**Between Art and Anthropology/Ethnography: Secrets Under the Skin: Materiality, Sensuous Form and Blurred Boundaries**

"...the production of knowledge is always a collective effort, a series of back-and-forth conversations that produce multiple results" (Taylor 2003, xx).

*Secrets Under the Skin* is a collaborative, multi-media arts-based research project built upon artistic exploration, ethnographic fieldwork and historical research spanning Ghana, Togo and Cuba since 1991. The research explores the connections of the Ewe peoples of West Africa to the Arará peoples who are descendants of the Ewe living in Cuba as a result of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. It focuses on traditional religious dance, music, ritual and shared artistic roots along with religious objects, sacred spaces and oral histories in four specific communities: Dzodze Ghana, Adjodogou Togo, and Perico and Agramonte Cuba. Inherently trans-disciplinary with multiple entanglements and porous boundaries, it offers “interpretive frictions” (Campbell 2011, 54) and alternate/new directions at the boundaries/borders (Miller 2011, 75-77) of ethnography, performance, material culture, material religion, arts-based research and embodiment of lived experience.

During the research a dialogue was initiated between the West African and Cuban communities. Images, photographs, messages and recordings of dance, music and ritual were carried back and forth for comment and reflection. Respected elders in the Cuban field sites began to invite the collaborative team into their homes to see religious objects that were located in private spaces or shrouded while others were present in the everyday view. Objects ranged from old and elaborately carved statues of Catholic saints (included in the Arará religious materiality), old stones elevated to the sacred by ancestors as fodunes (representations of the Arará religious deities) and altars comprised of Catholic statues, fodunes and shifting layers of popular culture and mass produced objects and images. We were often taken to sacred spaces ranging from a lagoon at an abandoned sugar refinery, to a sacred site in the sugar cane field near that refinery and to the threshold of a small and difficult to reach cave-like indentation near a secondary lagoon. Here, we lit a candle for the ancestors and purified it with cigar smoke and rum. Time was also spent listening to and recording multiple elder oral histories. Several members of the research team danced alongside members of all communities during religious ceremonies participating in accompanying rituals that preceded the dance and music infused events.

The data described above all comprise an embodied religious repertoire that exists as layers of materiality, as sensational forms (Meyer 2008, 128), as practice and as performance. All are inherently fluid and consist of simultaneous truths. Moved by the depth of materiality and the performance of religious lived experience, the first stage of this project’s “write-up” is being realized through a multi-media, multi-
temporal, trans-generational and contemporary art installation. Comprised of performance-based videos, photographic assemblages, visual, conceptual and performance art, the installation offers layers of artistic exploration grounded in ethnographic inquiry.

During the development of the installation, works-in-progress were carried between field sites for reflection and comment. At the installation’s opening in Havana, religious elders, musicians and dancers from Cuban field sites were present to witness and comment thus stimulating further ideas. The show went next to Alaska with subsequent reduced versions in San Francisco involving artists’ talks. A skeleton portion of this project was introduced in Ghana and Togo July 2012 for comment and refinement. In July 2013, the entire show will travel to Ghana adding a greater dialogical component for upcoming presentations (Mission Cultural Center, San Francisco, 2014). The reflexive and fluid nature of this installation has become a site for and allowed a generation of knowledge, not just repetition of knowledge (Basu and MacDonald as cited in Brodine 2011, 84).

The artistic intent of this installation is to evoke and suggest the experience and the embodied moments (especially since three members of the research team are also dancers) from a place that speaks of them and of us. It explores the historical context of sensuous forms, simultaneous truths of oral histories, the unfolding of ritual process and shared musical and dance forms recast as imaginative riffs grounded in deep structures. It is built on the dialogues between members of the research team, those we were beside in the field, the materiality of religion and conversations between Ghana and Cuba both literal and figurative.

Parallel voices and dialogues are inherent in the installation design. While the space is infused with contemporary art and performance medias and soundscapes, it is also infused with more documentary style fieldwork videos and photographs. A text-based catalogue accompanies installation artwork “...allowing for the performative cross-indexing of words and works” (Campbell 2011, 55). Repeating images as art and as “data” are in a layered interplay of ethnographic information (see Gibson, forthcoming). This dialogue of subjective and objective layers invites multiple points of view and engagement (Campbell 2011, 55; Gibson, forthcoming). The installation does not replicate ethnographic knowledge/history, but neither is it inventing ethnographic knowledge/history. It does, however, offer a creative space for conversation and a merging of art and anthropology/ethnography.

As arts-based researchers we consistently interrogated our own practices as artists embedded in the ethnographic process. Issues of social and cultural memory, identity, spectatorship, varied representations of experiencing history, politics of authenticity and heritage, alternate modes of ethnographic representation, appropriation of artistic form and materiality all emerged in conversation during our work. The project moved from what van de Port (2011: 17-18) describes as authoring the world through research; that is initiating research with a pre-
determined frame, into one being written by the world in response to fieldwork material. It is a project that is a mode of inquiry embracing artistic and theoretical investigation while crossing and erasing boundaries that are also new borders (Miller 2011, 75) and multi dimensional portals of investigation (Errington 2012, 542). Aesthetic form emerged in active partnership with the materiality of the ethnographic fieldwork (after Delport 2001, 38) telling more complex stories by working with different mediums (Rasool 2001, vii-xi) and inhabiting the space between art and anthropology/ethnography (Campbell 2011, 55-56; Gibson, forthcoming).

As project director and as an artist who employs ethnography as a methodology for inquiry as research and as an artistic process, Material Religion's editorial calls and challenges for re-casting, reflection and for a dialogue with process and embodiment is exceptionally relevant for discussions that include the space between art and anthropology/ethnography. It invites an exploration of materiality inclusive of “the coming to be,” of lived experience, sensuous form, the body, embodiment, performance and their mutual and dialogic conversations. We welcome an “In Conversation” on the blurring of these boundaries/borders and the frictions and frontiers waiting to be crossed (Miller 2011, 75-77; Behr 2007, 145-155). Boundaries/borders are sites of experience while they are simultaneously borders offering frictions and the generation of new ways of theorizing (Errington 2012, 542; Miller 2011, 75-77; Taylor, 2003, 11-16).

Jill Flanders Crosby
with
Brian Jeffery
Marianne Kim
Susan Matthews

Secrets Under the Skin:
www.uaa.alaska.edu/secretsundertheskin

For further reflection see:
www.ethnographicterminalia.org

Bibliography


