editor, scholar, theatre artist, and Marie Skłodowska-Curie individual fellow (2022–2025) at the University of Exeter, UK. Their interests include women and performance, gender, identity, and practice.

Laura Purcell-Gates is a reader in theatre and performance at Bath Spa University in the UK and co-artistic director of Wattle and Daub, through which she conducts practice-based research on puppetry and non-normative bodies.

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*Edited by Paulette Richards, Hazel Briar,
Alissa Mello, and Laura Purcell-Gates*

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and the communities that support our collective work*

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	x
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
<i>Foreword by Katherine Hipkiss</i>	xix
Introduction	1
<i>Paulette Richards, Hazel Briar, Alissa Mello, and Laura Purcell-Gates</i>	
PART 1	
Reframing Puppetry Through Race, Gender, and Disability	11
1 Puppets on Plinths: Disputing Gender and Hegemonic Narratives with General Baquedano's Monument During the 2019 Chilean Uprising <i>Denise Rogers Valenzuela</i>	13
2 A Real American Wife, a Japanese Object: Critical Puppetry and the Construction of the Orient in Anthony Minghella's <i>Madam Butterfly</i> <i>Tobi Poster-Su</i>	33

viii Contents

3 Performing Emergenc(e)y: Puppetry, Gender, Race, and Madness in <i>Plot 99</i> <i>Aja Marneweck</i>	51
4 Global Perspectives to Elevate Diversity in Puppetry <i>Ana Díaz Barriga</i>	67
5 The Galilee Deaf Theatre Project <i>Pablo Ariel</i>	79
PART 2 Negotiating Identities	87
6 Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue: Kids on the Block and the Intersectionality of Oppressions <i>Paulette Richards</i>	89
7 Black Bodies in White Spaces: Reflections on Men/toring in Puppetry <i>Jacqueline Wade</i>	99
8 Crip Ventriloquism as a Means of Coping with a Hidden Disability <i>Hendrik Quast</i>	111
9 Beyond Representation: A Conversation with Jummy Faruq on Decentering Puppetry Practice and Design <i>Tobi Poster-Su</i>	120
10 <i>Pancha la Parda</i> : A New Myth for an Ancient Tradition <i>Daniel Loyola</i>	130
11 Colored Feels of Felt <i>Azusa SHESHE Dance</i>	139
12 The "Other" Karagöz: The Kurdish <i>Qeregoz</i> <i>Duygu Çelik</i>	146
13 Resisting Objects: « Refugee » Visibility in Theatre <i>Husam Abed</i>	161

PART 3	
Performances of the Other	175
14 What Happened to the Room of Forgotten Voices: Challenging the Flawed Vision of Human and Puppet Movement from the Past That Left Out Disabled People <i>Emma Fisher-Owen and Nikki Charlesworth</i>	177
15 When Goiters Are Your Family Jewels: Maladies and the Grotesque in Regional Heroic Glove Puppet Characters of Northern Italy <i>Felice Amato</i>	191
16 Intervening with Institutional Patriarchy: Woman Karagöz Puppeteers in Turkey <i>Deniz Başar</i>	204
17 Puppetry, Race, and Identity in <i>The Bluest Eye</i> <i>Janni Younge</i>	218
18 Remote Representation: A Puppetry Sensitization Project in Nairobi <i>Howard Abwao, Louis Netter, and Matt Smith</i>	225
19 Making Seen/Sounding Difference: Performing Black at a Majority White Institution <i>Margaret L. Kemp</i>	238
<i>Index</i>	250

FIGURES

COVER Maria Degadillo, Jasmine Washington, AnnaRita Moukarzel, Karina Rodriguez with Claudia and Freeda puppets from the 2018 UC Davis Department of Theater and Dance production of Lydia Diamond's adaptation of *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. Margaret L. Kemp discusses this production in Chapter 19. Photo by Nick Yoon, copyright UC Regents.

1.1	General Baquedano's monument defaced with graffiti and paint, and draped with banners and the rainbow-checkered Wiphala Flag, an emblem representing Andean Indigenous nations. November 21, 2019.	21
1.2	Women climbing onto the plinth of Baquedano's defaced monument during 2021's International Women's Day. March 8, 2021.	24
3.1	Linomtha Lino performs Nontetha Nkwenkwe.	60
3.2	Nontetha Nkwenkwe and Patient Number Three/Inanna in the Dream Space/Deathscape.	63
7.1	Jacqueline Wade painting Mumia's head.	103
7.2	The Mumia puppet standing strong and erect with arms spread out in front of a mural.	105
8.1	Hendrik Quast performing as ventriloquist with his dummy who embodies his chronic condition in <i>Spill Your Guts</i> (2022).	112
8.2	The dummy taking over the ventriloquist's body.	116
9.1	One of two completed puppets.	125
9.2	One of two completed puppets.	126
10.1	Nayelhy Montaño and Mario F. Dávila collaborating in the puppet animation laboratory with children from Copuyo.	131

10.2	Pancha la Parda puppet.	136
11.1	Azusa SHESHE Dance.	140
13.1	Figures from model railway installed on the puppeteer's body: Pernilla Lindgren.	165
13.2	Figures of model railway attached to the leg of puppeteer: Pernilla Lindgren.	166
13.3	Matches represent Karim's family: Martin Špelda, Alfred Ve Dvore, Prague 2022.	171
14.1	<i>What Happened to You?</i> production shot, August 2021.	181
14.2	A still from <i>The Room of Forgotten Voices</i> , 2021.	186
15.1	The author's sketches of Gioppino glove puppets in the collection at the Castello dei Burattini in Parma, IT. Both made by anonymous carvers, the puppet on the right is one of the few in which the eyes show possible effects of a thyroid disorder. However, since Gioppino tends to be wide-eyed and jovial, it is impossible to be sure.	191
15.2	Esteemed glove puppeteer Pietro Roncelli and his Gioppino interact with the audience after a show with his grandson Gabriele Codognola in the small Bergamasque town of Calusco d'Adda.	196
18.1	Billy the puppet and Kelvin the puppeteer from <i>Billy's Day Out</i> , 2020.	231
19.1	Jasmine Washington, AnnaRita Moukarzel, Austin Taylor Brown with Claudia puppet.	240
19.2	Maria Degadillo, Jasmine Washington, AnnaRita Moukarzel, Karina Rodriguez with Claudia and Freeda puppets.	242
19.3	This image of Tiffany Nwogu, Rose Kim with Pecola puppet represents Coltrane Voice with each performer in a different pitch and tone.	247

CONTRIBUTORS

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Paulette Richards, an independent researcher, co-curated the *Living Objects: African American Puppetry* exhibit at the University of Connecticut's Ballard Institute and Museum with Dr. John Bell. Since 2019 she has moderated numerous panels for the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival's Ellen Van Volkenburg Puppetry Symposium series. Her book, *Object Performance in the Black Atlantic: The United States* won a 2024 Nancy Staub Award for excellence in writing on the art of puppetry from UNIMA-USA. Her traveling exhibit, *The Wonderland Puppet Theater*, ran at the Ballard from August to December 2024.

Hazel Briar is an independent scholar with a PhD in theatre historiography from the University of Minnesota, USA. Her research examines performances of the dead, considering practices involving spiritualism and matter.

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xiv Contributors

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xvi Contributors

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We are grateful for the opportunity to bring this collection together; the collaboration to do so extends far beyond the editorial team and authors included in this volume. This volume is the result of years of conversations and thinking about an art form we care deeply about with numerous artists and scholars around the world; we are grateful for each fruitful and insightful dialogue. Nor are we alone in engaging with these areas and we are thankful to the organizers, Jungmin Song, John Bell, and Matthew Cohen, of the symposium *Representing Alterity through Puppetry and Performing Objects* at UConn April 9–10, 2021, at which some of the essays in this volume were presented alongside fertile conversations about othering, race, and representation in puppetry. Several essays were also blind peer reviewed by scholars who donated their time and offered these authors invaluable feedback that furthered their thinking.

Toward the end of the process, we added a new team member, Katherine Hipkiss, to copy edit the entire book and help us prepare the manuscript for our publisher. Hipkiss's thoughtful and detailed editing further enriched and clarified the essays in collaboration with the authors.

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FOREWORD

Katherine Hipkiss

Why is a Shakespeare and performance studies scholar writing a foreword in a book about puppetry?

In 2022, I taught a series of puppetry classes. It wasn't my very first encounter with puppetry: I had done some very basic puppetry work in my undergraduate degree, and in 2018 I had worked as a research assistant on Laura Purcell-Gates's impact research project for *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak*, but I had never *taught* puppetry before. The topic of the class I was taking over was puppetry and monstrosity (a module designed by Purcell-Gates), and the students had to apply one of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monster theses from "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" (2020) and explore them in practice.

I was at first concerned about how *I* was going to guide the students in their work with their assessments only a few weeks away. But as we got into discussions about the narratives they wanted to tell, and the way in which they wanted to tell them, I realized that puppet bodies are bodies and that all bodies—whether puppet or human—convey meaning when placed on a stage.

My work in Shakespeare and performance studies is on the presentation of bodies, and parts of bodies, in performance through the lenses of race, gender, and disability. The more I worked with the students, and the more I began to spend time within the field of puppetry and material performance, the more I realized the potential within puppet bodies to explore things that human bodies cannot. Puppet bodies can be pulled apart, opened up, and stitched back together. They can be left lifeless and inanimate, only to spring up again moments later. They can be constructed to be the representation of whatever the puppeteer wants them to be.

Whereas all bodies convey meaning, puppet bodies are able to be active agents in their construction of meaning, made to fit whatever is needed within the narrative of the piece they are in. Puppet bodies, unlike the bodies of human performers, are directly created *for* their story, their narrative. They are purpose-built (or purposefully reused), and they are able to represent and explore questions, anxieties, and issues through their embodied representation to a level of specificity and depth that would be difficult—if not impossible—to achieve as or with a human actor. As such, we who study the presentation and representation of human bodies onstage have much to learn from the world of puppetry and material performance; our bodies have limits, but puppet bodies are limitless.

In working with the puppetry students in 2022, I had the privilege of seeing these ideas in practice. By the time I was teaching the class, the students were well underway with their constructions and ideas. One group had settled on exploring the « monster » of cancer, and another the childhood fear of the monster under the bed. Whilst the first group made a life-size, multi-puppeteer, humanoid puppet, the second were working within a form of hybridity, turning everyday bedroom objects (a dressing gown; books; a pair of socks) into at first scary, and then ultimately friendly, creatures. Throughout our time together, I saw the students take lifeless lumps of foam and turn them into fully realized characters; I witnessed the drudgery of the domestic sphere—washing baskets; pillowcases; curtains—become an entire world of delight.

I also (in this class, and others) saw students use puppets to explore aspects of their own identity: their gender, their sexuality, their disability, their neurodivergence. Creating a puppet that embodied or represented some aspect of themselves seemed to allow students a way of either communicating with that part of their identity (as Hendrick Quast explores in this very book), or to display it for an audience: a puppet body used to present an intimate aspect of humanity.

However, my experience with this class was not my first experience of puppetry, and as I've looked back over my academic and theatrical life, I realized that I have always been surrounded by puppets: puppets are everywhere! In thinking about how the students work in exploring the very boundaries of the possibility of puppet bodies, I remembered one of my first theatrical memories is deeply rooted within the performance potential of a puppet body. In the late 1990s, when I was a child at primary school (in Mullion on the Lizard Peninsula in Cornwall, one of the most southerly points in the U.K.), a touring theatre company performed an adaptation of *The Mermaid of Zennor*. I can't remember the theatre company, or the time of year. I can't even remember anything else about the production. But I remember the puppet.

The Mermaid of Zennor is a Cornish folktale about a mysterious and beautiful young woman who attended the local parish church in the village of

Zennor (James, 2018). One day, a young man from the village followed her home and neither was ever seen again. Not long after, a group of fishermen were out of the harbor on a Sunday when a mermaid asked them to raise their anchor so that she could access her home—it was the same young woman from the church. The story is derived from a mermaid carved on the end of a pew in St Senara's Church in Zennor—part of a different long tradition of material performance (Cornwall's Maritime Churches, 2025).

I don't remember how this touring company portrayed the young man, or the church. I don't remember how they represented the ocean, or the villagers of Zennor. I just remember a mermaid puppet, that—magically, for me then as a child, and for me now as a performance scholar—opened to reveal that inside the body of a mermaid was the body of a woman. I remember her skull glowed as her form shifted in front of my eyes. I remember being amazed, and I also remember being terrified. It is such a clear and distinct memory and, looking back, I now understand that this was the first time I saw the potential of the puppet body in performance.

I have been able to further situate myself within this world through reading this book. The ideas of race, gender, and disability that are considered in this volume, the questions that some chapters raise, and the answers that some chapters provide have cross-cultural, cross-temporal, and cross-theatrical resonances. For example, in the chapter “Don’t It Make My Brown Eyes Blue: Kids on the Block and the Intersectionality of Oppressions,” Paulette Richards’s close analysis of KOTB as a company, and of Melody James as a puppet, enables the consideration of representation, and how the representation of individuals (rather than amorphous groups) allows a wider range of people to see themselves. Richards also ends the chapter on a fascinating question of materiality: when the original creator of the KOTB puppets lost ownership over them and their likeness, the material puppet body still existed. Rebecca Schneider’s framing, in her foundational 2011 text *Performance Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, of the past as incomplete and never finishing, means the “remains” of a puppet “might be understood not solely as the object or document material, but also as the immaterial labour of bodies engaged in and with that incomplete past” (2011: 33). In the “remains” of the puppet body is the labor of the creator and of the puppeteer.

Other chapters draw on personal experience to examine the relationships between puppet bodies and human bodies, and how meaning is constructed in those intersections. Emma Fisher-Owen and Nikki Charlesworth, in “What Happened to the Room of Forgotten Voices: Challenging the Flawed Vision of Human and Puppet Movement from the Past That Left Out Disabled People,” discuss their work and how they both (through practice as research and practice respectively), challenge ideas of how puppets are supposed to look and be performed. Both authors are particularly concerned with the

xxii Foreword

way, historically, disabled puppeteers have had to resort to forcing their bodies to move in ways to have the puppet move as it « should », which can cause pain and discomfort. Utilizing the social model of disability, through detailed discussions of their individual projects and then the project they are working on together, Fisher-Owen and Charlesworth analyze both literal and symbolic representation, and questions of bodies, voice, the individual, and society through their puppetry. Similarly, in “Resisting Objects: « Refugee » Visibility in Theatre,” Husam Abed draws on his own experience and background as a Palestinian Jordanian theatre-maker, puppeteer, and social worker to consider the representation of displaced peoples through object puppetry. Abed defines the term « the resisting object », meaning an object that causes an audience to rally against the status quo, and how his own show *War Maker* looked to subvert understandings and expectations of displaced peoples by subverting understandings and expectations of objects, bodies, and puppets.

Further chapters address questions of who gets to work with, and access, puppets. In “Intervening with Institutional Patriarchy: Woman Karagöz Puppeteers in Turkey,” Deniz Başar explores how women are often excluded from the practice of the traditional shadow form *Karagöz* in Turkey. Başar begins to unpack why this is the case—such as the argument of tradition, institutional discrimination, and even internalized misogyny. Using archival material, the work of contemporary Turkish women working as *Karagöz* puppeteers and puppet builders, and interviews with some of these women, Başar begins to deconstruct the idea that *Karagöz* is inherently and traditionally a field for men. In a completely different geographical and theatrical location, Azusa SHESHE Dance addresses what it is like to be a Black woman puppeteer working in the Bible Belt in her chapter “Colored Feels of Felt.” Drawing on her own experiences working with Chattanooga, Tennessee’s Kids on the Block, Dance explores the intersections of the discrimination she faced (and faces) as a Black woman in the rural South, and the work she was doing to empower and educate the community she was working with. Throughout the chapter, Dance touches on moments on and off stage, and with both children and adults who engaged with her work, engaging with the impact the work had on the community and on herself. Importantly, Dance demonstrates how easy it is for audiences to read puppet bodies as they read human bodies, and both the positive and negative effects this can have for audience members and for puppeteers.

This book is for anyone interested in puppetry and material performance. It is for anyone interested in relationships between bodies. It is for anyone working within the study of race, gender, and disability in performance. It is for anyone who is interested in contemporary performance practices. It is for puppeteers, students, and scholars of puppetry. It is for performance studies scholars. It is for this Shakespeare and performance

studies scholar. Because puppets are everywhere, and this book will help us understand why.

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INTRODUCTION

*Paulette Richards, Hazel Briar, Alissa Mello,
and Laura Purcell-Gates*

This book was initially conceived in 2019 among colleagues who came together from different perspectives to expand the *how* and the *what* of puppetry and material performance, and to foster new paths of inquiry. We shared a mutual interest in looking deeply at the objects, their cultural contexts and societal roles, how they reveal and conceal exclusions or commitments of various kinds, and how they contribute to the maintenance and disruption of cultural norms and institutions. We launched the project in 2020 in a significantly different global moment than where we are today and yet the questions, experiences, and analysis illuminate ways that puppetry and material performance are part of interconnected global and local networks.

We write this introduction from a moment of precarity due to multiple crises and rapidly changing events. War rages in Palestine, Lebanon, the Ukraine, and the Congo; immigrants and dissenters face deportation from the U.S. without due process; disabled people confront renewed marginalization and disenfranchisement; transgender people experience increasing forms of legal and social exclusion; women struggle for the right to make decisions regarding their own bodies. We are in the midst of movements for racial justice and equity in the U.S. after the murder of George Floyd and countless unarmed Black people at the hands of police. And we are dealing with the unabashed return of white supremacist ideology and white Christian nationalism in the United States, as well as anti-democratic movements in multiple contexts globally. We are writing following a pandemic that has forever altered social and political landscapes. We are writing from a moment of isolation, mourning, and fear, yet we have hope knowing that people across barriers of difference continue to organize, support, and care for each other, and that artists,

2 Race, Gender, and Disability in Puppetry

who continue to engage with the pressing issues of our times, can help us all survive and thrive.

This anthology explores presentations of race, gender, and disability in puppetry and material performance, through the performance of bodies in object/effigy form; gender roles within puppetry; performance of contexts which speak to societal anxieties about *the other* and bodies excluded from normative social spaces. Since Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality in 1989, it has become a useful framework for activists, artists, and scholars in a wide range of contexts. Disability rights activists like Patty Berne, for instance, have taken up the term to expose how ableism is often masked by other forms of exclusion like racism and sexism. While intersectionality is an explicit form of analysis in some of the chapters, it is also the implicit frame of the book. We encouraged our authors to think critically about their own social positions and consider the wider conversation created by the book.

Race, gender, and disability are categories that operate across cultures in different ways. We do not presume to craft a grand-scale argument connecting the three, but instead gather many stories from artists, scholars, and artist/scholars, putting theatre practice and academia in conversation. This book is also a gesture towards connections across disciplines. We ask: how does making with and looking at puppets help us understand issues of representation, identity, othering, and oppression?

Human social categories of difference are always at play in puppetry and material performance arts, but they can be less visible or more guarded than in other forms of human-embodied performance such as the less visible racism that, as Tobi Poster-Su argues in chapter two of this volume, emerges in an internationally acclaimed production of *Madam Butterfly*. This can present opportunities for artists to think radically through representation, and it can also present problems for analysis. For example, tropes of blackface continue to inform contemporary American puppetry repertoires, but only recently have these racial meanings been discussed by puppet scholars (see work by Ben Fisler and Amber West). In contexts around the globe, each of which is informed by its specific local context, analysis of puppetry can illuminate forms of racism, sexism, and ableism, and there is much more work to be done on these issues.

Chapters in this volume also demonstrate potential forms of liberation. For instance, in chapter eight, Hendrik Quast's voicing of his disability through ventriloquism allows him to take an experience that had previously isolated him and turn it into a life-giving conversation between two selves, separated along the axis of disability. In Chapter 10, Daniel Loyola demonstrates how liberating it can be for children in rural Mexico, in a culture that privileges light skin and masculinity, to embrace their indigenous and African diasporic ancestry through performance.

The structure of an academic book was a necessary constraint, but within this constraint we sought to create a sense of openness and preserve the diverse voices of our authors who do not necessarily write from or work within an academic setting. Sometimes this meant trying to understand and clarify forms of argumentation that do not abide by the editors' English-language conventions. Other times this meant asking questions that led to entirely rewritten chapters. All of this was in an effort to let the page represent diverse perspectives and thinking in motion. Though the four editors each had a hand in shaping the chapters, we hope it has been towards clarifying and amplifying what matters most to the authors.

Puppetry, object, and material performance have gained greater significance in the academic and contemporary theatre world over the last twenty-plus years in what Claudia Orenstein frames as a "puppetry moment" (2014: 2). Alongside this increased recognition of the potential of the art form is a significant growth in scholarly interest in puppetry, as evidenced in recent publications focused on the subject around the world in numerous languages (e.g. to name a few published in English in the past ten years: Foley 2016, Goodlander 2018, Posner et al. 2014, Purcell-Gates and Fisher 2017, Mello et al. 2019, Smith 2014, 2018, Richards 2023, Orenstein and Cusack 2023, Sears 2023), as well as international puppetry conferences and symposia. Many theatre companies and directors are turning to puppetry as an expressive form in work on big and small stages and screens, and scholars within a wide array of disciplines from theatre studies to anthropology and computer science have expressed interest in and are writing about puppetry. Despite this fascination, writing on the performances of race, gender, and disability embodied by puppets on stage is only recently emerging.

The unique representational qualities of puppets have been explored by Morse (2014) who examines stereotypical representations of Arab and North-African Muslims within Sicilian *opera dei pupi*. Cohen (2007) explores instances of destruction and violence against the puppet body wherein the puppet may function both as a surrogate for actual victims of violence and in a more broadly metaphorical sense. Issues of gender and representation both on and off the stage are raised in *Women and Puppetry: Critical and Historical Investigations* (2019), inviting more in-depth analysis of women's labor, constructions, and subversions of the female on stage, and social anxiety about femaleness. Puppetry and race, culture, disability, and national identity are explored in the context of applied puppetry practices in the 2020 special editions of *Journal of Applied Arts and Health* and *Applied Theatre Research*. This volume is a space for scholars and practitioners to consider their work within global and shifting discourses surrounding race, gender, and disability.

Over the past few decades with the rise of New Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontologies, puppetry has received a new kind of attention, not only as an art form but also a critical form of thinking. Our choice to include

4 Race, Gender, and Disability in Puppetry

material performance is a gesture to open the field towards performances that might not conventionally be seen as puppetry, but which often awaken radical thinking about materials and representation. Take Husam Abed's work, in Chapter 13, in which found objects like a salt shaker and a match become the protagonists. The narrative moves through metaphor to a new landscape of identity and materiality, helping audiences rethink the lives of displaced people beyond the baggage that accompanies the term "refugee."

We contend that puppetry and material performance have a unique capacity to help us trouble and experiment with the human/non-human divide that, as many scholars have noted across disciplines, is fundamental to Western epistemology and a source of oppression in colonial contexts. Puppetry can create a third space between the embodied human world and the world of meaning, a place that can be radically transformative. The third space of the puppet can be thought of in terms of Homi Bhaba's understanding of the "Third Space" in a postcolonial condition—a space of creativity and emerging realities, in which community expectations and traditions can mingle with the desires and dreams of individuals (Bhaba, 1994). It can be, as many scholars after Bhaba have noted, a space of liberation or a space that exposes forces of oppression.

In the process of compiling this anthology, we quickly discovered that language and voice raise power differentials. We wanted to equalize the reflective authorial voices of artists and the analytic authorial academics. We did not want facility writing in standard English to be a barrier. Our commitment to inclusion, therefore, required the editorial team to invest considerable time in amplifying some voices. The fact that not all contributors had access to the same tools such as a paid subscription to Microsoft Word alongside interruptions to internet access due to conflict further complicated the revision process. With a mix of UK and American English speakers on the editorial team, we had to standardize language and grammar. Additionally, authors wrote about puppetry traditions from all over the world with terminology from a variety of languages, so we had to decide when to provide English equivalents for technical terms and when the original language carries a meaning that does not translate readily.

Many of the authors speak a language other than English as their primary language. Conventions from the authors' primary languages sometimes created friction or misunderstandings due to word choice, grammar, syntax, and rhetoric. For instance, some languages do not use the funnel argumentative structure that American English speakers learn with the classic essay form. In some chapters it was difficult to find the thesis and understand how the author was supporting an argument. Overall, our goal was to help authors craft a voice that would sound like themselves in English.

Additionally, many authors quoted remembered words for which no reference was available. Faced with having to cut quotations that lacked references,

which would have stripped important memories of lived experience from the text, we chose to replace the quotation marks that framed them with *guillemets*, the French punctuation form of chevrons « », to denote quotations sourced from personal memory. We also decided to use *guillemets* for words and phrases that authors wished to emphasize often in order to complicate, such as Husam Abed's intentional problematization of the term « refugee » in Chapter 13.

The book includes three sections, each of which cuts across the categories of race, gender, and disability: Part 1: Reframing Puppetry through Race, Gender, and Disability; Part 2: Negotiating Identities; Part 3: Performances of the Other. Across these sections, this volume underscores puppetry's ability to interrogate identity, challenge exclusionary norms, and foster new frameworks for representation. From theorizing material performance as a tool for political and cultural critique to showcasing its role in reclaiming erased histories and empowering marginalized communities, the chapters collectively demonstrate puppetry's transformative potential. By centering issues of race, gender, and disability, the authors illustrate how puppetry serves not only as an art form but also as a medium for activism, resistance, and healing.

The first section, “Reframing Puppetry,” establishes a theoretical foundation for understanding puppetry as a site of intervention—whether in political protests, theatrical productions, or educational contexts. It highlights puppetry's ability to reimagine authority, disrupt colonial narratives, and amplify silenced voices. The second section, “Negotiating Identities,” builds on this foundation by examining how puppetry operates as a tool for reshaping identities and expanding representation. Through innovative design and performance techniques, the chapters explore the intersections of race, gender, and disability, pushing the boundaries of what puppetry can communicate. Finally, “Performances of the Other” emphasizes how puppetry challenges established norms of embodiment and inclusion, offering possibilities for cultural reclamation and the redefinition of marginalized identities.

Section 1: Reframing Puppetry

Opening with an exploration of political protest as a form of puppetry, Denise Rogers Valenzuela's “Puppets on Plinths: Disputing Gender and Hegemonic Narratives with General Baquedano's Monument during the 2019 Chilean Uprising” examines how protesters and authorities interacted with the monument to General Baquedano as a performing object during the *Estallido Social* in Chile. Drawing on puppetry theory, she reframes the statue's defacement, maintenance, and removal as acts of material performance, revealing contested power dynamics around nationalism, gender, and race. Valenzuela interrogates both care and control in these object interactions, ultimately

6 Race, Gender, and Disability in Puppetry

using puppetry as an analytical lens to challenge hegemonic narratives and illuminate decolonial, feminist resistance.

Continuing this examination of representation, Tobi Poster-Su's "A Real American Wife, a Japanese Object: Critical Puppetry and the Construction of the Orient in Anthony Minghella's *Madam Butterfly* shifts attention to theatrical performance, critiquing the 2005 English National Opera's production of *Madam Butterfly*. Poster-Su interrogates how bunraku-style puppets, intended to evoke cultural authenticity, simultaneously exoticize and dehumanize Japanese characters. Drawing on semiotic theories of puppetry, the chapter employs the form and mechanics of puppetry as an analytical framework to interrogate what is being represented in the puppetry itself.

Aja Marneweck's "Performing Emergenc(e)y: Puppetry, Gender, Race and Madness in *Plot 99*" deepens these inquiries by examining how puppetry can be emancipatory, reclaiming erased histories. Focusing on *Plot 99*, a South African production by the Paper Body Collective about the prophetess Nontetha Nkwenkwe, Marneweck highlights the layering of temporal, spacial, spiritual, corporeal, and material dimensions in puppetry. Through an examination of the process of creating this richly textured performance, the chapter explores how the medium engages with cracks in meaning and intervenes in constructs of race, gender, spirituality, and madness.

Expanding the discussion to pedagogy and scholarship, Ana Díaz Barriga's "Global Perspectives to Elevate Diversity in Puppetry" critiques the dominance of English-language frameworks in puppetry studies from her perspective as a Mexican puppeteer and scholar. Reflecting on her creation of a new syllabus, Diaz Barriga advocates for geographically diverse perspectives and pedagogies. Her chapter underscores the importance of representation—both in the classroom and in the wider field—and raises epistemological questions about how puppetry knowledge is constructed.

Concluding the section, Pablo Ariel's "The Galilee Deaf Theatre Project" provides a case study of puppetry's transformative potential within marginalized communities. Documenting his work with deaf young women in the Druze community in the northern Galilee region of Israel, Ariel illustrates how collaborative puppet-making fosters agency and connection. His reflections emphasize the embodied nature of puppetry, showing how it transcends verbal language to create spaces for empowerment alongside theatrical and social opportunities.

Section 2: Negotiating Identities

Paulette Richards's "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue: Kids on the Block and the Intersectionality of Oppressions" investigates how racialized and ableist assumptions materialize in puppet design. Using *Kids on the Block* as a case study, Richards reflects on the transformation of a Black puppet's eye color

and its implications for representation. Her analysis considers how puppets reflect and reinscribe identities, raising broader questions about materiality and inclusion in educational and performative contexts.

Complementing this critique, Jacqueline Wade’s “Black Bodies in White Spaces: Reflections on Men/toring in Puppetry” highlights the challenges of navigating predominantly white puppetry spaces. Recounting her experience constructing an 18-foot puppet of Mumia Abu-Jamal for protests, Wade addresses systemic barriers, including limited mentorship opportunities for BIPOC artists. Her chapter explores how puppetry can operate as a tool for activism, while also emphasizing the need for structural reform to foster equity and representation within the field.

Addressing disability through humor and ventriloquism, Hendrik Quast’s “Crip Ventriloquism as a Means of Coping with a Hidden Disability” offers an innovative approach to puppetry performance through his new form of chronically (ill) theatre. Using his ventriloquist dummy to externalize his experiences with inflammatory bowel disease, Quast reframes chronic illness as a performative narrative and puppetry as a way of externalizing and processing it.

Another approach to representation emerges in Jummy Faruq and Tobi Poster-Su’s “Beyond Representation: A Conversation with Jummy Faruq on Decentering Puppetry Practice and Design.” Their dialogue examines racialized assumptions in puppet-making, advocating for non-literal representations of non-white characters. Drawing from Faruq’s project with Mafwa Theatre and the Shantona Women’s Centre, the chapter highlights how misunderstanding and misinterpretation can become generative sites for creative exploration, and how representation can be addressed not just in the stories that puppets tell, but in the construction of those puppets.

Further illustrating puppetry’s role in shaping personal and communal identity, Daniel Loyola’s “*Pancha la Parda: A New Myth for an Ancient Tradition*” recounts his experience teaching and creating puppet theatre with youth in rural Mexico. Inspired by a young girl’s questions about her identity, the project allowed Loyola to work through questions around his own. Loyola demonstrates the importance of puppetry to this rural community, and more broadly as a site of engaging with issues of difference and belonging.

Expanding on the intersections of race and puppetry, Azusa SHESHE Dance in “Colored Feels of Felt” reflects on her experiences as a Black woman puppeteer working in the Bible Belt with Chattanooga’s *Kids on the Block*. Dance explores the dual impact of puppet bodies being read like human bodies, detailing how this both empowered her work and exposed her to discrimination. By addressing the responses of both children and adults, she illustrates how puppetry offers a space for community education while simultaneously confronting biases tied to race and representation.

8 Race, Gender, and Disability in Puppetry

In “The ‘Other’ *Karagöz*: The Kurdish *Qeregoz*,” Duygu Çelik interrogates whether *Qeregoz* is a translation of the Turkish *Karagöz* or an independent theatrical form, through a detailed analysis of televised episodes of *Hecîwat û Qeregoz*. By analyzing modifications in *tasvirs* (puppet characters), Çelik reveals how Kurdish identity is articulated in ways that resist being subsumed by dominant Turkish narratives, emphasizing the role of puppetry in the preservation and evolution of marginalized cultural forms.

Husam Abed’s chapter “Resisting Objects: « Refugee » Visibility in Theatre” shifts the focus to object performance as a tool for exploring representation and displacement. Drawing on his experiences as a Palestinian Jordanian theatre-maker, Abed introduces the concept of the “resisting object”—a puppet or object designed to challenge the audience’s perception of displaced peoples. Comparing puppetry performance *Invisible Lands* and his own *War Maker*, Abed critiques the tendency of theatre to evoke empathy by, essentially, asking audiences how they would feel if the « refugees » were white and/or more like them, proposing instead that puppetry subvert understandings of displaced peoples by subverting expectations of objects.

Section 3: Performances of the Other

Emma Fisher-Owen and Nikki Charlesworth’s chapter, “What Happened to the Room of Forgotten Voices: Challenging the Flawed Vision of Human and Puppet Movement from the Past that Left Out Disabled People,” opens the section with a critique of traditional approaches to puppetry that exclude disabled bodies. Drawing on their own collaborative works, including *What Happened to You?* and *Pupa*, the authors advocate for more inclusive puppetry practices that reflect the lived experiences of disabled performers. Fisher-Owen explores symbolic approaches to representation, using fragmented puppet forms to mirror how disabled bodies are perceived, while Charlesworth’s work focuses on replicating the physicality of her own cerebral palsy in puppet design. Together, they argue that puppetry’s ability to move and transform challenges outdated ideas about “normal” movement, calling for a redefinition of what makes puppetry “good” and promoting designs that embrace access and diversity.

Shifting to representations of historicized illness, Felice Amato’s “When Goiters are Your Family Jewels: Maladies and the Grotesque in Regional Heroic Glove Puppet Characters of Northern Italy” examines grotesque aesthetics and regional identity through Italy’s iconic hand puppet, Gioppino. Focusing on the character Gioppino from Bergamo, Amato explores how his three goiters—caused by hypothyroidism—serve not only as identifiers but also as links to regional history and iodine deficiency in the Prealps. Amato shows how these grotesque features foster identification and empathy, reflecting the lived experiences of audiences. The essay argues that Gioppino’s

condition complicates the boundary between humor and pathology, revealing how disease can be reclaimed through affectionate representation rather than stigmatization.

Further elaborating the discussion of cultural identity, Deniz Başar's "Intervening with Institutional Patriarchy: Woman *Karagöz* Puppeteers in Turkey" addresses gendered exclusions in traditional puppetry practices. Başar unpacks how *Karagöz*, historically dominated by male puppeteers, has become a site of resistance for contemporary female performers and builders. Using archival research and interviews, Başar traces the challenges faced by women entering the field, including institutional discrimination and internalized misogyny. She highlights how female puppeteers reclaim ownership over the *Karagöz* tradition, challenging patriarchal structures and expanding the field's boundaries. This chapter demonstrates how puppetry becomes both a practice of resistance and a tool for reimagining gender roles, emphasizing its power to subvert entrenched hierarchies.

Moving to themes of racial identity, Janni Younge's "Puppetry, Race, and Identity in *The Bluest Eye*" reflects on her work as co-director and puppet designer for a stage adaptation of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Younge focuses on how puppetry provides distance from traumatic material, enabling complex subjects like racial violence and internalized oppression to be addressed with sensitivity. She explores how the materiality of puppets—crafted from paper—emphasizes fragility and vulnerability, mirroring the experiences of the child protagonist, Pecola. The chapter also highlights how puppetry can prevent performers from mimicking racial stereotypes, instead offering a mode of abstraction that amplifies emotional resonance and symbolic power.

Continuing the exploration of puppetry within specific cultural settings, Howard Abwao, Louis Netter, and Matt Smith's "Remote Representation: A Puppetry Sensitization Project in Nairobi" shifts the focus to public health education. Reflecting on their *TUPUMUE* project, which addressed lung health awareness in Nairobi, the authors explore the process of a cross-cultural Theatre for Development project using puppetry. Abwao describes how puppets were received in Nairobi; Netter extends this analysis by discussing the "ecology of sensitization" between artists, local people, and academics; and Smith discusses the project through his concept of applied puppetry. The chapter highlights the shifts that took place in the puppets' meanings and cultural connotations as they moved from the UK, where they were built, to resident artists in Kenya.

Offering another perspective on *The Bluest Eye*, in "Making Seen/Sounding Difference: Performing Black at a Majority White Institution" Margaret L. Kemp reflects on using puppetry and sound to stage W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness, as the creative lead and director of the show at UC Davis. Kemp's experiences as the first African American professor

10 Race, Gender, and Disability in Puppetry

in her department inform her innovative approach to representing Black identity on stage. Drawing on her experience staging this piece, Kemp considers the “made/seen” of puppetry and objects, in which performers intentionally step into and out of puppet bodies, alongside “sounded/difference” enactment of the production through puppeteer/actor voices and intentional sitting in silence. Kemp argues that through these devices, puppets can bring performance theory to life in powerful ways.

Together, these chapters illustrate how puppetry can challenge conventions, articulate nuanced identities, and illuminate complexities of race, gender, and disability. Whether addressing systemic biases, reclaiming cultural traditions or confronting trauma, the works discussed here affirm puppetry’s role as a uniquely versatile medium—one capable of both critiquing social structures and imagining new possibilities for justice and representation. By foregrounding puppetry’s capacity to amplify marginalized voices, this volume positions it as a vital site of interrogation and a tool for rethinking identity, power, and community in contemporary performance. By pushing the boundaries of material performance, the contributors demonstrate puppetry’s power as a medium for reimagining identity and society.

We intend this book to be a starting point, not a final word (does such a thing exist in our ever evolving global landscape?), that will serve as a resource for students and academics interested in puppetry, objects in performance, race studies and performance, gender and feminist studies, disability theory and performance, and students and academics of visual and material culture. Placing a diverse range of art forms from across cultures in dialogue, we have attempted to create a constellation of case studies that inspire new reflection and further research.

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