

Chapter 10: Beyond representation: A conversation with Jummy Faruq on decentring puppetry practice and design

Tobi Poster-Su

Jummy Faruq is a puppeteer, theatre-maker, and facilitator based in the UK. They are the founder of Puppetry Creatives of Colour UK¹, who hosted their inaugural retreat in January 2022. Tobi Poster-Su is a puppeteer, theatre-maker, and researcher exploring puppetry and racialization. Since early 2021, Jummy and Tobi have conducted an extended conversation over Zoom and WhatsApp about puppetry, race, and their respective practice-based research. On 14 September 2021, Tobi sat down with Jummy to discuss the culmination of a year-long Arts Council England funded research and development (R&D) project working with Mafwa theatre² and Shantona Women's Centre³ to produce puppets and run workshops rooted within local communities of color. The discussion has been edited for length and clarity.

Tobi: What was the project?

Jummy: What? That's the vaguest question. I just asked you to ask me really specific questions and you're like «So what's the project? » (laughs).

Tobi: Fair. So, it was an R&D which was specifically around the idea of working with puppetry with communities of color, is that right? Was it initially an R&D with a particular endpoint in mind, or more exploratory?

Jummy: The idea was to create a set of puppets, and puppetry workshops, by the end of it, that were representative of PoC⁴ and inclusive.

Tobi: And what was the impulse behind this — what did you feel was missing from current practice?

Jummy: By this point, I had been working in puppetry for several years, and I just felt like I was not able to bring my full self to spaces — all the spaces are just hella white! Training, seeing shows — a lot of the time I was the only PoC. And I don't think I was always conscious of that, but as I started to think more about race and identity, I felt like «Oh, I kind of understand why I've had this underlying feeling of «outsideness» in those spaces.» And what I feel like we need, or at least I need is to be in spaces where I can see myself in the people, in the materials that are used — in the text, in the puppets.

Tobi: That really resonates. I'm really interested in the fact that you've identified a number of layers of inclusion that have to happen for puppetry to be a more welcoming space for people of color. What I find frustrating about diversity initiatives is they so often end at the invitation...

Jummy: (groans) «We invite PoC to apply.»

Tobi: ...and the historic barriers to entry aren't just that the application forms didn't say, «We particularly welcome applications from people of color.» But it strikes me that what you're immediately working with is a much more coherent and multi layered approach. Thinking about who it's about, who else is in the space, both as participants and as a

facilitator, puppets that you can see yourself in. I'm interested in this idea of materials that are more inclusive or exclusive...

Jummy: I don't necessarily mean physical materials, but everything you bring to the workshop. It could be the objects that you use, but I was thinking also around what we use as devising prompts — texts, images, we might use a postcard or something from a newspaper article. It's those subtler details that I never saw myself in either.

Tobi: I have the materiality of puppets on the brain, but I wonder if there is something there too?

Jummy: Let me tell you something: the marionette puppet we made [in the R&D], I keep it in a mango box — just because that's what I had — but I think it's really nice to bring that into this space. When I brought it in and the participants were like «Oh, you brought mangoes!» and I had to say «Nah, sorry guys!» But mangoes unite all PoC.

Tobi: There's something about whose cultural trappings are being mirrored and enacted and replicated within a space, right? We talked recently about the whiteness of sandwiches as event catering.⁵ I'm thinking about how whiteness is enacted at all levels of a process, in the details of the environment, the nature of how things are stored. It all feels crucial in terms of moving beyond this idea that it's simply about inviting people into a white space.

Jummy: I'd love to play more with that — how we create an environment. I'd love to have been in a yurt, a circular space. But this is just the beginning.

Tobi: Are there any other things you identified — thinking about spaces or practices that might make you feel less welcome and how you tried to work against this in your process?

Jummy: I remember at the start of the project, my mentor asked, «how are you going to ensure that the process centers PoC?» and I said, «I'll just do the opposite of what's happening now.» I just knew it had to include PoC at all levels. A lot of it is about feelings rather than necessarily being able to name exact specifics, because whiteness is so...I remember reading this essay on white supremacy being like a monster that shifts its form. And that's what it feels like. Whiteness is so «neutral» — it's right there but no one sees it.

There's a feeling that I have felt in certain white majority spaces which is a sort of rigidity, of being rushed. I was aware of that, of trying not to be too rigid. Though I feel I was at times!

Tobi: I think it's so important to remember that we're always working from inside these structures. That goes for my questions too — a lot of what you're talking about is instinctive and embodied knowledge. And what I'm doing with my questions is trying to codify it into a sort of action plan, when maybe we're talking about modes of knowledge that can't be held by action plans.

Jummy: When I've been in PoC spaces — workshops and events that are specifically for PoC — there's often a lot of consideration and care taken towards making people feel comfortable. You have the agency to say, «I'm going to step out of this now» or «I don't really want to be put on the spot» and know no one in that space is going to question you for taking agency. As a PoC in a white workshop space, if I feel I need to step out...I would usually have to think twice about doing that.

Tobi: Which is interesting, because of course, the moment you start doing that it also becomes a less-ableist space, it becomes a space more capable of holding neuro-diverse participants.

Can you tell more about the specifics of the process — what were the stages, who was involved?

Jummy: It started with Mafwa theatre and Shantona women's center. Mafwa had an associate artists' grant for women from refugee and migrant backgrounds in Leeds — I think there were six participants. They got mentoring and workshops from facilitators from different artistic backgrounds, so that they can use it in their own practice. Some of the group shared things like, «I already act» or, «I already write. » And some of them said, «I'm really interested in this, but I don't know if I'd call myself an artist. » So that was really interesting.

Those were the participants. And the illustrators I brought in to help design the puppets were Zoya Ahmed, Soofiya Andry, and Marie Perault, and the puppet makers were Sascha Gilmour and Shaun Lati. They were all from different PoC backgrounds. And I had a mentor, Trina Haldar, throughout the process.

So in the planning phase, before the pandemic, I thought «It's gonna be easy — we'll do a workshop, we'll come up with some text or they'll draw something, and then we'll make puppets! Go Jummy! You've finally made something simple!» Yeah, that didn't happen. But I learned a lot!

The second phase was working with the associate artists. It was during the pandemic, so it was all online. And I thought «bloody hell, how am I gonna teach puppetry online? Without puppets?» But actually, even when I had planned it I didn't set the content of the workshops, I thought I'd be responsive when I got there. So I think that worked well.

The first session was about just getting to know them, asking them their experience of puppetry. People were from different countries, but there was a lot of common ground, like puppets that are satirical and political and talk about domestic issues in a really funny way. But it's deep underneath. That was something that people had across different cultures.

The following sessions used writing exercises with objects shared with me by Sarah Wright and Anna Murphy. This was about getting an object, finding the weight, the material, and the smell etc. And then from there, using those words, to imagine the perspective of the object as if it was alive. Then they read back what they wrote — who is this character? And it was funny because I'm not always clear; I meant them to come up with a character, but to start with people would say «this really reminded me of my little sister...» I thought «Oh, okay, I see how you took that.» But we used some of those texts as well, so that was cool.

So, the first stage was about coming up with a character so that the illustrators could draw them. And then the next stage once we've got all the writing was to send it to the illustrators.

Tobi: So the illustrators transformed a piece of writing into character designs? What was the process for that — was it something that you laid out? It feels like quite a specific and unusual brief.

Jummy: Yeah, they said that! They did ask «Are there parameters Jum? Because we could do anything?» And I said «Yeah, I wanted that, just do what you want. Let your imagination go wild» and they said «Okay, but wouldn't the puppet makers need to know certain things? When we do the design, what would be helpful to them?» So I went to the puppet makers and asked «what would be useful for you to know, and to see in the designs so that you could make the puppets within budget and timeframe?» So we needed to make sure the illustrations weren't too complex, but that they were still able to be designed within the time. Yeah. So I suppose, for example, Shaun said it'd be really good to have puppets that perhaps have some flowy material so that we're not making legs — he came at it with a bit more practicality. And then Sascha was bringing...she really likes working with atmosphere and little details, and she said, «Yeah, I'd really love to see some of that.» So that was reported back to the illustrators, and that definitely helped. So, yeah, I think it was important for there to be communication back and forth. I kind of thought of this so linearly in my head, this whole project, but I now realize there was so much need for back and forth.

Also, we wanted a set of seven puppets in the end, and we didn't necessarily have that many texts that were written from the object exercise. So we used lists as well, like shopping lists, that was part of the exercises of coming up with the character design. We thought let's send the illustrator a shopping list and see who comes out of that.

Tobi: So, it feels like even with all the parameters, it's a really wild design brief. Where did that come from? Was this a practice you have some experience with?

Jummy: Have I worked like that before? I think I haven't. Really, I think it came from wanting to work like that...A sense of «what happens if,» like [the game] exquisite corpse.

I'm really interested in the moment where you think «I never would have come up with that if I didn't just play with it.» Yeah. What I liked about this process is that everyone puts their ideas in. I did start off with an idea of what the puppets would look like. But yeah, that went out the window.

Tobi: It feels like you're embracing a playfulness, not only that, but also the role of chance and the possibility for, perhaps not miscommunication, but the possibility for something to not translate exactly between two things, a possibility for something to sort of transform through the process between two people, or two forms. It strikes me that you're very consciously working transculturally, and perhaps welcoming an idea of things changing in translation. Were you conscious of trying to work against a rigidity of processes which you mentioned experiencing in white spaces, in adopting an approach which privileges chance and transformation?

Jummy: Was that intentional? Now that you say it, I'm like...yeah. I think a lot of what I try to do doesn't go to plan, and mistakes happen. And I'm trying to embrace that, maybe I've subconsciously tried to put that into the way I work.

For example, another kind of misinterpretation: I sent each of the illustrators three texts that they would turn into three character designs. But when I sent them on to Soof, they actually combined it into one character design. So we've got this character where the shopping list is present in their clothes — you can see fruits and vegetables on them — but then the two other texts, one came from the prayer plant, which was like, «I wonder how long it will take you for to notice me, to see me. I'm your friend, some call the likes of me guardian angels,» things like that. And then the other texts were a bit more straightforward — «I am a mother,

and I'm scared that my children will leave me.» So that all got mixed up into one awesome character design.

Tobi: I think what's clear is that a wealth of discoveries have come out of this, and also that there are not many projects in the UK which are working outside of white frames with puppetry, so there's so much that's interesting in terms of new knowledge being generated. I'm so interested in the puppets that you ended up with; what really struck me when you first showed me the images was how rare it is to see modern puppets representing people of color, where the ethnicity of those people is not really clearly signaled in the design of the puppet, which isn't to say that was true for all of them, there were some that had clear signifiers of race. But even those didn't feel nearly as...literal.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1: One of the completed puppets. Photo: Jummy Faruq.

It made me reflect on how even now, when productions are increasingly careful to try and get puppeteers of color to operate similarly racialized puppets, we're still in a place where often those puppets will be designed and built by white makers. I think there's something really limiting about this, because if the people who are in charge of making the puppet are politically aware and sensitive, they're going to work very hard to avoid anything that looks like racist caricature. In a funny sort of way, that means you just end up with something that looks, like a very literal,⁶ nothingy depiction of a racialized person. Often, it's just the puppet they would have made if they were making a white person, and then they've made it brown — the 90s Disney approach to non-white main characters. Or worse, they don't think about it and then you do end up with something that looks like a racist caricature. By contrast, it's

very common to see quite abstract puppets representing characters that are not racialized. It's quite usual for us to see puppets that look nothing like a white person, if the character is white, but I think it's much rarer to see puppets that look nothing like a person of color if the character is a person of color. That abstraction was what really struck me about these representations that have been produced outside of frames of whiteness. I wondered if that was something you had thought about.

Jummy: Like you said, I was thinking about all of this in a really multi-layered way. So when it came to thinking about the puppets, a lot of the puppets I've seen of PoC have been made by white people, and some of them are just really bad. Like in one performance, a white maker had made black puppets, puppets racialized as black, and they looked like they had a skin disease. And then the lighting did nothing for them, it made it worse! And it felt quite caricatured, and I just thought, «where's the line with this?» And similar to how cameras and photography have historically been made for white skin, when you think about putting black and brown puppets on stage, who's thinking about the lighting there? It's so important with a puppet.

And then like there's this classic «Oh, it's a brown puppet because the show is about Arabian Nights and therefore it is brown and therefore it has a turban and therefore it has jewels and sparkly shit and...» I don't relate to that. And if it's not that, then it's an animal that we're depicted as, some mythical creature, right? Oh, I guess I'm that one then.

But I agree, I definitely have seen more puppets recently that white makers have made of brown and black people and they look like they could be a real person, maybe they've based it on a real person.

Tobi: It strikes me though that what you have is someone who makes something that's non-offensive, but actually, what we want from a puppet design is creativity and verve and all those things. And so often we end up with puppets, which are at worst offensive and at best boring. And what struck me about all of the puppets that were produced in this process is that none of them were obviously offensive or boring. And I'm not saying that that's unique, but sadly it is quite unusual. Were you expecting to end up with such abstracted designs?

Jummy: No, not at all. I thought they'd all be figurative. I thought they'd all be people. I kind of expected most of them to look «female» because of the people I was working with, the women associate artists.

Tobi: So it was surprising to you when you ended up with some puppets that were so abstracted? Were you just hoping for less offensive puppets that look like people of color?

Jummy: Yes, because I was going off my own experience of how I felt in puppetry workshops. What would I want? I would want to be able to see myself. But because the process was so collaborative, it was very intimate and personal in terms of the objects people brought, the people they thought about. People were bringing so much of themselves to this, whether it was conscious or unconscious, that it just came to a point where it wasn't really about representing it visually but about being true to what came up in our imaginations as people of color. That was my happiest and biggest surprise.

Tobi: That's beautiful on a number of levels — there's so much there. However much we might believe we want to move beyond the politics of representation, we're also all kind of

still stuck with this need be represented properly, but it strikes me that in quite an organic way, you've been able to move beyond an initial aim, which was maybe to do with the idea of representation, puppets that look like you, and move to a place where it wasn't just about people being represented, but about people being fully present within a space or process. I'm thinking about the difference between presence and representation, and «representation» seems to imply that you're not *really* there, or that there's just one of you there to represent more people, which is distinct from the idea of «presence,» fully inhabiting or occupying a space; existing within a space as opposed to simply being allowed into it.⁷ And I wonder if your determination to have creatives of color at every stage of the process is what allows for puppets that are less representational.

I think that one of the — pretty niche — privileges of being white is being able to look at a puppet that looks like jay cloths and a potato and think, «that represents me.» There's a sort of assumed privilege in being able to say, «Oh yeah, this totally abstract thing. Yeah, that's me.» I think there's a privilege to that abstraction; to be automatically seen as human whatever form you take.

And it feels like you're working towards a situation where, where people of color might feel more like, «Oh, yeah, that like, weird, abstracted-looking thing, yeah, that might be me as well,» that might not just be assumed to be white. I think that's fascinating.

Jummy: I keep on thinking, there must be so many projects like this that people do, and they just do it. And then it ends. But no one really thinks to look at it with this lens, or ask questions, or see the things that are coming out of it. And I'm like, «Oh shit, that's amazing!» I often haven't had a lot of time to reflect on my processes and stuff — I just do it. It's really

nice to have been able to also share this with you, the space of reflecting and pulling stuff out. It's really exciting — thank you.

Works Cited

Cavallo, J.A., 2021. Sicilian Puppet Theater: Alterity or Diversity? Presented at the Representing Alterity through Puppetry and Performing Objects Symposium, Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry.

Puwar, N., 2004. *Space invaders: race, gender and bodies out of place*. Oxford : New York: Berg.

¹ An informal collective set up to support racialized puppetry practitioners working in the UK.

² A theatre company that works with refugees, asylum seekers and settled communities in Leeds.

³ A Leeds-based service working to empower Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women, children, young people, and families.

⁴ People of Color (PoC) and BAME, are contested and problematized terms which nevertheless continue to function as a shorthand for racialized groups in both casual conversation and organisational strategies. The use of these terms by individuals or organisations cited in this interview by no means represents a full endorsement of the terms themselves.

⁵ This earlier discussion cited Adriana Disman, whose polemic on the whiteness of sandwiches springs to mind every time I approach a buffet table.

⁶ A tendency for white makers of racialized stock character puppets to focus on racial signifiers more than racialized makers of the same character puppets was highlighted by Jo Ann Cavallo at the *Representing Alterity through Puppetry and Performing Objects* symposium at Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry (2021).

⁷ This line of thinking is undoubtedly influenced by Nirmal Puwar's *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (2004)