

**“It was if the archives were waiting to speak again”¹: The Adodi Project, Archives,
and Performance**

*Black men loving black men is the revolutionary act*²

*Telling personal narratives does something in the social world. Personal narratives
participate in the ongoing rhythm of people’s lives as a reflection of their social
organization and cultural values.*³

*Because communities of color are so often under attack, marked as a collective hot mess
of excessive, irrational, unorganized bodies and behavior, we have reasons to worry
about what we make available to the public for consumption.*⁴

*What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.*⁵

Ruth Landes and Zora Neale Hurston recognized the transformative power of narratives to cut across disciplinary divides to address societal injustices particularly in the areas of race, sexuality and gender. They refuted the reduction of experiential knowledges to quantifiable numerical values with the humanizing act of people sharing their own life stories. Landes, an American Jewish anthropologist whose primary (and prolific) critical ethnographic work concerns sexuality and gender performance among Native American, Afro-Brazilian and African American communities would literally bar her from holding a professorate in the United States. *The Ojibwa women* and *City of*

¹ The words uttered by my colleague Eda Cufer as we unearthed the Adodi cassettes and listened to the interviews during the summer of 2015.

² Riggs, Marlon T. *Tongues Untied*. United States: M. Riggs, 1989. Film.

³ Langellier, K. M. Personal narratives: Perspectives on theory and research. *Text and Performance Quarterly*. 9 (1989): 261. Print.

⁴ Rodriguez, Juana Maria. Queer Archives: A roundtable discussion. *Radical History Review*. 122 (2015): 211. Print.

⁵ De Certeau, M. *Practice of everyday life*. Berkley: University of California Press (129:1984). Print.

*Women*⁶ represent the ingenuity and forethought of Landes to redefine the ethnographic object to speaking subject; thus opening a space for the articulation of real everyday human experiences that privileged lengthy passages of narrative that sought to encourage and promote dialogue. Hurston followed suit and endeavored to transform the narratives to plays, operas and novels. The two scholars, both trained under Boas, challenged the presentation of research and methodologically, embraced a trans/interdisciplinary epistemological and ontological positionality that rejected disciplinary decadence and superiority.⁷ It was under the influence of the work of Landes and Hurston that I embarked on the Adodi project.

The Adodi project was a six-year ethnography of a collective of men of African descent who identify as same-gender-loving men and gather annually to perform rituals from various African traditions as a way of affirming themselves. The purpose of the Adodi project was to provide a greater understanding of the complex terrain of African American men who identify as “same-gender-loving.” In doing so, the questions explored interrogated the importance of community and ways in which community affiliation aids in the construction of identity and self-esteem among this community of African American men. Also, given the prominence of the sacred at their meetings, another question posed surrounded the role of ritual in the development of self, masculinity, and sexuality. My academic training privileged the single method and theory formulation of assessing research questions. I deferred to the integrative (interdisciplinary) analytical approach as embraced by Hurston and Landes. It is a transdisciplinary approach that borrows, builds on, and steals from an assortment of disciplinary theories and methods. The amalgamation of disciplinary thoughts challenged the presentation of the research. In his defense of performance studies as a para-discipline, one that weaves in and out of strictly defined disciplines, Dwight Congquergood opined, “Dominant epistemologies that link knowing with seeing are not attuned to meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context.”⁸ Landes and Hurston understood that all

⁶ Landes, R. *City of Women*. New York: Macmillan (1947). Print.

⁷ See Gordon, L. *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* □ Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (2006). Print.

⁸ Congquergood, D. Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research. *TDR* 46 (2002) 146. Print.

knowledge and meaning could not be assessed simply by observation and were preoccupied with critical, creative and dare I say performative ways of engaging in ethnographic research.

The Adodi project is a performance ethnography rooted in the tradition of Landes and Hurston, where the aim is to create a dialogic performance in which the cultures status as object is redefined as subject. In this research project, I focus not only on the men of Adodi, but also on my role as participant and performer in the rituals, my interpretations of events, and my criticisms; moreover, I reveal my values, ideologies, and political commitments. Fabian suggests, “‘Performance’ seem[s] to be a more adequate description both of the ways people realize their culture and of the method by which an ethnographer produces knowledge about that culture.”⁹ My participation in the rituals at the Adodi retreats and my critical ethnographic representation of those rituals constitute a performance because I engage the other and myself in the critical evaluation of my role in the various performances. When I write my critical ethnographic analysis of the Adodi, I am performing as much as the “others” I examine in my study.

As mentioned above, the use of narrative is foregrounded as a means of opening up dialogue and thus commencing a conversation between the men of Adodi, the researcher, and those who read research materials. Therefore, the research tools used to gather the ‘data’ highlighted life stories. The unstructured post-modern interview format, as advocated by Guba and Lincoln allows for dialogue between the researcher and participant, thereby establishing a human-to-human relationship that blurs the lines of researcher/informant. Denzin posits that performance ethnography is predicated on “subjective accounts of [an] experience” that “reflexively map multiple social discourses that occur in a given space” which in turn are grounded in “epiphanal moments” in people’s lives.¹⁰ Therefore, the focus is on the narrative performance, the recounting of the stories people share with each other as they attempt to make sense of the epiphanies

⁹ In Trujillo, N. Interpreting November 22: A critical ethnography of an assassination site. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 447-66. Print.

¹⁰ Denzin, N. *Interpretive ethnography*. Thousand Oaks: Sage (1997): 225. Print.

or existential turning points in their lives. Such interviews make the data richer and more complex when recorded with minimal influence from the researcher. Given that critical ethnographers rely on critical theory, they therefore recognize “the strictures caused by these [historical, social, and economical] situations and their value-laden agendas and seek to undermine existing oppressive systems”¹¹; furthermore, the postmodern interview validates new and creative ways of reporting and compiling the interview including photography, video, and other visual forms. The tools I used for this research endeavor include life story interviews, journal writing, photography and video. The “data” collected is more than just quantified raw numerical bits drawn from a simple survey, the “data” collected is an archive of the lives of men of the Adodi. The goal of the postmodern unstructured interview format is understanding, not quantifying.

The fieldwork for the Adodi project began in 1998 and extended to 2005. The research was “published/performed” in a variety of ways from adapting the interviews to a solo theatre performance, reading my field notes in a gallery, three installations (visual and sonic) and a written monograph. Assembled here is a performance of the Adodi archive: “Tribute to the Ancestors” an ethnographic essay about the Adodi community; three life story interviews (Phillip, Dana and Cleo), four hand-written journals (Jerry, Marc, Michael Haynes and Sam), a gallery of photographs, a small video excerpt and the sonic performance installation *Telling First Love Stories*.

Thirty men participated in life story interviews that include their articulation of the Adodi retreat experience. On this site, you will hear a selection of three, unedited narratives that will provide a glimpse of the fluidity of the exchange. You will hear my story, the researcher, intertwined with the stories of the men. I was first taken aback by the level of intimacy revealed in the interviews, but soon realized that rarely were the men asked to share their stories because of marginality. Foucault coined the term “subjugated knowledges” for experiences and narratives erased of those ranked at the bottom of society by the dominate culture. The Adodi archive as presented here resists erasure.

¹¹ Lincoln, Y. & Denzin, N. (Eds.) *The handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage (1995): 369. Print.

Because the interviews were recorded on a GE *Personal Portable recorder and cassette player* and later digitized, a listener will hear a “blibbing ” sound or an abrupt break in the flow of the conversation. The pause sensor on the recording device caused the sound. The interviews are raw and unedited, therefore, environmental noise—such as the sound of a plane overhead or the thrust of the wind blowing are heard. Moreover, some interviews end with questions about popular culture (mostly visual representations of black gay men on film), the responses were to be used for further research endeavors. In addition to the life story interviews, also available on the site is the *Telling First Love Stories* sonic performance. The audio project is an assemblage of narratives from a workshop titled “Telling First Love Stories” where the men recorded each other’s narrative of first loves. It is also the audio installation that was presented at the CAAR Conference *Black States of Desire - Dispossession, Circulation, Transformation*, University Paris-Diderot, April 6-9, 2011 and organized by Jean-Paul Rocchi.

The methodological tools were selected not only to provide data but to promote reflexivity and thereby emancipatory actions as does the overarching ethos of the Adodi retreat experience. I was concerned with how my research practices might also be a form of liberatory praxis. For example, I chose the art of journaling because of its multiplicity of functions. It has the capacity to supply insight on a therapeutic and creative process, it helps clarify our beliefs and thought process by reflection, it can represent a healing process, and constitute a record of experiences in one’s life. I selected twelve men to participate in this exercise. The men were asked to write about their experiences in their journals in any way that they wished. The only stipulation was that they return the journal to me at some point after the retreat. I was interested not only in the record of their epiphanal moments at the retreat, but how they represented that moment in their own words and in their own style. Four handwritten journals have been scanned for the reader to peruse. Though most men stated their openness to having their real names used, the names of others referenced in their journals were concealed. The present installation/performance also includes a small five-minute excerpt from a looped video installation that was presented at Performance Studies International held at Arizona State University in 2005 and photographic gallery are images taken by me but selected by the men of Adodi that best represented them and their experiences.

The Adodi materials presented here are a participatory and promissory performance. Reflecting on Langellier's statement above, that narratives do "*something in the social world*," the "doing" is not just listening and reading, but rather an invitation to a dialogue, asking the reader/listener to think to reflect, to do. The sonic tones of the men's voices, the sketches on the pages of the personal journals and the photographs exemplify the haunted nature of performance. It is a haunting that is persistent, contested and infectious, that will challenge the listeners/readers to make sense of their own personhood as they partake in daily life. It is also that very same haunted nature that extends a promise, "not because it promises possible change," as Pollock opines, "it is a contract with possibility: with imagining what might be, could be, should be."¹² Since, as De Certeau argued, when academic disciplines divide the study of the human experience narratives instead transcend and unify.

¹² Pollock, Della. *Remembering: Oral History Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.