

Performance ethnography: The role of embodiment in cultural authenticity.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Performance Ethnography:
The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity

During February 2001, I created a performance installation based on my research in Nigeria on the Yoruba deity Osun. The installation, "Searching for Osun," was performance ethnography that charted my overtly subjective and selective meditation on Nigeria. The audience who came interacted with the aspects of Yoruba life that moved me most—dance and music, divination, Osun's relationship to children, "women's work," and food preparation. I was deeply aware of the ways that my African Americanness at times converged with Yoruba realities and at other times sharply veered away from them. While in Nigeria I felt simultaneously foreign and indigenous, welcome and invisible, comfortable and utterly disoriented. These dynamic tensions among African diasporic peoples were suggested in the performance installation through the juxtaposition of Yoruba art with the work of artists in the Caribbean and the Americas, and in the U.S. performers' negotiation of Yoruba movement, language, and sensibilities. The performance ethnography sought to disrupt notions of "the real" by encouraging the participants to question what they accept as truth, and to examine how their truths are shaped by their perspectives. This work allows for the melding of many authoritative texts, many realities, by prodding the participants to create their own truths as they move through the installation. This essay is an exploration of the successes and failures of that project.

"Searching for Osun"

As the audience walked toward the Jones Center for Contemporary Art in Austin, Texas, they were met by Yoruba music and storytelling that was broadcast outside on loudspeakers. Inside, the gallery was loosely marked into an altar space and five areas of continuous performance: The Children's Area, The Market, The Divining Area, The Food Area, and The Drumming Area. Upon entering the gallery, the audience was greeted by Aisha Conner, one of eight performers, who delivered *oriki*-like praises in English. With improvised repetitive poetry, she might thank an audience member for coming to the event, or acknowledge the beauty of that person's spirit, or pray that an audience member be granted prosperity. Most of the performers primarily occupied specific locations within the gallery, but I moved from location to location offering explanations of Yoruba life, instigating improvised arguments with other performers, and chasing down the one child performer in the company, Kala Rose Anderson, who was sent on endless errands by her elders.

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To the left of the entrance in The Children's Area, the audience found a mural combining images of Austin with images of Osogbo, Osun's patron city. Crayons, vibrantly colored paper, and glue were available for children and adults who might want to put their own creativity into the mural. The cement floor held the taped outline of Nigeria with a star identifying Osogbo. Video footage of the annual Osun Festival and the Festival of Sixteen Lamps, which precedes the Festival, was continuously running next to a painting by Austin-based artist Reji Thomas. A large yellow, green, and indigo batik of a nude woman by the water, created by Osogbo artist Nike Okundaye, hung in one corner in the middle of the mural. A 6' x 8' photograph of Yoruba twins hung in another corner, along with museum-like text, which discussed the details of the Osun Festival and the importance of children in Yoruba social structure. Periodically throughout the two-hour performance, one (or two) of the performers stood beside the nude batik and began a monologue that she had written about her relationship to or understanding of Osun. The performers brought their own personal spiritual traditions to this experience. One woman was Christian, two practiced an eclectic blend of African and Asian spiritualities, another was pagan; yet I asked each to talk about the role Osun—a prominent power in Yoruba spirituality—played in their lives. Osun is the force of life and creation, of attraction and pleasure, of luxury and abundance. In the monologues, one woman talked about her...

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