

The Self as Other: Creating the Role of Joni The Ethnographer for *Broken Circles*

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Contemporary discussions of ethnographic research often draw attention to psychological and ethical problems centering on the observing ethnographer. Performance can be a valuable method for working through these problems. This essay describes the ways one performance helped me as an ethnographer work through such problems as objectivity, the marginalizing of the self, and the appropriation of another culture. In particular, it emphasizes how performance led to a more sophisticated understanding of myself as an African American, an academic, and a woman.

"It has become clear that every version of an 'other,' wherever found, is also the construction of a 'self.' "

James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths" (23)

"If you don't go seeking the other, You'll never find yourself."

Sheila Walker, *Spirit in the Diaspora Conference*

"I call ethnography a meditative vehicle because we come to it neither as to a map of knowledge nor as a guide to action, nor even for entertainment. We come to it as the start of a different kind of journey."

Stephen Tyler, "Post-Modern Ethnography" (140)

During the summer of 1993, I began my initial fieldwork experience with the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria. My specific interest was in the Osun Festival in Osogbo, though I was interested in understanding Yoruba cosmology and performance in general. When I returned to the United States, I was not immediately able to write about my experiences, though that was the expected result of my fieldwork based on a long history of academic ethnography. Because I had spent a mere three weeks with the Yoruba, writing seemed premature. Print ethnography tends to steer away from personal narratives, and my conflicted personal responses were much clearer to me at that time than were the cultural patterns of the Yoruba. Finally, I resisted writing because the Osun Festival is a ritual performance that is incorporative and fluid.¹ Indeed, Osun herself is the deity of fertility, sensuality, and creativity.² While there are strong print ethnographies of performance practices to serve as models, I had to find a way to get perspective on the personal and subjective nature of my fieldwork experience. Writing, which then seemed permanent and fixed and in opposition to the performative nature of Osun and her Festival, had to be postponed. My desire to share was strong enough to move past the awkwardness of writing and turn to the intimacy of performance. In performance, the personalism

of my moments has an established history in autobiographical performance and in performance art. Performance would allow me to share issues of Yoruba reality as well as issues of identity formation with less chance of accusations of self-indulgence, loss of perspective and tainted research. As a result of this need to share and this resistance to writing, I created *Broken Circles: A Journey Through Africa and the Self*, which was presented for three performances at the University of Texas in the Spring of 1994.

In *Broken Circles* I played three Yoruba I met in Osogbo; another performer, Monique Cortez, performed the role of Joni the Ethnographer. My performing the Yoruba was grounded in traditional performance choices in which performers regularly take on a variety of real or fictional others. The decision to perform the Yoruba was also well supported by contemporary ethnographic theory and practice that point to performing the other as a way of adding polyphony, privileging the body as a site of knowing and mitigating the simplification and appropriation of print ethnography.³ As I performed the Yoruba, I was engaged in what Dwight Conquergood calls "dialogic performance" in which "different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs . . . can have a conversation with one another." (9) The intent of such conversation "is to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another." (9) As I performed, I was conversing with the Yoruba, negotiating the truths of my cultural reality with the truths of theirs into a harmony of bodies, voices and spirits. The audience could see the ways in which my body would or would not respond to an *Osun* dance, the degree to which my voice could bring forth Yoruba sounds, the way in which my energy/spirit would yield to a Yoruba sensibility; indeed, the audience could see African America and Yoruba talking about, perhaps at times arguing over, identities. The audience was witness to the conversation I was having in my body with the Yoruba.

Victor Turner describes this dialogue as "pragmatic reflexivity": "the attempt of representatives of one generic modality of human existence, the Western historical experience, to understand 'on the pulses' in Keatsian metaphor, other modes hitherto locked away from it by cognitive chauvinism or cultural snobbery." (100) Performance ethnography requires an intimate, direct and bodily awareness of one's own culture and the culture of the other. In describing post-modern ethnography, Stephen Tyler provides an apt description of performance ethnography:

[. . .] post-modern ethnography privileges 'discourse' over 'text,' it foregrounds dialogue as opposed to monologue, and emphasizes the cooperative and collaborative nature of the ethnographic situation in contrast to the ideology of the transcendental observer. There is instead the mutual, dialogical production of a discourse, of a story of sorts. (126)

Performance ethnography, like Tyler's vision of post-modern ethnography, honors the embodied acts of interaction and dialogue. Indeed, performance ethnography is how the body does culture.

While my decision to perform the Yoruba was supported by a history of theatrical performance and by contemporary critiques of ethnography calling for the voices of the culture under study to be heard, situating my self as other was a choice with less precedent. Autobiographical performance, however, does position self as other by creating a print and therefore external and separate text/self; in autobiographical performance one scripts *and* performs self. In *Broken Circles* having Monique perform Joni the Ethnographer further "otherized" the self by giving the self-text to someone

else to perform. This "otherizing," in which one sees the self as foreign, is akin to the fieldwork circumstance in which the ethnographer is powerfully aware of herself or himself as not-self, as other, one who is not of the culture one is temporarily inhabiting.

CONSTRUCTION OF SELF AS OTHER

My sense of self as other began during fieldwork; however, as an African American living in the United States, experiencing my self as other is a ubiquitous reality. In early discussions of woman as other, Simon de Beauvoir wrote, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. . . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (xvi). African Americans play other to European American subjectness, as woman functions as other to the male sense of self. The term "other" acknowledges what Edward Said calls "the difference that counts," the difference that accounts for hierarchy, power and the formation of rules. Constructing the self as other, as I did for *Broken Circles*, lets one see one's self from an outsider's view, as tangential, as reference rather than referent. The self becomes the object in the process of otherizing.

The initial ethnographic experience is a collision with the self, an exercise in shifting the self from center to periphery. The ethnographer confronts the constructions of the other created prior to contact and the ways in which those constructions are intimately linked with the constructions of the self. For me, a Pan-Africanist, African-American ethnographer doing fieldwork in Africa, the cultural collision derailed both constructions.

The definition "African American" made little sense when standing in Nigeria talking with the Yoruba. Outside of the familiar, albeit hostile, context of the United States, "African American" had little reality as a functional phrase. It did not communicate resistance as I believe it does in the United States, nor did it assume the transatlantic kinship described by African-American anthropologist Niara Sudarkasa⁴ and Pan-African philosopher W.E.B. DuBois.⁵ My dialogue with my self, my construction of my self, did not make sense if "African American" did not communicate as a reality and therefore did not exist.

Just what is an African American in Africa? My inability to answer this question uprooted a heretofore fundamental aspect of my identity, a part of the self I took for granted in the United States as a part of my cultural identity. In my mind, my dreadlocks, West African inspired clothing, and "blackness of tongue" (Gates xix) meant something powerful in the United States, while from the Yoruba, these artifacts of identity elicited puzzlement, amusement, and sometimes disdain. I did not feel that my self, the self I had constructed on U.S. soil, was visible. Indeed, I felt out of my self. This displacement of my identity in Osogbo, Nigeria, was particularly disturbing because African Americans have mythologized Africa into a nurturing mother who embraces her children. My experience was quite the contrary. I wrote in my field notes, "I was sent off to Nigeria with gifts and well wishes and am an honored guest upon my return to the States, having touched the so called "motherland." Do not intend disdain—but it is a mother with decided disinterest in her dispersed children."

African-American identity is situated in a discourse of dislocation. Stories of not being at home in North America, of "returning" to Africa, of finding "brothers and sisters" in the "motherland" abound among African Americans, solidifying the African-American position as one of stranger in a strange land who has but to "go home" in order to find her true place. In Nigeria, although the location changed, the dislocation continued.

Many of the Yoruba referred to me as *oyinbo*, stranger and white person. Rather than *omowale*, child returned, I was *oyinbo*, leaving me dislocated in the very land that was to be the ultimate "homeplace," that space, according to bell hooks, "where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole." (49) In an important way, my first journey to Osogbo did begin a healing or "self-recovery" of identity; however, being there was anything but the replenishing environment that "homeplace" suggests. The name *oyinbo* deepened the sense that I was not being seen, at least not as I saw and had carefully constructed my self.

For me, my skin alone granted me some degree of insider status; however, kinship based on skin color is an American phenomenon not shared by the Yoruba. There were none of the dramatic welcomings noted by Malcolm X in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Alex Haley in *Roots*, and the several African-American travelers to Senegal recorded in PBS's *Family Across the Seas*. Unlike the combined insider/outsider position that anthropologist Delmos Jones found himself in when he conducted fieldwork among African Americans (D. Jones 471-482), I experienced my self in Nigeria almost exclusively as an outsider.

Not only was my sense of self derailed, but so was my construction of the Yoruba. Just as they did not see the self I had constructed, I did not believe I was seeing the Yoruba. My view had been distorted by years of dehumanizing images on the one hand and romanticized ideals on the other. As much as I had prepared my spirit with a kind of desk anthropology, pouring over books and tapes prior to my visit, I fear I was as tainted by what Toni Morrison calls "American Africanim" (6) as any of the most ethnocentric European writers Morrison critiques.

Conceptualizing my self as other gave me the space to take greater risks in the production than I would have had had I performed both self and Yoruba. Joni the Ethnographer talked about issues that felt risky for Joni Jones to discuss. Joni the Ethnographer told the audience:

And I had Sanitary Napkins—
yes, I was in my moon when I went to Osogbo!
No one at the University Health Center
where I'd gotten a shot for Yellow Fever
and a shot for Meningitis
and a shot for tenus
and my malaria pills—
one to be taken one week before you go,
one to be taken each week you are there,
and one to be taken each week for four weeks after you return—
well, they gave me a 24-page booklet on international health issues,
no one wrote a word about being on your period!
No one told me that when I got back to the States I might miss my moon
after all, I'd traveled half way around the planet. It makes sense that I should be in a new
moon cycle,
right?

There's a book—
Women in the Field
 there's no mention by any of these women—
 Niara Sudarkasa,
 Peggy Golde,
 Margaret Mead even—
 none of them said a word about the moon cycle!
 Sisters, we have got to help each other out! (*Broken Circles* 5)

I am not in the habit of discussing my menses with strangers, but fashioning my self as other gave me room to share ideas I felt were important, without owning them in the same way I would have to if I had actually spoken them. I could put my body on the line because I wasn't putting *my* body on the line; in performance it was Monique's body that would have to commit to these words and experiences.

Joni the Ethnographer also interrogated ethnographic practice when she acknowledged her ineptness with the electronic tools of ethnography and the cultural blunders she made. While the inclusion of such truths of fieldwork may already have been passé in some academic circles, I believed that exposing the pitfalls of the profession could be academically fatal. After seeing a performance of *Broken Circles*, a few graduate students wondered why I would reveal my inadequacies in doing fieldwork; they were concerned that such an appraisal of myself would hurt my bid for tenure. They also wondered if the College of Communication and the Department of Speech Communication might question the decision to partially fund my work given the fact that I fumbled in my fieldwork. Excising the mistakes of fieldwork from ethnography perpetuates the impression that the ethnographer is the all-knowing expert who, through sustained interaction, can uncover the nuances of virtually any culture; the very position I hoped to challenge with *Broken Circles*.

A straightforward discussion about the "careerist dimension" (Pratt 400) of the work, and the ways in which that dimension shaped the work itself extended the interrogation of ethnographic practice in *Broken Circles*. In responding to charges that her work on culture was a form of "academic colonization" (Fromm 398), Mary Louise Pratt described the ethical dilemma of fieldwork and ethnography while accepting that "[a]ll academic activity has a careerist dimension" (400). I am among those artist/scholars who, Pratt believes, "have . . . questioned their work along these lines, who have . . . felt a twinge at the thought that they are building their fame and fortune (or at least their livelihood) on the work of others or acquiring professional capital by opening up previously unscrutinized territories" (400). My fieldwork was intimately linked with issues of tenure; and the ethical complexities of doing this work for my own gain became a part of *Broken Circles*:

Joni the Ethnographer: And I had to ask myself,
 was I really making friends,
 or was I making deals?
laughs How about this for my next article!
video footage begins that reads,
 " 'Cultural Exchange' "
 by Dr. Joni Jones
 B.S., M.A., Ph.D., D.S.T.
 (Desperately Seeking Tenure)
 After three weeks of study
 among the Yoruba of

Southwestern Nigeria
 I learned . . .
 How to get scholarly
 articles in refereed
 nationally recognized
 journals,
 the respect of my peers,
 and tenure;
 and they get
 a ticket to the land
 they think brings them
 easy material wealth."

video footage ends

Joni the Ethnographer: In this context, who were we to each other?

Was he [Michael Oludare, Yoruba artist] merely the subject of my American publish-or-perish ritual and an unwitting partner in the dance of African-American romanticizing of Africa?

Was I merely his American meal ticket to the good life America offers in his own romantic visions of America?

In short, did we both see each other as a means to a financial end?

Probably more so than I care to admit. (*Broken Circles* 13)

Many of the Yoruba with whom I worked and studied were more involved with the immediacy of survival issues than I am on a daily basis. The inequities in our material realities and social status forced me to examine the relationship of this work to my potential for financial stability through tenure. After the production two colleagues questioned the wisdom of calling such attention to my forthcoming tenure bid. Both felt that doing so made me seem too anxious, thereby lessening my chances of getting tenure. As one colleague noted, "If they know you really want it, they won't give it to you."

While exposing my own issues with the academy and with ethnography was indeed risky, I felt the greatest risk taken in *Broken Circles* was its critique of Black Nationalism and African-American identity in general, because aspects of Black Nationalism have been integral to the formation of my identity, and because I thought the audience would be comprised of large numbers of African Americans who might find a challenge to Black Nationalism blasphemous. At the end of the production, Joni the Ethnographer said:

Motherland?
 Africa felt more like a distant cousin
 who was mostly interested in my money
 and really just wanted me to go on home.

You know the real deal?
 As painful as it is for me to say this—
 America is home.
 And being African American is our unique contribution to the diaspora. Africans are already African—we don't need to be African too.
 Coming to terms with this allows us to fully share *our* selves,
our realities with Africans.
 When we *embrace* the hyphen—
 even as it may pierce us from both sides—
 then we can engage in a truly dialogical performance with Africans—
 —one born of direct and immediate contact.

It is in this way that we can develop the respect for one another that can truly strengthen the diaspora. (*Broken Circles* 32)

Expressing these ideas undermines the unified front that African Americans have attempted to create as a shield against hegemony.

By creating a work which served as an extended personal narrative, I was engaged in what D. Soyini Madison calls "self-theorizing," which "in performance helps identify where and how people are giving name to themselves and their experiences" (229). In *Broken Circles*, the self-theorizing through the act of self-otherizing could be riskier than my performance of myself might be. Otherizing the self gave me a safer space to question African-American identity, share private commentary, and critique the academy. In this way, I was best able to give name to my self and my experiences, because I would not be inhabiting the constructed self as other in performance.

PERFORMANCE OF SELF AS OTHER

While doing fieldwork, I was displaced and disoriented "without a Joni self to hold on to." (*Broken Circles* 18) For this reason, I chose to cast Monique Cortez, a Mexican-American woman, as Joni the Ethnographer. Casting Monique problematized notions of identity and difference since it challenged the audience to accept a Mexican American as an African American. Non-traditional casting notwithstanding, such a casting choice raises questions about the director's intention and concept. This response to non-traditional casting is especially apparent in Austin, Texas, where such casting is rarely seen on the city's professional or university stages. *Broken Circles* was to be the story of an African American's journey through Africa and the self. While some audience members may have assumed Monique was African American, her honey-colored skin and her naturally straight hair could easily raise that awkward but frequent question "What is she?" Similarly, my identity in Nigeria raised questions and elicited labels from the Yoruba, like the paradoxical *oyinbo*. Having someone who was phenotypically different play me underscored the feeling of dislocation and not-selfness that I experienced.

While I believe the casting choice encouraged the audience to consider issues of identity, it also generated confusion for the audience. As the audience entered the performance space, Monique greeted everyone as Joni the Ethnographer. She walked through the auditorium welcoming the audience and engaging in conversations with several of them. Many audience members knew that she was not Joni Jones, and some challenged her to explain who she was and why she was claiming to be Joni. During these opening moments I was on stage as Yetunde Omoniwa, a Yoruba batik artist, and I could hear these confrontations; but as Yetunde, who was oblivious of the audience through the convention of the fourth wall, I was unable to assist Monique through these moments. The Director's Note for the production did little to clarify my intentions for the audience:

So—can performance stand alongside print and film as ethnographic documentation? What does performance reveal that print may obscure, and vice versa? These are important questions I'm asking myself.

About the script? I didn't use either Everyday Life Performance or Anna Deavere Smith's

techniques in developing this piece, though both these approaches informed the creation of *Broken Circles*. Just as Monique used her memory of me from class in developing the role of Joni, I have relied heavily on my memory of the Yoruba I met in Osogbo in (re)creating the people you will meet this evening.

With hindsight, the program reads as obscure and jargonistic, providing little assistance to those who are not in Performance Studies. The program did include the *dramatis personae* with the performers and their roles clearly designated; however this did not eliminate the confusion about the relationship Monique and I were to have during the production. Shortly after the final performance, I received a card in my University mailbox addressed to Monique Cortez. On the inside of the card, the sender wrote: "Dear Monique, The play was wonderful! Stay focused and Happy Bon voyage to Nigeria this summer. Best Wishes!" The writer believed that it was *Monique* who would be returning to Nigeria, not *Joni Jones*. While such an error could be a testimonial to Monique's ability to convincingly be Joni the Ethnographer, I recognize that the error also means my intentions with casting were not clear to all. Rather than encourage the audience to see Monique as a physical manifestation of my sense of not-selfness, the casting simply confused some of the audience leaving this critical point embedded only in the dialogue of the production.

Rehearsals of the self as other raised critical issues about ethnography and representation. The Yoruba were not able to shape my performances of them, therefore I felt it was unethical for me to shape Monique's performance of me. Yet as director, that was one of my most important duties, shaping the performances into the overall vision I had developed. When I began to direct her portrayal of me, I was always in danger of moving from otherizing to glamorizing. Monique had done her fieldwork through interviews and by "studying" me in classes and invited lectures; her performance of me would be her report on that fieldwork. The strength or weakness of her performance would be dependent on the detail of her fieldwork and her skill as a performer. In this way, she developed Joni the Ethnographer as I had developed Michael Oludare.

Occasionally, I would give Monique a line reading for Joni the Ethnographer with the intention of giving her more details to choose from rather than offering her a performance to duplicate. We did not use Everyday Life Performance⁶ techniques in which Monique would repeat a line again and again until she had found Joni the Ethnographer's voice, body and spirit inside her. Instead, she chose from a range of "Joniisms" that she noted during fieldwork and sprinkled these throughout the performance. Fieldwork became a part of her role preparation and rehearsal process.

In her creation of Joni the Ethnographer and in my creation of the Yoruba, we both relied on distinctive characteristics of our "subjects" rather than replications of them. Our memories or impressions of our "subjects" were as much a part of our performances as were the actual details of the "subjects' " performances of themselves. In my portrayal of Michael Oludare, a Yoruba carver and rice paper artist, I made my body small, I used a high voice, and I glanced shyly as Michael talked with Joni the Ethnographer. [Photo 1] What I gave the audience was a stylized version of my impression of Michael rather than a realistic representation. In doing so, I featured the ways in which I saw Michael as different from me. He is shorter than I am, his voice seems higher than mine, and he is less direct than I tend to be. I



Joni the Ethnographer (left) talks with Michael Oludare (right) about life in America. Monique Cortez as Joni the Ethnographer uses the hand gestures she associates with Joni Jones. As I performed Michael, my shoulders were pulled in and my feet raised from the floor in order to accentuate the contrast between Michael and me.

became the standard for my performance of Michael, unconsciously accenting the aspects of Michael I felt were least like myself. I enjoyed finding the new parts of my body and psyche as I performed him, reveling in the way my voice could stretch or the way my mind could think as his did. There was a curious freedom and expansion in doing a stylized rather than realistic Michael.

Monique used this selective method of performance when she focused on my hand gestures as identifying trademarks of Joni Jones. Some people felt her gestures were exaggerated, but I believe she was making specific choices to communicate her impression of "Joniness." This selective method was also used with phrases. During one rehearsal very close to the production date, Monique was telling a story as Joni the Ethnographer. In the middle of the story, she added "Bless her heart," a Joniism not a part of my telling of the story nor any of Monique's previous tellings. Working in this way, seems to have given Monique a distinct sense of Joni, because she was eventually able to improvise as Joni during rehearsals and in performance.

Early in the rehearsal process, Yetunde Omoniwa, one of the Yoruba batik artists I met in Osogbo, came to Austin to visit my daughter and me. She agreed to help with the production and guided me through dances, songs, pronunciations, and my performance of her. [Photo 2] While I created Michael and another character, the Anonymous Yoruba Man from the Anglican church, solely from my memory, my performance of Yetunde was supplemented by her continuous critique. She stopped me when she felt I was not finding her, and I still am not able to place her voice in mine.

Because I did not know the rules of interaction in Yorubaland, I had to rely on the improvisational skills that assist us in forging a script second by second. While this free-wheeling and frustrating improvisation was shaped by conventions of conversation and interaction, in experience, the improvisation seemed to exist without identifiable rules. How many measures could I solo? Where was the coda? Where was Maceo to take us to the bridge?⁷ Conversations were full of long silences and



Yetunde Omoniwa (left) teaches me a Yoruba dance during rehearsals for *Broken Circles*.

several re-statements as we tried to understand each other. In performance, my anxiety about this confusing improvised interaction was manifest through frequent asides to the audience. In the asides, Joni the Ethnographer could reveal the internal and continuous second-guessing and negotiating that marked my conversations with the Yoruba. The asides also served to communicate Joni's frustration with reducing complex social realities to simplistic phrases. When talking to Michael, Joni the Ethnographer makes use of such asides:

Michael: Tell me about America, please.

Joni: America? What do you want to know?

Michael: Do you like America?

Joni: *to audience* Now, how do I answer that? Is, "I like it sometimes," an answer? Can I explain oppression to Michael? [*to Michael*] It's hard to like America sometimes. There's a lot of poverty—

Michael: Poverty?

Joni: Yes, poor people, people without homes or food.

Michael: In America?

Joni: Oh yes, lots. And there's racism—

Michael: Racism? What is racism?

Joni: Well, a lot of white folks think they are better than black folks. (*Broken Circles* 11)

Broken Circles displayed the awkwardness of my otherness in the dialogue between Joni the Ethnographer and the Yoruba.

As I performed the Yoruba in scene with Joni the Ethnographer, I was literally having dialogue with myself. While I understand this was not Dwight Conquergood's intention when he described "dialogic performance," the brand of dialogue in *Broken Circles* intensified the "oppositions between Identity and Difference" (Conquergood, 9) when I saw Joni the Ethnographer as other. Monique's embodiment of Joni and my embodiment of the Yoruba [Photo 3] increased my ability to see through a Yoruba experience and hear Joni the Ethnographer's naivete and pomposity. This is reflected in the following dialogue between Joni and an Anonymous Yoruba Man talking during an Anglican church service:



Joni the Ethnographer (foreground) shakes her head as she recognizes the naivete of her comments to a Yoruba Man. Seeing the simplicity of my questions played through Monique Cortez increased my sense of my self as other.

Yoruba Man: I was at Osun. I did not see you there.

Joni: [to audience] What did that mean? There were thousands of people there. Did I stand out that much? [to Yoruba Man] Do you go to this church? [to audience] Would that make sense? "Go to" means "belong to"—did he know what I meant?

Yoruba Man: I come sometime. I am Muslim.

Joni: You are Muslim and you are in an Anglican church and you went to the Osun Festival!

Yoruba Man: Yes.

Joni: Well—is there any conflict for you in that? Being Yoruba and Muslim and going to a Christian church?

Yoruba Man: Conflict? Oh no. Honoring the orisa links us with our ancestral past and helps guide us through a prosperous future. The orisa provide a kinship for the Yoruba—no matter religion or politics. (*Broken Circles* 27)

As this dialogue suggests, I experienced my self as alien to me.

Anthropologist Pat Caplan describes a similar phenomenon when she discusses her fieldwork in Tanzania: "I have become aware that being an ethnographer means studying the self as well as the other. In this way, the self becomes 'othered,' an object of study, while at the same time, the other, because of familiarity, and a different approach to fieldwork, becomes part of the self." (180) My initial three-week visit to Osogbo did not give me the same kinship with the Yoruba born of "familiarity" that Caplan describes. However, in performance, I began to develop that kinship with the Yoruba, and to see my everyday, African-American, academic self as distant and strange. Situated in the performance reality of Osogbo, Nigeria, I-as-Yoruba was in the dominant self position, with Joni the Ethnographer in the subordinate other position. In this Yoruba world, I was offered amala, a yam-based doughy substance often eaten with chicken and a spicy red sauce, a substance I refused on my first visit because it looked unpalatable. As Yetunde Omoniwa, I had to eat amala with gusto. Because the yam flour was difficult to find in Austin, I had to substitute amala for iyan, the somewhat more available pounded yam. The

first chance I had to actually taste iyan was the opening night of the performance. At that moment, I had to fight my stomach and appear to be a frequent eater of this food. The scene was actually included so that Joni the Ethnographer could question with the audience the authenticity of her fieldwork during which she had committed the social breach of refusing food.

Joni: One afternoon

they decided to serve us an authentic dish.

Leigh: [*whispering*] Ma, what is it?

Joni: I don't know. [*to Yetunde*] Yetunde, is that lunch?

Yetunde: Yes. [*she offers Joni the plate*]

Leigh: [*still whispering*] Do I have to eat it?

Joni: No, baby—go get the tuna.

Leigh: [*whispering*] Are *you* going to eat it?

Joni: Get me one too.

Yetunde: Do you want lunch?

Joni: No, thank you so much Yetunde.

I'm, I'm, I'm

going to my room to write.

Yetunde: OK.

Joni: [*to audience*] Just what is my body to endure in the name of ethnography? (*Broken Circles* 20–21)

I became other from another angle as Monique's identification with the audience grew into a we-ness that excluded me, the Yoruba other. Monique and the audience could share their Americanness through asides and communal laughter; in performance I was the "they" in opposition to their developing "we." This was tempered by the fact that much of the audience knew I was indeed a part of the "American we" even as I played the Yoruba. Ideally, this created for the audience a shifting identification with positions of other/self, same/different, insider/outsider.

The final scene captured for me the layers of identity that undergirded the entire production. As Joni the Ethnographer sat center stage and told the audience "culture is not captured—/it is absorbed—/here [*indicates body*]/—/in the *doing*," (*Broken Circles* 33) I sat batiking upstage right in the role of Yetunde Omoniwa as I had throughout most of the production. The drummer, Rick Blakey, sat upstage left observing. The real Yetunde rose from the audience and joined us on stage, giving me instruction in batiking, and my daughter Leigh, who had only been a microphoned voice during the production, also came on stage and sat with her "mother," Joni the Ethnographer. Running throughout these tableaux was video footage from Osogbo of Yetunde teaching Leigh and me to batik. Here, the audience had the past Joni Jones on video; the real Joni Jones performing Yetunde while standing with the real Yetunde and the past Yetunde on video; the past Leigh on video with the real Leigh seated next to Monique as Joni the Ethnographer. Where did self and other begin and end? Which performance was true? To whom did this production belong?

CONCLUSIONS

Broken Circles gave me an opportunity to deepen my understanding of the Yoruba and the particular constructed identity I call Joni. While in Osogbo, another African-American woman asked me why the Yoruba women continue to wear *iros*,

the large wrapped fabrics that serve as skirts, when there are plenty of tailors who could create the more convenient waistbands. An *iro* loosens naturally and must be regularly tightened while a waistband remains forever in place. In Osogbo, many Yoruba women wear Western clothing, and some wrap *iros* over Western dresses. A fellow traveler couldn't understand why Yoruba women would insist on what seemed like a cumbersome style of clothing. I too wondered until I performed in an *iro* and *buba*, the short cropped shirt that accompanies an *iro*. The *iro* responds to a bodily aesthetic that does not value narrow waists and flat stomachs. Walking, sitting or dancing, there is not the binding or subtle cinching that one endures with a waistband. It accents both the buttocks and the stomach that figure prominently in much Yoruba dancing. I understood the preference for an *iro* when I wore one.

The *iro* is one of many instances of how performance ethnography revealed the ways in which my everyday practices are deeply idiosyncratic and simultaneously wedded to a cultural reality. Performance ethnography allowed me to stretch my self by clarifying for me where some of its boundaries exist. In this way, *Broken Circles* reflected Mary Catherine Bateson's notion of "canons of experience" (118). In using the literary metaphor, Bateson writes, "when you expose yourself to the culture of another human community, you are exposing yourself to a masterpiece, to a work of art, to the invention of a form of humanness that has been made over a long period of time" (119). Through performing the other and seeing self as other, I am adding more masterworks to my library of the self. Monique had a similar experience in performing *Joni the Ethnographer*. A year after the performance, Monique wrote me a letter: "Something funny happened. I had been spending so much time working at the [Korean] restaurant with Steve [who is Korean], and I had just spent time in Corpus [Christi] eating Mexican dishes with my family that I actually told Steve I needed to feed the African-American in me! Isn't that weird?" (Cortez) She had come to African Americanness so specifically, she felt it as an absence when she was not performing it. African Americanness had become a part of her self that she wanted to nourish.

I come to know the Yoruba, and my self, more complexly when I perform the Yoruba. While I might be able to write what I "discovered" about the Yoruba, my performance reveals what I know about the Yoruba, with the clear implication that such knowing is a blend of memory and experience. Bateson states, "the assumption is that you first learn a role and then you perform it. Now I'm arguing that this often happens the other way around. You have to begin *performing* a role before you *learn* it, and *the learning never ends*" (118) (*italics mine*). Bateson's belief harkens to Don Geiger's compelling observation, "... understanding by way of realizing is a particular kind of knowing" (311). Indeed, performance as knowing is a basic tenet of performance studies. I will continue performing the Yoruba as a way of increasing my knowledge about them and myself.

I believe Turner is right when he says: "If anthropologists are ever to take ethnodramatics seriously ... we will have to become performers ourselves" (101). I'd go one step further to say we also have to let others perform our selves—see our selves as others and allow others to speak for and as us. In this way we bring some balance to the ethnographic project, and we deepen our appreciation of others—self and otherwise.

NOTES

¹Margaret Thompson Drewal challenges the notion that ritual is "rigid, stereotypic, conventional, conservative, invariant, uniform, redundant, predictable, and structurally static" (xiv). Drewal demonstrates that improvisation and play are essential to any understanding of Yoruba ritual.

²Fa'Lokun Fatunmbi refers to Osun as "the Spirit of the River, fertility, eroticism, and creativity" (204). Luisah Teish writes that Osun is "the queen of the performing arts" (121). In Santeria, Osun is experienced primarily as a seductress while among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, Osun's gift is her ability to grant children to women who want them. For a discussion of Osun that references both Santeria and indigenous Yoruba practice, see Neimark.

³For discussions of the importance of the body to ethnography and the implications of print as documentation see Conquergood "Rethinking" and Pratt "Fieldwork."

⁴Sudarkasa believes she was able to move with ease among the Yoruba women she studied because they saw her as a relation from across the seas.

⁵Others could be added to the list of Pan-Africanists who speak of Africans and diasporic Africans as kin. Most prominent would be Leopold Senghor, Cheikh Anta Diop, Franz Fanon, John Henrik Clark, Dona Richards and Molefi Kete Asante.

⁶For a discussion of Everyday Life Performance techniques see Hopper, Stucky, and Juhl.

⁷Maceo Parker was the saxophone player for Rhythm and Blues legend James Brown. Brown called upon Parker in "Make it Funky," among other songs, to take the song in a new direction. I use the reference to illustrate how improvisation in music and conversation is governed by the rules of each medium. I agree with Ntozake Shange when she says that she should not have to footnote African-American cultural specifics in her writing—"Either you know us or you don't. If you don't, then you should look it up" (164). In this case, I have footnoted the James Brown reference because I do not want the cultural specificity of its inclusion to be missed.

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