Living Objects: How Contemporary African American Puppet Artists "Figure" Race

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The proverb "everything you own owns you" effectively summarizes Saidiya Hartman's explorations of a paradox in the asymmetrical balance of power between masters and the enslaved. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, she outlines how the chattels that slaveholders claimed to possess exerted claims on material and psychic resources in ways that influenced their masters' senses of self.[1] Hartman and other theorists have consequently analyzed the phenomenon of blackface minstrelsy as a mode of performance that enabled white people to contain their commodity objects' claims on humanity.

In his chapter "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," Fred Moten pushes this observation further by exploring "the convergence of blackness and the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance at the scene of objection."[2] Moten asserts that "the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist" and identifies a "dual ventriloquization" in Marx's discussion of "the commodity that speaks." According to Moten, Marx first imagines the commodity object speaking in its own voice and then projects the voice of classical economists as speaking through commodity objects. Moten points out that Marx ignored the historical reality that Africans enslaved in the Americas were "commodities who spoke" at the time he was developing his ideas on "the fetishism of commodities."[3]

Moten coins the term "animateriality" to describe the phenomenon in which a person inhabiting a Black body becomes a creator of value (humanity). Enslaved Black bodies had an exchange value as commodity objects but were accorded no human value. Thus a slaveholder could kill a

slave with impunity even though the slave as commodity object might have been worth hundreds of dollars. Moten asserts that the creation of value—human worth—from the apparent nonvalue of Black existence is always a feature of Black performance. But what happens when performers inhabiting Black bodies that are customarily objectified in American society animate objects in performance? This study asserts that African American object performers use sculptural figures and repeated cultural patterns to "figure" the human value in Black experience. In particular, this study reviews performances from the Living Objects: African American Puppetry Festival that took place at the University of Connecticut, February 7–10, 2019, as tangible examples of Moten's animateriality at work.

The Living Objects festival was part of the ancillary programming associated with the Living Objects: African American Puppetry exhibit that ran from October 25, 2018, to April 7, 2019, at the University of Connecticut's Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry.[4] Dr. John Bell, director of the Ballard Institute, and Dr. Paulette Richards, puppet artist and independent researcher, curated the exhibit, which featured more than sixty objects. The performers in the festival were all artists whose works were part of the exhibit.

The exhibit grouped the puppets into five categories: Storytelling, Puppetry in Community, Visual Art, Historical Context, and Craftsmanship. While most of the puppets would have fit in multiple categories, grouping each of the festival performances under one of these specific categories provides a more focused approach to considering animateriality (how value animates presumed nonvalue) in African American object performance. This critical review then explores the following manifestations of animateriality based on their relevance to the various categories of performances:

- How African American ventriloquists throw voice to heal the rupture that the slaveholders' ban on African figurative objects created between visual and auditory representations of African American experience.
- How African American storytellers continue to draw on the whole range of figurative patterns present in the African storytelling complex to represent African American experience with or without figurative objects.
- How African American object performance continues the community-building functions of object performance in Africa, thereby countering the social death that Africans suffered through their objectification as slaves.
- How recounting African American history through object perfor-

mance mediates double consciousness by focusing both the performer's internal sense of identity and the audience's external perception of Blackness onto an object that the performer endows with agency.
- How African American visual artists rejoin an African aesthetic preference for art in motion when they animate their creations in performance and offer audiences the "double vision" pleasure of viewing them as beautiful objects or living beings.
- How the craftsmanship that African American artists bring to puppet building surmounts the loss of continuity with African material culture by weaving the material culture of North American history into living objects.

Throwing Voice

Moten's notion of value animating nonvalue—that is, human chattels asserting their own intrinsic human dignity—is particularly intriguing when considering the "break" between the material culture of object performance in Africa and its transubstantiation into an aural mode of figurative representation in the Americas. Figurative sculptures such as masks and puppets as they had functioned in their original African context were proscribed, but the linguistic, musical, and gestural figures of the performance context that had accompanied African object performance took root in the Americas and engendered new patterns of figurative representation. Moten focuses specifically on screams, moans, and other tones from the realm "where sound figured as external both to music and to speech."[5] Yet, as African Americans have recovered the capacity to create and animate performing objects, they have begun to heal the rupture between visual and auditory representations of Black experience by "throwing voice" into the breach.

On Friday, February 8, 2019, the Living Objects festival presented a show titled "Throwing Voice: African American Ventriloquism." Unlike other forms of puppetry, ventriloquists customarily present their own bodies onstage while animating figures. The three performers therefore used the juxtaposition of their own bodies with their performing objects to both highlight and defuse the Black body as a "scene," whether of subjection or objection.

The first performer, Nate Puppets, projected a commanding presence onstage simply by rolling out in his wheelchair and gesturing expansively with his hands. The first puppet he introduced was a brown-skinned ventriloquist dummy named Skylar. Skylar continuously challenged Nate's authority and offered such insults as, "Your legs don't work either." Later Skylar accused Nate of not liking him because he is Black. When Nate

protested, "I'm Black," Skylar looked him up and down in disbelief. Nate is biracial with fair skin and curly hair. Thus, he effectively dissipated layers of tension that his physical being provokes by throwing his voice into a figure.

In the songs and sketches he has performed on Cartoon Network's *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*, David Liebe Hart foregrounds the alienation he experiences as the inhabitant of a Black body with claims that he was abducted by aliens.[6] Space travel is a frequent theme in his work. Africans who disembarked in the Americas after surviving the arduous Middle Passage had definitely experienced abduction by aliens. Thus Hart figures among the "Flying Africans in Spaceships" that Soyica Diggs Colbert identifies in *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics*.[7]

Hart's performance did not overtly reference the harsh labor and oppression African Americans experienced under slavery. His delivery of "Ghost Frog" was comical. Still the song's indictment of an owner who neglected to feed his pet could echo the lament of many enslaved African Americans whose masters refused or neglected to provide sufficient food.

Supernatural powers are another element Diggs associates with "flying Africans in spaceships." With his shaved head, glasses, and prosaic diction, Hart would seem the antithesis of a mythical hero. Yet throwing voice is his superpower. He chooses not to disguise or minimize the movement of his own mouth when animating his figures. Instead he used the figures to induce the audience to accept all his eccentricities, thereby asserting that there are many different ways of being Black and empowered.

The theme of flying away, however, is the most telling strand in Hart's work. His performance included a short video documenting his visit to a hobby shop that sells model trains. Before arriving at the shop, Hart performed a song that expressed simple, childlike glee at going to buy a model train. His obsession with the Australian Tingira commuter train makes him seem like the ultimate nerd. Yet trains figure prominently in African American freedom narratives—from the Underground Railroad to gospel trains bound for glory and blues train whistles heralding movement out of the Jim Crow South during the Great Migration.

In her work with two puppets named Sassy and Classy, Megan Piphus further complicated the figure of the Black body with issues of gender and respectability politics. While her puppets were stylized characters rather than realistic-looking figures or grotesque caricatures, both presented beautiful images of young Black women (figure 2.1). Resplendent in a white tunic with a bubble skirt that ended in a cuff just above her knees, Piphus herself was a model of respectable Black womanhood,

Figure 2.1. Classy, Megan Piphus, and Sassy. (Photo by Shay Albert. Courtesy of the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry)

both modest and chic. Her natural-texture hair was carefully cut and coiffed. Thus, her visual image was polished, professional, and unapologetically Black.

Piphus's technique is very well-developed. She has a beautiful smile with very white, even teeth. She uses this dazzling smile to hide her vocalization so that viewers can barely tell that she is throwing her voice to animate the puppets. She is also very skilled in her manipulation, so the puppets move in very natural ways.

Although Piphus began doing puppet ministry at a young age, this performance did not deal overtly in religious themes. Sassy and Classy evoke the archetypal angel and devil sitting on our shoulders, but in this sketch they were acting as Piphus's vocal coaches. This scenario gave her an opportunity to showcase two very different vocal styles. Much of the humor in the show derived from Sassy and Classy continuously giving examples of what they thought Piphus should do without leaving her any space to sing herself. The last song was a very simple melody. The words were innocuous—"I'm a dum, dum, dum, dum dummy for your love"—but the song allowed Piphus to highlight her virtuosity by switching rapid-fire from one voice to the other.

The most poignant part of the show was when Piphus mentioned her husband and her puppet friends expressed surprise that "someone loves

you?" She related how they met—her husband saw one of her shows, then came backstage and asked her out. Piphus then revealed that, given how strange she appeared as a child who was constantly talking to dolls, it seemed miraculous that no one tried to do a psychiatric "intervention" and that someone could love her for her true self.

Ventriloquists develop a very close relationship with their puppet characters. For this reason it was difficult to convince any of them to lend figures to the exhibit for five months. The "dummy" often embodies aspects of the self. Externalizing these internal conflicts onstage simultaneously draws the audience's attention to "difference" while defusing negative judgments and eliciting empathy. "Throwing voice" therefore empowers African American ventriloquists to speak truths that might otherwise be too dangerous to acknowledge, whether the danger is psychological vulnerability ("I feel unlovable") or the threat of racist violence. The animateriality of their performances creates human value from Black experiences that frequently have little or no value in the dominant society.

Storytelling

Critical race theorists such as Patricia J. Williams attest to the cultural wealth that communities of color possess even when they are economically disadvantaged, and they have identified linguistic capital, particularly storytelling, as a means of transmitting experiential knowledge.[8] Due to the ban slaveholders imposed on figurative sculpture, very little of the material culture associated with African performing object traditions survived in the Americas. Yet figurative representation encompasses patterns of speech, movement, and musical expression. African and African diasporan performance is often noted for its improvisational flair, but improvisation is based on the skillful recombination of figures. Artists may master these figures through deliberate practice or absorb them unconsciously by attending to master performers. In his performances at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford on Saturday, February 9, 2019, Schroeder Cherry demonstrated how master storytellers pass these figures down to successive generations.

The moral education of youth was an important function of the storytelling performance complex in traditional African society, so Cherry's ability to engage even the youngest members of the audience places him firmly in the tradition. In particular, "How the Sun Came to the Sky" showed his skillful use of repetition and call-and-response refrains. The setting of "The Land of Dark" counters cultural biases that characterize darkness as ugly or sinister (figure 2.2). DiAndre, the rod puppet narrator, explained that "it was pretty, though" because all the colors were pres-

Figure 2.2. Set and puppets for "The Land of the Dark." (Courtesy of Schroeder Cherry)

ent. He also described the inhabitants as friendly. Then he initiated the audience into this friendly community by teaching them the customary greeting, "Star light," and response, "Star bright."

Cherry's artfulness as a storyteller not only entertained the audience but also effectively socialized them in how to appreciate a storytelling performance. For example, the initial cue of listening for Star Runner (who runs so fast you can't see him) teaches audiences to listen carefully to the story since the inhabitants of the Land of Dark discover that Star Runner has been stealing their stars only when they pay attention to the sound he makes in passing. The story also imparts the message that everyone has a star (something special that makes them shine), everyone's star is different (but equally beautiful), and when everyone's stars shine together, no one is left in the dark. Thus the call-and-response refrains reinforce the importance of participating in community and working collaboratively for the greater good.

Later that evening, the potpourri of performers in "Double Selves: African American Puppets and Puppeteers" demonstrated that figures associated with the African storytelling performance context became embedded in muscle memory and survived through generations long after the original material objects had crumbled to dust.

Like Schroeder Cherry, Isaac Bloodworth, a University of Connec-

ticut Puppet Arts alumnus, focused on uplifting youth. He presented a crankie that illustrated the trials of a little Black girl who kept getting into trouble at school because the other kids teased her about her hair. The girl's parents didn't recognize what was going on, but the grandmother sat the girl down, styled her hair, and talked to the child until she had identified the root of the problem. Then she boosted the girl's self-esteem by telling a story about an African princess.

Masterful storytellers like the legendary Scheherazade have held audiences spellbound through layers of interpolated narratives. Bloodworth used the crankie to orient audiences within his narrative web by rendering the interpolated narrative with black-and-white line drawings that contrasted with the vibrant colors of the main story. Crankies do not require much skill at puppet manipulation, but Bloodworth certainly distinguished himself as a storyteller in this performance.

The last act of the Saturday night show was Brad Brewer and the Crowtations. While there was no narrative in their lip-synched performance, the Crowtations created a satisfying build up and release of dramatic tension by drawing on gestural figures familiar to fans of soul music. During the many years when the group performed in Central Park, they learned to break down the fourth wall between audience and performers, even in more theatrical presentations. Without a custom stage to hide the puppeteers' movements, this performance exposed the complicated choreography and tight synchronization that create the illusion of four distinct characters moving independently. During his symposium presentation, Brewer emphasized that puppetry could be about artistry and entertainment and does not always have to have profound themes. He and the other Crowtations proved that point with their performance.

Puppetry in Community

From the beginning of human history, puppetry and object performance have had deep roots in spiritual practices. Eileen Blumenthal indicates that the earliest recorded puppet performance occurred in Egypt about six hundred years before the reign of Tutankhamen: "A twentieth-century B.C.E. hieroglyphic text describes a performance in which a walking statue represented a god."[9] Western-style theatrical performances did not exist in traditional African societies, but object performance for community building or spiritual functions was well established. Consequently, when 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 existence, they

suffered a loss of identity in community that Orlando Patterson terms "social death."[10] 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 re-create community in some form among themselves, and indeed the Black church has been one of the spaces where African Americans have re-created community. Contemporary African American practitioners like Edna Bland believe that puppet ministry in the United States originated in white churches. Puppet ministry nevertheless reconnects African American congregations to the spiritual dimensions of object performance in Africa.

The festival's Sunday morning Gospel Puppetry show started with Edna Bland's "The Greatest Love Story Ever Told." Bland trained with Caroll Spinney, the master puppeteer behind Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch, so most of her puppets are Muppet style, rod-and-glove puppets that look like familiar characters in the African American community. She also had some hand puppets, including a black lamb that recited the applicable scriptures between vignettes. Since Jesus is often represented as the Lamb of God, having the black lamb preach the Gospel was a powerful choice, refuting negative connotations of Blackness that have led English speakers to describe ne'er-do-wells and sinners as "black sheep."

Bland performed the other puppets cabaret style in front of the play board. She had a pedestal on which each puppet would sit or stand while she stood behind manipulating it. She wore all black but was still clearly visible to the audience as she worked. The puppets lip-synched to recordings of popular Gospel songs. The recordings both contain and elicit call-and-response patterns that are familiar figures of Black church services. The puppets' movements also employed patterns that are common gestural figures. For example, the old lady puppet caught the spirit while singing Mahalia Jackson's "How I Got Over" and left the stage doing the holy dance, provoking laughter since she had entered hobbling on a cane.

Reverend Yolanda Sampson's "Agape Love Train" was the last performance of the festival. It also had the most elaborate stage production with a train set piece, a table full of props, and a high-quality video sequence projected on a screen at the back of the stage (figure 2.3). The setup of this show suggests that the closest that African American puppet artists come to fulfilling W. E. B. Du Bois's vision of theatre is in the Black church. The church is the one venue where dramatic performance can reliably be "by us, about us, for us, and near us."[11] While this show is rooted in Black Baptist tradition, it probably would play well for any group of Christians. Reverend Sampson, costumed as the train con-

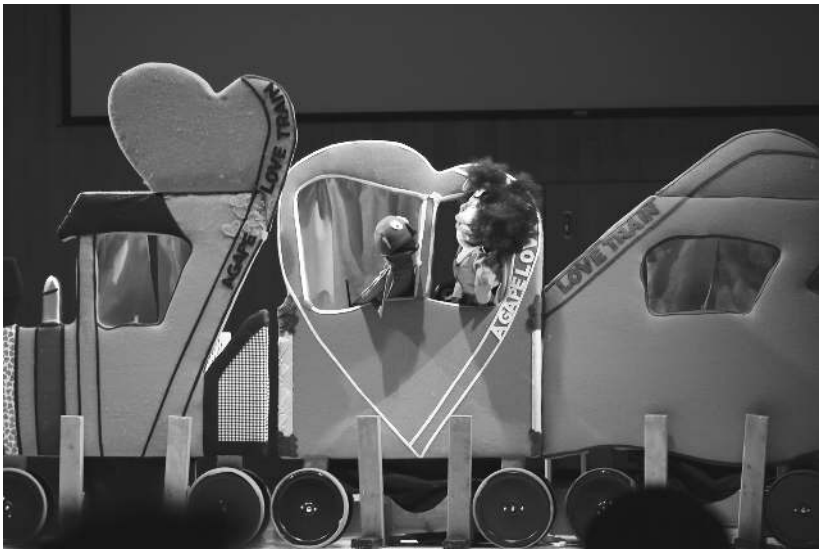

Figure 2.3. Delfonzo and Loveuro ride the Agape Love Train. (Photo by Shay Albert. Courtesy of the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry)

ductor, took time in the beginning to educate the audience about how to respond, with appropriate interjections of "amen!" and "hallelujah!"

Like most religious productions, the script falls into some heavy-handed allegory at points, but it also contains a lot of poignantly human humor. The audience laughed at Princess Loveuro getting sent to planet Earth as a punishment for sassing her mother. Loveuro and her new Earth friend, Delfonzo, traded comical insults. Their linguistic duel did not descend into profanity or disparaging remarks about family members, but it did follow a pattern familiar to African Americans as "playing the dozens."[12]

Then Loveuro turned that humor on herself. The puppet just barely fit through the windows of the train set piece, but Reverend Sampson made the most of it. Every time the puppet got hung up, Loveuro would comment, "I guess I do have a big head." The self-deprecating humor invariably drew big laughs. Thus the characterization was strong even though the characters serve as symbols of particular phases in the soul's journey.

African American Christianity has long included a vision of heaven that may encompass existence on planes outside of planet Earth. In the 1970s, Parliament Funkadelic reinterpreted the spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" as the landing of a spaceship sent to carry New World Africans back to the Mother Continent. In the same era Stevie Wonder imagined

a utopian society on the planet Saturn singing: "We have come here many times before; To find your strategy to peace is war; Killing helpless men, women and children; That don't even know what they're dying for."[13] He repeatedly describes Earth people as "cold," just as Loveuro, who hails from Peaceuro, initially finds Earth to be a hellish place because of its snow-covered landscape. Knowing that she would be performing the show in Connecticut in February, Reverend Sampson indulged in another African American linguistic figure—signifying. She gauged her audience accurately and drew an appreciative laugh. Yet signifying from the pulpit is a staple of Black church experience that invites the congregation to examine their own complicity in sin. As Loveuro learns during her journey, lack of forgiveness can make the world a cold, hellish place.

Visual Art

Traditional African figurative art was inseparable from performance contexts in which it was danced. Thus African American artists who make puppets rejoin an aesthetic that presents visual art in motion, whether their work appears in gallery shows, in museum exhibits and installations, or as performance art outside of theatrical venues. 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.[14] 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 create value from perceived nonvalue by sharing the cultural wealth of African American experience.

The puppets from Dirk Joseph's "For the Love of Cats and Dogs" were displayed in the visual art section of the exhibit, so when he removed them from their stands and animated them in performance, he reconnected his figurative images with the African aesthetic of art in motion. Like Reverend Sampson, Joseph employed allegory, but his message was political rather than religious. The puppets are composed of simple geometric shapes, but their features and postural attitudes nevertheless reflect figures of African American visual style (figure 2.4). Thus, even as flat, black silhouettes, they figure a world that foregrounds a "Black" point of view.

Leona, the protagonist of the show, reports to a new job but revolts when she learns she is expected to hold a kitten in place so that the tyrant can kick it like a football. She runs off with the kitten, and he sends his soldiers to search for her. She hides under a bridge with a character named Meta Phorical. In the end, the bridge people revolt and topple the tyrant.

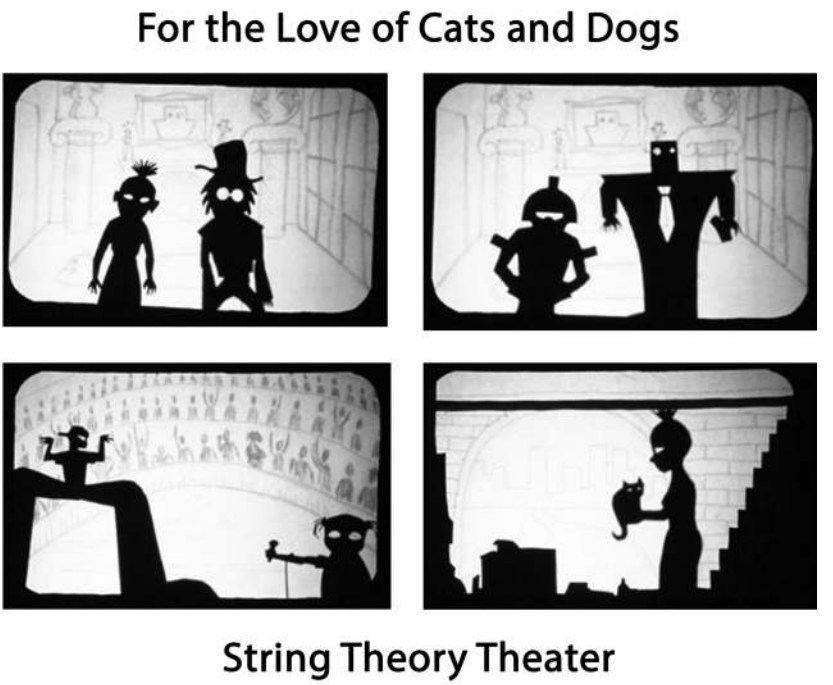

Figure 2.4. Scenes from "For the Love of Cats and Dogs." (Courtesy of Dirk Joseph)

Joseph is a very skilled wordsmith. The narrative arc was tightly structured. The characters were well-developed and their dialogue was artful in showing who they were through the word play itself. The show was tightly rehearsed. Behind the scenes, Joseph and his daughters made some complicated maneuvers very smoothly, even though he later said that he was revising sections of the show up to the last minute. Joseph's prerecorded narration voiced a number of distinct characters with flair. Overall, it was a production that could be pleasing to children while adults can appreciate it on multiple levels.

Historical Context

W. E. B. Du Bois fully recognized the power of the stage for combating stereotypes and called for African Americans to produce theatre that is "for us, by us, about us, and near us."[15] Object performance may be a particularly powerful means of mediating the double-consciousness experience that Du Bois eloquently described as the "sense of always look-

ing 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."[16] 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."[17] 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.

Many of the performers in the Living Objects: African American Puppetry Festival presented pieces designed to enlighten audiences about African American history. For example, Bruce Cannon performed "Harlem River Drive" in an afternoon show on Friday, February 8, 2019. Cannon stepped behind a play board to manipulate two hand puppets, an uncle and a nephew, whose intergenerational dispute about musical taste set the stage for a review of famous performers who had passed through Harlem. Cannon would then come out in front of the puppet stage to perform cabaret-style with his marionettes. Only the Michael Jackson puppets were patterned after a particular performer. The other puppets were original characters that danced and lip-synched to popular music. Cannon's ability to switch smoothly between the marionettes and the hand puppets was impressive.

Cannon started as an apprentice at the Swedish Cottage Marionette Theatre in Central Park in 1974 and never left, ultimately rising to serve as the artistic director. Having discovered early in life what he wanted to do, decades of dedicated practice have made Cannon a master of the craft. His artistry was most apparent in the salsa dance. First, Cannon was managing two marionettes at the same time and they were on separate controls, one in each hand (figure 2.5). Second, rather than taking turns, the marionettes were dancing with each other, and they kept the beat of the music the whole time. Sometimes they danced in close and did the bump. Sometimes they touched cheeks on one side and then the other. Cannon was recovering from knee surgery, but he danced along with the puppets through the whole show. Performing popular dance figures with animated figures was a particularly powerful form of redress, reconnecting figurative sculpture with its original role in African object performance traditions.

Cannon packed a lot of historical information into the script, but it

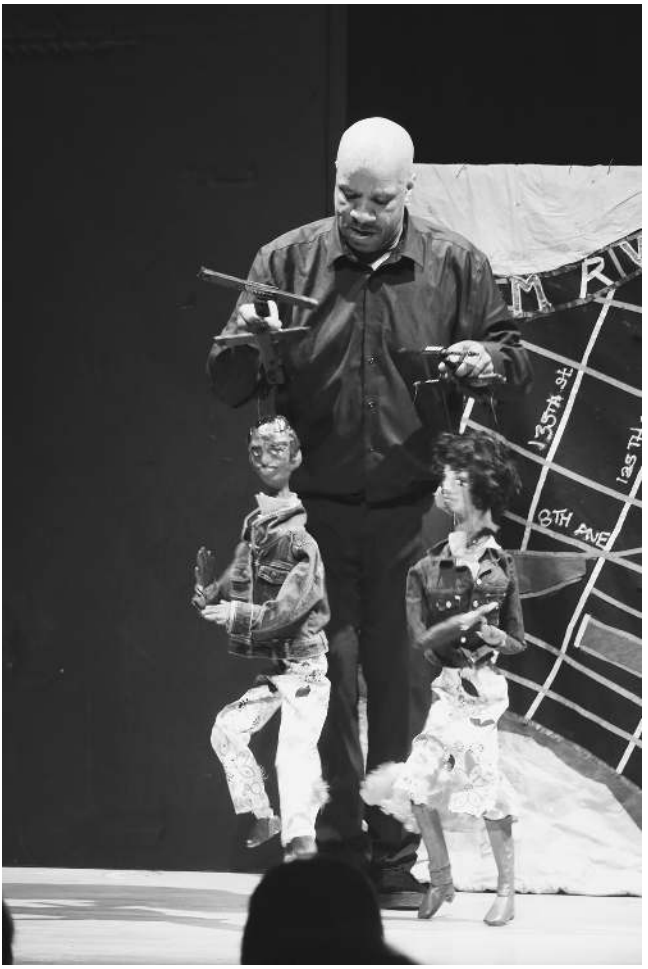

Figure 2.5. Bruce Cannon performing "Harlem River Drive." (Photo by Shay Albert. Courtesy of the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry)

also had some humor and the marionette vignettes were highly entertaining. Audiences might not retain all the historical facts in the show, but the review of African American achievement once again countered the perceived nonvalue of African American life.

Pandora Gastelum's "The City That Care Forgot" focused on a less elevated lineage, tracing the life of Lulu White, an infamous madame from New Orleans's Storyville district. In addition to the Lulu White

marionette, the show featured hand-cut shadow puppets. These black-and-white sequences vividly illustrated the story of a woman who resisted being classified as simply Black or white.

Gastelum's musical theatre training gives her good stage presence and a strong, expressive singing voice. She made effective use of "Careless Love," emphasizing that this popular tune was not just an anonymous folk song but was composed by Lulu White's nephew, Spencer Williams. Foregrounding "Careless Love" invoked African American musical figures such as bending notes and presented Lulu White as a foremother in a lineage of independent, sexually liberated women that Daphne Duval Harrison describes as "black pearls" in her book about the blues queens of the 1920s.[18]

Gastelum is also an excellent writer, so the language of the play is beautiful. In another layer of blues figures, Gastelum mines a rich vein of double entendres to describe White's racy career. There were touches that gave viewers access to White's interior psychology, though this show uses a voice-over narrator to tell most of the story. In the full version, the narration is a powerful choice, because Lulu White's story is really a meta-narrative about Gastelum's own life as a woman of color.

While Lulu White falsely claimed to be from Cuba, Gastelum's great-grandfather was Afro-Cuban. He married her Mexican American great-grandmother, and they produced children with dark complexions and hair textures ranging from curly to nappy. After he left the family, however, they stopped admitting that they had African ancestry. In the abbreviated version Gastelum presented at the festival, she drew parallels between her paternal grandmother, herself, and Lulu White. In particular, she used Lulu White's continuous editing of her origins to speak to her own experience of living on both sides of the color line, thereby offering an especially poignant window on double consciousness.

Craftsmanship

In *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott describes the practice of white actors darkening their faces and performing caricatures of African American music, dance, and linguistic style as "racial ventriloquism."[19] Blackface minstrelsy was so pervasive that Benjamin Fisler estimates that in 1934, 25 percent of American puppeteers depended on blackface puppets for their livelihood.[20] Since school shows were the bread and butter of many puppet companies, minstrel-style puppets inculcated generations of American schoolchildren with stereotypical images of African Americans. Meanwhile African Americans themselves had little power to deflect these images. As a result, stereotypical caricatures such as minstrel puppets, rather than figurative repre-

sentations created by African Americans themselves, came to represent Blackness in American object performance traditions. As the civil rights movement gathered force in the mid-twentieth century, African Americans began to demand the removal of these demeaning caricatures from public spaces. They also created images that consciously affirmed "Black is beautiful."

The design and construction of puppets not only draws on all the visual arts but may also encompass innovative use of materials and engineering techniques. Thus the skillfully crafted Frederick Douglass puppet is what enables Tarish "Jeghetto" Pipkins's "A Conversation with Frederick Douglass" to impact audiences so powerfully. The figure is about three-quarters human scale. Pipkins molded air-drying Sculpey over cardboard to shape the face of this puppet that uses a rod with a trigger mechanism to move the mouth. Pipkins used his own hands to move the puppet's hands during the performance. The gestures he chose were very effective. His skill at manipulation made the puppet seem very lifelike even though its form was stylized and abstract.

Throughout his life, Douglass countered the objectification of Black bodies by posing for photographic portraits in which he consciously presented himself as the face of freedom and dignity.[21] Pipkins riffs on these figures and transforms the "fabric" of African American history by fashioning Douglass's iconic mane of salt and pepper hair from strips of old denim jeans (figure 2.6). Denim took its name from Nîmes, a French port that was heavily invested in the slave trade. The sturdy fabric woven from cotton cultivated by slave labor served to make sails for ships that plied the triangular trade routes. Dyed with indigo produced by enslaved laborers in the Carolinas and the Caribbean, blue denim jeans became the quintessential uniform of the American workingman.[22] The Douglass puppet's hair therefore signifies on how integrally the legacy of slavery is woven into American identity—everything you own, owns you.

While this piece is billed as a "conversation," the Douglass figure commanded the stage from a chair placed down center and did all the talking. Pipkins sat behind and manipulated the puppet. He wore a black shirt, pants, and shoes but did not try to hide his presence. Still he disappeared from the audience's awareness in short order. During the show, photographs of Douglass and historical scenes were projected onto a large screen in the background. Douglass's text paints very vivid word pictures, but the photographs help audiences put themselves in the place and time Douglass describes so the emotional impact of the performance became even more intense.

Pipkins structured a strong dramatic arc by selecting passages from Douglass's 1845 narrative and reading them on a recorded soundtrack over a cello score. In the talkback after the show, Pipkins said that he

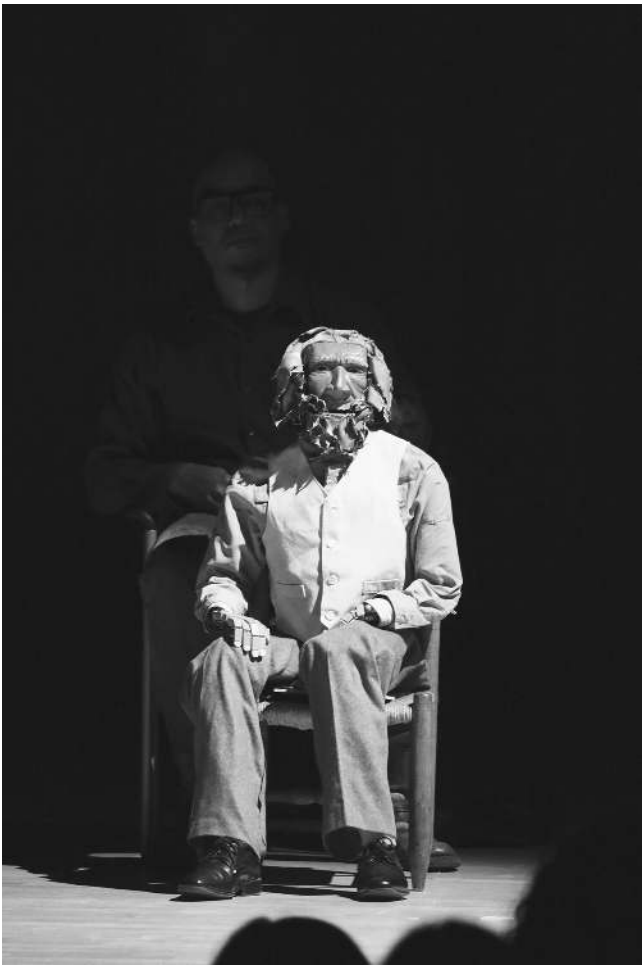

Figure 2.6. "Frederick Douglass Speaks." (Photo by Shay Albert. Courtesy of the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry)

had been very close to his grandmother so he chose to organize the show around Douglass's memories of his own grandmother and how poorly she was treated in her old age, because those were the passages in the narrative that horrified him the most.

The show nevertheless also touches on the Aunt Hester sequence that Moten uses to support his assertion that dehumanized objects do speak and resist. The spectacle of a Frederick Douglass puppet recounting the

merciless beating of his Aunt Hester brought members of the audience to tears, demonstrating that the "double vision" audiences experience when they confront the animateriality of an African American puppet can move them to accept the agency and humanity of African American people.

Conclusion

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman sought to flesh out an understanding of the slave experience by looking at the "fraught pleasures" of amusements that masters permitted, enticed, or forced the enslaved to accept. Enslaved people were frequently forced to participate in "amusements" that were not pleasurable for them. "Going before master" to perform was part of this class of "amusement." Masters liked to see the enslaved singing and dancing. Some individuals had genuine talent as performers, but the primary pleasure of this spectacle from the master's point of view was bolstering the belief that the enslaved were happy with their lot or that they were essentially frivolous people who could be induced to engage in productive work only through the discipline of whips and chains.[23]

Building on this fiction, minstrel stereotypes then turned African Americans into "figures of fun."

So what happened when performers inhabiting objectified Black bodies animated objects in the Living Objects performances? The figure of a formerly enslaved man "owned" the dance floor and received several lap dances during the spontaneous after party that followed the Saturday evening "Double Selves" show. Pipkins's performance made the animateriality of his Frederick Douglass puppet a tangible assertion of human value. Now that the "living objects" can once again speak, "throwing voice" through all the figures of the African storytelling performance complex liberates participants to embrace human pleasures as a right.

Notes

1. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

2. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

3. Moten, *In the Break*, 6.

4. John Bell and Paulette Richards, "Living Objects: African American Puppetry Online Catalogue," *Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry*, accessed August 16, 2020, https://bimp-exhibitions.org/livingobjects/.

5. Moten, *In the Break*, 18.

6. "When I was a child I was abducted by Korendian aliens. They took samples

of my skin and my blood. They hadn't tested a black species yet." Quoted in Jennifer Juniper Stratford, "Off Hollywood—David Liebe Hart," *Vice*, April 24, 2012, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/3b5aj8/off-hollywood-david-liebe-hart.

7. Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

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20. Benjamin Daniel Fisler, "The Phenomenology of Racialism: Blackface Puppetry in American Theatre, 1872–1939" (College Park: Digital Repository at the University of Maryland, 2005).

21. John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celest-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015).

22. James Sullivan, *Jeans: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Avery, 2006), 99–113.

23. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 8.