

Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity

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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.



I tie an *iro* (wrapper) around a young girl while she watches women pounding black soap.
Photo: Deanna Shoemaker.

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 admiration for “precocious little girls,” another discussed her ambivalence around motherhood, another talked of her love of opulent cloth, and another described her sexual coming of age. These monologues were the only time during the



Ane Kidd teaches the audience how to make *pepe* stew. Photo: Deanna Shoemaker.

performance that the performers spoke as themselves; during the rest of the event we maintained our roles as Yoruba women. We wore traditional *iros* (wrappers), *geles* (head ties), and *bubas* (blouses), and we spoke a Yoruba-inflected English that I acquired during my Nigerian visits and that the other women practiced from audio and video tapes. None of us was playing a specific Yoruba woman, but instead we represented an amalgamation of Yoruba women we met, studied, observed. The audience was free to listen to the monologues or move through the space to another area they found more appealing.

Immediately to the right of The Children's Area was the popular Food Area. Here, the audience found traditional *pepe* stew with chicken and rice being served by Ane Kidd, a gregarious performer who insisted that the passersby get a lesson in Yoruba food preparation. A basket of tomatoes, garlic and onions—the primary ingredients for *pepe*—a bottle of palm wine and a container of palm oil—were arranged around the performer. An abstract tree made of ironweed leaves and metal hung over the area, and a caged chicken and rooster added their voices to the raucous gathering. A 6' x 8' photograph of a groundskeeper walking through the Osun groves, a woodcut of a woman pounding yam created by University of Texas professor Christopher Adejumo, and a painting by Nigerian artist Wole Oyeyemi contributed to the visual landscape in The Food Area.

Just behind this area hung a painting by University of Texas professor John Yancey suggesting the Yoruba deity of indeterminacy known as Esu. On a nearby wall, a slide display of creation deities from other spiritual traditions and scenes



Audience members try on clothing in The Market. Photo: Deanna Shoemaker.

from Osogbo clicked by throughout the performance. Next to the slides was a 6' x 8' photograph of the rooftops of Osogbo. Across from this image, the clothing I wear each year in the Osun festival was draped on a metal female frame. The displayed clothing marked the entryway to the altar that was encircled by black cloth creating a shrine. The back of the shrine was a ceiling-high exposed brick wall with a diagonal brick ledge in a small corner of the gallery. River rocks, brass bracelets, honey, cloth, plants, and black-eyed peas—all properties of Osun—were placed in the shrine. A Yoruba carved statue of an Osun devotee carrying her offering of thanks to Osun at the river was a focal point in the shrine. Performers instructed the audience members to remove their shoes, enter quietly, and make prayers and praises to Osun if they would like. By the end of the four weeks of the installation, which included four days of performance, many offerings were made to Osun—several jars of honey, candy, jewelry, pennies to satisfy Osun's love of copper, \$156 in bills, and many quarters and nickels, which acknowledge Osun's sacred number five.

Continuing through the installation, to the left of the altar was The Market, which was devoted to Yoruba women's traditional work. Video footage of women engaged in making black soap, clay pots, and *adire* (indigo cloth) continuously played. Piles of Yoruba clothing that the audience could wear was on the floor. Batiks (multi-colored cloths created through applications of dye and wax), reverse appliqué (quilt-like designs made from a simple under-stitched pattern sewn over a contrasting solid color), *asoke* (woven cloth), and *adire* hung from the rafters. A friend loaned me his father's *agbada*—an opulent embroidered kaftan-



Audience members, clad in clothes from The Market, dance while other participants look on.
Photo: Deanna Shoemaker.

like garment, which was spread high above The Market. Tina Anderson, the performer who ran The Market, showed the audience how to create traditional *adire* by dipping a chicken feather in cassava paste, then painting designs on white cotton cloth with the feather. The audience could watch the video, listen to Tina's explanations, and find their own section of cloth to prepare. In The Market, they could also read text that described Yoruba women's crafts.

Walking back past the altar and the slides, then turning right, the audience found The Divination Area. The exhibit designer, Stuart Sussman, constructed a corrugated tin roof that was attached to a gallery wall in this area. Dirt was placed under this awning to suggest the outer dwellings of some Yoruba village homes. Performer B.C. Harrison sat at this location giving information about the role of divination in Yoruba culture. She encouraged the audience to touch many of the items of divination—cowrie shells, an *opon* (divining tray), kola nuts—but she would not actually perform divination. Instead, she gave cryptic information that sometimes sent audience members searching throughout the exhibit for answers. Under the tin roof hung a large batik quilt cover by Gbenga Tope bearing the image of a fishtailed woman. This image is commonly associated with Osun and with her sister Yemonja. Adjacent to this batik was a 6' x 8' photograph of the Iya Osun of Osogbo resting at the Osun shrine. Austin-based artist Andy Colquit created a metal staff with bird images that stood in front of the photograph. Birds are a supreme manifestation of female power and are often seen in spiritual ceremonies for Osun. Along the same wall was a table full of books about Osun, Yoruba pottery making, Yoruba cosmology, and Nigerian history.



B.C. Harrison (center in white) explains divination to audience members while some watch the dancing nearby. Photo: Clyde Cooper.

Circling around to the left in The Drumming Area were examples of the Yoruba art of pounded metal, a king's beaded crown and beaded vest on loan to the exhibit by Romeo F. Montalvo, batik paintings by Yetunde Omoniwa, a woodcut by Arlene Polite, and video footage of a Yoruba masquerade suspended high above the space. Under the footage sat a semi-circle of drummers—Eric Dannenbaum, Alli Aweusi, Michael Stevens, I.D. Adewaye, Rachel Pervin, and Gerard Villanueva—who drummed throughout the performance. In this space, the performers gathered to sing Yoruba songs, offer a traditional Yoruba dance led by performer Chandra Washington, and present two dance dramas—one about the founding of the city of Osogbo, and the other describing how Osun thwarted a Fulani invasion. The Drumming Area was also the site for a scene between myself as my Yoruba “character” and Deanna Shoemaker, a European American woman playing the role of Joni the Ethnographer. Deanna was the embodiment of my disorientation while in Nigeria where I was frequently called *oyinbo*, meaning stranger and white person. Our scene occurred early in the two-hour roving performance to establish this tricky identity for the audience. Because Deanna and I shared this unique relationship in the performance, we wove our Osun monologues together for The Children's Area to further explore the multiple, shifting, and blurry identities that were a central theme of the installation.

In this same space there was also a piece by installation artist Vicki Meek, a 6' x 8' photograph of the 1995 Osun Festival, Yoruba rice paper art by Michael Oludare, and a placard describing Yoruba aesthetics. A large table held Yoruba

newspapers, Yoruba wood carvings, the popular game *ayo* (also known as *mancala*), a CD-ROM on the nature of Osun created by Reginald Metcalf, and postcards, which read, “What happens when images of Nigeria are brought to Austin, Texas for a performance installation: cross-cultural understanding or reinforcement of stereotypes?” The postcard cover image was from Osogbo and read, “Greetings from Austin!” The audience addressed messages to friends, and I mailed them after the performance. The exhibit preparator, Peter Nurczynski, created maps of the installation to help the audience chart a course through the space, and to identify each of the artworks being exhibited.

Performance Ethnography and Embodiment

“Searching for Osun,” was an example of cultural exchange known as performance ethnography, which is, most simply, how culture is done in the body. This method builds on two primary ideas: 1) that identity and daily interactions are a series of conscious and unconscious choices improvised within culturally and socially specific guidelines, and 2) that people learn through participation. If people are genuinely interested in understanding culture, they must put aspects of that culture on and into their bodies. Performance ethnography translates fieldwork experiences into performances among the researcher, artifacts from fieldwork, and audiences. While such performances may entertain, the aim of the work is to explore bodily knowing, to stretch the ways in which ethnography might share knowledge of a culture, and to puzzle through the ethical and political dilemmas of fieldwork and of representation.

This audience-centered brand of performance ethnography is not the only type of performance ethnography possible. D. Soyini Madison is currently scripting a performance based on her work in Ghana with *Trokosi*, the practice of ostracizing girls who have been sexually abused. She plans to direct other performers through the Ghanaian debates over this practice and present this work proscenium-style for audiences. Myron Beasley created a performance ethnography in which the individual performers presented autoethnographic installations about their experience with Yoruba culture as African American gay men. The performers stood near their installations and explained the different elements to the roving audience. Olateju Omolodun enacted a performance about being an African child growing up in the United States. She used her own experiences as the basis for the work, and she performed with women she had cast in various roles. Like Olateju, I also performed in my 1994 ethnographic performance entitled “Broken Circles: A Journey Through Africa and the Self.” In this way, she and I extended Victor Turner’s dictum that “if anthropologists are going to take ethnodramatics seriously . . . we will have to become performers ourselves” (101). Using what Stephen Tyler suggests as an emergent ethnography in which “the form itself emerges out of the joint work of the ethnographer and his native partners” (127), the features of the performance cannot be prescribed prior to the ethnographic encounters. And although a prescription for performance ethnography would be restrictive, I have followed certain principles in the development of

performance ethnographies. These principles underscore the personal nature of fieldwork and the bodily understandings that can be derived from performance.

1) The performance should center around an idea or a question rather than provide a general “you are there” atmosphere. The idea or question constitutes the **context** for the performance. “Searching for Osun” asked two overlapping questions: how does an African American construct identity in Nigeria, and what is the nature of Osun? In establishing the context, specific referents from fieldwork (clothing, articulation of sounds, foods) help demonstrate the challenges inherent in the questions or issues. The referents not only include tangible artifacts and actual members of the culture being presented, but also video footage and audio tapes that give the audience the “real” culture to contrast with the world created in the performance.

While the performers were in The Drumming Area dancing a choreographed sequence of Yoruba movements, an audience member spontaneously joined our dance. She first began to dance to the drummers, then to the dancers and the audience. Her clothing, her movements, and her deportment all suggested that she was indeed a Yoruba woman. It turned out that she was not only Yoruba, but was actually from Osogbo and was therefore very familiar with the ethnographic details of the performance. Her dance, her carriage, her speech, and her relationship to the audience became referents by which the audience could contrast the other performers. Here, the audience could see the U.S. performers stretching to find the Yoruba qualities in our bodies. I hoped that the contrast between referents throughout the gallery, the performers, and the audience would prod the audience to think about the central idea of identity that helped create the context for the work.

2) The performance should grow as a collaboration between the ethnographer and the community being presented. In this way the ethnographer remains **accountable** to her or his fieldwork community. Distance and time may make it impractical to work with community members on the development of the text or have them present during the performance, however this important sharing reminds the ethnographer that they have developed a relationship of mutual influence with the fieldwork community members.

The \$156 that was placed in the shrine during the performances was taken to Osogbo several months later. It was presented to the Iya Osun who serves as the major conduit between Osun and humans. This monetary offering, then, was given the highest possible Osun consecration. Giving the money to the Iya Osun of Osogbo was an acknowledgement of the relationship between the fieldwork community and my ethnographic representations. The Yoruba shared ideas, images, and feelings with me, and I, in turn, offer what I can to them. This relationship is ongoing and reciprocal. It does not end with this project.

After the Yoruba woman joined the performance, the performers’ accountability instantly rose. We had a Yoruba woman among us who would see

the many places where our performances had gaps. Some of the performers said they were afraid to talk when they knew she was present because they feared this woman could hear how their Yoruba accents were poorly executed, or that the woman might even be offended if they did not perform Yorubanness well.

There are some Yoruba living in Austin and teaching at the university. I invited those I knew and was gratified that they appreciated my efforts. Although I could not create “Searching for Osun” with the Yoruba with whom I worked in Nigeria, I could be sure that some Yoruba were present at the performance in Austin, and in this indirect way make myself accountable to representatives of my fieldwork community.

3) Although much current ethnographic work is fully aware of its **subjectivity**, I would still argue that we must point toward the role that subjectivity plays in the performance. Ethnographers must determine how they will situate themselves in the work. Ethnographers do not present the culture but are conscious of how they act as interpreters of the culture. This powerful subjectivity can become a theme to be examined in the performance.

I struggled with how much of my story to include in the performance. With my first attempt at performance ethnography in 1994, Joni the Ethnographer told her story to an audience complete with the travel tropes of arrival, disorientation, and departure. I felt that this autoethnography, in which I was the subject or context, began to obscure the ethnographic details of Yoruba life, and after a few performances I felt as though I wasn’t learning much new about myself or the Yoruba. The improvisational nature of “Searching for Osun” allowed me to be explicit about the subjectivity—through my monologue, through the scene in which Joni the Ethnographer talks to a Yoruba woman, through the various texts displayed around the space—and pushed me into new understandings about identity, as I had to map my identity anew with each audience encounter or each unrehearsed conversation with a performer.

4) **Multivocality** helps to mitigate the authority of the ethnographer, and provide varied, even contradictory perspectives that the audience must synthesize. The active process of synthesizing turns the audience into collaborators in the experience as they sift through the different points of view. Multivocality may be achieved by casting several persons in the production, or through the ethnographer’s embodiment of particular persons from fieldwork, or in encouraging the audience to share their perspectives during the performance. Here, issues of the ethnographer’s performance ability become important to the audience’s understanding of how culture is reflected in body knowledge.

In Yorubaland, children are humble and deferential with their elders. They often serve the elders of the community by doing errands, preparing meals, and tending to smaller children. Although they surely tire of this work and vent their frustrations privately, they would be punished if they refused to obey an elder or if they showed their annoyance in public. In “Searching for Osun,” the youngest

cast member was often fidgety and uncooperative during rehearsals. She is a bright self-possessed child who is accustomed to treating adults like peers. It was difficult for her to accept how she needed to behave during the performance. She simply did not want to practice being submissive. If she didn't convey this aspect of Yoruba culture, if she would not allow her body to conform to different habits, the performance would lose this ethnographic detail. Her ability to perform was directly related to what the audience would understand about Yoruba children. If multivocality is a goal in the performance, the performers must skillfully execute the features of the culture, or the different voices and perspectives will simply be lost.

5) **Participation** differentiates performance ethnography from other forms of documentation and representation, and allows performance ethnography to take advantage of its live nature. Through participation, the audience can contrast their own culturally inscribed bodies with those from the community being shared. They get an opportunity to "practice" the physical elements of culture through the performance. Participation is where some of the deepest understandings occur. We learn a great deal about cultural continuities and discontinuities, about the malleable and contingent features of identity when we humbly attempt to perform across cultural divides.

I was able to realize my vision most fully of what performance ethnography about Osun might be with "Searching for Osun"; however the space itself was a major weakness in the work. In 2000, I staged a simpler version of "Searching for Osun" in the George Washington Carver Museum in a predominantly African American section of Austin. There were five active areas, but because the museum was so small, the audience could experience all five areas simultaneously. The close quarters didn't allow for many people to stand back and stare. They were immersed in action all around them. The Drumming Area was particularly small, which proved to be advantageous to the performance. Audience members were often crowded around the drummers because there was little room to get much distance from them. The audience would spontaneously dance, and those who did not wish to dance could stand across the room and experience the rhythms without appearing to be conspicuously still. At the Jones Center for Contemporary Art, The Drumming Area was the largest of the five areas. When the performers entered for one of the dance dramas, there was a clear demarcation between the performers and the audience, who mostly sat on the floor and watched during these moments. It remained difficult to reduce the sense of being on display while in The Drumming Area at the Jones Center. At the Carver Museum, the audience was on its feet most of the time, making the boundaries between performer and audience more fluid and therefore easier to cross. Participation was significantly hindered in The Drumming Area at the Jones Center.

Participation was also affected by the atmosphere at the Jones Center. The stark white walls were difficult to enliven. Stuart (the designer), Peter (the prepator), and I talked about what could be done to make the space more inviting, to counter the gallery conventions of quiet, solitude, stillness, and "don't



Audience members dance in clothes from *The Market*. Photo: Deanna Shoemaker.

touch.” Fabrics hanging from the ceiling helped bring warmth to the space, but the buffed concrete floors, the sharp right angles the walls created, and the very polished finished look that the final effect achieved worked against the communal, spontaneous atmosphere that would make participation flow naturally. While several audience members crossed the invisible but distinct line separating the performance from the onlookers, I think many more would have ventured forward if the space had been more conducive.

6) The **ethics** of representation remain a challenging issue for ethnographers. Even when accountability has been fully considered, the possible power inequities between the ethnographer and the community being shared can compromise the integrity of the work. As Dwight Conquergood has asserted, the work can move toward commitment rather than detachment, respect rather than selfishness, dialogue rather than exhibitionism, mutuality rather than infatuation.

I hoped to address ethics, in part, by the very location of the work in a gallery. I wanted this location to indicate my awareness of how black bodies have been displayed for all manner of unethical reasons in similar educational and artistic settings. By mounting this work at the Jones Center for Contemporary Art, I wanted the audience to consider the ethical complexities of presenting Yoruba realities out of context and in an environment dangerously reminiscent of sideshows and entertainments. Performance work presented in gallery spaces has been critiqued for its appropriation and fetishization of non-Western cultures. To make sure this point was not lost, Stuart and I created an exhibit brochure, which discussed this issue head on.

Performance Ethnography and Authenticity

An African American search for authenticity is predicated on a hyphenated existence—the very hyphen creating a sense of inauthenticity. Add to this hyphenated experience the race-based oppressions that plague people of African descent throughout the diaspora, and it becomes clearer why Africa (unhyphenated, uncolonized) has been positioned as “homeland” and haven for some African Americans. When African Americans position Africa as an authentic reality, it reflects their own feelings of displacement in the diaspora, what folklorist Regina Bendix calls a “peculiar longing” for “unmediated genuineness” that is a “reaction to modernization’s demythologization, detraditionalization, and disenchantment” (8). The investment in Africa as a space of authenticity persists in spite of the vigorous and widespread critiques offered by anti-essentialists (especially Kwame Anthony Appiah and Stuart Hall), who specifically challenge the excesses of some branches of Afrocentricity, and by “anti-anti-essentialists” such as Paul A. Gilroy and Joseph Roach. Gilroy and Roach postulate a “Black Atlantic” and “Circum-Atlantic” respectively, a literal and figurative terrain comprised of political, aesthetic, and social commonalities in key regions of the African diaspora where mutual influences have proceeded in multiple directions.

Although I am persuaded by the arguments these scholars make against essentialism, especially the social, cultural, and historical continuities that are posited by the “anti-anti-essentialists,” these scholars seem to disregard the passionate longing that undergirds the hope of authenticity. The search for cultural authenticity, much like the search for Osun, is a search for psychic fulfillment. Performance ethnography has led me to believe that by relinquishing the desire for authenticity, one does not give up some vital aspect of blackness or spirituality, but opens up blackness and spirituality to greater variety, ambiguity, and therefore possibility. I acknowledge and respect (and sometimes feel) the desire for fulfillment that authenticity brings while simultaneously believe that, as Bendix states, “In emphasizing the authentic, the revolutionary can turn reactionary” (8), and people are left in bounded isolation rather than recognizing our shared humanity. Performance ethnography is my way to complicate authenticity.

In 1999 when I returned to Nigeria for the fifth time to attend the annual Osun Festival, I also participated in the Osun initiation of an African American woman. Because I recently had been initiated, I was aware of the many differences between what the practitioners did with her and what these same women had done with me two years earlier. The two prominent Yoruba families who presided over the initiation even quarreled about what should be done next and why. At one moment during the three-day ceremony, the initiate-in-training leaned over to me and said, “I am so glad I am here because I am getting the true tradition.” This remark seemed to suggest that the many Lucumi, Santeria, and Vodoun practices in the U.S.—all informed by Yoruba cosmology to varying degrees—were not “true,” that initiations conducted outside of Africa were somehow of questionable validity. If one manifestation is deemed authentic, that implies

that other manifestations are fake. Was the initiate's relationship to Osun more sound because she was initiated in Osogbo rather than Brooklyn? Could "true tradition" occur even when the practitioners needed to debate exactly what should happen next? This initiation, like all cultural practice, is a spontaneously negotiated series of moves that forges its validity in the very process of the negotiation.

With "Searching for Osun," I wanted to examine what constitutes authentic identity and authentic performance and how these constructions are made. Identity issues were foregrounded in my choice to cast a European American woman as Joni the Ethnographer. Many audience members expressed surprise or shock when Deanna introduced herself as Joni, the professor who worked in Nigeria. Deanna performed her role so well that some of those audience members who did not know me prior to the performance accepted that she was Joni, and they couldn't reconcile her phenotypic whiteness with the ideas of blackness that she talked about throughout the performance. Eventually, she and I had to take a few people aside and tell them that she was pretending to be me. Even with this explanation, one audience member insisted that Deanna (believing she was Joni) contact her so Deanna could tell her more about how she mounted "Searching for Osun." This person's response made me wonder if my intention to push an examination of authentic identity could live within the "pretend" world of performance. The conventions of performance may remind an audience that what they are seeing is a conscious construction, but these conventions may not help an audience determine the boundaries of that construction. In some ways this confusion was consistent with the disorientation we often feel when we travel, but in other ways the confusion prevented some spectators from understanding the cultural context, or the central issue of the piece: that identity is constructed, contested, and contingent. For many participants, "Searching for Osun" was more a recreation of Nigeria than it was an interrogation of the very idea of recreation.

As the audience watched the Yoruba woman dance alongside the performers, or as they watched the video footage of a woman making traditional cloth next to a performer engaged in the same action, they had an opportunity to examine both authentic identity and authentic performance—and it is here where the two ideas fruitfully meet. Authentic performance occurs when the details of that performance are so precise that they create an authentic identity—a culturally specific, distinctive, comfortable, full identity. Authentic performance relies on the poise and the improvisational skills of the performer, for it is through improvisation that the performer must imaginatively invent reality and discover what feels true for the "character." The video and live referents serve as a model for the performers and as a standard of evaluation for the audience. The audience could see how my back did or did not undulate with the confidence and grace demonstrated by the Yoruba woman. The audience could practice this undulation and thereby learn more about their own everyday movements, and how those movements help form cultural specificity.

This authentic identity has less to do with essentialism than it does with practice—a tireless striving for the physical details that make up cultures. Blackness is a series of acquired behaviors with political, social, and material ramifications; it is not a conglomeration of indelible heritable characteristics. What some call essentialized features of race may more accurately be the predominance of certain acquired behaviors and attitudes found within particular groups. Rhythm is not inherited, but if one grows up in a family surrounded by music, in a family that encourages family members to dance at every family gathering, then one is likely to acquire a sense of rhythm, and that sense of rhythm will be particular to the kind of music being shared and the kinds of expectations about rhythm that the family holds. In this way, rhythm is only “in the blood” after a persistent physical relationship with rhythm.

With performance ethnography, one determines authenticity by noting the consistent physical details of the performer, and by comparing those details with the referents (video, audio, persons from the culture) that are present. Performance itself creates a particular authenticity that is rooted in the present, in the experiences here and now that are collaboratively and improvisationally generated.

Performance offers a new authenticity, based on body knowledge, on what audiences and performers share together, on what they mutually construct. As a form of cultural exchange, performance ethnography encourages everyone present to feel themselves as both familiar and strange, to see the truths and the gaps in their cross cultural embodiments. In this exchange, we find an authenticity that is intuitive, body-centered, and richly ambivalent.

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