Trickster Theatre: The Poetics of Freedom in Urban Africa by Jesse Weaver Shipley, and: *Yorùbá Performance, Theatre and Politics: Staging Resistance* by Glenn Odom (review)

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cally seductive sense of discovery to the act of seeing movement that expands the possibilities of postmodern performance practice rather than merely clarifies the terminal glories and limitations of modernist performance. It is now difficult to imagine how anyone can sufficiently understand this exciting moment in modernist performance without consulting this immense, gorgeous book.

—*Karl Toepfer*

Reference

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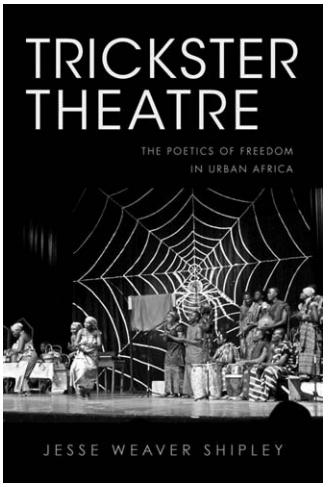
Trickster Theatre: The Poetics of Freedom in Urban Africa. By Jesse Weaver Shipley. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015; 308 pp.; illustrations. $85.00 cloth, $35.00 paper, e-book available.

Yorùbá Performance, Theatre and Politics: Staging Resistance. By Glenn Odom. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; 174 pp. $119.99 cloth, e-book available.



Jesse Shipley's *Trickster Theatre: The Poetics of Freedom in Urban Africa* offers an insightful analysis of the politics of performance and the performance of politics by showing how the line between "the real" and the performed—what happens on- and offstage—is produced and contested. Shipley argues that various incarnations of the Ghanaian state have sought legitimacy by promoting a trickster figure known as Ananse, which takes the form of a spider. This figure connects urban Ghana to both a rural origin and a transnational African and African diaspora liberation politic.

Shipley's methodology thoughtfully situates Ananse at the crossroads of tradition and modernity in the city and in the context of centuries of struggle against European imperial influence. By extension, this method identifies the Ghanaian citizen with Ananse, whose meaning changes in different postcolonial periods. Shipley organizes his study chronologically with corresponding thematic emphases divided into two parts. Part one, *History and Mediations in Making Theatre*, has a chronological structure: the colonial period (chapter 1), early independence period (chapter 2), populist revolutionary years in the 1980s (chapter 3), and the political transformation to marketization in the 1990s (chapter 4). Part two, *Stagings in Millennial Ghana*, aptly uses Ananse as a structural mode of storytelling to examine a wide range of contemporary performances. These modes of dramatic performance include the following: the play *The Witch of Mopti* (2002), by leading Ghanaian playwright Mohammed Ben Abdallah, about a moral and spiritual battle in an ancient kingdom (chapter 5); a concert party popular theatre sponsored

by a multinational corporation (chapter 6); sermons by charismatic pastors and popular theatre comedians (chapter 7); and the reenactment of Kwame Nkrumah's 1957 speech declaring Ghana's independence (chapter 8). The result is an illuminating analysis of the historical development of an urban theatre and its embodiments on- and off-stage. Technologies of storytelling, theatrical plays, television, video, advertising, and popular culture, as Shipley meticulously demonstrates, have changed ways of communicating and connecting with audiences.

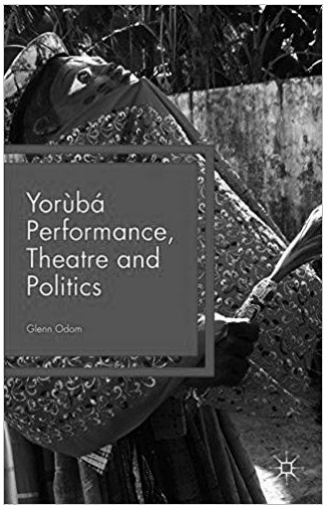
One aspect of Shipley's analysis worth noting is that Ghana represents a unique case in the history of postcolonial African theatre. He contends that oblique, polyvalent, or roundabout action, defined as indirection, has been far more central to the Ghanaian drama, politics, culture, and social life than to its Nigerian and South African counterparts. One form of evidence that he offers comes from the testimony of Ben Abdallah, who in addition to being a renowned playwright is also a former politician. Ben Abdallah recalls a conversation with a Nigerian colleague who claims that military leaders in Nigeria have historically been more likely to attack Nigerian artist-intellectuals whose art directly challenges the dominant political order. Shipley asserts that under General Rawlings the Ghanaian military regime and artists alike were far less confrontational and even apathetic relative to their Nigerian counterparts. However, might the Yoruba trickster figure (Eshu Elegba) and its many cognates offer evidence of an important element within Nigerian ritual, theatre, and politics that parallels Ananse and its influence on Ghanaian publics? The well-chronicled Yoruba masquerade performances (Egungun and Gelede) in Nigeria also exhibit qualities of a political culture that include both violent confrontation and subtle, ambiguous cultural and political commentary. Yet, Ananse is a more popular figure in the British and United States educational curriculum and children's storytelling cultures, as I found when I taught Shipley's book in an advanced undergraduate course on art and politics in Africa.

Trickster Theatre not only appeals to scholars of theatre, anthropology, African performance, and Ghanaian and Nigerian history and politics, it also speaks to scholars of colonialism, postcolonial studies, and the cultural politics and legacies of the Cold War. It highlights the ways in which colonial education shaped ideas about the arts in national development. Furthermore it calls attention to the neoliberal turn during the Cold War era and persuasively demonstrates how neoliberal discourses and policies entered a new phase with the fall of the Soviet Union (1991) in ways that illuminate China's expanding role on the African continent. As Shipley's evidence reveals, China built and gifted Ghana a new national theatre in 1992. The implication here is that neoliberalism and China's development policies and practices in Africa complicate understandings of ongoing Western imperialism and rivalries between "East" and "West."

Taking a different approach, Glenn Odom's *Yorùbá Performance, Theatre and Politics* creatively links the politics of ritual and theatrical performances to the rhetoric and policies of some of Nigeria's leading nationalist politicians and civilian and military leaders from the 1950s to the early 1990s. Combing the work of Nigerian playwrights, masquerade performers, diviners, and politicians, Odom insightfully identifies four underlying structural aspects that form the basis of the major chapters of the book. These aspects include authority, identity, time, and morality. He meticulously shows how Nigerian playwrights (four of Yoruba descent and one of Igbo descent) use their plays to challenge the views and policies of Nigeria's rulers. He argues that performance offers an indigenous vocabulary through which to explain how performers resists politics.

A major strength of Odom's work is the rich array of ethnographic and oral sources that he uses to illuminate a Yoruba vocabulary in particular. He analyzes sculptures, shrines, and performances of Gelede masquerades and Ifa divinations. He questions how practitioners and audiences interact with these performances. He documents the content and mode of delivery of oral narratives (*itan*) and praise poetry (*oriki*), particularly during Gelede masquerade ceremonies. Most illuminating are the links he finds among ethnographic and oral evidence, plays, and the speeches, memoirs, biographies, and autobiographies of Nigeria's founding nationalists and

other civilian and military leaders. Given this range of sources, Odom's book targets scholars of Yoruba ritual, philosophy, and performance as well as Nigerian theatre, history, and politics.



Odom takes a thematic approach. He moves back and forth through time in the service of a structural analysis that gives little attention to patterns in the material or political conditions that would resonate more with historians. Chapter 1 explores the theme of authority with a focus on the reign of the military ruler Olusegun Obasanjo from 1976 to 1979. Odom analyzes how playwright Femi Osofisan responds to Obasanjo's administration through the play *Morountodun* (1982). Chapter 2 moves back in time to the era of Nigerian independence (1960) to examine the ways in which political leaders articulated stable individual and national identities. He also draws on Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, produced in 1960 and published in 1963. Commissioned to celebrate Nigeria's independence, the play challenges stable identities and subjectivities and presents the protracted struggle for agency as essential to the stability of a newly formed nation. In this chapter and throughout the book, historians may find Odom's thematic approach a bit too ahistorical in that it distances rulers and playwrights from the conditions of the time and obscures the ways in which leaders used the resources of the state to police or even silence dissidents, particularly during moments of greater repression.

The next two chapters move forward in time. Chapter 3 pairs playwright Ola Rotimi's plays *Kurunmi* (1969) and *Akassa You Mi* (1977) and the speeches of Yakubu Gowon (a military ruler from 1966 to 1975) and Sani Abacha (military ruler from 1993 to 1998) with Yoruba stories, Ifa divination poetry, and traditional Yoruba proverbs. Odom argues that the traditional Yoruba notion of time is embedded with tensions between fluidity and stability: Yoruba speakers historically privilege the past as a source of precedents that are open to interpretation based on present conditions. Chapter 4 begins with a brief reflection on the development of extragovernmental organizations aimed at promoting ethical thought and values. Odom continues to explore Abacha's reign before returning to Obasanjo, not as the military ruler of the late-1970s, but as a democratically elected head of state from 1999 to 2007. Odom places the play within the framework of traditional Yoruba notions of the self that are articulated in contemporary oriki in ways that unsettle the fluidity and stability of subject positions and the relationship of identity to community. Odom claims that contemporary performers emphasize the stability of identities. However, performers I have witnessed take diverse approaches. Performers draw inspiration from so many elements—religion, ethnicity, occupation, history, myth, morality, politics, etc.—linked to the conditions of their performance as well as to their capacity for improvisation (most elaborately explored in Margaret Thompson Drewal's 1992 *Yoruba Ritual*) that I wonder about the persuasiveness of the author's claims. In other words, a more compelling case is needed for why stable identities receive greater emphasis than fluid or unsettled ones.

The tone of the author's representation of Nigerian postindependence politics reflects a longstanding and contentious view of Nigeria (and Africa for that matter) as plagued with problems such as corruption, violence, and division. In this respect, the book does more to reify these tropes than to problematize discourses and material conditions that reproduce dominant hierarchies. To his credit, Odom acknowledges the challenge that he and many Western-born and -trained scholars face to understand Nigerian and African societies on their own terms. Odom is transparent about his early struggles to pose questions that his interlocutors could apprehend and find meaningful. He contends that the structural aspects he identifies along with his questions reflect his apprenticeship with Yoruba performers. Odom develops his analysis of Yoruba masquerade and divination rituals in a manner that philosophers will find engaging.

Postcolonial studies scholars also will find a wealth of data from which they can theorize about the politics of performance and the performance of politics in postindependent Africa in these two important scholarly works from 2015.

—John Thabiti Willis

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More Books

Diversión: Play and Popular Culture in Cuban America. By Albert Sergio Laguna. New York: New York University Press, 2017; 269 pp.; illustrations. $89.00 cloth, $30.00 paper, e-book available.

For Albert Sergio Laguna, it is laughter that shapes diasporic structures of belonging in Cuban Miami-Dade Hialeah. Tracing what he terms *momentos de diversión*—sonic, gestural, and linguistic moments of collective play in the malleable sense of diasporic Cubanness, i.e., *cubanía*—Laguna performs a shift in diasporic affect studies. Humor as an object of study moves him from the privileged analytic registers of melancholic exile (anger, loss, and pain) to ways that "ludic sociability" performs Cuban belonging in, against, and sometimes with US-American whiteness, antiblack racism, and heteronormativity. Multiple sites of kinship and identity emerge throughout the book's transdisciplinary pedagogies. Loosely following the migratory waves of Cubans to the United States (from the Cuban Revolution's Freedom Flights [1965–1973] to the *balsero* [rafter] crisis of 1994), Laguna argues that Cuban-diasporic belonging is itself workable: performatively available for quotidian-collective reshaping through objects of popular culture. Comedic performance facilitates contact and exchange on and off the island, finding shape, velocity, and texture in the shared pleasures of stand-up, morning radio, political satire, comedic theatre, prank phone calls, and comic strips. Throughout, the first wave's stand-up icon Guillermo Álvarez Guedes cedes and indelibly marks popular contemporary public radio; economies of sentiment structuring the Miami festival known as Club Nostalgia touch and warp under population shifts and changing labor economies in Hialeah; and all tangle in the diasporic, where what *feels* Cuban is playfully rearranged—and shared.

The Art of Civil Action: Political Space and Cultural Dissent. Edited and introduced by Philipp Dietachmair and Pascal Gielen. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018; 304 pp.; illustrations. $25.00 paper.

The touchstones for Philipp Dietachmair and Pascal Gielen's collection of conversations and essays on the art of civil action are familiar: Occupy Wall Street, the Zapatistas, Pussy Riot, the occupations of Maagdenhuis and the Teatro Valle Occupato, and refugee initiatives in Greece and Germany. And yet the lines of flight drawn primarily from the academic chairs, full profes-