

Critical Puppetry and the boundaries of the Human in Edwin Salas' *7 Deadly Sins in the Border*

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In the Border

A large blade cleaves easily through the living flesh beneath it as the short yelp of a siren sounds. A fragmented news report plays, detailing escalating violence at the Mexico/US border. The cuts become more brutal. Flesh sprays across the stage in small chunks. Pre-recorded shouts erupt from offstage, and the performer pulls out a fake gun which he brandishes alongside the real knife, pointing both weapons at imagined, disembodied figures. The fragmented flesh, scattered onstage, appears to have been forgotten in this moment of high drama. Nevertheless, we have witnessed its transformation from that which is alive, capable of growth and reproduction, to that which is dead, capable only of decomposition.

This enormously complex opening scene juxtaposes documentary reports of violence against actual human beings, theatricalised violence against imaginary human beings, and the physical destruction of an onion. The onion is not the focal point of the scene. Indeed, later in the performance a figurative puppet is suspended from a scaffold, force-fed, and shot in a far more explicit evocation of the cruelties enacted in an increasingly hostile environment for migrants at the Mexico/US border. Nevertheless, I contend that the material vulnerability of this onion is a key component in Edwin Salas' *7 Deadly Sins in the Border* (2018), and one which allows the production to grapple fully with the rhetorical and physical violence which are employed to police and maintain geopolitical and cultural borders.

In this chapter, I will analyse Salas' use of puppetry and material performance¹ to explore both the construction and dehumanisation of migrant

¹ "Material performance" is a term used alongside puppetry both to include non-figurative object performance and to signal the connections between puppetry studies and new materialisms (Posner 5-6).

subjects. I suggest that by employing a combination of figurative puppetry and object performance,² Salas uses the material in/vulnerability of these objects to explore violence and physical precarity, approaching the work's political intent in a manner markedly different from more conventionally humanist theatrical approaches advocating for migrant subjects, such as Good Chance and Cat Smits Company's roughly contemporaneous productions *The Walk* (2021) and *Borders* (2020).

I propose that Salas, by rigorously avoiding constructions of the "good" migrant, and focusing instead on a shared human capacity for injury, destabilises the racialised hierarchies of humanity identified by scholars such as Sylvia Wynter and Mel Y. Chen and bypasses conventional strategies of empathetic identification. I trace how Salas' use of puppetry allows for a destabilising of ontological categories and foregrounds the corporeality of human, puppet and vegetable bodies as a political and ethical strategy. In doing so, I argue that puppetry, a process by which objects are humanised, can provide unique insights into racialisation, a process by which humans are objectified. Further, I sketch some of the contours of *critical puppetry*, a practical and theoretical framework I am developing wherein the form and mechanics of puppetry are used to critique and resist politically constructed identities and hierarchies of value.

"Good" Migrants

To illustrate the narrative constructions of "good" migrant identities that Salas' work both enacts and contests,³ I begin with a brief examination of two roughly contemporaneous puppetry performances about migration which adopt what I suggest is a contrasting approach: Good Chance and Handspring's 2021 production *The Walk*, and Cat Smits Company's 2020 production *Borders*.

² "Object performance" refers generally to material performance in which non-figurative found objects are used in material performance.

³ The cultural construct of the "good" (im)migrant, is explicitly named in the title of Nikesh Shukla's 2016 edited collection of essays on the British Immigrant experience. An earlier related concept, the model minority, was coined in the 1960s to describe the particular "good immigrant" status of Japanese Americans.

Good Chance's *The Walk* is a 3 month long international processional performance which centres around Little Amal, a 3.5 metre puppet representing a young refugee girl, created by Handspring Puppetry Company. Amal, a fictionalised 9-year-old Syrian girl, is feeling war and travelling to find her mother and to go to school. Moving through public spaces in each host city—from town squares to cultural and political institutions—Amal is greeted by various performances of solidarity that have been organised locally. The express purpose of the project is to generate empathy and support for refugees and migration. Speaking about the project, Handspring's Basil Jones suggested that puppetry allows both puppeteers and audiences to "step into" the experience of a migrant child (Jones and Kohler)—a concept of empathetic self-insertion that is made literal by the puppeteer/stilt walker visible within the cage of Amal's body. To this end, Amal has been constructed as an archetypal "good" migrant.

Fleeing mortal danger, innocent, and devoid of any financial motivations, Amal appears to embody a desire for transcultural exchange and assimilation, with her journey conceptualised as an opportunity for her to learn about the cultures she visits, as well as demonstrating "the contributions made by refugees and immigrants" (*The Walk*). As has been noted by Kate Duffy-Syedi (13), Amal does not represent a typical unaccompanied child refugee; in 2020, 86% of child refugees and migrants were male and 90% were between the ages of 15-17 (UNHCR et al.). Amal can therefore be seen as a particular and atypical construction of child refugee identity designed to signify specifically gendered and aged innocence and vulnerabilities, and to elicit certain responses—the production's own press materials highlight Amal's potential to move audiences emotionally.

Cat Smits Company's *Borders* explores the bureaucratic mechanisms which distinguish between deserving and undeserving migrants, centring around Evie, a Dutch caseworker who is tasked with interviewing refugees to ascertain whether or not they are in mortal danger. Evie discovers that her current interviewee is fleeing homophobic persecution, but that the specific questions she is tasked with asking may not allow him to demonstrate sufficient danger to his person. As a male teenager, he is more typical of actual unaccompanied child refugees than Amal. The interviewee is portrayed as a small foam puppet who emerges from his own case

files; the visibly manipulated and formally insubstantial puppet seeming to speak of the brutality of a bureaucratic system too vast and depersonalised to accommodate the human subtleties of persecution and risk.

While the production raises questions as to the legitimacy of the interviewee's asylum claim within the narrow parameters of the Dutch asylum system, the text nevertheless indicates that he is a deserving migrant – a romantic monologue about his sexual awakening stirs up feelings of empathetic identification in the interviewer as she despairs of a system too rigid to properly protect him. His gay identity here is invoked to demonstrate both his genuine vulnerability and also to introduce a point of empathetic connection with Evie and by extension the audience. That this is the point of connection is significant, reinforcing what Jasbir Puar describes as a deliberately constructed “Muslim or gay binary”, which frames queerness as synonymous with Western values (15). *Borders* ultimately reads as a critique of the bluntness of the instruments used to decide who may cross borders as much as a critique of borders themselves. Like *The Walk*, *Borders* relies on an empathetic identification with a character whose humanity is asserted through the very biographical details that are often elided by asylum application processes, and whose vulnerability is transmitted to the audience primarily through the emotional investment of his white caseworker.

I suggest that while such artistic projects of “humanisation” undoubtedly generate forms of empathy for certain migrants, they nevertheless rely on—and risk contributing to—logics which are themselves fundamentally dehumanising. I contend that a focus on the innocence and social value—and thus the humanity—of “good” migrants simultaneously produces a category of non-innocent, non-valuable – and thus inhuman – “bad” migrants, a phenomenon which is easily exploited by populist anti-migrant rhetoric. This is not to critique either individual project but rather to reflect that both appear to be produced from within specific border discourses and notions of humanity. Both productions deliberately construct—both materially and narratively—innocent, unthreatening migrants in genuine mortal danger. *Amal*, constructed with the identity of a physically non-threatening 9-year-old girl, is permitted to be larger than life-size in order that the outdoor audiences might clearly see her hyper-expressive eyes.

Borders' asylum seeker, on the other hand, as a male child on the cusp of manhood, is rendered tiny and insubstantial to denature any possible threat offered by his maleness and sexuality—though the fact that he is gay crucially avoids any possibility that this sexuality will be directed at Western women, a commonly deployed anti-migrant trope. Neither production could function within its stated aims if the puppet were to present, for example, an adult male economic migrant who has committed crimes. Both performances rely on a stable narrative of a migrant who is both categorically other, yet sufficiently just-like-us in emotional and moral character to be relatable and sympathetic. Puppetry here supports this fixed relationship between migrant and host society—the migrant is represented by an appealing and unthreatening figurative puppet and the visible puppeteers are benign or helpful presences that facilitate the puppet's movement.

7 Deadly Sins in the Border

The audience applause dies down. Breaking character, and speaking in extemporaneous fragments, Salas holds up a picture of a young woman. "All this" he gestures to the mechanics of the show "was an excuse to say this: Her name was Claudia Gómez González and border patrol killed her with a shot in the head. 19 years old. She came to find her boyfriend. She came from Guatemala. She came to search for heaven. And she found a bullet in the head."

Salas' direct and vulnerable delivery is in contrast to his demeanour throughout the previous hour of performance, during which he has dispensed cruelties with gleeful irreverence. *7 Deadly Sins in the Border*, which draws on the purgatory section of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, tells the story of a fictional undocumented migrant called Dante, who has been deported from the United States and must pass through purgatory at the Mexico/US border to re-enter. Dante, a small wooden puppet, spends almost the entire performance suspended naked from a wooden scaffold, during which he is force fed via nasogastric intubation, shot, and racially abused by Salas, who is present both as a puppeteer and as a characterised narrator named Virgil. Virgil is a *coyote*, a colloquial term for

paid guides who move migrants across the Mexico/US border. As a puppeteer, Salas animates a number of characters and objects including Dante, animals representing Dante's seven deadly sins, a member of the Ku-Klux Klan, and various foodstuffs.

Given that Salas' explicit intent is to contest the cruelties enacted by border regimes, the production lacks many of the familiar tropes of liberal humanitarian cultural production for social change – that is to say, theatre and media which seeks to remedy social injustice using frameworks based on liberal humanist notions of humanity and empathy. Here, liberal humanism refers to the dominant paradigm of mainstream post-enlightenment philosophy, particularly as it pertains to human subjectivity. Wynter critiques liberal humanism as overrepresenting white, western, bourgeois “Man” as the universal and normative subject and placing all others within a hierarchical arrangement of humanity which positions Black populations at the bottom (260-261).

Empathy has become a key register of value in contemporary cultural production: Lindsay B. Cummings argues that it has come to be viewed not only as a preeminent metric by which the success of theatrical performance can be judged but also a justification for the importance of theatre itself (1). However, Cummings also notes that empathy has been charged with fostering misguided identification and an erroneous sense of understanding which is in fact wholly rooted in self-projection (5). For Cummings, empathy risks shifting attention “from systemic conditions to individual experiences” (15), thereby undermining projects towards social justice which attempt to overhaul systems of power and oppression. Emma Welton has critiqued Good Chance's previous production, *The Jungle*, as doing just this, arguing that the production's emphasis on empathy valorises emotional response over the need “to materially change the realities for non-white migrants and refugees who face the structural racism and oppression of the British border” (238).

Patrick Anderson asserts that contemporary neoliberal understandings of empathy neglect its potential to “destabilize the subject”—an undoing of the boundaries of the self—in favour of a simplistic negation of difference (81)—a denial of such boundaries. Anderson regards the undoing of the subject as the original

promise of the empathetic attempt. The word attempt here is crucial—Anderson rejects a contemporary understanding of empathy as an achievable and indexable “true emotional connection” (87) with the other and instead proposes the empathetic attempt as an ethically fraught act of labour which might both occasion the blurring of boundaries between the self and other while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of truly bridging experiential and affective divides (89). Examining an abolitionist missive by John Rankin in which he imagines himself an enslaved person, Saidiya Hartman argues that a focus on empathetic identification via self-insertion privileges the self at the expense of the other, a “violence of identification” (20)—the fact that Rankin finds it necessary to imaginatively substitute his own white person for an enslaved Black person in order to render the horrors of slavery legible, leads to an erasure of Black humanity.

Salas does not furnish his audience with the usual routes to identification. Aside from the reference to Claudia Gómez González, and some often-inaudible audio clips from news bulletins, the performance contains no documentary material. No facts or statistics are given. The audience is not furnished with significant biographical details for Dante, and those which are related are clearly fictional and do not affirm his goodness, innocence, or family ties. Dante’s trauma is presented not for cathartic audience identification but rather as a throwaway punchline. If the work aims to resist the dehumanisation of undocumented migrants, Salas does not deploy many of the standard techniques to do so.

What work is being done by the irreverent cruelties bestowed upon Dante? Of course, one function of these cruelties is to make visible the physical and rhetorical violence by which national borders are policed and maintained. However, I propose that beyond simply documenting and enacting dehumanisation, the work uses material performance to appeal to a shared humanity that does not depend on empathetic identification or biographical detail but rather a recognition of shared physical and material vulnerability. Drawing on Ivan Ramos’ theorisation of anonymous human remains in the socially engaged work of Mexican artist Teresa Margolles (298),⁴ I argue that Salas presents us with a compelling alternative to

⁴ In Margolles’s 2009 contribution to the Venice Biennale, *De Que Otra Cosa Podríamos Hablar?* (What Else Could We Talk About?), the artist used anonymous blood collected from crime scenes in a series of works about the Mexican drug wars.

more conventional narrative approaches which make the subject's humanity contingent on shared biographical details or proof of innocence in order to warrant concern.

Ramos' analysis of Margolles' work draws on Judith Butler's theorisation of *Precarious Life*, in which Butler explores how certain lives, particularly those lost as a result of US state-sponsored violence in the aftermath of 9/11, are framed as both insufficiently human and insufficiently alive to warrant public grief or mourning (12). Butler highlights the unequal apportioning of obituaries to US and Palestinian citizens, suggesting that dominant paradigms of grief require a knowledge of the names and personal details of the dead to humanize them and render them grievable (12). Ramos argues that this approach to grief, which is dependent on a narcissistic recognition of the self, delimits certain lives, marked as they are by differences of race, gender and nationality, as beyond the limits of grief (304). Butler proposes an alternative, and non-hierarchical mode of grief which is instead based on a shared bodily vulnerability and precarity (30); that is to say, a more inclusive notion of the human dependant not on the liberal humanist category of Man, but rooted in the body itself, and its susceptibility to injury.

In Salas' work, resistance to dehumanisation is approached through a series of different bodies. At its core, a critical puppetry demands the question "what is a body?", paying particular attention to the political resonances of this enquiry. As such I consider a number of bodies: that of the puppeteer, those of the puppets, that of an onion and that of a machine. A critical puppetry analysis also requires that we consider the politics of form. More specifically, what is communicated through the form and mechanics of puppetry and material performance? What power dynamics are revealed in the relationships between puppeteer and puppet; between that which is represented and the mechanics of representation? Let us start with Salas himself, and his relationship to the Dante puppet.

Salas appears simultaneously as a puppeteer and a characterised narrator, who occupies the same theatrical world as the puppets he operates and is capable of interacting with them. Paul Pirus terms this "co-presence" (31), which is distinct from the costumed but uncharacterised puppeteers visible in works such as *War Horse* (2007). The specific characterisation of Virgil as a *coyote* positions Salas, who

was born in Mexico City, grew up in Costa Rica, and now resides in the US, in a very particular relationship with the puppets and characters he presents.

The cultural associations of *coyotes* – hired people-smugglers as distinct from traffickers – are wide-ranging and difficult to disentangle from politically motivated moral panic around undocumented immigration; cultural and media narratives paint *coyotes* variously as professional service providers, trusted benefactors, and exploitative victimisers of migrants (Slack and Martínez 152-3). Of course, this is testament to the many and varied individuals who provide this service, as well as shifting political narratives, but it is also the case that the increased demand for assistance created by intensified border enforcement has resulted in greater costs and vulnerabilities borne by migrants crossing the border (157). By casting himself as a *coyote*, one who possesses an invaluable specialist expertise in borders, Salas positions himself in a liminal space wherein he is at once migrant, helper and abuser. Virgil occupies a position of lesser vulnerability than Dante, but one (likely) greater than the predominantly US American audience. Salas imbues the flamboyantly dressed Virgil with a mercurial and often cruel playfulness, recalling the pre-colonial trickster figure *Huehucóyotl*:⁵ the other kind of coyote.

Before exploring the specific intersubjective relationship between Salas/Virgil as puppeteer and Dante as puppet, I want to take a moment to reflect on how the relationship between puppeteer and puppet is commonly theorised, and some possible limitations to this approach. In her introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*, Dassia Posner provides a concise definition of puppetry as “the human infusion of life into lifeless, but not agentless, objects in performance”, but adds that the life and agency of puppets and other performing objects has become a central point of enquiry within puppetry studies, often engaging with wider new materialist frameworks (5). However, while scholarship in puppetry and material performance has thoroughly contested the lifelessness and inanimacy of objects, less attention has been given to the troubled consolidation of the (Western) subject, with most puppetry scholarship assuming a stable category of the subject/human. As Wynter contends, we have never all been

⁵ *Huehucóyotl* is an Aztec deity whose animal form was the coyote, and who was associated with music, dance, mischief and uninhibited sexuality.

human, as within Western modernity this category of being has been naturalised as synonymous with the category of (white, western) Man (260).

I argue that without engaging with political and racial ontologies, puppetry cannot resist, and may indeed reproduce, hegemonic racial ideologies. Chen proposes that hierarchies of humanity—which have been used to deny subjecthood to certain people across intersecting matrices of race, disability, class, and gender—are reliant on underlying hierarchies of animacy which are both politically significant and culturally produced (30). This framing carries fascinating implications for puppetry, which produces a constant shifting of animate status which might both reinforce and destabilise such ontological hierarchies. For example, is a puppet, non-living but capable of animation, more or less animate than an onion, alive but visibly inanimate? While the body of the puppeteer might be assumed to exist at the top of any such hierarchy, the act of puppetry requires that the puppeteer move only in the service of the animation of a puppet—as such, the animating force might be said to belong to the puppet. Chen’s assertion that the logics of dehumanisation often rely on the related logics of objectification—whereby dehumanisation is achieved by actively reconceptualising the human as an object (43), might be understood as a warning of the dehumanising potential of puppetry.

While Liam Jarvis and Sue Buckmaster (107) rightly caution against a simplistic equation of object performance with objectification – which might imply that puppet representations are inherently dehumanising – it must nevertheless be acknowledged that puppetry has often been employed for the specific purposes of racialised dehumanisation, from William John Bullock and Lambert D’Arc’s marionette minstrel shows of the late 1800s (Fisler 33) to Jeff Dunham’s Jose Jalapeno on a Stick in the present day.⁶ As Michael Meschke notes, many puppeteers also reject the term manipulation due to the negative and coercive associations of the word. Again, while endorsing this distinction, I would caution that throughout history puppetry has indeed been used to manipulate bodies and identities, including in the service of ethnic hatred (Condee) and in unwittingly replicating damaging racial stereotypes and ideologies. For the purposes of this

⁶ A character who appears in Dunham’s ventriloquist act who is depicted as an anthropomorphic jalapeño pepper on a stick with a long, drooping moustache and a small sombrero. Dunham affects a thick, ostensibly Mexican accent when voicing José.

chapter, I prefer the less negatively charged term “animate”, partly due to the aforementioned links with Chen’s animacy theory and partly because I believe Salas is using puppetry to animate a complex discussion of borders and boundaries—not simply geopolitical borders but also the boundaries between object/subject, living/dead and human/inhuman.

I also introduce the idea of *empuppetment*, both to refer to the material construction and animation of a subject in puppet form, but also as a way to understand processes by which human beings are disciplined and animated by politically and culturally constructed frameworks. Empuppetment is related to but distinct from both objectification and manipulation; crucially, it does not deny the agency of those empuppeted, but rather it recognises the ways in which individual agency is nevertheless mediated by legal and political structures in ways that are routinely invisible to the beholder and perhaps also to those empuppeted. In this way it differs from the cultural construct of the all-powerful puppet master and instead recognises the complex interactions of identity, materiality, agency and control which typify actual puppetry.

In sharp contrast to Jarvis and Buckmaster’s resistance to the objectifying potential of puppetry (107), Salas wholeheartedly embraces the objectification of Dante, who is presented as a jointed wooden puppet. Salas does not animate Dante according to the usual conventions of puppetry but rather through violent interactions with his body. I want to take a moment to examine two such moments, focusing not simply on what is being depicted but also on the mechanics of representation. I opened this paper with a reading of a scene which deliberately called into question the animate status of an onion, and encouraged consideration of the onion as a body and character onstage. Here I wish to explore the reverse, moving away from the notion of Dante as a character, if not a body. I contend that this is a reading that Salas’ particular use of puppetry encourages.

Two moments

I will begin with the first appearance of the main character, Dante. A simple action summary might read as follows: “Virgil pulls away a sheet to reveal Dante, who is

strapped to the purgatory machine. Virgil begins to adjust the machine as Dante quakes in fear.” A more detailed attention to the mechanics of representation might read as follows – here I have chosen the pronoun “it” to refer to Dante, both to avoid confusion with Salas but also to signal that I am discussing the puppet itself, and to observe what this linguistic choice does to an understanding of Dante’s animacy:

Salas whips away the white sheet with a flourish and a grin, revealing Dante. Dante is suspended from a wooden scaffold which it is tied to by its wrists and ankles. The scaffold sits atop a small table, from which hangs a banner inscribed with the word “PURGATORY”. Dante is a small, roughly carved, painted wooden puppet approximately 1.5 feet in height. Dante is nude, its carved wooden penis exposed. Its physical appearance is not wholly dissimilar to that of Salas. The wooden scaffold includes two pendulums, a hanging metal sheet, and various connected strings, giving it the appearance of a contraption. Crossing the stage, Salas drapes the sheet over his head, clasps his hands together and directs his gaze upwards in a pose reminiscent of “Madonna in prayer” religious iconography. He wraps the sheet around his shoulders and sashays back to Dante’s scaffold; turning away from the audience, he places his hands on the table and arches his back, looking over his shoulder at the audience. He walks slowly around to the back of the table, caressing his buttocks. He plucks at the scaffold contraption; this produces a noise which is amplified and heavily distorted. He picks up a violin bow and begins to draw it across the strings at the top of the scaffold - this too results in an amplified and distorted noise. The vibrations are passed through the frame to Dante, causing its body to shudder and convulse. Salas sets a pendulum in motion, producing a ticking sound. He does not touch Dante.

While the visible puppeteer is likely the dominant convention of contemporary puppetry (Francis 27), it nevertheless remains standard practice for puppeteers to hide in plain sight, drawing focus to the puppets rather than to themselves. In this reading it becomes apparent that Salas is directing the audience’s attention firstly to himself, secondly to the purgatory machine, and only

finally to Dante, the puppet. It is clear that Dante's animation is a result of Salas' action, transmitted through the machine. This forces the audience to encounter Dante not simply as a dramatic character, but also to consider the relationships between Salas/Virgil, the purgatory machine and Dante. Salas' physical presence is hyperanimated and theatrical throughout; he burlesques religious and sexual imagery with an arch pleasure, and brings an intense focus to his ministrations to the purgatory machine.

Salas signals his own positionality as a Mexican migrant throughout, both explicitly within his dialogue and through the use of cultural signifiers; this positionality seems crucial to his wholehearted embrace of the violent potentiality offered by puppetry and material performance. Certainly, the gleeful violence inflicted on surrogate Mexican bodies would likely read differently if performed by a white US American performer. But what is signalled by the unusual remove created by the intermediate control mechanism of the purgatory machine? I will revisit the layered possibilities offered by the machine shortly, but for the time being I will suggest that the lack of direct contact between Salas/Virgil and Dante serves two primary functions. Firstly, this emphasises Dante's objectness and empuppetment, interfering with any possibility of reading Dante as a conventional dramatic protagonist. Secondly, this discourages any readings of the piece which might literally interpret the depicted violence as solely referring to the individual actions of e.g. coyotes or border patrol officers. The lack of direct human/puppet contact encourages a consideration of state and systemic forces, and depersonalises the violence in a manner that rigorously avoids common tropes of the cruelty and monstrosity of individuals. Additionally, Salas' use of his own body to portray Virgil, combined with the use of direct address throughout, leads to an inevitable blurring of the identities of Salas/Virgil. The use of a wooden puppet body to portray Dante, combined with the distance created through the mechanisms of manipulation, avoid identifying Salas strongly with Virgil. This in turn may discourage further empathetic projection of the audience into the character of Dante.

To further explore the ways in which the puppeteer/puppet relationship is used to explore real-world violence and the dynamics of power enacted by border regimes, I turn to a second moment of interaction between Virgil and Dante which

occurs approximately halfway through the production. Again, an action summary might read, simply: A hooded man intubates Dante and force-feeds him brown liquid, which Dante excretes into a jar.

Virgil/Salas smiles at the audience as Judy Garland's Somewhere over the Rainbow begins to play. He walks over to a small table and removes a black, pointed PVC hood from a hook. Turning away from the audience, he dons the hood and turns back with a flourish - the hood leaves only his eyes and mouth exposed.

Hood/Virgil/Salas crosses behind the table to a small crock pot of stewed pinto beans; dipping a spoon in, he raises a spoonful of the steaming liquid, letting it drip back into the pot. He crosses to the audience, proffering a spoonful which he again returns to the pot. He picks up a serving tray laden with small jars and bowls and ferries it over to the purgatory machine, displaying it to the audience with a pirouette. Selecting an empty jar, he places this underneath the purgatory machine, returning to the table for another jar, this one filled with brown liquid, which he again displays to the audience, miming olfactory disgust at the contents. Hood/Virgil/Salas turns away to place this jar on the purgatory machine and picks up another object from the tray. He lifts the object dramatically above his head. It is a clear plastic tube approximately 4 feet in length, which terminates in a small orange funnel at one end. Hood/Virgil/Salas spins, waves the tube jauntily and mimes inserting the non-funnel end between his buttocks. Turning towards Dante, Hood/Virgil/Salas begins to insert the same end of the tube into its body via the mouth. Dante's body jerks and thrashes as Dante/Salas scream in one voice.

The intubation takes around 45 seconds - part-way through Hood/Virgil/Salas turns to placate the audience with a raised palm. Once the tube has emerged from between Dante's legs, Salas transfers the brown liquid to a small metal pan, and placing a larger metal funnel inside the orange plastic funnel, pours the entire contents of the bowl through the tube and through Dante's body. The brown liquid slowly drains into the empty jar beneath the purgatory machine. Hood/Virgil/Salas makes the OK symbol to the audience.

There is much to unpack here, but let's begin with the relationship between Salas and Dante. If it has already been ambiguous whether Salas is acting as Virgil or Salas (an ambiguity heightened by occasional audience asides about the performance itself), the donning of the hood further muddies the question of onstage identity. Certainly, the force-feeding and purging of Dante by Virgil, a coyote, does not make straightforward narrative sense. Firstly, Dante's intubation unambiguously evokes the contemporaneous force-feeding of hunger-striking ICE detainees, a manifestation of state rather than individual violence, and one that bears little resemblance to any of the duties of a coyote. Further, the purging that takes place (contextualised by Virgil as a purging of Dante's sins) would seem to be a function of the purgatory machine.

I propose that the hooded figure is therefore coded as an extension of the purgatory machine, one of the many faceless individuals tasked with enacting the violence demanded by the state. This, curiously, leads to a sense that the hooded figure is himself empuppated, which is furthered by the obscuring of Salas' flesh with inorganic material and the manner in which Salas' body becomes wholly animated by the violent task he performs. This can be understood as signalling the inevitable dehumanisation of those tasked with enacting the violence demanded by border regimes. Indeed, while there is a theatricalised quality to Salas' movements there is also a practiced and quotidian quality to how he discharges the tasks – something akin to the demonstration of equipment at a trade show for torturers, albeit with burlesque overtones.

However, the brief slippage between Dante/Salas that occurs when Salas vocalises Dante's screams – also a rare moment of contact between their respective flesh and wooden bodies – hints that whatever distance Salas has introduced between himself and Dante through the mechanisms of the performance, the potential for identity to bleed through and out of their bodies is ever present. This is further developed in the scene immediately following the purging; the release of Dante's shit appears to free up something within Salas/Virgil, who briefly loses his arch irreverence and rails at the audience, initially in Spanish, about the human cost of US capitalism.

Vegetable matters

What other work might be being done by the introduction of biological matter, which begins as stewed beans but also comes to stand in for shit? Clearly, it is a simple sleight of hand that mimics the biological process of ingestion and excretion, but the beans are able to confront an audience with the reality of the body in ways that the wooden puppet alone cannot. The beans are warm, they smell, they rot. They are essential to life, taken into and becoming part of the human body, and are animated by transformative processes of both cooking and of digestion – indeed, slow stewing has broken them down to a consistency which resembles already-digested food. They are also associated with the specific bodily needs of Mexican migrants, who have been assigned the racist epithet “beaner” by parts of the US population. The beans, their scent and viscosity invoking not only the sustenance and excreta, but also the viscera of human existence, engender a forcefully affective connection between the wooden body of the puppet, the human bodies it represents and the human bodies of the audience.

This returns us to the onion. While a less obvious proxy for human victims of state and political violence than Dante, the onion offers further qualities that the puppet does not. Matthew Cohen asserts that all puppets carry in them the inherent potential for their own destruction but also an attendant potential for reanimation (126-7). When Dante is harmed, we understand that the puppet can be dusted off and reused for the next performance. But this is not always the case – Margaret Williams contrasts the “death” and reanimation of formally stable puppets with instances in which the form of the puppet is itself destroyed, for example a paper figure which is reduced to ashes, arguing that the latter represents a more complete “death” (19-21). The onion, which is not only formally destroyed but is also changed onstage from a living thing to dead matter arguably represents one of the most complete material “deaths” which can be enacted on stage. This death does not occur without struggle – the onion, in attempting to defend itself, releases a chemical irritant which produces a physiological response superficially similar, at least, to grief.

The interruption of the real cutting of an onion with the theatricalised threat of

violence in which the knife transforms from kitchen implement to improvised weapon brandished at both unseen assailants and the audience, unearths the violence within the common domestic act of chopping vegetables – an act which dismembers bodies and ends lives, albeit nonhuman ones. This serves to make explicit that onions, victims of state violence and the audience are all united in a shared material vulnerability; the effect of the knife on any of their flesh will be much the same. Salas makes use of the qualities of the Dante puppet – it clearly signifies the human form and is, practically speaking, reusable – and layers these qualities with that of the onion – it is alive, it can be entirely destroyed in performance. In doing so, Salas both defamiliarises the onion and allows an equivalency of sorts with the human body.

This is not the first time Salas has used food to destabilise the boundaries between animate and inanimate matter and human and nonhuman bodies. In *Maya Genocidio* (2016), Salas stages the trial of Fernando Romeo Lucas García – the former president of Guatemala responsible for the genocide of indigenous Guatemalans – who is embodied by a wooden puppet skeleton wrapped in raw meat. At the culmination of the trial, the body is cooked, and the audience, which included family members of García's victims, were offered the opportunity to consume the flesh. The act, which Salas describes as cannibalism, blurs the lines between human flesh and meat, between ritual symbolism and corporeal revenge.

This troubling and blurring of ontological categories is a key offering of critical puppetry. If we understand dehumanisation as an often racialised process which denies certain humans the status of thinking human subject via constructed hierarchies of animacy (Chen 43), then puppetry, which destabilises mainstream ontological categories of objecthood and subjecthood, offers a uniquely powerful and dangerous location from which to speak about race and dehumanisation. Salas uses objects to represent subjects who have been granted the status of objects in mainstream political discourse. Lifeless matter is used to represent lives that, to draw on Butler, are not considered fully living because their proximity to death is naturalised and assumed. We have seen this logic deployed continually during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic in the framing of certain lives as vulnerable, as if the frequently cited underlying conditions render the loss of these lives an almost

inevitable consequence of this vulnerability rather than the avoidable result of politically and economically motivated decisions.

The Purgatory Machine

This focus on bodily vulnerability, as opposed to Dante's goodness and dignity, points to a rigorous avoidance of a particular kind of empathy courted by narratives of the good migrant. Staying with the various moral regimes that attend upon refugee or asylum status, I wish to consider the role of the purgatory machine, arguably the central character of *7 Deadly Sins in the Border*. The purpose of the purgatory machine is to literally purge Dante of his sins—all of which are mapped onto narratives of “bad” migrants—in order to transform Dante from underserving to deserving migrant, and thus grant him the full humanity required to reach the US. There is historical precedent for both the racialised coding of Dante as unclean and the industrialised, inhumane, and physically damaging measures taken to remedy this: Salas was inspired by the practice of spraying DDT on Mexican migrant workers on entry to the US in the 1950s, extending this to the notion of spiritual purity (2021). Here, the violent bureaucratic apparatus which disciplines humans into deserving/underserving migrants is realised as a simple wooden construction which strips Dante of his actual, enfleshed humanity even as it purports to humanise him. The hidden violence of a system which sustains itself on its supposed capacity to distinguish between humans deserving and undeserving of mobility is spectacularised through the apparatus of the machine.

The routine and automated nature of this process crystallises dehumanisation as not simply an ethical or philosophical act, but a political and economic act necessary for the functioning of racial capitalism, which demands the empuppment of raced bodies. That some of these bodies will be destroyed, whether during border crossing or in the process of unsafe and precarious labour, is not an aberration within the functioning of the machinery but rather an inevitable consequence of its operation. The border empuppets, assigning migrants with a narrow set of possible actions and disciplining their bodies into particular activities and narratives. This empuppment can also be seen in the reliable production of

cruelty on the part of border officials.

It is incorrect to imagine that the primary function of borders is to prevent movement – borders assign bodies with classifications that do not simply denote who may or may not cross, but also what the conditions of crossing impose on those bodies. According to Heyman, the current US border serves not only its acknowledged function—that is, to impose an unequal degree of mobility on Mexican and US subjects—but also serves a vital function as a site of unofficial labour processing, allowing for the commercial exploitation of undocumented workers (269-273). The purgatory machine, which subjects humans to a process of violent empuppetment and renders their bodies disposable even as it purports to confer legitimate status to the deserving, thus makes visible a core function of the apparatus of border enforcement.

The question of visibility, of what can be seen, haunts Salas' piece. Undocumented victims of border enforcement violence and unsafe labour practices are inevitably hidden from view. Political activists and advocates have been criticised for an excessive focus on the trauma and violence visited on racialised bodies, often understood to be at the expense of the dignity and humanity of victims of violence (Slobodian). However, Salas' work is unusual in that it rigorously avoids the dramaturgy of empathy and identification that so often underpins such presentations. By the end of the performance, the stage reeks of bodily trauma. Yet the audience is never coached to a cathartic identification, is not schooled in sympathetic grief. The terrible power of the imagery is precisely in the quotidian depiction of violence. Not monstrous, not spectacular, but routine. The presence of Salas' body, and his visible positionality in relation to Dante – as an unsympathetic yet unaggressive agent of Dante's suffering – is crucial to this. Salas' relationship to the puppet does not allow for self-congratulatory outrage on the part of the audience because he himself is implicated in the action. His hyperanimated presence places him at the centre of the work, raising uncomfortable questions about the role of an artist in the trafficking of human trauma through acts of empathetic border crossing. To witness Salas empuppet Dante is to recognise the potential of theatrical representation to do violent harm to those who are represented.

Conclusion

A critical puppetry demands that the puppeteer reveal their own positionality in relation to the material and characters they represent; a more complete and complex revelation of self than simply stepping from behind the booths or veils that have typically hidden puppeteers.⁷ Paulette Richards has suggested that “African American performers have been slow to embrace puppetry because we *were* puppets”,⁸ and it is my contention that a *visible puppeteer positionality* allows puppeteers to engage directly with the coercive frameworks that haunt both puppetry and racialisation.

Acknowledging his positionality, Salas’ work uses the various bodies onstage to insist that the horror of border regimes is not simply that their exclusionary violences are levelled at innocent people, but rather that such cruelties are levelled at any human body; that the moral regimes used to justify borders are themselves an unspeakable and an unspoken violence. In his refusal to sentimentalise victims of state violence through sympathetic biographical detail, and his highlighting of shared corporeal vulnerability, I contend that Salas’ work appeals to a more inclusive sense of the human than that which has been naturalised in the contemporary western world. In doing so he perhaps begins to find an answer to calls by Butler and Ramos for forms of grievability that transcend the boundaries of subjecthood.

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⁷ See also Poster-Su, “Sculpting China”.

⁸ In Puppet Objections, an informal working group on puppetry and minoritised bodies convened by myself, Paulette Richards, Mike Chin and Hazel Rickard. I have learned a great deal from our ongoing conversations.

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