

Object Performance in the Black Atlantic: The United States. By Dr. Paulette Richards. New York: Routledge, 2024. 312 pp., 82 b/w illustrations. Hardcover \$153.00, eBook \$41.64, Paperback \$41.60.

In her well-constructed study, *Object Performance in the Black Atlantic*, researcher and puppet artist Dr. Paulette Richards elaborates several crucial questions into a new and generative format by engaging her topic through lines of inquiry that build on the work of previous theorists while also providing much needed expansions of the culturally charged work accomplished by objects in performance. In addition, Richards asks us to consider the many aspects of lived experience and cultural memory that exist in oral and written texts bolstered by much needed insights into the day-to-day of individuals and communities of the past—here, through explorations of objects in performance. Richards establishes for the reader a belief in the presence of embodied texts conferred upon precisely constructed, sometimes ritualized objects as palimpsests which, over time, become saturated with embedded meanings which possess an ability to pollinate the present with knowledge of multiple generative pasts.

Richards' work paves a new direction for object history. Although her project is performatively similar to explorations pursued by Soyica Diggs Colbert, who also framed the construction of dramatic narratives as rites of repair, Dr. Paulette Richards' in-depth explorations of object performances and the efforts of multiple object performance artists and practitioners enlarges the scope of performances under consideration as said constructions.

Throughout the book, Richards beautifully and effectively situates performing objects (puppetry and doll cultures) as tools assisting in much needed, object-based cultural reparations vital in the ongoing explorations of diaspora and identity construction. Richards provides us with engaging inquiries on object performance by asking whether traceable connections exist between traditional African puppets, masks, and performing

objects, and contemporary African American puppetry. For Richards, it is the collaborative whole of the existing performance complex surrounding African performing objects that serves as a tool to allow a closer reading of multiple material cultures of object performance.

Generally, Richards divides her vast study into three parts with the first outlining how the spaces and tactics utilized by community groups act within a sometimes ritually established structure or, according to Richards, an “African American object performance complex” (12) that persisted and thrived through various periods of American slave cultures and beyond. Part two provides the reader with an in-depth mapping of how African Americans began the arduous task of cultural reclamation during the periods of Jim Crow Era segregation while a third and final section provides details on how increased educational and economic opportunities, by way of new media technologies, enabled and assisted a bolstering of shifting African American cultural norms through the use of performing objects as “a powerful mode of resistance to the objectification of Black bodies” (13).

In her opening chapters, Richards skillfully unpacks tribal practices whose belief structures posited that “spirit animates all of creation” (12). Thus, the reader can understand that figurative sculptures, according to Richards, were periodically brought out and “animated” in processions even though the figures were not articulated and, when not in use for various ritual practice, were in fact perceived as animated by devotees of a specific belief system or “complex.” Richards deftly introduces the reader to her innovations in the study of African American Object Performance as an embodied structure which utilizes varied ritual practices as embedded aspects of objects used in group and individual day-to-day lived experiences. Included are discussions of ritual objects such as cloth sashes and wood carvings, all placed in service to mappable instances of African societies theatrically charged community building events.

Richards’ surgical engagement with material objects and object performances capably clarifies for us the desire for such objects to engage societies in multiple acts of



community building rather than as mere objects of ritual or aesthetic performances.

Most intriguing is Richards' unpacking of various performance practices with ritualized objects through deep readings of the work of object artists like The Buffalo Historical Marionettes, Reverend Yolanda Simpson, Edna Bland, Megan Piphus Peace, and even more well-known artists such as Kara Walker and her object, silhouette works. Equally vibrant dives into spaces of performance provide new information about puppet-based ministries in a section titled "Object Performance in the Black Church" (149). Other engagements bring to light the energetic community-based efforts of performance object artists and puppeteers who each served multiple communities with puppet and object-based performances integral to community building and stability. These works established and maintained multiple instances of stewardship over communities stifled by outside forces and affected by problematic circumstances but, in these instances, bolstered through performances of self which reflected the hope and promise of those lives.

It quickly becomes obvious to the reader that Richards' study is a well-structured engagement that mines new ground in explorations of object performance while, at the same time, providing much needed information for theatre scholars and practitioners alike. Most effective are Richards' explorations of specific artists who have shared multiple innovations and methodological discoveries across recent decades. The author's text truly accomplishes her own goal of establishing a "treasure map" for future scholars to more easily follow her methodological approach, to "look for evidence of things not seen" (10).

Keith Byron Kirk

Virginia Commonwealth University