The Space Between

Artist brochure statement for *Lorraine O'Grady / MATRIX 127*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, May 21 – Aug 20, 1995. Adapted from "Lorraine O'Grady, conceptual artist," in Susan Cahan and Zoya Kocur, eds., *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education*. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and Routledge, 1996.

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My parents both came from Jamaica in the 1920s. They met each other in Boston at the tea table during a cricket match in which one of my uncles was bowling. It was the post-World War I period of the great West Indian migration, and most of their compatriots had settled in Brooklyn. In Boston, the tiny West Indian community could barely establish and fill one Episcopal church, St. Cyprian's.

At some level, I understood from the beginning that as a first-generation black American I was culturally "mixed." But I had no language to describe and analyze my experience: not until years later would words like "diaspora" and "hybridism" gain currency for the movement of peoples and the blending of two or more cultures.

As a teenager with few signposts and role models, I had to negotiate between: (1) my family's tropical middle- and upper-class British colonial values; (2) the cooler style to which they vainly aspired of Boston's black Brahmins, some of whose ancestors dated to before the Revolution; (3) the odd marriage of Yankee and Irish ethics taught at the girls' prep school where, after six backbreaking years that marked me forever, I was the ranking student in ancient history and Latin grammar; and (4) the vital urgency of the neighboring black working-class culture, constantly erupting into my non-study life despite all my parents' efforts to keep it at bay.

I rebelled against the conflicting values instilled in me. Although it may have been easy to say "a pox on all your houses," eventually I realized that I had to inhabit each of them. Looking back, I can see that the *diasporain* experience, however arduous, has been critical for my life and work. Not so much in the mixed details of my background as in the constant process of reconciling them. Wherever I stand, I find I have to build a bridge to some other place. This position, far from being unique, is becoming more and more typical. Soon we may all have to be bi- or even tri-cultural.

Art for me is part of a lifelong project of finding equilibrium, of becoming whole. I have had to simplify while giving complexity room to breathe. Like many cross-cultural artists, I have been drawn to the diptych or multiple image, in which much of the important information occurs *in the space between*. And like many, I have done performance and installation work where traces of the process are left behind. In my work, "miscegenation," the pejorative legal word for the mixing of the races, functions as a metaphor both for the mixed media I employ and for the difficulties and potentialities of cultural reconciliation.

I believe that every culture is complex and differentiated by its history and that artists arrive at the universal only by attending to the specific, which is inevitably ambiguous. That is why I object to such concepts as "the authentic black experience" and "the spokesperson." I want my work to be an example not of differences *between* cultures, a principle which seems obvious, but of differences *within* cultures. The latter idea remains unnecessarily embattled with respect to black culture, seen often as a monolithic whole. But complexity is true to reality. I subscribe to Toni Morrison's non-binaristic belief that "art can be both socially responsible and irrevocably beautiful at the same time."