
"Sista Docta": Performance as Critique of the Academy

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sista docta

Performance as Critique of the Academy

Joni L. Jones

The space is a deep three-quarter thrust. Upstage are a drum stand and chair, and a rolling swivel chair draped with a suit jacket. At the opening of the performance Joni Jones is seated in the audience. Drummer Alli Aweusi enters through the audience, drumming. On the drum Alli offers:

AA: PATAPITIPATAPITI GUN
PATAPITIPATAPITI GUN
PATAPITIPATAPITI GUN
PATAPITIPATAPITI GUN

Joni rises and moves center stage addressing the audience:

JJ: Good evening!
I would like to welcome you to
sista docta!...

Before I even open my mouth with these words and drummer Alli Aweusi strikes the first “PA” on the djembe, the critique of the academy has begun. *sista docta* was created in 1994 as seriate sketches that offer my commentary on being an African American woman professor at predominantly European American academic institutions.¹ This essay explores the ways performance in general, and *sista docta* specifically, challenges the academy’s philosophy of inclusion and the academy’s predilection for print scholarship. By the time I speak in *sista docta*, there has already been drumming, which invokes the long history of African American women in the academy. That history is a collective biography marked on the downside by exclusion, silence, and overt and covert discrimination, and on the upside by determination, courage, and achievement. While the genre of autobiography explores the singularity of experience, autobiography of marginalized peoples often serves as a collective biography, giving name to the experiences of many through the experience of one.² In a discussion of Maya Angelou’s autobiographical work, Selwyn Cudjoe explains that “the Afro-American autobiography, a cultural act of self-reading, is meant to reflect a public concern rather than a private act of self-indulgence” (1990:275). African American autobiography as collective cultural

act, as a decidedly public multivoiced concern, is made palpable through the human exchange and polyphony of performance.

JJ: How many sista doctas are in the house?...

This bittersweet question yields varying affirmative responses depending upon the venue. Tellingly, the second lowest number was registered at the Second Annual Performance Studies Conference, 21–24 March 1996. There were many more sista doctas-in-training at this conference, but so few sista doctas, African American women with doctorates. So few! D. Soyini Madison, Sandra L. Richards, and me. If I have overlooked anyone, I hope I will be corrected. In 1991, the percentage of doctorates awarded in the United States to African American women was 1.6 percent. The percentage of U.S. faculty who were African American women was 2.0 percent; the percentage of tenured faculty who were African American women was 1.0 percent; the percentage of full professors who were African American women was 0.8 percent.³ Perhaps these statistics are the stiffest indictment of the academy because the numbers challenge the academy's rhetoric of inclusion, of a nonracist, nonsexist society of scholars (and secondarily, artists). In spite of Affirmative Action programs and similar initiatives such as the University of Texas's Target of Opportunity money, the low numbers are sobering.

Joni stomps out the statistics making a diagonal across the space. As each question is answered she and Alli pound together, she with her feet, he with his drum.

**JJ: In 1993
out of 2,342 faculty at the University of Texas
How many were African American?**

**45
AA: GUN GUN GUN GUN**

**J: Of that 45,
how many were African American women?**

**15
AA: GUN GUN GUN GUN**

**JJ: Who was the first African American woman
to be hired by the Department of Speech Communication at the
University of Texas?**

**Me
AA: GUN GUN GUN GUN**

In the recent "reverse discrimination" suit against the University of Texas known as the Hopwood Decision, the University was required to dismantle its Affirmative Action policies with regards to admission. In order to win the case, the University attorneys would have had to admit to and demonstrate past discriminatory practices against numerical minorities at the University.⁴ While low numbers alone do not prove discrimination, they do reveal systems resistant to minimizing white privilege.⁵ After an extensive study of the current U.S. labor force, Barbara Bergmann concludes, "[O]ur need for affirmative action depends not on what happened 100 years ago but on the situation in the labor market today" (1996:33). The University attorneys might have won their case had they been willing to describe the current demographics and the relationship of those demographics to discrimination. After initially voting against the University of Texas and its Affirmative Action policies with regards to admissions, the Fifth Circuit Federal Court of Appeals granted a

stay allowing the University to resume its Affirmative Action policies until the Supreme Court made a final ruling in the case. The Supreme Court has turned down the case, leaving the University with no Affirmative Action admissions policies.⁶

Performance is a form of embodied knowledge and theorizing that challenges the academy's print bias. While intellectual rigor has long been measured in terms of linguistic acuity and print productivity that reinforces the dominant culture's deep meanings, performance is suspect because of its ephemeral, emotional, and physical nature.

Performance reveals the extent to which *sista doctas* are an absent presence on many U.S. campuses. In performance, the numbers are no longer statistics, but they are specific, distinct women. Performance makes the statistics *our* experience as we strain to see who rises when I pose the question. We share the flux of embarrassment, frustration, elation, and anger when the handful of *sista doctas* come to their feet. In performance the hypocrisy surrounding the academy's inclusion, and the lunacy of "racial preference" (D'Souza 1995:293) granted to African American women is given flesh.

JJ: I would like to dedicate
this evening's performance
to all the *sista doctas* in the house!
AA: PATAPITIPATAPITI GUN
PATAPITIPATAPITI GUN

JJ: I—
have arrived!
MA, N.U.!
AA: GUN
JJ: PhD, N.Y.U.!
AA: GUN
JJ: Tenure Track, U.T.!
AA: GUN
JJ: OOOOWWWWW!

I am
the new Negro.

And thus, after welcoming remarks, *sista docta* officially begins with Mari Evans's poem "Status Symbol" (1970).⁷ Performance is a form of embodied knowledge and theorizing that challenges the academy's print bias. While intellectual rigor has long been measured in terms of linguistic acuity and print productivity that reinforces the dominant culture's deep meanings, performance is suspect because of its ephemeral, emotional, and physical nature. *sista docta* simultaneously offers my perspective on life in the academy and critiques the academy through the content and structure of the performance. At its best, I hope the work contributes to what bell hooks calls "visionary feminist theory" that is "an integration of critical thinking and concrete experience" and is "articulated in a manner that is accessible" (1989:39). Ideally, it also provides a "radical move [...] to explore performance as a mode of scholarly

1. In the opening of *sista docta*, performed at the November 1994 Speech Communication Association National Conference in New Orleans, Jones lifts a leg as she says, “[...] tenure track, U.T.! OOOOOWWWWWW!” (Video by Claire VanEns)



representation” (Conquergood 1995:15) that does not seek to usurp print but rather joins print in the scholarly discourse. Performance, then, subverts the binary of artist/scholar when performance exists *as* scholarship.

JJ: [...] along with my papers
AA: GUN GUN GUN

JJ: They gave me my Status Symbol—
AA: PAPAPITIPAPAPITIPAPITI GUN

JJ: the key
to the White
Locked
John
AA: GUN

In challenging the “Euro-centric, linguistically convoluted” and “Western white male sexist and racially biased philosophical frameworks” that characterize U.S. academic institutions, bell hooks considers the possibility that the academy may be able to “produce theory that begins with the experiential before it enters the printed stage [...]” (1989:36). Of course, the academy already produces theory that begins with the experiential; that theory, however, does not support the material culture of the academy in which one is measured by what can be held and contained—a book, an article, a study. Print scholarship has been the primary product of academicians. Performance is not as readily reproducible and can never be copied with the same veracity as a book or essay. While this disappearing quality may be its virtue and strength, it also makes it difficult to measure in a system that rewards quantity, empirical data, and a marketability that relies on reproducibility. You can’t pass a performance around the country for peer review, and videos of performance negate the presentness that *is* performance, thereby becoming a new art form unto themselves. Because performance has not fit neatly into the academy’s methods of evaluation, performance has been given second-class status within the

academy. Each time performance occurs within academically sanctioned events, it is a reminder of the limited ways in which success is earned in the academy and of the narrow definitions of academic theory.

Joni walks in a circle around the performance space, talking as much to herself as to the audience.

JJ: What do I like about my job?
 When a student makes a discovery—
 really stretches to meet a character—
 moves outside of herself—
 That's what I like about my job.
 Then I believe the work can be
 transformative.

Performance is theory. It need not be written *about* in order for its theory to be present. Sandra L. Richards explains performance as theory in her analysis of Jamaican Jonkonnu and New Orleans Mardi Gras. Richards argues that "Afro carnival traditions constitute theory in motion" (1996:3). Performance is reflective of a particular philosophy and set of theories about performance and African diasporic existence. Performance itself tells its worldview, its resistance, its politics. I agree with Peggy Phelan that:

[P]erformance theory often stops short of the affective and psychic weight of a piece in favor of a schematic grid, a diagram, a logical theory. [...] The performance that interests me is not a literal "illustration" of a theoretical proposition but I find that much performance theory and criticism suggests it is or ought to be—and often the degree to which the performance disrupts the elegance of the theory is the degree to which it is said to be "flawed." (1995:186)

Performance may be theorized about, but the theory of the performance is imbedded in the performance itself, "flaws" and all. The provocative question is not "What theory created this performance?" but "What theory is revealed through this performance?"

Each time performance occurs within academically sanctioned events, it is a reminder of the limited ways in which success is earned in the academy and of the narrow definitions of academic theory.

sista docta was the featured performance in the opening plenary session of the Second Annual Performance Studies Conference at Northwestern University in 1996. Rather than a keynote speech, the conference opened with performance. I was quite aware of the significance of this position. I felt as though I was challenging a tradition that has been hostile to performance, to women, to African Americans. For me, so much was riding on this performance among my peers and colleagues in performance studies. A strong performance could remind academics, even the converted, that we operate daily in institutions that belittle, ignore, or merely tolerate performance; the impact of a weak performance, especially in such a context, could have far-reaching

consequences. As Wallace Bacon writes, “We have probably done ourselves some damage by offering in public too many bad performances” (1986:22).

Joni is seated in the rolling chair sliding, twisting, and spinning across the space as she offers comments from prominent African American women in the academy:

JJ: “[I]f I know my name,
I know
that in the academy,
like in America,
the sister is caught between the rock of racism
and the hard place of sexism.”
—Johnetta B. Cole

sista docta is rooted in a “pleasure-centered economy” (Bell 1995:99) in which I allow myself to publicly revel in my own femaleness. The extension of my leg and consequent exposing of my crotch in the opening whoop, the flapping of my breasts as I jog to the answering machine, the vibration of my buttocks with a Yoruba dance—all announce loudly my femaleness and love of that state. Indeed, my pleasure in performance and in my femaleness through performance feels more womanist, a glorying in the female, than feminist as Elizabeth Bell (1995) uses the term in her discussion of a feminist aesthetics of performance. The very body-centered pleasures that Bell imaginatively describes I associate with a womanist sensibility, what Alice Walker defines as “[L]oves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. [...] Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (1983:xii). For me, *sista docta* is “outrageous, audacious, courageous...serious” (1983: xi). Because the femaleness of the performance is so evident to me, I was taken aback when one woman asked me why I hadn’t included more references about being a woman in the academy. Did my blackness obscure my femaleness for her, a white woman?

Joni stands center, very still. She surveys the audience:

JJ: She said she was my sister,
but sisterhood is being redefined without my consent.
She pressed my hair
and she wasn’t even my mama.
No comfort of familial straightening,
no warm mama hands on Saturday night before Sunday school gotta
look good.
She pressed out the kinks of me-ness,
of slash marks and nouns into verbs and hmph, hmph, hmph.

My very presence is female, and black female reads as a particular physical reality that, I felt, did not require direct comment. As Sander Gilman said of 19th-century art, “the black female thus comes to serve as an icon for black sexuality in general” (1985:231). Gender, race, and sexuality are inscribed on my body by a world that reads me as such and by my conscious performance of my self that vociferously proclaims these identity markers. My black female body is a specific entity, a gestalt rather than a black and female body. It is a body that has been constructed in the U.S. as a service commodity. During the 1800s in the U.S., the black female body was breeder; ironically, that body was often depicted as asexual so as not to suggest the relationship between



2. In the November 1994 performance of *sista docta*, at the Speech Communication Association National Conference in New Orleans, Jones frequently faced her buttocks to the audience while drummer Alli Aweusi provided the rhythm. (Video by Claire VanEns)

white masters and African women in bondage. The body was simultaneously sexual for purposes of procreation and economic growth, and asexual to foster the illusion that it was an unattractive and therefore safe body to have in the white household. With the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 came a shift in the construction of the black female body. In order to restrict the newly acquired freedom, the black female body had to be constructed anew. The black female body was once again sexualized, but this time the intent was to show her as decidedly unsafe. She became the jezebel, now figured in popular culture as the bitch and the 'ho—sex being the sum total of her identity. This history comes to the performance space with *sista docta*; it is the collective history of African American women.

Continuing in the rolling chair, Joni slides from place to place in the performance space.

JJ: "It made me feel alienated
as a black woman in white universities
teaching every white boy to be Biff and Happy!
Is that pedagogically sound in this time?"
—Anna Deavere Smith

"being an afro-american writer
is something to be self-conscious abt"
—Ntozake Shange

"Black women intellectuals [...] must recognize the call
to speak openly about [...] our work as a form of activism."
—bell hooks

"I've realized people in academic circles
aren't really talking to me.
They're trying to figure out
if I'm smart or not."
—Anna Deavere Smith

Honoring black femaleness and a black female epistemology is a direct challenge to the white male sensibility that characterizes the U.S. academy. While the performing black female body challenges white male dominance, it may also perpetuate some of the very images that the content of *sista docta* seeks to problematize. Gilman's analysis of the ways in which black and female came to be joined to the role of the prostitute remind me of what I may be communicating as I perform. I am very conscious of feeding notions of black women as eroticized, exoticized objects, as "more primitive [than white people], and therefore more sexually intensive" (Gilman 1985:231). Rather than subvert stereotypes about African American women and interrogate the precepts of the academy, I may actually give the audience a reason to believe the sexualized stereotypes and support the status quo's dismissal of black female sensibilities. Perhaps my dancing allows people to simply make me invisible, so very Other that I am disregarded.

Performance work in the academy subverts the mind/body split even while it appears to exist on the physical end of that inappropriate binary, because performance is at once physical and intellectual, visceral and cerebral.

I am aware that this discussion of bodies suggests an essentialism that is out of favor in the academy at present. At the same time, it is my black female body that wears its history and shares its history with other black female bodies. Black and female may not be my essence, but they are my markers, identifying features that serve as bas-relief against the erroneously assumed neutral, stable, and therefore legitimate background of white and male. Unlike the dilemma Rebecca Schneider faced in writing about bodies in her discussion of Spiderwoman Theatre Company, a dilemma in which "working and thinking about 'the body' too easily located it, somehow, outside over there—an object at safe distance from a subject [...]" (1993:228), in this writing I am very much in my body as I am in performance as I am in everyday life.

Audience members assume the role of White-Faculty-Members-at-the-Faculty-Party. They speak from cards Joni distributes just before the performance:

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: You know we're moving. Well,
it will be good to be in a city where
the only people who stay home
during the day aren't on welfare.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: Yeah, I think the move will be
good for us.
We just found a great house.
It looks just like a plantation!

To say the academy is dominated by white people is an obvious point that misses the more complex reality that white behavior patterns and white thinking dominate the academy. White is at the center of the academy's consciousness, so much so that people who exhibit white behavior patterns do not hesitate to make remarks about welfare and plantations, seemingly oblivious to any racial implications in their remarks. I gathered these and similar comments with varying degrees of white-centeredness from colleagues who gave me per-



3. Reading from cards, audience members played the role of “white faculty members at the faculty party” in the November 1994 performance of *sista docta* at the Speech Communication Association National Conference in New Orleans. (Video by Claire VanEns)

mission to use their words in the performance. In *sista docta*, these statements are performed by audience members reading from cards that I distribute before the performance. They become white faculty members at “The Faculty Party” (plate 3). In this participatory moment, specific audience members must embody the white-centered position while all audience members are asked to look at themselves and consider their own behavior at social gatherings.

Joni moves throughout the performance space with the same movements done in the rolling chair, though this time she is standing. She performs the roles of her family members who talked about Joni’s work via a conference call.

JJ as SISTA 1: Well,
I’m going to say something into this tape
that everybody here already knows
and that is
white folks are toxic and oppressive.
They can’t help it.
It’s in their genetic coding.

JJ as SISTA 2: But Joni works with white folks.

JJ as SISTA 1: I wouldn’t have nothing to do with none of them.
I wouldn’t be going to their parties
and I wouldn’t be putting on no pantyhose!

JJ as SISTA 2: But Joni can hang with white folks.

JJ as SISTA 1: You can hang with white folks?

When one of my sisters rather accusingly asks about my ability to interact with white people, I pause as I try to articulate who I believe my white colleagues to be. Most would identify themselves politically as liberal, though this position does not ensure that we share the urgency about and commitment to exposing and countering racism. When *sista docta* is performed at

conferences and academic institutions, I believe much of the audience would likewise identify themselves as liberal. This characteristic becomes an important part of the performance because *sista docta* is interrogating the position of the white liberal. In writing about the liberal's retreat from race, Stephen Steinberg explains the white liberal's complicity in racism when he writes:

The truth is that it is the *refusal* to see race—the willful color blindness of the liberal camp—that acquiesces to the racial status quo, and does so by consigning blacks to a twilight zone where they are politically invisible. In this way elements of the left unwittingly join the right [...]. (1995:135)

By being oblivious to the politics of their own whiteness and white consciousness, white faculty remain unable to see blackness, to experience black as a sociopolitical identity construct interwoven around and through a white identity construct. *sista docta* can confront the white-centered assumptions upon which the academy is based, insisting that white faculty acknowledge their contribution to the white sensibility of the academy.

While the bulk of the performance centers around my experience at predominantly European American institutions, I also include commentary about Historically Black Colleges and Universities. HBCUs tend to press the public debate regarding race, sometimes at the expense of gender and sexuality issues. Black women have often been advised to keep silent about sexism so as not to dilute the energy generated toward combating racism; to name oneself feminist can be seen as an act of betrayal.⁸ This has established the same kind of complicity in inequity that retreating white liberals have created.

Joni pounds out a step routine interspersed with words in the percussive step tradition of African American fraternities and sororities:

JJ: We are the *sista doctas* from the HBCUs
but when we talk about our differences
blacks give us the blues
at black colleges they preach unity
but forget feminism and sexuality!

When a *sista docta* says
“What about women’s rights?”
they tell her she’s been hanging out with too many whites.
When her analysis includes sexualitaaaaay,
they say, “Hey! That *sista docta* sho nuff must be gay!”

Performance work in the academy subverts the mind/body split even while it appears to exist on the physical end of that inappropriate binary, because performance is at once physical and intellectual, visceral and cerebral. However, the work that is revered in the academy separates the mind from the body and seems to negate, or at least ignore, overt physicality. Athletes and dancers who embody the theories that govern their work are ridiculed as “brawn-with-no-brain” or “airheaded bimbos,” the implication being that there *is* a mind/body split, and that body work is inferior to mind work. While the content of *sista docta* encourages reflection, the performance is strenuous body work. One month prior to the performance I must adjust my daily physical regime in order to prepare myself for this workout, and by the end of the performance I am physically spent. Throughout the performance I am speaking while dancing, running, rolling on the floor, jogging, stomping, and stepping.⁹ This activity not only suggests the exhaustion of being an Assistant Professor, and specifically an African American woman Assistant Profes-



4. During an improvisation in the October 1995 performance of *sista docta* at Amherst College, Victoria Gonzales (standing, left) performs a white department chairman while Monet Hilson (right) performs an African American woman professor being told she did not get tenure. Other audience members (far left) watch the action. (Video by Kevin Palmer)

sor, the intense energy of the performance also interrogates the academy's narrow vision of what constitutes knowledge and how knowledge should be shared. This critique is most pronounced when *sista docta* is right in the middle of an academic conference, a conference that primarily (often exclusively) acknowledges the work of the mind. The audience has to integrate my dancing body into their notions of academic acceptability, and they are invited to put their own bodies into the performance, not only as observers but as spect-actors.

Speaking as herself, Joni addresses the audience. Alli drums softly throughout this preparation and the improvisation which follows. Joni dances continuously through the preparation and improvisation to keep the established energy flowing.

JJ: And now

I would like for you to help me create the next moment!

Let me tell you a situation

that a graduate student here told me—

something that happened on this campus—

then I want to see if you would like to play any of those roles!

I incorporate Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre techniques into the performance to require the audience to participate. I added the techniques to *sista docta* after a year of performing the piece and feeling that I was putting so much of myself on the line while the audience, during the time of the performance, did not have to commit much at all. I wanted to balance our sharing by moving the performance into the space of collaboration. It is in the doing that we stretch and learn most profoundly, so participation seemed the right approach to serve the efficacious ends I had in mind. At the Second Annual Performance Studies Conference, I learned how naive some of my assumptions were and just how much I was asking the audience to risk. Participation requires some level of identification, an identification that may be too risky when dealing with issues of race and gender. To contribute to an improvisation around these issues might expose too much about the participant, the

5. During a Forum Theatre session, the audience offers suggestions, while Jones as Joker (standing, left) and spect-actors Monet Hilson (center, seated with son) and Victoria Gonzales (standing, right) listen for their directions, in the October 1995 performance of *sista docta* at Amherst College. (Video by Kevin Palmer)



participant's institution, or the relationship of the participant to others present at the conference. Participation also necessitates a willingness to collaborate. Audience members may be reluctant to improvise because they feel they do not possess adequate skills, they might embarrass themselves in front of the highly judgmental conference audience, or the performance space might be too formal to enter. At the Northwestern conference, attendees offered all of these various reasons for not contributing to Forum Theatre. The situation was loaded on many levels, and I was not prepared for the long moments of prodding and cajoling that were necessary before some courageous souls joined me in the improvisation. This moment in the performance was asking the audience to behave in ways they were not accustomed to behaving at academic conferences. I wanted them to think *and* to do. I was sweating, the audience was squirming, and we were all hoping someone would please come to the stage! The prolonged waiting that followed my invitation to come into the performance space was strained, but I believe important work was happening in those moments. Everyone had to ask herself or himself why they were not getting up, why even the spirit of collegial support could not wrest them from their seats! What did it mean that those in performance studies would not heed the call to perform?

I first used Forum Theatre techniques in *sista docta* at an Amherst College performance in 1995. The performance took place in the Gerald Penny Memorial Cultural Center, a warm old house used as a gathering place for African American students. It was casually adorned with a painting of Marcus Garvey, the Black National Flag, and fliers announcing upcoming events. The intimate room had an octagonal wood floor designated as the performance area, and the seating was right on the rim of this small space. The improvisation centered around an African American woman professor not receiving tenure, and her European American chairman coming to her office to tell her this news. The situation was adapted from an incident that had recently occurred at Amherst and was relayed to me before the performance by one of the *sista doctas* present. After I introduced the situation, encouraging audience members to cross race and gender in their portrayals, two audience members quickly assumed the roles. Both were students at local institutions and both

said they had never performed before. They seemed comfortable in their performances, and the audience was eager to advise them and to adjust the scene. After bringing the scene to a close, I invited everyone who had given a suggestion to join us in the performance space. Several people traveled the few feet from their chairs to the center of the performance space, and we embraced as a way to return us all to our various selves. The ease of Forum Theatre in the Amherst performance left me ill-prepared for the tension and discomfort of Forum in the Northwestern performance! The Amherst performance was a one-evening event, attended primarily by local undergraduates, that was intended to jump-start a performance studies reading group across the several colleges and universities in the area. The Northwestern performance was attended by professors and graduate students, many of whom had moments before alighted from planes and vans and cars to attend the four-day conference. The performance space at Amherst was intimate and friendly; at Northwestern the performance took place in a formal theatrical space. At Amherst, my performance was preceded by Shannon Jackson's *White Noises*, which explores the construction of her whiteness. Her performance was self-reflexive and frequently humorous, and it created an open and responsive tone; at Northwestern *sista docta* was preceded by three brief speeches, which may have predisposed the audience to a lecture rather than a performance. At Amherst I had talked directly with the audience prior to the performance, asking them to participate in an upcoming sketch, "The Faculty Party"; at Northwestern I was grateful to have an efficient stage manager who took care of this responsibility. However, not interacting with the audience prior to the performance may have increased the demarcations between performer and audience, performance space and audience seats, making it difficult for the audience to cross into the performance space for improvisation. I am still working through how to effectively incorporate improvisation within a scripted performance as people continue to share with me their reactions to this work. And it is in this way that another challenge to the academy is offered.

The performance continued well beyond the 40 minutes playing time; throughout the conference, people shared their impressions of the performance with me and, interestingly, with the audience members who joined in



6. After the improvisation in the October 1995 performance of *sista docta* at Amherst College, everyone who offered suggestions or performed gathers in the center to release energy in a communal hug. (Video by Kevin Palmer)

the improvisation. This essay is yet another continuation of the performance, a re-visiting of the performance for me and others who saw it, and a vicarious experience for those who did not. *sista docta* is conceived as a perpetual work-in-progress, and all performance in our field of performance studies is such. Phelan notes “the impossibility of creating a beginning and an ending for a performance in a discursive field” (1995:184). Our work is rooted in working through, talking about, reflecting upon performance which conjures up impressions of the lived experience. The “return” to performance in writing or in subsequent performances constitutes a new arrival rather than a repetition. In this way, performance does not have the measurable closure and definitive answers that are most easily assessed in the academy. *sista docta*’s seriate structure of autonomous interchangeable sketches likewise does not culminate in a resolution. The performance stops but does not end. This undermines the academy’s commitment to answers and conclusions, and declares the significance of process and exploration.

Joni stands stage right of Alli and extends her arms in a wide arc.

JJ: And this is for *sista doctas*
Who are making our own arrivals!

Joni gives a deep bow as Alli begins.

AA: PATAPITIPATAPITI
PATAPITIPATAPITI

Joni dances through the audience. Exits.

AA: PATAPITIPATAPITI
PAPAPITIPATAPITI
GUN

* * *

JJ in the rolling chair as a prominent African American woman in the academy:

“[...] every black writer knows
the very people you may most want to hear your words
may never read them [...]”
—bell hooks

Notes

1. *sista docta* is the result of a collaboration between choreographer Llory Wilson and me. Wilson is the director of the dance company Tallulah in Seattle, the recipient of National Endowment for the Arts grants, and currently an artist-in-residence at the University of Montana at Missoula. Drummer Alli Aweusi is also a poet, puppeteer, actor, and community activist. *sista docta* has been performed primarily at academic conferences and universities. Its production history is as follows:

University of Texas, Reading Hour—Work in Progress, Fall 1994
University Hills Library, Austin, Texas, Fall 1994
Speech Communication Association National Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, Fall 1994
Union for Democratic Speech, Austin, Texas, Spring 1995
University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Spring 1995
Semester Recitals, Dept. of Theatre & Dance, University of Texas, Spring 1995
Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, Fall 1995
Santa Cruz Cultural Center, Austin, Texas, Fall 1995
Second Annual Conference on Performance Studies, Northwestern University, Spring 1996

- It should be noted that at the Amherst performance, I was accompanied by Murisku Raifu. Alli Aweusi was the drum accompanist for all other performances.
2. Several writers have discussed the ways in which African American autobiography presents collective experiences. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "My Statue, My Self: Auto-biographical Writings of Afro-American Women" (1990); Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "Maya Angelou: The Autobiographical Statement Updated" (1990); and Francoise Lionnet, "Autoethnography: The An-Archic Style of *Dust Tracks on a Road*" (1990).
 3. The statistics regarding the number of doctorates were derived from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Degrees and Other Formal Awards Conferred" surveys, and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System "Completions" surveys. The other statistics were gathered from the *1995 Digest of Education Statistics of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for 1991*. Katina Johnson in the Office of Student Affairs, College of Communication at the University of Texas, assisted in compiling these statistics.
 4. The Hopwood Decision reads:

The Supreme Court has insisted upon some showing of prior discrimination by the governmental unit involved before allowing limited use of racial classifications in order to remedy such discrimination. [...] In sum, for purposes of determining whether the law school's admissions system properly can act as a remedy for the present effects of past discrimination, we must identify the law school as the relevant alleged past discriminator. [...] In order for any of these entities to direct a racial preference program at the law school, it must be because of past wrongs at that school. (1996:37, 43)
 5. A powerful neoconservative critique of Affirmative Action is offered by Dinesh D'Souza, who sees no privilege accorded to white Americans and equates centuries of oppression with 24 years of minimally effective attempts at redress.
 6. Although the Supreme Court decision and that of the Fifth Circuit Court address admissions policies only, the University of Texas took a decidedly broad and conservative interpretation of the decision by removing all financial aid and grants and most university services specifically designed to assist numerical minorities.
 7. *sista docta* uses Evans's poem twice. In the opening, her words have been embellished with statements that are specific to my experience, such as where I have received my degrees; near the end of the performance the poem is done as Evans wrote it.
 8. Angela Davis (1989) and Audre Lorde (1984) have written eloquently about the subordinate roles gender and sexuality are relegated to in the struggle against racism. Davis expresses frustration over the position of women during the Civil Rights Movement. Lorde implores black men not to be frightened by homosexuality and encourages them to gather allies wherever they may be.
 9. Stepping is a vigorous dance style created by African American fraternities and sororities, frequently presented as competitive challenges at step shows. For more information on this art form, see Fine (1991) and Malone (1996).

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Video images were transferred to hard copy by Dr. Leslie Jarmon, Assistant Professor at Indiana University.

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