

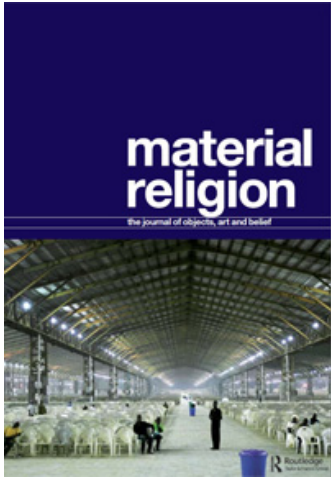
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On: 25 June 2015, At: 06:53

Publisher: Routledge

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Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfmr20>

The art of tracing

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Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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To cite this article: Markus Balkenhol (2015) The art of tracing, Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief, 11:1, 109-110

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/205393215X14259900061715>

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the art of tracing

markus balkenhol

The project *Secrets Under the Skin* raises once more the old riddle of subjectivity in the African diaspora, a riddle that is told either as a story of origins ("roots") or a story of movement ("routes"). *Secrets* makes no decision one way or the other, and instead investigates it as *tension*. Looking at the Afro-Cuban Arará religion, the makers argue that this religion "both is and is not a continuation of Ewe and Fon religious expressions as they exist in West Africa."¹ The West African roots, they continue, "permeate, underpin and inform Arará," but Arará is at the same time a "revitalization" and even a "reinvention" of these roots.

The project is thus situated in a long genealogy of debate about the nature of diasporic subjectivity. A classic in this debate has become Frantz Fanon who wrote in 1952 in response to Léopold Sédar Senghor's idea of *négritude*: "In no way must I strive to bring back to life a negro civilization that has been unfairly misrecognized. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to sing the past at the expense of my present and my future ... My black skin is not the repository of specific values" (Fanon as quoted in Macey 2012: 182). At stake in this debate is, among other things, the body, and in particular the question of how to understand the black body. In particular, Fanon dismissed Senghor's idea that the black body possesses an innate sense of rhythm that distinguishes it from the white body. Fanon opted for a different politics, instead proposing to understand blackness as a historically situated *experience*. For Fanon, the history of transatlantic slavery is both a fact of life for

black people today, and inaccessible except through embodied experiences in the present. Hence he advocates an understanding of black subjectivity from within the embodied experience of his own present as a black man in Martinique, France, and Algeria. His body thus becomes the site on which both the present and the past is *performed*.

With its emphasis on performance, *Secrets* has chosen a route similar to Fanon. The anthropologists, artists, and performers do not aim for a return to a prelapsarian past. Nor do they simply ignore the Middle Passage. Instead, they dance. They dance the water and the "ideas of secrets and memories contained, carried, and left behind."² They dance the air, and "bell ringing to call the deities—sounds carried in the air—and the seed of the first stages of ritual."³ They dance earth and fire. The elements they dance are at once connections and ruptures—with the past, with "Africa," indeed with "humanity." Yet by way of performance, the anthropologists, artists, and performers enter the creative realms of art and the divine. While both are not outside of a history of colonialism, these realms may nonetheless hold the promise of rearticulating the elements of diasporic identity that have been ruptured by the Middle Passage.

This opening towards the realm of artistic and spiritual creation to me qualifies *Secrets* as an engagement in *tracing* (Balkenhol 2014). By tracing I mean a double movement in space and time: Following a trace takes the follower through a particular geography, much like moving along a road map. At the same time, following a trace is a movement in time—someone or something left a trace in the past, and following it means getting in touch with that past. Of course, since one also moves forward, the trace, by leading into the other's past, leads into the follower's future.

Following a trace, however, is not simply following a predetermined path. A trace needs to be pieced together, much like Sherlock Holmes is following clues (cf. Ginzburg 1980). In other words, following a trace is a creative process. Tracking an animal, for example, needs a particular knowledge in order to recognize the trace as

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a trace. I understand a trace, then, as both an index of a past event, as well as a creative practice in the present.

This means that tracing is also an inevitably political practice: it is part and parcel of memory politics, and the political claims made with regard to the past. As Stuart Hall has famously argued, “[c]ultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture, and power. Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall 1989: 225).

Secrets has moved beyond the idea of redress, of repairing an original state that is necessarily an imagined place. Instead, the project has begun the more tedious, but also infinitely more rewarding labor on ways to possibly rearticulate the disjunctures of diasporic subjectivity that truly points to the future.

notes and references

¹ <http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/spotlight/secretsundertheskin/about/ethnographic.cfm> (accessed July 9, 2014, emphasis mine).

² <http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/spotlight/secretsundertheskin/jillflanderscrosby/index.cfm> (accessed July 11, 2014).

³ <http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/spotlight/secretsundertheskin/jillflanderscrosby/index.cfm> (accessed July 11, 2014).

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