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## Ethnographic Performance and Global Learning: Lessons From "You Always Go Home"

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## **Ethnographic Performance and Global Learning: Lessons From *You Always Go Home***

Margaret Baldwin and Karen Robinson

### **Abstract:**

Ethnographic performance draws upon fieldwork in a particular social/cultural “lived domain” (Madison, 2005, p. 5) as the text (aural, visual, gestural) for the performance (or representation) of other identities. Through ethnography, we are required to enter into a “deep and abiding dialogue with the Other” (Madison, 2005, p.8). Ethnographic performance is particularly focused on giving representation to individuals and groups whose voices and stories often go unheard.

This essay will focus on the conception, development, and impact of an ethnographic performance entitled *You Always Go Home* that was produced by the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at Kennesaw State University. In this discussion, we reflect upon the effectiveness of the performance as a vehicle for global learning for our students, our audiences, and ourselves.

I am now in the midst of a profound meeting. Do I remain here at the margins of the meeting, or is the performance beautiful enough and political enough to compel me to travel more deeply inside the mind, heart, and world of the subject? In this ability to travel across the worlds, two identities meet, engage, and become something more.

—D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, (2005)

*We are sitting on the floor of a classroom at Kennesaw State University in North Georgia. The desks and chairs, backpacks, coats, and shoes are shoved to the edges of the room to carve out a space for rehearsal. It's a Tuesday evening in February. The student cast members are reading selected fragments adapted from a transcription of an interview with Nelson Otieno Obul, a Kenyan drummer and dancer who now lives in Marietta, Georgia, with his wife and children. Each student takes a paragraph as we read the text focusing on Obul's description of the funeral of his grandfather, an elder in the Luo ethnic community from the village in western Kenya that Obul calls his "ancestral home." The students take turns reading each paragraph:*

*All the people . . . Oh, you can't count. You can't count. Like let's imagine here in Kennesaw is my funeral. People start crying as far as Windy Hill when they're walking, coming. People you don't even know. They walk crying. Yeah, you see people joining them. By the time they get to your village it's like a thousand people.*

*And there is music. There's dancing, everybody's dancing. They are singing their song and everyone is dancing in their own style.*

*You would think that they are making merry, but that is the way of mourning.*

*When they get there, they go straight to the kitchen. The first thing they ask is, "Where's the food?"*

*The students finish reading. Margaret Baldwin, writer and co-director of the project, asks, "So what do you think?"*

*Silence.*

*After several seconds, one responds: "It's kind of weird."*

*Just then the door opens, and Obul himself bursts into the classroom, his arms laden with drums, kayamba (rattles) and a bin full of vikoi (traditional Kenyan cloths). He has come to lead his second dance workshop with the cast. Tonight he will teach the cast a traditional Luo funeral dance known as the sal. Baldwin explains that the cast has just been reading excerpts from his interview transcript. She asks the class: "Now that we have Nelson here in person, do you have any questions for him?"*

*Silence.*

*Finally, one student—an African American male who will play the "character" Nelson in different parts of the play—asks: "Why do people in Kenya*

*dance and sing at somebody's funeral?"*

*Obul crouches down to join the circle. He replies, "It's respect, man. You've got to celebrate them, honor their life. That is the way we do it. Dancing and singing, feasting, it's part of everything we do. And, you know, where I come from? It's easy to die, man. There's death all around you. So the dancing, the singing . . . that's for the living. Life goes on. We the living, we have to carry on. You know what I'm saying?"*

*The student nods, "That's cool, man."*

*Another student joins the conversation, "My family comes from Jamaica . . . that's how they do it there too. Like one big party."*

*"It's so different in America."*

*"But what about New Orleans, the jazz funerals?"*

*"I come from South Georgia, and I can't imagine anybody in my family dancing at a funeral. But we do some serious eating . . ."*

*A conversation evolves about similarities and differences in our cultural attitudes toward death. Eventually we stand up and start to learn the dance.*

We live in a time and space, on a planet where we can no longer afford to isolate ourselves within our own worlds. The urgent call for global citizenship increasingly resides at the center of conversations in the educational, social, political, and corporate arenas. Imagine a world where people are able to "understand world cultures and events, analyze global systems, appreciate cultural differences, and apply this knowledge and appreciation to their lives as citizens and workers" (Olsen, Green, & Hill, 2006, p. v). A utopia perhaps, but the act of striving for such global citizenship must not be dismissed as a utopian endeavor. It is essential.

As educators and practitioners of the performing arts, we are not only well poised, but responsible for creating and presenting performances that "travel across . . . worlds." If we take the importance of "global learning for engaged citizenship"<sup>1</sup> to heart (if we "walk the talk"), we are responsible for producing work that consciously fosters global learning. The act of performance possesses a unique power to take us on a journey—"beautiful enough and political enough," cathartic and provocative enough—wherein we visit imaginatively and viscerally multiple lives in multiple contexts. We traverse cultural bridges. We dedicate space and time to both ordinary and cataclysmic moments from human lives across the world. These are then shaped, framed, and presented to an audience. The performers embody; the audience observes, feels, and reflects. The events and the characters portrayed by the performers are honored as worthy of contemplation, and not just contemplation, but emotional investment and identification. In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell (1988) describes the powerful transformation



in human relationships when the Other <sup>2</sup> becomes a “thou” as opposed to an “it” (pp. 78-79).<sup>3</sup> Complete ignorance or disconnected understanding evolves into empathy and reverence. Such transformation is one of the potentialities of performance. Dolan (2006) reminds us:

Perhaps part of the desire to attend [and create] theatre and performance is to reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other. I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture. Such desire to be part of the intense present of performance offers us if not expressly political, then usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might feel like. (p. 520)

Among the many modes of performance that build global bridges, is one that will be the focus of this essay, ethnographic performance. When we use this term, we are specifying a theatrical approach that combines the disciplines of performance and ethnography—one that draws upon fieldwork<sup>4</sup> in a particular social/cultural “*lived domain*” (Madison, 2005, p. 5) as the text (aural, visual, gestural) for the performance (or representation) of other identities. Through ethnography, we are required to enter into a “deep and abiding dialogue with the Other” (Madison, 2005, p. 8), often crossing a significant cultural divide. Ethnographic performance is particularly focused on giving representation to individuals and groups whose voices and stories we have not heard.

It is essential to note, however, that ethnographic preperformance activity is not focused exclusively on the product; the creative *process* is of equal importance. These preperformance processes—research, fieldwork, and rehearsal phases—encompass a combination of traditional research *and* praxis that are equally vital modes of inquiry and learning. As faculty in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at Kennesaw State University, we are particularly interested in “engaging students as artists, scholars, and active participants in their social worlds.” Thus, we foster performance encounters that combine “rigorous theoretical investigation and practical, engaged learning”<sup>5</sup> in a variety of modes and contexts. Ethnographic performance provides the opportunity for such encounters and brings with it ethical imperatives that reinforce social responsibility.

Madison (2005) reminds us of the seriousness of the stakes “when you stand in as the transmitter of information and the skilled interpreter in both presenting and representing the lives and stories of others whom you have come to know and who have given you permission to reveal their stories” (p. 5). She asserts:

Critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice. By "ethical responsibility," I mean a compelling sense of duty and commitment based on moral principles of human freedom and well-being, and hence a compassion for the suffering of living beings. (p. 5)

While a full discussion of the ethics of performance ethnography is not the focus of this essay, it is important to iterate here that we must enter into any ethnographic endeavor with a profound sense of ethical responsibility and willingness to explore ourselves as deeply as we purport to explore the Other.

This essay will focus on the conception, development, and impact of an ethnographic performance entitled *You Always Go Home* that was produced by the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at Kennesaw State University in November 2006 and March 2007. In this discussion, we will reflect upon the effectiveness of the performance as a vehicle for global learning for our students, our audiences, and ourselves.

Kennesaw State University is a liberal arts university, located in the northwest region of Georgia, approximately 30 miles north of Atlanta. It is the third largest university in the state with an approximate enrollment of 20,000 students (as of Spring 2007). Minority students comprise 20% of the population. The campus enjoys a diverse population of traditional and nontraditional, commuter and residential students, and "more than 1,700 international students from 136 countries" (Kennesaw State University, 2004). Among those international students are a substantial number of Kenyans (approximately 100 as of Fall 2006). In fact, the community of Kenyans has been a consistent enough presence over the years that the university enjoys the popular nickname of "Kenyasaw." Partially in response to the Kenyan demographic, KSU chose to devote its annual "Year of" program in 2006-2007 to an exploration and celebration of Kenyan life and culture. As part of that celebration, the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies undertook the development of an original theatre work about Kenya. Two faculty members guided the project: Margaret Baldwin served as writer and codirector, Karen Robinson as dramaturg and codirector.

### **Concept**

The goal of the project was multidimensional: The piece would celebrate Kenya and teach KSU audiences—comprised of faculty, staff, students, and their families—about Kenyan culture. Just as importantly, it would provide an opportunity for the student actors and faculty leaders to immerse ourselves in

research about Kenya that would inform the performance; in fact, students and faculty involved in the project knew little about Kenya at the beginning of the process. We communicated from the start that the process would be a theoretical and practical mode of inquiry for the entire artistic team.

When we initially began discussing ideas for content, we did not specify an ethnographic approach. First we investigated scripts by the esteemed Kenyan writers Francis Imbuga and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, but immediately questions of representation arose: How could our student actors convincingly portray the struggles of postcolonial Kenyans that dominate these authors' works? Given our casting pool<sup>7</sup> how could we best represent and honor the people and culture of Kenya?

Karen Robinson suggested that we create a performance work based on a variety of sources, pulling from contemporary Kenyan poetry and traditional Kenyan tales. This approach would allow for more flexibility in terms of casting, and might offer our students (and ourselves) a more fitting entry point into Kenyan culture. It would also serve our pedagogical mission of nurturing multiple modes of performance through a variety of literary genres.

At the same time, Margaret Baldwin was teaching a course in the History and Theory of Theatre and Performance. A student in Baldwin's class, who happened to be from Kenya, performed for a class project the Kenyan version of the classic tale of the tortoise and the hare or, in Swahili, *Sungura na Kobe* (Hare and Tortoise). The student donned a kitenge (traditional Kenyan dress) on top of her jeans and tee shirt and directed the class to push the desks aside and sit in a circle on the floor. She framed the tale by saying this was a story her mother used to tell. She also shared with the class stories about growing up in a mixed-racial household and traveling to the United States.<sup>8</sup> This student was "rusty" on her Swahili from having lived abroad so long, so she had asked her sister (also a KSU student) to assist with the translation and to help replicate the gestures and phrasing that their mother had used. Although the class members did not know Swahili, they easily followed the tale through her physical gestures and vocal rhythms.

Hearing some of the student's life story gave the traditional tale a new context and led Baldwin to ask: What are the stories of other Kenyans at KSU? What is the place of story (traditional, familial, personal) in their lives? Baldwin, having created several prior performance works based on oral histories, proposed to alter the structure of "the Kenya play" to interweave the traditional Kenyan tales with the stories of contemporary Kenyans living in our own community, thereby shifting our approach to that of an ethnographic performance. The stories of their journey to Kennesaw and their perspectives on both Kenyan and American culture could offer our KSU student audiences a meaningful global learning experience.

In January 2006, Baldwin attended an African singing workshop where she

heard a remark by a Kenyan man that eventually led her to the theme and the title of the play. Baldwin asked the man where his home was in Kenya, and he said that he lived in Nairobi, but his home was elsewhere. He said that home, to most Kenyans, is a complex notion. Many live in the city, but consider their real home to be the village—their ancestral home. For those Kenyans living abroad, “home” takes on even more complex layers of meaning. Still, according to this gentleman, regardless of where you live and work, eventually, “you always go home.”

### **Fieldwork**

Armed with the project title of *You Always Go Home* and a general theme to pursue, Baldwin sent an e-mail to over 100 Kenyans in the KSU community asking for their input and participation in our project. The goal was to interview the students and gather stories about their experiences growing up in Kenya and coming to the United States. Those who responded helped us find more Kenyans: KSU students, staff, and alumni, their family members, and friends. The pool of interviewees—and stories for the play—rapidly grew. This growing network of connections and intersections points to a significant benefit emerging from the research process: the discovery of an extensive local Kenyan community, formerly invisible to us, but now revealing itself before our eyes.

Our questions focused on interviewees’ memories of growing up in Kenya, stories and songs they remembered, their perspective on village life versus city life, their journey to the United States, the challenges and rewards they have encountered living abroad, their future plans (either to stay in the United States or go home to Kenya), and their definition of “home.”<sup>9</sup> The questions served as a loose guide or structure to help “spark” memory and narrative on the part of the interviewees. The richest material often arose from tangents—places where our planned structure veered into unexpected territory. One memorable interview included a KSU graduating senior accompanied by her mother, aunt, and cousin who had all come for her graduation. What began as a one-on-one interview with the student’s mother evolved into a lively intergenerational exchange. Our conversation culminated with the whole family pushing back the desks to teach us a traditional Luhya<sup>10</sup> drinking song. The older women erupted in song and dance while the Kenyan student drummed accompaniment on a plastic chair. In an instant, our cinder-block classroom was transformed into a Kenyan celebratory space. We stepped from the edges (as observers) into the dance (as participants) and became world travelers.

*It’s late June 2006—an unseasonably warm day. A Kenyan graduate student assisting on the project appears at Baldwin’s office door. He*

says, "I'm telling you, it never gets this hot in Nairobi. I can't wait to go back home."

*He has just come from an interview with a fellow Kenyan student. He reports: "It went okay I guess. She had just come from World History class: The Africa Section. She was really frustrated."*

*"About . . . ?"*

*"All the negative stuff. That one-dimensional view of African life: HIV/AIDS, drought, war, tribalism, corruption. I guess it's unavoidable."*

*"Why do you say that?"*

*"You know, when people talk about Africa, their perspective is shaped mainly by what they see on TV: news coverage, AIDS Concerts, the Discovery Channel. They've never been there. They don't know what it's really like. We get frustrated because they don't take the time to see the whole picture."*

The student's remarks led us into deeper conversations with our subsequent interviewees about stereotypes and assumptions they had encountered since "going Stato."<sup>11</sup> Their responses took the form of questions that they had been asked by Americans; eventually we incorporated these questions into the play as a litany that accosts a Kenyan who has just arrived in the United States:

Do you live in trees in Africa?

Do you ride elephants?

Do your parents hunt lions?

Do you keep wild animals in your backyard?

Is this your first time wearing clothes?

I thought you people only wore skins.

How did you get here?

You don't have planes, do you?

Did you learn English in the airport?

I know a guy from Nigeria named Olu! Do you know him?

(Baldwin, 2006, p. 19)

This passing conversation—and the conversations that followed—heightened our awareness of the dangers of presenting a generalized portrayal of Kenyans (or Africans) "As Seen on TV." The ethical responsibility to which Madison (2005) calls us as performance ethnographers challenges us to present a balanced portrayal, one that counteracts backward and/or negative stereotypes by

presenting multiple perspectives of what it means to be Kenyan. Our growing awareness of this multiplicity guided our hands as we moved to the next phase of development: selecting and shaping material for our play.

### ***Development and Rehearsal Process***

In keeping with our departmental mission, we structured the development and rehearsal process of *You Always Go Home* to interweave traditional research, collective learning, and performance as a mode of inquiry. The development took two phases: the first in Fall Semester 2006, the second in Spring Semester 2007. The first phase culminated in seven performances of a "work-in-progress" version of the script that was approximately 40 minutes in length (comprising two thirds of the finished work). Feedback sessions with audience members and ongoing conversations with our Kenyan interviewees (plus additional interviews with other Kenyans) armed us with ideas for revision and further development of the script.

Working with an ensemble of theatre and performance studies majors, we began to select excerpts from the interview transcripts to build the play. While we did not know exactly what the final content would be, Ngugi wa Thiongo's (1986) comments about "the elements of form of the African theatre" (p. 45) served as a model for the texture of the piece:

First was song and dance. Song and dance as we have seen are central to nearly all the rituals celebrating rain, birth, the second birth, circumcision, marriage, funerals or to all ordinary ceremonies. Even daily speech among peasants is interspersed with song. It can be a line or two, a verse, or a whole song. What's important is that song and dance are not just decorations; they are an integral part of that conversation, that drinking session, that ritual, that ceremony. (p. 45)

Our fall cast consisted of an ensemble of eight women, none of whom were Kenyan.<sup>12</sup> The nontraditional casting<sup>13</sup> reflected our decision to take an approach wherein we openly acknowledged ourselves, not as realistically impersonating our Kenyan "subjects" by using the dramatic approach of full immersion into one character, but rather, a narrative approach whereby we acknowledge ourselves as performers who are telling Others' stories.<sup>14</sup>

We discarded the hierarchical mode of new play development and direction in favor of a collective approach; in other words, Baldwin did not arrive at the first rehearsal with a finished script that she and codirector Karen Robinson



would conceptualize, then “direct” the performers to enact. Rather, playwright, performers, directors, and designers participated as *cocreators* of the script and the performance: Everyone brought his/her creative imagination to the “writing” of the piece using the interview transcripts, traditional tales, and even the performers’ bodies as “texts.” Physical and vocal improvisations were the primary means used to shape those texts into performance. Baldwin would distribute transcript excerpts, collaborate with Robinson to design improvisatory exercises for the cast, draw inspiration from the resulting improvisations, draft the scenes, design more exercises, and revise multiple times before coming up with final drafts.

*October 2006. There is a knock at Robinson’s office door. One cast member—an African American woman in her late twenties—enters, visibly upset.*

*“Karen, can I talk to you for a second?”*

*“Sure, what’s up? Is something wrong?”*

*“I’m feeling uncomfortable about the way the piece is heading. I mean, the process is great and creative and everything, but it feels like what we’re making is Disneyfying it or something. It doesn’t feel African enough.”*

*Silence.*

*“Okay . . . I really appreciate you coming to me about this. Can you be a little more specific about what is bothering you? Is it the whole piece or just certain parts?”*

*“Well, like yesterday. When we were staging the part about the questions—the way we staged it—all the gestures and sound and craziness—felt like it was distracting from the weight of what they’re saying. I’m afraid if we do it that way, we’ll let the audience off the hook. They won’t have to stop and think about how hurtful those questions really are.”*

The student’s critique offered us an opportunity for deep reflection and challenged us to ask some difficult questions: In our attempt to theatricalize the lives of these Kenyans had we, in fact, “Disneyfied” their stories? Had we whitewashed some of the weightier aspects of their lives, veering too far in the direction of sheer entertainment? What did it mean for our work as performance ethnographers to be “African enough?” How could we—without trying to pretend we are Kenyan or sinking into a generic “Africanness”—bring a more authentic Kenyan aesthetic to our work?

At the next rehearsal we took two immediate steps to address the student's concerns. We clarified our intention to offer a balanced perspective of contemporary Kenyans' lives—one that counteracted some of the negative stereotypes brought to our attention before rehearsals began. We also addressed the issue of staging the litany of questions by stripping away all excess movement, by placing the questioners in a shape that threatened the Kenyan character, and trusting the questions to speak for themselves. This simplified staging proved to be a far more effective choice. Many of our American audience members later commented that this scene challenged them to reflect on their own assumptions about Kenyans in particular, and Africans in general.

Two additional outcomes followed: We instigated follow-up conversations with some of our Kenyan interviewees to probe some of the deeper challenges they faced as contemporary Kenyans living in diaspora (between cultures); and we pursued further collaboration with artist Nelson Otieno Obul, a Kenyan dancer and drummer who had conducted dance workshops through the Institute for Global Initiatives in the fall of 2006. The student's critique and the outcomes that following contributed significantly to the evolution of the work; this speaks to one of the many values of taking a collective approach to making theatre.

When we began the second phase of development in February 2007, we recast the ensemble to include six women and three men, having determined that a male presence was central to our clear portrayal of gender roles in Kenyan culture. With Obul's assistance we revised the piece to include two Kenyan dances. Obul also offered movement consultation for a number of scenes in the play.

At the same time, we incorporated some of the weightier stories that our interviewees had shared with us. One particularly poignant story came from a Kenyan student whose father had passed away unexpectedly during the previous semester. The cost of travel and her responsibilities as a student and mother prevented her from journeying home to take part in the funeral ceremony. Her story conveyed the kind of sacrifice that many Kenyans face upon leaving their homeland to pursue education and opportunity in America. Baldwin adapted a monologue to capture the student's story of how she learned of her father's death, and Obul choreographed a funeral dance that followed it. The monologue provided intimate emotional context, while the ritual movement in the dance completed the cathartic experience by means of emotional and physical release. A student audience member's response later described the effect in performance:

When one imagines the idea of singing and dancing at a funeral it sounds inappropriate, but the drumbeats that were used created a heaviness that even a "Westerner" like myself would have interpreted as mournful. Even the dancing that went with



the music was very grounded, and I loved how they all danced in a circle, which really allowed them to mourn as a community. That particular scene in the play really gave me an even deeper insight into Kenyan culture and how they grow and develop bonds as a community.

During the last four weeks of development and rehearsal, we continued to seek feedback from the many Kenyans who had been involved in the project as we fine-tuned the script and staging for performance. This phase culminated with three performances in March of 2007. The final performance was presented as part of an international conference on the Kenyan Diaspora held at Kennesaw State University. We were eager to see how a primarily Kenyan audience would respond.

### **Outcomes**

Ultimately our goal as theatre and performance artists and educators is to have an impact on human lives; if so, then what differences, if any, did we make in the lives of others by means of this project? What did participants—directors, writers, performers, audiences—gain from *You Always Go Home*, and how did the outcomes meet our expectations? When we embarked upon the process of creating the piece, we anticipated a number of benefits that included substantive learning about Kenya for our student performers, our audiences, and ourselves. We also anticipated meaningful dialogues about Kenyan identity and life experiences. We knew we would be asking “the audience [and ourselves] to travel empathically to the world of the Other and to feel and know some of what they feel and know” (Madison, 2005, p. 175). We certainly hoped the journey would cultivate openness, tolerance, and respect that outlasted the performances, but we could not predict the attitudinal transformations that might take place. Reflection would be key to our assessment of the impact. In pursuit of this, we planned to follow every performance of the play with talkbacks between members of the audience and the artistic team. These discussions as well as additional surveys offered us testimonials from the artistic team, the audiences, our Kenyan interviewees, and their peers that crystallized the benefits of the project.

“Before this project, I would never have thought to learn about Kenya,” wrote one of our cast members. Indeed, when we auditioned our student performers in fall of 2006, we suspected that the initial reason some of them committed to the project stemmed from their desire to perform in a “show,” rather than a desire to learn about Kenya in particular. Nonetheless, their evolution from ignorance and/or disinterest to understanding and empathy was palpable throughout rehearsals as they worked to develop (and portray believably) emotional connections with

their Kenyan “characters.” Their reflections after the final performances affirmed that significant learning and attitudinal shifts had taken place:<sup>15</sup> “I will admit I was very ignorant about not only Kenya, but Africa as a whole. It taught me humility.† Another participant expressed a similar thought more strongly:

Before *You Always Go Home*, I knew very little about Kenyan people and their culture. Honestly, I didn’t care much to ever find out. But thanks to this entire experience I have learned a great deal about Kenyans. I [have] also come to revere them as a people. I deeply respect their determination and courage to live through and overcome some of life’s greatest tests.

Not caring “much to ever find out” points to a set of boundaries around this person’s selfhood that were firmly in place before participating in the production; although, in all likelihood this individual was not even aware those boundaries existed. His embodiment of Kenyan stories and identities effectively dissolved those boundaries, thereby creating an opening for “deep respect” and reverence. Other performers articulated recognitions of equal weight:

My attitude toward Africa in general has changed. I realize that it is the most unknown and neglected continent. Kenya is just one country out of many, and I only know a small amount of information about it, but a whole lot more than I knew before the process began.

While these thoughts raise as many questions as they answer (What was the former attitude?), they do bear the marks of change, alongside an admission that links “not knowing” with neglect. Taken together, these remarks suggest an emerging sense of responsibility to know more about the world at large.

Possibly the greatest fulfillment for our students emerged from postperformance talkbacks that moved them beyond the immediate pleasure of performing for an appreciative audience to a deeper understanding of the value of their work:

Our Friday performance for the Kenyan conference was the most rewarding performance I have ever been involved in. The talkback let me know that the Kenyans were incredibly grateful for our dedication to giving their country a voice. Some even said it felt like they were back in Kenya just for a while. Their comments touched my heart and let me know that we accomplished our job as performers.

Here the performer's sense of fulfillment is linked foremost to giving "their country a voice." She comprehends, emotionally and intellectually, that "the subjects themselves are the focus" (Madison, 2005, p. 6), and she feels the full weight of making a *social* (as opposed to purely an aesthetic) contribution through the performance. As another performer stated:

The importance of the work was not complete until I saw their reactions after the show. To have the woman I portrayed [...] come up to me after the show with tears in her eyes is a moment I will never forget.

In the midst of rehearsing and performing, this performer understood empathically what it was to be her subject; but when she witnessed in person the cathartic effect of her performance, she felt the full weight of its impact. The interviewee, in turn, was able to express her gratitude and sense of being honored (she later used these very words). In that momentary meeting, the two individuals reaffirm that they have seen each other through each other's eyes. There has been a moment of *mutual* understanding that has deepened the connection.

From the outset we knew we had a responsibility to speak to a wider audience, one outside the immediate experience of creating the piece. For these larger audiences:

The performance strives to communicate a sense of subjects' worlds in their own words; it hopes to amplify their meanings and intentions to a larger group of listeners and observers. These listeners and observers are then affected by what they see and hear in ways that motivate them to act and think in ways that now beneficially affect (directly and indirectly) either the subjects themselves or what they advocate. (Madison, 2005, p. 174)

Although our audiences consisted of diverse groups of students, families and friends, three broad groups have offered us evidence of positive impact: non-Kenyan Kennesaw students of various ethnic backgrounds (primarily Americans); Kenyan students and staff (including interviewees and some of their family members); and finally, Kenyans outside of the campus community (some living locally; some from various parts of the United States; some who had traveled from Kenya) who attended the performance as one of the aforementioned conference events.

The first of these groups attended the production primarily because it was required for a theatre appreciation course that is offered as part of the liberal arts curriculum at KSU. Prior to their attendance at the production, we presented

a lecture- demonstration that introduced the genre, content, and performance style of the production. Choreographer Nelson Otieno Obul participated in these lectures by providing a personalized glimpse of Kenyan culture and involving willing students in drumming and dancing. The students later responded to the production verbally in the talkbacks and class discussions, and in writing by means of a short essay. Their responses communicated interest in what they had learned about Kenya, observations of similarities with their own experiences, and respect for the cultural differences they witnessed. This respect was often linked to details in the performance that included ritual enactments, story, humor, dancing, singing, and physical and vocal impersonation; they credited these details for communicating Kenyan beliefs and values and evoking their interest and empathy. Although their connections with Kenyan identity were not as deeply felt as those of our student performers, these students' essay responses reflected that they were exercising intercultural critical thinking skills through the act of comparison and contrast. As Edward Bruner (1986) observes: "Cultures, I hold, are better compared through their ritual, theatres, tales, ballads, operas than through their habits. For the former are the ways in which they try to articulate their meanings" (quoted in Madison, 2005, p. 152).

Thus, for our theatre appreciation students, the performance content served as an accessible entry into a foreign world, a world in which they could discern and articulate both differences and similarities with their own. In traveling to the 'life-world' (Madison, 2005, p. 176) of these Kenyans, they experienced connections and, perhaps, a relaxation of the categories of self and Other.

The second audience group, those Kenyans we interviewed, offered reflections that revealed two benefits of the performance processes: the experience of sharing their stories through interviews, and later, the experience of seeing those stories enacted upon the stage.<sup>16</sup> The former was a benefit we had not anticipated nor considered until we asked our Kenyan interviewees how the interview affected their perceptions of their "story," culture, and identity:

The interview made me realize that someone is interested in my story as it is and not what they have seen or heard. They are trying to understand the meaning behind it and not criticize it but respect it.

Embedded within this Kenyan's description is a progression from criticism to understanding to interest and respect, which articulates exactly what we seek from intercultural dialogue. Moreover, the implication is that her identity as a Kenyan has been validated by means of the interview. We, in turn, are more fully cognizant of ourselves in her eyes; and ultimately, we feel validated that she

recognizes (and apparently appreciates) our efforts to forge a connection and tell her story. Another interviewee wrote how the interview led her to an altered sense of self; through “storying” herself, she gave time and space to both reconnect with and share aspects of her culture and identity:

The interview process was like a storytelling session where I got the chance to open the door to my life and invite my new friends to take a peek into the challenges and triumphs of who I am. As I continued telling stories of my life, I got a chance to reflect on my own life and share the values and traditions of my family as passed on from generation to generation.

This response illuminates how the interview process served as catalyst for reflexivity, recalling Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) words: “I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another” (quoted in Madison, 2005, p. 9). In this light, we understand how the ethnographic fieldwork sparked revelations for our interviewees as well as ourselves. The performance then sparked another revelation for this interviewee when she watched her Self enacted on the stage:

For a moment, somebody else became [me], sang my childhood songs, carried my ‘suitcase’ of cultural experiences in both countries and most of all, taught other people through art, who I was.

**I am therefore you are.**

**You are, therefore I am.**

**And because you are, WE ARE.**

The actors took on this saying that my dad always shared with us when talking about family. They became us, because we (Kenyans) were.

This memory of a Kenyan proverb ushers us more deeply into the idea of two identities in a cycle of exchange that is mutually affirming. (“I” and “You” become “We.”) Our interviewee’s association of this proverb with her father and “family” reinforces the feelings of community and pride that were evoked by the performance. As another interviewee remarked:

[The play] made me proud of my story, of my experiences. To hear that other friends had similar experiences made me laugh a lot, but in all honesty it made me proud of who I am as a Kenyan,

and proud of my heritage.

This communal pride was most palpably present during the final performance, an evening that crystallized the benefits of our performance for the Kenyan community.

*It is Friday evening, March 23, 2007, in Kennesaw, Georgia, USA. Audience members stream into KSU's Stillwell Theatre for the final performance of You Always Go Home. Roughly half of the audience members are KSU students required to see the performance for their theatre appreciation course. The other half of the audience consists of Kenyans who have traveled to Kennesaw from Kenya, from Europe, and from communities across the United States to attend a conference on the Role of the Kenyan Diaspora in Kenya's Development. The conference attendees include dignitaries, university professors, business people, journalists—all keenly aware of their diasporan status. They have come to see the play because it is listed as a "conference event." What do they anticipate?*

*The house lights dim; the audience murmurs as a woman's voice delivers the preshow announcement, first in English, then in Swahili. The Kenyan Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence Eric Aseka is invited on stage to lead the audience in the Kenyan National Anthem in Swahili. The anthem ends. The lights go to black.*

*One of our Caucasian cast members enters the bare stage, calling in Swahili:*

*Hadithi, hadithi! [Story, story!]*

*Other performers respond:*

*Hadithi njoo! [Story come!]*

*The stage fills with our student performers calling out the names of the Kenyans who have shared with us their stories, laughter, and tears over the past year. Pockets of the audience applaud as the performers call out*

*different Kenyan ethnic identities:*

Luo  
Pokomo  
Luhya  
Kamba  
Kikuyu

*The performers voices rise together for a resounding call:*

**KENYAN!**

*The entire audience erupts—propelling the performers into the opening dance.*

*The play continues; a meeting of cultures unfolds.*

Through witnessing the storying of their lives, these Kenyans reconnected with their homeland and with one another. One of our Kenyan guests later noted that the play challenged him to question: “What forces define and shape our identities as Kenyans? What core identities must we assume to develop an intense sense of Kenyanness despite our coming from diverse social or ethnic groups, identities that go beyond petty ethnicity?” Indeed, the performance impressed upon them a unity they might not have shared at home.

Here is how another Kenyan audience member responded:

For me, the highlight of the occasion was seeing mostly “White kids” (written in good faith) speaking and sounding black and enjoying every moment of it. “You Always Go Home” is not just entertainment drama; it is the image and voice of a community that is mostly perplexed, flabbergasted and confused about everything around them. [...] For such a community, nothing is more healing and reassuring than knowing that somebody takes interest in them and at least tries to understand them. The play breaks socio-cultural barriers. It is an addition to efforts aimed at creating an international citizen.

This gentleman’s comments suggest that the seemingly simple act of “taking



interest in" others and "trying to understand them" through performance can have a transformational effect—for both the performer and the performed. His statement takes us back to our notion of the Other who becomes "thou." For this audience member, the "White kids" represented the Other. The fact that they became "thou" through representing his fellow Kenyans had a healing effect for him as a member of a dispersed community.

For those of us in the audience who were not Kenyans, there were also moments of communion that night when we recognized aspects of human experience we all share. Could these existential moments shared between us have approached what the anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) describes as *communitas*?

In the workshop, village office, lecture-room, theatre,  
almost anywhere people  
can be subverted from their duties and rights into an  
atmosphere of *communitas*.

[...] Is there any of us who has not known this moment  
when compatible

people—friends, congeners—obtain a flash of lucid  
mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel  
that all problems, not just their problems, could

be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the  
group which is felt (in the

first person) as "essentially" us could sustain its intersubjective  
illumination? [...]

In industrial societies, it is within leisure, and sometimes aided by  
the projections of art, that this way of experiencing one's fellows  
can be portrayed, grasped, and sometimes realized. (quoted. in  
Schechner, 2006, p.71)

If so, then *communitas* rightfully deserves a place in our consideration of performance as a catalyst that dissolves boundaries and connects us all as global citizens. With hindsight, we see that the spirit of "lucid mutual understanding" exerted its presence not once, but several times during our journey from ethnography to performance.

## **Conclusion**

When we look back over the process of creating and performing *You Always Go Home* to the moments that offered the deepest fulfillment, we find them within the conversations—beginning with the initial interviews and continuing



with the deeper discussions that followed. To hark back to the spirit of critical ethnography: These were the “deep and abiding dialogue[s] with the Other as never before” (Madison, 2005, p. 8). The dialogues that contained criticism challenged us to reflect more deeply on our purpose, and to take new action to make the work (and ourselves through the work) grow into something more. The dialogues that took place during postperformance talkbacks further expanded our experience of theatre/performance as a means to traverse cultural bridges. Here, the arena of exchange grew into a public space for sharing between larger numbers of Kenyans, Americans, and others from a variety of nations, a space where we might experience both *communitas*, and the “meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among the Other(s), one in which there is negotiation and dialogues toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in the Other’s world” (Madison, 2005, p. 9).

Our charge as artists and educators is to nurture dialogue, understanding, and empathy between seemingly separate human identities, to encourage “lucid mutual understanding,” and to create opportunities for our students to be world travelers. World traveling does not mandate crossing geographical borders. It does, however, mean opening to others in ways that allow us to see ourselves through each Other’s eyes. Then, and only then, are we equipped to engage as global citizens in today’s world.

### Notes

1 This is the focus for Kennesaw State University’s “Quality Enhancement Plan” (QEP), a central component of the University’s plan for strengthening its educational experiences in the coming decade. A campuswide QEP is one of the requirements for institutional reaccreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

2 “Other” with its uppercase ‘O’ signifies the act of marking or constructing a boundary between groups, and placing the self at a safe remove, often implying objectification. We are indebted to our colleague Dr. Hannah Blevins Harvey for this iteration of the concept.

3 In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell notes how “you can feel the change in your own psychology” when exercising this linguistic change from “it” to “thou.”

4 By “fieldwork” we refer to the kind of participant-observer research that involves “direct, intimate . . . encounters” with the Other (Geertz, quoted in Conquergood, 1982, p. 2).

5 The phrases in quotations are excerpted from the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies Mission Statement.

6 Now 21 years old, this model program spotlights a different country each academic year through a weekly lecture series, special topics courses, and campuswide cultural events.

7 While the overall campus population is ethnically diverse, the majority of students who audition for departmental productions are Caucasian Americans. For this production, however, we actively recruited a diverse cast.

8 The student’s mother is Kenyan from the Pokomo ethnic community, and her father is British.

9 Sample interview questions:

Who are you?

Where are you from?  
 When/where were you born?  
 What is your ethnic community?  
 Describe the house you grew up in.  
 Describe your ancestral home.  
 What was your relationship to that home?  
 What were your daily chores and responsibilities as a kid?  
 How did you entertain yourself?  
 What kind of toys did you have? What kind of games did you play?  
 What stories/songs do you remember from your childhood?  
 What brought you here? Why did you choose Kennesaw State University?  
 Tell the story of your first journey here (to the United States and/or Kennesaw).  
 What are the major differences that you see between the United States and Kenya?  
 What is the cost (personal as well as financial) of being here?  
 What have you gained?  
 How has living here changed your perspective about your life in Kenya?  
 What changes do others from home recognize in you when you go back?  
 Will you go back to Kenya when you are done with school/work here? Why or why not?  
 What does home mean to you?

10 One of more than 40 ethnic communities in Kenya.

11 A Kenyan slang term for going to the United States.

12 This was not by choice. We held open auditions at the beginning of the term and selected our ensemble from those students who auditioned and (a) expressed interest in the production; (b) demonstrated vocal and physical flexibility and willingness to work collaboratively with an ensemble. Aesthetically, we were not dependent upon "realistic" casting to implement the production; moreover as stated earlier, we viewed this project as an opportunity for non-Kenyans to learn about Kenya through ethnographic performance and embodiment.

13 Nontraditional casting signifies casting against type, ethnicity, and/or gender. The philosophical underpinnings for this approach include basing casting choices on alternate criteria, such as skill level and inner traits; equally significant is the aesthetic emphasis on theatre and performance as metaphor, not real life. Moreover, nontraditional casting also reminds audiences visually that the performers giving "voice" to the Others are not attempting to *be* the Others. They are *performers* telling and subjectively interpreting the Others' stories.

14 The script features two modes of writing and attendant delivery: dramatic mode, in which the performers impersonate characters in dialogue with one another; and narrative mode, in which the performer uses direct address with the audience. While performing in narrative mode, the actor might choose to stay "in character" or assume the point of view of an omniscient narrator. In *You Always Go Home* the performers play multiple characters and frequently shift modes of delivery.

15 After the production closed, we asked our student performers the following questions: (1) Think back to the beginning of the process. What were your expectations? What surprised you about what actually happened? (2) What points of connection did you find between yourself and the "characters" in the play? (3) How did this process move you from a place of mild interest about Kenyan people and culture to a place of deeper understanding/empathy? (4) How was it different for you as performers to create characters based on *living people* as compared to impersonating fictional characters? (5) Overall, how did this experience transform you? What was the most meaningful outcome of the process for you personally?

16 We asked the following questions of our interviewees: (1) The experience of the interview: how (if at all) did it affect your perception of your "story" and culture—your sense of

who you are? (2) Describe the experience of watching the performance.

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