

art, anthropology, and religion

birgit meyer

Secrets Under the Skin is a fascinating, experimental and experiential project that raises intriguing issues with regard to the production and presentation of knowledge across various boundaries: between West Africa and Cuba, between religion and art, between shrine and gallery, between ethnographic and artistic representation. The project is based on Jill Flanders Crosby's extensive research on dance in both field sites; in fact, we met in Ghana where I saw her dancing beside and with her interlocutors in the early 1990s. Since then I have been following her work with keen interest, realizing—and seeking to make up for—the shortcomings of my own, initially strongly language-based approach to Ewe culture and religion (Meyer 2012a). The guiding idea of the project is that traditional religious dance actualizes a longstanding, embodied religious repertoire that is shared by the Ewe and the Arará people. Dance is approached as a performance that is playful and diverse, and yet relies on a resilient, more or less fixed embodied form through which dancers engage with their deities. Exploring the African roots of Arará religious dance, the project does not carry out a conventional archive-based historical exploration of the cultural and religious legacies of the transatlantic slave trade up to our time. The recognition of a shared core in Ewe and Arará dance involves opening up another kind of “living” archive with its own modes of storage and transmission: sacred sites and artifacts, human bodies, rhythms, and steps. The unique feature of the project is that in the research phase the team moved to and fro across the Atlantic, visiting the field sites, recording dance performances and showing

these audiovisual materials to and debating them with all interlocutors, thereby producing a fabric of multilayered audiovisual materials. Unlike a great deal of academic research that is limited to spot links and currents in the transatlantic realm, this magnificent project actively brought and still brings people in touch across this realm. This, in turn was the basis for the art installation, which does not only document the team's visits to the sites, but also is mobile itself, traveling to all the locations involved.

Flanders Crosby and her collaborators work on the basis of a material approach to religion that resonates strongly with my own approach (Meyer 2012b). They do so as artists, while I am in anthropology and religious studies; what we share is an ethnographic way of working. In my comment I would like to raise three issues evoked by the *Secrets Under the Skin* project that I deem particularly fruitful to be pursued in the future conversations envisioned by Flanders Crosby in and about the space between art and anthropology.

One concerns the observed commonalities underneath the diversity of Ewe and Arará dance. Flanders Crosby notes that there are “shared and discernible larger deep structures across these diverse music and dance expressions . . . , along with shared deities, often with slightly different names depending on location and people.”¹ The project offers compelling evidence for the mutual recognition of these “deep structures” that inform the various dance practices across the Atlantic. As a scholar of religion, I would be very much interested to know how the research team explains the existence of these deep structures. What makes for the resilience of these embodied rhythms and movement patterns documented by the project? In order to answer this question, it would in my view be fruitful to situate dance in the conceptual framework offered by ritual theory. As an authorized, longstanding format for improvised repetition, ritual is key to the preservation and ongoing actualization of cultural forms that are inscribed into and performed via the body. Ritual, in other words, organizes the incorporation, externalization, and transmission of these

forms across time and space. Could one say that religious ritual, as an excellent device for cultural preservation, needs to be taken seriously as a central part of the “living” archive of transatlantic circuits, from the slave trade to the present?

Second, I would like to raise a question about the relation between art and religion. On the project website, Flanders Crosby opens with an intriguing statement: “In many cases, artistic ideas are informed by traditions that have been passed hand to hand over centuries. Artists are the guardians of these traditions because they hold them in their hands and bodies, practice them, and keep them alive.”² She goes on to propose that the artists involved in the project and the Arará and Ewe religious practitioners share an artistic grounding, thereby drawing art and religion close together. Obviously, this is at loggerheads with the common understanding of modern art and aesthetics as some kind of substitute for religion. While I appreciate the attempt to conjoin art and religion, I nonetheless wonder about the implications of this approach for the project. How would the Ewe and Arará priests and other religious practitioners think about being cast as artists of sorts? Would they agree with Flanders Crosby’s statement that, “as theirs is a danced religion and as dance and music-making embrace spiritual expression, it moves these ceremonies into what I like to call pure performance”?³ To my knowledge, a great deal of the dances evokes the presence of spirits through trance and possession; we could even say that dance is central to “making spirits” (Espirito Santu and Tassi 2013), in that their presence depends on dance as a mediating practice that conjures the invisible into the being. How did the project deal with the phenomenon of spirit possession? Was the manifestation of spirits confined to the Ewe and Arará, or did the dancers involved in the project also have experiences into that direction? And, given that the project involved extensive video registration, how did the presence of the camera impinge on the performances recorded? Were any restrictions imposed? What I am trying to get at is the question how Flanders Crosby and her collaborators would address the experience of spirits as an ontological reality on the part of their interlocutors. Obviously, this is also a big issue in the anthropology of religion (Espirito Santu and Tassi 2013). How to account for

and represent these experiences from the position of an outsider, be it an anthropologist or a dance artist? What are the pitfalls of drawing such experiences into the framework of an art installation? Conversely, how does being part of an art installation impinge on and reframe practices of religious dance in Cuba and Ghana?

Third, a brief comment on the choice of an alternative “write-up” in the form of a “multimedia, multitemporal, multilingual, and transgenerational contemporary art installation.” Reverberating with the opening up of alternative archives for generating knowledge, the project sought to develop distinctive forms for the representation of knowledge beyond the usual focus on texts. Unfortunately I have not visited any of the exhibitions. Still the introductory piece by Flanders Crosby and the website (much recommended) offer a vivid impression of what has been achieved. At this point in time, in Germany and the Netherlands I note a growing ambition, also on the part of funding agencies, to bring together artistic and scholarly research, so as to be able to convey the knowledge gained also to a broader audience. I see *Secrets Under the Skin* as a highly instructive example that showcases the benefits of this new direction. It would be interesting to draw out differences and possible tensions between artistic and more strictly scholarly modes of research and knowledge presentation. I would like to know how, in preparing the installation, the project found a balance between the creative freedom of the artists involved with the scholarly direction envisioned by Flanders Crosby (who combines being a dance artist and a scholar). Did anything go? And how were the choices made for the final format of the installation? Which options taken by the artists involved might generate tensions and conflicts, or yield criticisms on the part of the interlocutors and visitors? And finally, what is it that art and artistic research has that a more conventional scholarly account and research do not have—and vice versa?

notes and references

¹ <http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/spotlight/secretsundertheskin/about/ethnographic.cfm>.

² <http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/spotlight/secretsundertheskin/about/index.cfm>.

³ <http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/spotlight/secretsundertheskin/about/index.cfm>.

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Meyer, Birgit. 2012a. Unexpected Synergies. Contribution to In Conversation "Locating the Textual Gaze. Then and Now." *Material Religion* 8(4): 530–1.

Meyer, Birgit. 2012b. Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion. Inaugural Lecture, Utrecht University, October 19, 2012.