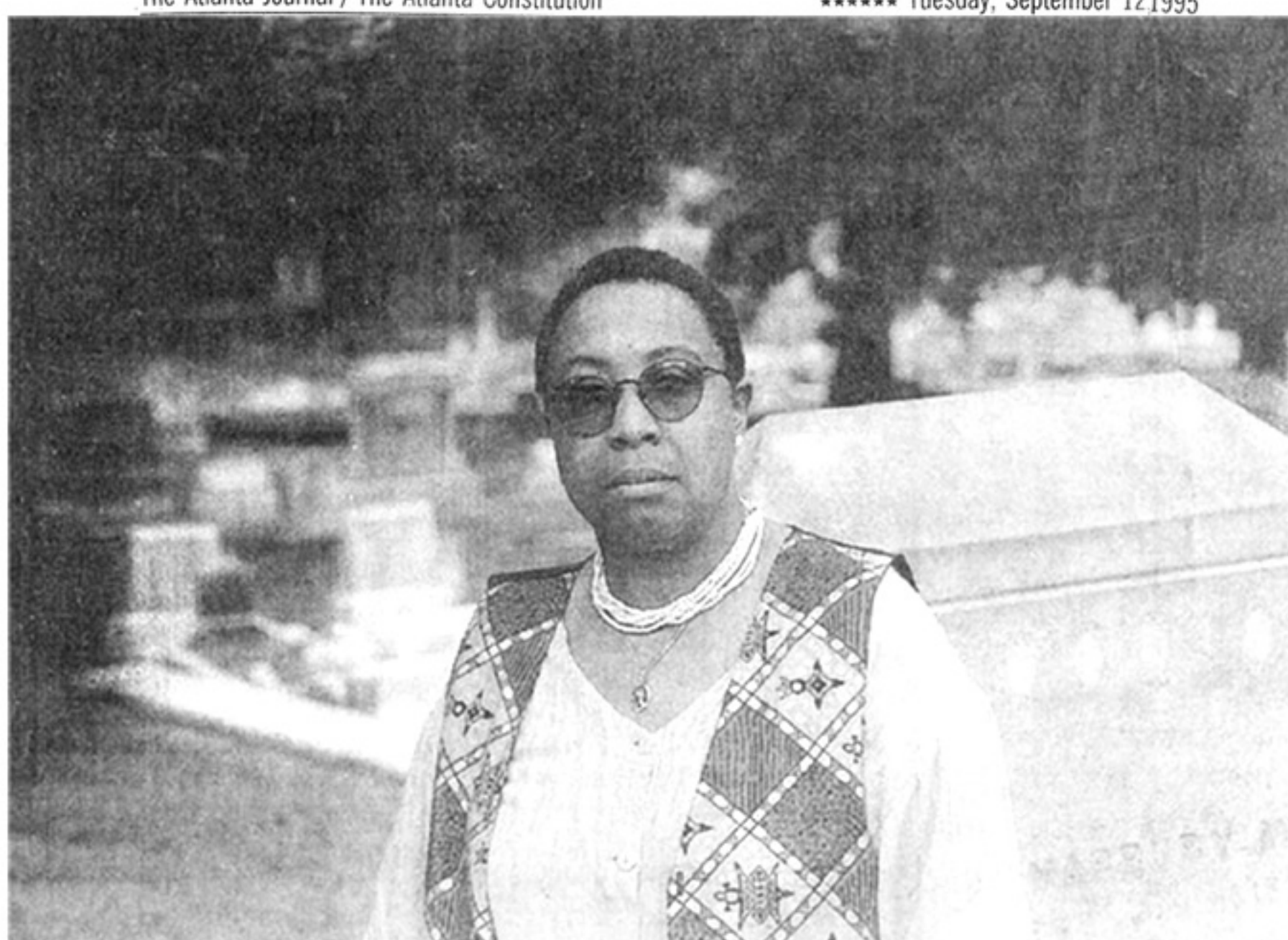


# Arts & Entertainment



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**Stephanie Anne Johnson** knew her search for a site at which to show "We Speak" was over when she found Antoine Graves Mausoleum in historic Oakland Cemetery.

DWIGHT ROSS JR. staff

## Nine with a shared legacy lend voices to 'We Speak'

By Valerie Boyd  
FOR THE JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

Visual artist Stephanie Anne Johnson gives new meaning to the term "graveyard shift."

For more than nine months, Johnson says, she has been "working like a demon" on her latest installation, "We Speak," which begins showing at dusk tonight at Atlanta's Historic Oakland Cemetery.

A projection of sound and images about African-American women in Atlanta, "We Speak" will be on view at the cemetery through Thursday. Then, starting at twilight Saturday, it will be projected onto the side of the Bathhouse at Piedmont Park during the Arts Festival of Atlanta, running through Sept. 24.

"We know that not everyone is going to the cemetery" for an art exhibit, says the festival's Lisa Tuttle, "so being able to move the presentation and show it on the side of the Bathhouse means more people will be able to see it."

The Arts Festival commissioned "We Speak" for its 1995 City Sites Work component, which expands the festival beyond Piedmont Park. But the festival didn't choose the cemetery — Johnson did.

"I drove all around Atlanta looking for a site," recalls the Berkeley, Calif., artist. "I saw the cemetery, went to the black section and saw this mausoleum, and I said, 'Oh, this is it!'"

Cemetery management was receptive to the idea.

"It's an experiment; we hope it works," says Allen Myers, manager of the 88-acre, 145-

year-old cemetery.

And Harriet Nash Chisholm, who owns the mausoleum — the only one on the cemetery's East side, which has evolved into "the black section" — agreed to allow Johnson to use it as a makeshift screen. Chisholm is also one of nine Atlanta women, famous and unknown, who Johnson chose (through word of mouth and with help from volunteer project coordinator Linda Ceay) to interview for the 45-minute project.

"Some of the women are younger than I am," says Johnson, 43, who will attend the cemetery shows. Others are Atlanta institutions — including Ruth Scott Simmons, whose family owns the Atlanta Daily World, the nation's first black daily newspaper; and Freddie Henderson, founder of Henderson Travel Agency.

With snippets of the women's dialogue woven throughout, "We Speak" has a rich, multilayered soundtrack that also features black spiritual music by artists from Mahalia Jackson to Sounds of Blackness.

Johnson says she chose music that "felt like it fit with the visual images," which include family pictures, anonymous archival photos from the Auburn Avenue

Research Center, recent photos of those interviewed, and images that Johnson shot of current sites and sounds around Atlanta, "including all the condos and apartments that have the word 'plantation' in their titles," Johnson says, acknowledging her "outside" status as a 15-year California resident who grew up in the Bronx ("and survived it").

Still, she says, the South is "the home of my ancestors and feels deeply familiar to me," so she figures she has a right to complain. "I don't know how, in the cultural context of this country, you can bring up the word plantation and not think about slavery."

Slavery is something Johnson thinks about every now and then, along with other, more recent aspects of African-American history that she has explored through recent multimedia presentations. One piece, "Binding Ties," is about the experiences of California railroad workers. Johnson projected it onto the façade of an Amtrak station in Oakland, Calif., capturing the attention of the folks at the Arts Festival of Atlanta.

"All my pieces are homages to the ancestors," says Johnson, who dedicates "We Speak" to two friends who recently died — actress and playwright Danitra Vance and actor Kenneth Dixon.

"My work is an invitation to examine the delicate membrane which veils those who dwell in the spirit world from those who we refer to as living. I use slide projections in outdoor sites such as building façades, and cemeteries to place neglected members of our culture in public view. This is my way of monumentalizing the forgotten and bringing art to people outside of the formal gallery setting."

Her artwork is both personal and public. "The pieces are about me, but they're not. They're much bigger. They're about us — as women, as black people, as humankind."

Valerie Boyd is editor in chief of HealthQuest and EightRock magazines.



STEPHANIE ANNE JOHNSON / Special

The mausoleum will serve as a makeshift screen before Stephanie Anne Johnson's project moves to Piedmont Park.