

THE PERFORMANCE ARTS IN AFRICA: A READER

by Frances Harding. 2002. London and New York: Routledge. xiv + 364 pp, index. \$125.00 hardcover; \$36.95 paper.

As many dance researchers know from experience, it is no easy task to compile and edit a reader. Because readers intend to provide an overview of a field in formation or transition, the fragmentary materials available do not necessarily “add up” to a coherent volume. Previously published documents straddle intellectual developments and historical events, rendering aspects of their contents dated or, worse, irrelevant. Terminologies seldom correspond; documentation slips and slides according to the context of the original publication; and entire areas of inquiry go unexplored when the editor cannot find suitable material related to that particular topic. Authors misplace photographs or visual materials that accompanied the original article, and, in many cases the new publisher will rarely fund the reprinting of these visuals. In all, the challenges of editing a reader can be as significant as those of writing a manuscript from scratch.

So we can empathize with Frances Harding, who apparently fell into all of these pitfalls as she edited this first anthology on African performance directed toward an English-language academic audience. A sturdy compilation of twenty-four articles, almost all of them reprints, the volume intends to “draw attention to the performer as a creative artist and to performance as a creative art” in order to “give an understanding of some of the particular qualities of performance in rural and urban Africa” (xiii). In this modest goal the volume succeeds, as any of the essays highlight the contributions of individuals as artists in societies that clearly value performance. Considered as a whole, however, the volume collapses under the weight of trying

to encompass performance in Africa. In trying to cover so many geographic areas across so many eras, political situations, and performance practices, Harding delivers a fragmentary offering that can satisfy only those looking for specific information contained in essays that, ironically, might be readily found elsewhere.

Harding’s introductory essay lays out the methodology that informed her choices, one grounded in performance studies. She argues that “performance is the preferred *form* of iteration, explication, and reinforcement of social order in a primarily oral society,” as well as “a primary *forum* for the exploration of new ideas, a new order” (7–8). Within this framework it is possible to consider that “*all* performance is ultimately about pitting established order against the challenges of change” (8), a perspective forwarded by most of the articles. A limitation of this sort of analysis recurs throughout the volume: the actual aesthetic practices of performance come in for short consideration, eclipsed by discussion of what the performance might be able to do for its audiences. Discussions of teleological structures that could shed light on *how* the performance arts in Africa achieve transformative status as potential agents of social change are not to be found here. Readers of the volume may be granted a sense of how audiences respond to performance in various settings but will get little sense of how performance feeds its performers.

The articles split neatly between textual analysis of literary theater—that is, plays in the Western mode, with individual African playwrights claiming sole authorship of works—in South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, and Congo, and detailed renderings of a variety of masking events—performance events honed by communities of participants over generations—in sub-Saharan regions. Throughout the volume,

dance arises almost exclusively in this latter context. Unfortunately, however, the depiction of dance here usually amounts to a few descriptive words. Readers willing to wade through articles that focus on other aspects of performance besides dance will find mentions of the importance of Zulu dance in the formation of the Darktown Strutters, a variety troupe, in an essay by Loren Kruger; the importance of dancing well in order to protect the memory of the ancestors among the Kalabari people of the eastern Niger delta in an essay by Robin Horton; dance as an aspect of the women's Sande society initiation rituals of the Mende of Sierra Leone in an article by Ruth B. Phillips; the dance of the *Lo Gue*, or white mask Muslim spirits, among the Zara of Upper Volta in an article by René A. Bravmann; the essential dancing of puppet theaters in rural Mali in an article by Mary Jo Arnoldi; reference to the dangerous spontaneous dances of the *Onifakun*, Ode-lay maskers of Sierra Leone in an article by John Nunley; a historical overview of the rise of the possession dance *Holey Hori* of the *Hauka* spirits of the Songhay people of Niger in an article by Paul Stoller; and a depiction of master Mende storyteller Lele Gbomba's resistance to dance in performance—because “the animating potential of dance is such that the narrator may not be able to redirect the attention and energy of the audience to the narrative” (194)—in an article by Julius S. Spencer. But note that these mentions are almost always in passing, and seldom the focus of authorial attention.

Two articles do scrutinize dance practice. Paul J. Lane presents an interesting assessment of the effects of tourism on the masked dances of the Dogon of the Sanga region of Mali, where, in the late 1980s, dance was overseen by a tourist board official who instructed the performers to “dance more energetically” and pose for photographs with tourists. Lane

rightly asserts several potentially empowering aspects of these shifts: “The rising participation of the young men in tourism has simply meant the substitution of one way of demonstrating their suitability as marriage partners for another” (309). In addition, through these tourist performances, “the youth are responsible for presenting their own society and can control the content of specific representations of Dogon culture” as they find themselves in a position to “give new meanings to those representations” (309).

Remarkably, the one essay completely devoted to dance offers a strangely naive reading of the “erotic” in the Tanzanian *sindimba*, a dance that author Laura Edmondson first viewed in Dar es Salaam. For women performers, the dance involves *kukata kiuno*—“to cut the waist”—evidently a swaying of the hips that, in performance, easily sustains a “cultural image of the sexualized, passive Tanzanian woman” (79). Edmondson wants to argue that the state has appropriated the traditional dance as a national symbol and, in the process, squashed its nuances to serve a nationalist agenda. By way of resistance, some dancers have created a “counter-canon” of *ngoma* (dance) in which “physical movements directly refuse the directives of the state that call for subdued sexuality” (82). Other versions of the dance have appeared in recent years: the nationalistic College of the Arts teaches *ngoma* and allows “sensual movements for female dancers, such as slow shoulder rotations and a gentle swaying of the hips,” which marks the college's alignment with “official cultural rhetoric” (85). Complicating matters more, popular theater troupes present *ngoma* that accentuate “women's erotic movement of the hips and pelvis” (79) while tourist dance companies present “restrained, subdued” versions of the dance that seem “more appropriate for an audience of cultural officials than for tourists” (86).

Throughout this reprinted article from a 2001 issue of the *Drama Review*, Edmondson places herself at the center of this dance practice as its viewer, relating performances largely to her sense of “unease” at witnessing such “sexually inviting” swaying of the hips. By her account, dancers *approach her* to explain the significance of their performance styles (86); issues of ethnicity and sexuality easily overlap in her analysis of the college setting because “the intermingling of primitivism and sexuality in the erotic southern female body flaunts the cultural mission” that it supposedly upholds (85); and, happily for her I suppose, she “did not find stereotypes of either the ‘savage male’ or ‘erotic female’ played out” in tourist performances she witnessed by the Bagamoyo Players (87). Edmondson seems unequipped to consider *sindimba* as *dance* in order to consider its physical gestures as embodied knowledge of any kind. Thus, dance constantly refers to other meanings (sexual, political, economic, ethnic) and never to its corporeal possibilities as embodied knowledge. What might she have written had she studied and performed the dance herself? Like many of the authors in the reader, Edmondson identifies herself as an outsider to the cultural traditions she documents. Here, and throughout the volume, the fault lines between observing performance in Africa, participating in it, and documenting it for an academic audience emerge in powerful relief.

In all, this volume is poorly organized. The editor offers no glossary of terms or tools to connect the shifting political landscapes across geography or time. There are no photographs, even though some articles, including Edmondson’s, originally included vibrant visual documentation.¹ Through its sheer volume, the book does convey some cumulative power, and in reading it we can sense the boundless possibilities for serious study of African arts.

If only the editor strove for depth of inquiry rather than breadth of republication. After all, no matter how much we may want a single reader to accomplish as much as possible, the performance arts in Africa will not be contained by a single volume.

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Note

1. For the photographic documentation, see Laura Edmondson, “National Erotica: The Politics of “Traditional” Dance in Tanzania *Drama Review* 43, no. 1 (2001): 153–70.

JOSEPHINE BAKER IN ART AND LIFE: THE ICON AND THE IMAGE

by *Bennetta Jules-Rosette*. 2007. *Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press*. 392 pp. \$60.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

Although Josephine Baker, the African American performer who shot to stardom in 1920s Paris, is primarily associated with the Jazz Age, her influence is alive and well one hundred years after her birth. In September 2006 pop star Beyonce Knowles performed in Baker’s signature banana skirt against a backdrop of Baker’s likeness at the Fashion Rocks concert at Radio City Music Hall in New York.¹ Several years earlier, in an interview with *USA Today*, the actress Angelina Jolie invoked another side of Baker, citing her as a model for the multiracial, multinational family she was beginning to create through adoption.² These two aspects of Baker are what Bennetta Jules-Rosette refers to in her new book *Josephine Baker in Art and Life: The Icon and the Image* as the primal (or exotic) image and the Marian (or saintly maternal) image. While the examples of Knowles and Jolie do not appear in the book, they lend support to Jules-Rosette’s compelling argu-