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(Un)doing Fieldwork

Sharing Songs, Sharing Lives

In the ethnography of musical performance we are particularly challenged, as writers, to present or re-present the experiential since performance *is* experience. The project of aligning form and content—writing and experience—is one way in which a focus on field research is reshaping ethnography. One might argue that all ethnography be considered ethnography of performance, since culture itself is at some level inevitably enacted. But the relative specificity of music, while always embedded in and enabled by other performance modes, can provide a heightened example of performance processes. A focus on the ethnography of musical performance—overdue in the ethnographic arena—can suggest incisive ways of researching, writing about, and understanding cultural processes.[1]

The renewed emphasis on experience is part of a continuing seachange in the humanities that is moving us toward reflexive, nonobjectivist scholarship (and, not by coincidence, distancing us from historically colonialist approaches). During our most in-depth and intimate field experiences, ethnographers and the people among whom we learn come to share the same narratives (as Edward Bruner has noted, 1986:148; also Geertz 1988); the deeper our commitment in the field, the more our life stories intersect with our "subject's," until Self–Other boundaries are blurred. The "field" becomes a heightened microcosm of life. When we begin to participate in music and dance our very being merges with the "field" through our bodies and voices, and another Self–Other boundary is dissolved.[2]

In this chapter I address three interrelated questions, drawing illustrations from my own experience with the singing, dancing, and everyday lives of BaAka pygmies in the Central African Republic:[3]

1. Is there a way to determine what is or qualifies as field research, or to distinguish between who is or is not a field researcher? Should there even be a distinction, and if so, why?

2. What new approaches to writing are suggested by the changing, developing relationship between field experience and the ethnography of performance, particularly musical performance?
3. Are there aspects of experience that might not be appropriate to an ethnography; how do we determine when to include or describe personal matters or controversial situations?

The first question can illuminate what field research is by discovering what it isn't. How might it differ from other kinds of research, or from tourism, missionizing, or journalism?[4] What *is* "the field"—is it spatially or temporally defined, or defined by a state of mind or attitude, an openness and readiness to see, to experience, to interpret? Who does or does not do fieldwork, and why might we say so? Ethnographers use tactics different from those of travel writers, for example, to define who they are in the "field." They also create themselves as ethnographers within the narrative itself, and thereby define their experience as "fieldwork." But are we using the term "fieldwork" to bring us closer to—or to distance ourselves from—our "real life"? Fieldwork *is* often intensified life, but part of a life-flow all the same, and it is inseparable from who we are. We might, therefore, begin to look for a term other than "fieldwork" (field research, field experience?) that implies seriousness and rigor without a scientistic/objectivist or colonialist connotation—incorporating the simultaneous vulnerability and responsibility of fully human relationships.

The second question suggests that one of the goals (or results) of a renewed emphasis on field experience in ethnography is to erase the dichotomy between "experience" and "scholarship," between "fieldwork" and "writing." The question is: How does ethnographic writing, and field experience itself, need to change and develop in order to facilitate the kind of writing we need to evoke experience fully? How might we integrate ethnopoetics, ethnoesthetics, and reflexive, narrative ethnography, along with forays into the ethnosensorium (Stoller 1989; M. Jackson 1989; Howes 1991), moving toward more effective strategies for describing performative interaction, feeling, sound, and movement?

With the third question I come to wonder what can or cannot, should or should not be included when translating from field experience into ethnography. Since performance-oriented scholars have acknowledged that experience is central to both research and writing, and have thereby dismantled the taboo against the "subjective," the floodgates of experience have opened. We may need to stem the tide, to rethink and perhaps redraw the boundaries of the ethnographic. Where is the border between getting at *truth* and going into a realm of the personal that is unnecessary or inappropriate for ethnographic purposes? The politically or personally sensitive, intimate points, or serious and profound self-doubt that throws one's whole project into question, spiritual crises and transformations, ethical dilemmas—when and where must they be included to present a full, evocative ethnography and how do we determine? Ethnography, like any creative enterprise,

is a re-presentation, a re-formation of experience, and we need to develop tools that help us sense when and what to include when re-presenting a part of life—of our lives.

The Elusive Field and Fieldworker

The construction of "the field," and ourselves as "fieldworkers," helps us to frame and delimit our inquiries and our identities. But the fiction of these constructs has become increasingly more apparent, to the point where the edges and borders crumble and we allow our identities and our inquiries to flow between the cracks. While in the field, we are constantly in the process of defining ourselves, of modifying and deepening our identities in relation to others. Life itself is, of course, such a process as well, but when we remove ourselves from a home environment, pay special attention to culture and identity in our research, and grow to become participants in cultural performances, the process of identity making surges to the forefront of awareness.

Following is an edited excerpt from the middle of my ethnography (Kisliuk 1998b), at a critical moment when questions of identity, research method, relationships, and theory all peaked at once. I chose to focus on a BaAka women's music and dance form, called *Elamba*, and took a long journey to the Congo to meet the originator or "mother" of that dance. To best learn and participate, I had been initiated into *Elamba* (this entailed receiving special herbal mixtures rubbed into tiny cuts in the skin at strategic points on the body). On returning to the home region of my research, however, I had some trouble finding how to proceed with my chosen focus. This excerpt takes place at a dance event hosted in a camp several kilometers away from the camp where I was living with an extended BaAka family (Bagandou region, Central African Republic):[5]

> *As the* Mabo *dancing continued, Djolo and Sandimba arrived at the host camp. During a long break between rounds of dancing, the two of them appeared to be negotiating with the hosts about something. Soon I realized that they were trying to stir up enthusiasm for* Elamba. *This effort, I feared, was expressly for my sake. I suspected that they had interpreted my numerous questions about* Elamba, *coupled with my pilgrimage to Mopoutou [in the Congo], as a request to organize that dance especially for me. But now I just wanted to settle in slowly and get to know the people and the dances better. I found, however, that what I actually wanted was rarely of much consequence. In Mopoutou my wishes seemed relatively compatible with those of my potential teachers, but here in Bagandou signals ended up crossed more often than not, and events simply took their own course.*
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> *After some resistance from the hosts, it looked as though Sandimba and Djolo—with the assistance of Elanga and Bondo—had succeeded in mustering some cooperation for* Elamba. *I wanted to let them know that I did not want them pushing* Elamba *for my sake, but I appreciated their intentions and was hesitant to*

Fig. 12.1. The author in home camp near Bagandou in 1989. Her neighbor, Koma, sits at center with her twin babies. The other women and children are relatives visiting from a nearby camp. Photograph by Roy Kisliuk.

discourage or confuse them. I decided to relax and see what would happen, so I moved to sit on the ground with the women who had gathered to sing. Bondo sat at my side and asked whether I would dance. I said that I probably would not because I first wanted to watch a few more times. She seemed disappointed and I wondered if I had made the right choice. Maybe they had already promised the others that I would dance—since, after all, I had been to Mopoutou to be initiated—and my declining would make them look foolish. But I wanted to dance well on my first try because I believed that how well I danced would establish my reputation as a serious learner. I had not yet seen enough to dance well.

It took a while for the singing and drumming to warm up. "Mama Angeli" was the opening song. I listened to the drum rhythms, trying to memorize the pattern, which I sometimes found elusive.[6] *As I sat there singing along, a young woman who happened to be sitting beside me suddenly pointed to her leg and told me to tend to her small, dirty cut. I was taken aback. I gave her an exasperated look and told her that we were in the middle of a dance and, besides, I was not a doctor (I did often spend hours, mornings, trying to meet the constant demand for first aid). She looked*

> *back at me defiantly and I kept singing. Sitting on my other side, Bondo had not noticed the interaction and smiled approvingly at the part I was singing.*
>
> *My frustration and confusion as to how the BaAka viewed me and how I should view myself had peaked. In retrospect, the young woman with the cut may simply have approached me in the only way she knew how. But I was frustrated by being pulled into an encounter more consistent with the earliest stages of fieldwork, and especially during a rare* Elamba *dance, while I was trying to communicate with Sandimba and the others. I had a sudden sense of panic that interactions like these would repeatedly interrupt my access to performance as it unfolded. I felt squeezed within a paradox. My experience as a researcher of music and dance helped me feel close to BaAka as performers, while strangers like the woman beside me resisted my efforts to move beyond being stereotyped. She approached me as though I were a nurse-on-demand, undermining, I felt, my developing role as an apprentice by insisting instead that I conform to her image of white people with medicine. Even my friends from Ndanga, who had tried to understand what I wanted (that is, "to participate in* Elamba"), *and had attempted to arrange it for me, did not realize that I—unlike most other non-pygmies they knew—hoped to pursue my interest not by grabbing at it greedily, but through patient interaction with them. Though I had developed what felt like effective communication with people like Sandimba and Elanga, it was becoming clear to me that even they had yet to understand what I hoped to do as well as had Bongoï and Kuombo in Mopoutou, and perhaps they never would.*
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> *But what really baffled me was the challenge of merging two roles: the silent new apprentice and the interacting partner in a cross-cultural dialogue. To learn a new expressive form, I first had to watch and listen. I wanted to absorb the repertoire as a quiet apprentice, but at the same time I puzzled with how this stance could fit with the interactive model of ethnographic enquiry within which I had also framed my project. My aim as an apprentice was to experience BaAka performance culture without radically transforming "it." I did not want to block my own access to learning about music and dance because other people's preconceptions about me were making my presence disruptive. At the same time I knew that I needed to understand those disruptions as part of a palpable context I had helped to create, set within historical circumstances beyond my control.* (Kisliuk 1998b: 84–85)

What does it mean to define oneself as a field researcher, ethnographer, or apprentice? The dialectic of defining oneself or being defined by others is the cornerstone of social and cultural politics (see Williams 1980). In any role or profession, in order to act upon the world we need to continually re-express our identities; we get to know other people by making *ourselves* known to *them*, and through them to know ourselves again, in a continuous cycle. In field research this task is broken down to its basics, and magnified, and the micro and macro politics of social life are revealed. When I first began interacting with BaAka, I named myself (rejecting the name "white person," which some assigned to me) and re-defined myself, so as to try and break from the legacy left by other people with white skin (colonialists, missionaries, and anthropologists) and local visitors

(villagers and people from the capital city). It was a long road getting to a place where I could define myself as an ethnographer and student of music and dance, let alone assert my particular personality. The basics of language acquisition and just the time it takes to get to know people made for long-term and formidable obstacles to identity building, and there were continual setbacks.

Having a close friend and research assistant to help me define myself was crucial. A man named Justin Mongosso, from the village of Bagandou, had worked with BaAka and researchers in the past and was particularly interested in my project. He taught me the BaAka language, guided me through the forest, and often mediated between me and people's assumptions about me. But this relationship, which was to transform later (as I will address) also had to stand continual tests. Establishing the economic and ethical base of our partnership was the first, early challenge:

> *After the day's heat had dissipated, I took a walk down the road with Justin. We discussed how to arrange the logistics and finances of our working together. The forest loomed on each side of the mud-tracked road as we walked, and black-and-white toucans crossed above, cawing. . . . The way to oppose the lingering effects of the colonial past, it seemed to me, was to take hold of the historically defined relationships imposed upon myself, Justin, and the BaAka with whom we would work, and knowingly struggle against that history, reshaping our relationships to fit our respective values and actual situation. Justin and I decided that the money for my project would be available for our collective necessities instead of me paying him a "salary." For Justin, this arrangement had several advantages. It liberated him from a social obligation to give his money to undeserving but insistent relatives who would otherwise assume, because he was working with me, that he always had extra cash. This way we could instead apply the funds to our projects (my learning, his farming) as required, while keeping on hand emergency resources—first aid supplies and petty cash—for family, friends, and neighbors in need.*
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> *Through this arrangement I was spared the untenable role of being my host's employer and was better situated to construct my own identity and relationships free from the weightiest colonial baggage. It might have been simpler (and in fact cheaper) just to establish a fixed salary, the way other researchers and business people usually do. Our way, by contrast, would require a constant effort to renegotiate financial matters according to changing mutual obligations, fluctuating priorities, and emerging circumstances. But, I felt, such negotiation would arise in response to those very real circumstances, and would therefore suit our living relationship.*
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> *Only a few days after our talk along the road, however, a gap between theory and practice was already emerging. As I watched the last of my recently purchased wheat flour being baked into pan-bread for Justin's children, I was wondering why Justin and his family could not seem to keep provisions around for any length of time. Why did they need to use the flour I had bought all at once? I ended up sharing the flour and other provisions with everyone in Justin's family compound, not to*

> *mention visiting passersby. And I noticed them giving away my emptied "ziploc" baggies. I would have liked to reuse them. "I know sharing is the thing here," I wrote in my journal. After all, they were sharing most of what they had with me (and what I had with others). "But how can I keep my head above water this way?" I wondered. I could not spend all of my time and energy worrying about provisions. "And I hope the money will hold out," I wrote. But my concerns were as much about the social interpretation of property as they were about money—about culturally defined boundaries of private property and its connection with definitions of "Self" or community. How I would construct my "Self" here depended on being flexible and examining those boundaries, first with Justin and his family, and then with BaAka.* (Kisliuk 1998b: 21)

Gradually, over two years and more, shared experiences and defining moments helped me to situate myself. The actual writing of the ethnography was also a process of identity formation, one in which I could sift my experiences and frame them ethnographically. I returned to my research area after having written the ethnography, with a strong but ever-evolving sense of my place in that particular social landscape.

But in fact the borders of my research area—the field—were not fixed but mutable. During visits to the capital city, Bangui, for example, I learned about the relationship of villagers to pygmies in the national context of the Central African Republic: I watched the children of Bagandou farmers—now at high school in the city—produce amateur comedies about the pygmies back home. And when Justin visited the United States in 1993, I saw in his reactions yet another set of reflections on his home world and mine. So, although we may imagine a "center" to our research area, the field is a broad conceptual zone united by a chain of inquiry.

Time itself plays a role in shaping the field and the fieldworker. The relationship we have to past research experiences tends to change, and the changing (hopefully maturing) theoretical and intellectual environment of the mind affects how we take in and interpret new field experiences. The following extended example illustrates this process: During my initial project—which consisted of two years of research between 1987 and 1989—I became familiar with and participated in the current repertoire of hunting dances and women's dances in the area where I lived—the Bagandou region of the southwestern Central African Republic (Kisliuk 1991). I spent most of my time with one particular extended family, but I also traveled to gain a sense for the flow and exchange of new dance forms and songs coming in and out of the area. In 1989, during the later part of those two years of research, I encountered the effects of recent missionizing efforts by evangelists from the Grace Brethren Church. An American woman, named Barbara but called Bala-bala by the BaAka, focused her "church-planting" work on a permanent BaAka settlement, called Dzanga, west of the area where I had spent most of my research time. I briefly visited Dzanga to get a sense for the choices BaAka in different areas were making in response to this new missionizing activity.

Fig. 12.2. BaAka at Dzanga during a church service in 1989. The man at far right wears a Muslim gown and sunglasses. The man standing at center tries to accompany the singing with a homemade guitar. Photography by Michelle Kisliuk.

I tried to keep an open mind, but when I got to Dzanga I could not help but be shocked and saddened by what I saw. The BaAka there had completely stopped performing the current repertoire of music and dance forms—with which I had become very familiar over the two years. Whereas in neighboring areas BaAka were hotly debating the value of what the "Christians" were saying,[7] at Dzanga all of the BaAka had been convinced by Bala-bala and her Central African evangelists that their own music, dance, and traditional medicine were "satanic." BaAka at Dzanga told me proudly—assuming that I would approve since I am white like Bala-bala—that they now performed only one kind of *eboka* (the word meaning singing, dancing, and drumming—*beboka* plural). Now they would only sing hymns to the Christian god in "church." These hymns were not in their own language, Diaka, but in Sango, the national language and the language of missionaries, which many BaAka do not understand (especially the women). What I saw and heard then looked to me like a slavish imitation of the missionaries—like a kind of cultural genocide—even though I tried to focus on improvisational aspects such as one BaAka churchgoer wearing a Muslim bubu gown, another sporting huge sunglasses and holding his Bible upside down, and the "preacher," trained by Bala-bala, reading haltingly and uncomprehendingly in Sango.

When I next returned to Central Africa in 1992, I saw a somewhat different situation. Three years earlier, the BaAka from my home camp had been arguing the validity of the Christian material, whereas now the controversy had settled. My old friend Djolo explained that the "god dance" is just one among many *beboka*, that they could dance their own dances and still "pray to god." They had begun to place the "god dance" within a BaAka system of values.

At the permanent camp at Dzanga, although BaAka were still rejecting BaAka song and dance forms, they too had begun to recontextualize radically the Grace Brethren Church material. At a "god dance" one evening I saw the dancers, mostly children and teenagers, move in a circle, using steps and drum rhythms just like the recreational dances popular among non-pygmy teenagers in neighboring villages. Many adults stood by, some joining in the dancing, others watching enthusiastically and singing along. The Grace Brethren songs were preceded and followed by hymns from various Christian sects practiced by neighboring Bagandou farmers, including Baptist, Apostolic, and even Catholic hymns. They not only blended all that into the same dance, but also mixed in recreational song styles and rhythms from the neighboring Bolamba people, and even pop song snippets in Lingala (from radio tunes from Zaire and the Congo). They called the entire mixture the *nzapa* (or "god") dance (*nzapa* meaning the Christian god in Sango). Ironically, Barbara and the Grace Brethren do not allow dancing in their religious practice, but they do introduce hymns; and since BaAka do not draw a line between music and dance, in Bala-bala's absence the hymns provided the basis for a new dance form.[8]

As I listened to the performance at Dzanga, I saw this developing expressive form as a means of addressing *modernity*. In an effort to reinvent themselves as competent in a changing world, these BaAka were claiming any "Otherness" that surrounds them and usually excludes them, and mixing it into a form they could define and control. While I found this change hopeful, I was still uneasy that at Dzanga BaAka continued to trade in distinctively BaAka expressive forms wholesale for an idea of the "modern."

While making my way deeper into the forest beyond Dzanga (along with my research partner and friend Justin from Bagandou village), I met BaAka who, never having seen Bala-bala but only having heard of her, assumed I was she and clapped their hands over their mouths in wonder as though encountering a living legend.[9] I told them I was not Bala-bala, whom I heard them refer to for the first time as a *ginda*, the BaAka term for master teacher of an esoteric dance form! These people didn't even know the real Bala-bala, and although the disturbing idea (to me) that BaAka things are satanic had made it as far as this forest hunting camp, something else seemed to be going on if enthusiasm for the "god dance" was catching on at this distance—budding into a BaAka fad. At present, the majority of BaAka I know are including the "god dance" within a wider, dynamic BaAka repertoire, where it is poised uneasily among several expressive forms vying to define an emergent identity.

Over time, the "field" itself—the ongoing cultural landscape—changed, as did my ideas about how missionary culture was affecting BaAka. Also significant and more difficult to realize, my effort to understand was inextricably linked with my struggle to distinguish my own identity from that of the missionary. As unsettling as it was, at first I could not articulate that distinction, even to myself. To local people I appeared similar to Bala-bala, even if at Dzanga they did observe that unlike the white evangelist, I helped cook my own meals, and unlike the missionaries, Justin and I thought to bring them emergency medicine. Of course, my involvement with BaAka *beboka* also distinguished me from Bala-bala, but sometimes only perceptive people or those who knew me well understood that difference. Over time, however, my experience broadened and deepened enough for me to establish my position, and by extension to better comprehend the developing ethnographic situation.

One obvious difference between ethnographers and missionaries is a difference in ideological and vocational ancestors, though one can argue similarities as well, especially when considering the colonial history of Europe and Africa. As ethnomusicologists, our ancestors and our roles both diverge from and unite with those of anthropologists, missionaries, tourists, and journalists, among others. But in each comparison there is a crucial difference, I've found, and that difference is rarely generalizable, but changes depending on particular circumstances and particular people. In one circumstance, excerpted earlier, I needed to show I was not a nurse, in others not a missionary, and in January 1992 I found that even a "performance artist" had a radically different agenda from my own. I was asked to help an African-American artist research a performance piece about "pygmies," and at first I thought we might share some interests: art, performance, cultural politics, and the richness of BaAka expressive culture. As it turned out, however, this person seemed not at all interested in BaAka themselves, but was interested in how they might serve her performance piece and her own romanticized version of what "pygmies" might symbolize. One anecdote sums it up: One day during her two-week stay in a BaAka settlement, the actress wandered off alone to find the "real pygmies," as she said. She returned a few hours later with a young BaAka man following her. She sensed that he had something very important and spiritually significant to tell her, but she could not understand him and needed help. When the young man spoke his mind, it turned out he just wanted her to give him a cigarette. Disappointed, she found him a cigarette and he left.[10] She spent the rest of her time snapping photos and trying to buy BaAka household objects, seeming more like a tourist than a researcher.

The location of the field, then, does not depend on geography, but on the self-constructed identity of the ethnographer in a given social landscape. Similarly, the emergent identity of a fieldworker depends not on a particular location or apparent resemblance to other investigators and interlopers, but on the quality and

depth of research relationships and ultimately on the way we each intend to represent our experiences.

Ethnographic Writing: Framing and Translating Performative Experience

The task of bringing experience to paper is in some ways like telling a story to friends, only more difficult—especially if one is attempting to interweave theoretical and aesthetic themes and analyses within an extensive, intricately crafted ethnography. The amount of space required to evoke experience exceeds that of other ethnographic modes such as the presentation of predigested theoretical observations or the "writing-up" of quantifiable "data." An ethnography of performance is in itself a meta-performance, requiring all the care, self-confrontational honesty, and detail that the subject matter—people and their expressive lives—demands. A focus on experience also helps to ensure that we as ethnographers explain both the entryways and the barriers to knowing. Being explicit about what one could not come to know, and why, can often be more useful than ostensibly unsullied cultural information.

Rather than seeing experience as two sided (either "my" story or "theirs"), it is more helpful to see the ethnography of experience as a conversation within which learning is located, both during research and while writing (where the metaphorical conversation is with the material and the reader—I take up this point again in the section following). The pretense of much anthropology—and some ethnomusicology in its footsteps—is that it claims to interpret reality *for* its "informants." Ethnomusicologists and other ethnographers have since learned to be suspicious of writing that adopts a self-appointed but unexamined ethnographic authority (Clifford 1988). I can only presume to speak from my own experience, hoping that I have been a rigorous and sensitive enough researcher to have gained insight into a mutual dialogue. If I provide enough relevant information about my experience within the ethnography, the reader can decide whether to trust my insight and how best to use it.[11] Because of our participation in performance, ethnomusicologists are especially aware that there is much one can only know by doing. If, as noted at the beginning of the chapter, we have come to partially "share the same narratives"—and songs—with those whose expressive lives we hope to understand, then an account of our experience—including the inevitable partiality and mis-steps—is indeed exactly where we should focus.[12]

Another argument in favor of experience brought to the forefront by the ethnography of performance is that research is to a great extent particularized by time, place, personality, and social circumstance. One of the most common errors in conventional ethnography is the tendency to generalize into theory based on experiences particular to a certain interpretive situation. The focus on experience

helps us to situate readers within the fluctuations and particularities of performative circumstances. This leads us to the task of writing about performance in a way that evokes this immediacy and particularity; that means finding ways to capture what we've learned via our senses, our bodies. We must make our writing specific enough to convey in detail the social and technical aesthetics of a group or style, and perhaps most important, to evoke the (interpreted) meaning of a performed moment. The following edited excerpt from my ethnography is one attempt to convey performative experience ethnographically:

> *In Elanga's camp [my home camp], on January 5, 1989, I joined the dancing of* Mabo *for the first time. That evening I had finally decided I had been waiting in vain to be invited to join in the dancing. Elsewhere in Africa people had always called me in to dance, even when they knew I was not familiar with the steps. So I had been hesitant to impose myself on BaAka—who as yet had not asked me to join—without being reasonably sure that they really wanted me to dance with them. When I mentioned this problem to Justin's uncle, the Mayor of Bagandou, he laughed, saying that the BaAka would probably not ask me to dance with them.*[13] *They would assume that if I wanted to dance I would get up and join them. He added that he was sure they would be honored if I did. This shed a new light on things. But aside from this, I suspected that my campmates were hesitant for another reason. Justin once mentioned to me that some [non-pygmy] villagers think that a pygmy can place a curse on them by touching them imperceptibly if they join a BaAka dance. As with the Elamba and sorcery issue [addressed earlier in the ethnography], the hesitation could have been that if they invited me to dance and then something were to happen to me afterward, they might be blamed. Whatever the case, I was restless and felt the time was long overdue for me to start dancing [. . .]*
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> *It was a cool night. As* Mabo *got started I stood near my tent watching, and considered whether to put on a single raffia skirt like some BaAka women wear while dancing* Mabo *[the special costume for* Elamba, *by contrast, requires at least three layers of skirts]. I had acquired some skirts in Mopoutou, where raffia is more plentiful, and now I pulled one out of my bag. The singing and dancing continued but I felt eyes on me, especially because I had, as requested, left a lamp sitting between my tent and the dancing circle. I tied the skirt over my jeans and moved a little self-consciously to join the dancing, stepping into the circle among Ndoko and Kwanga, women of about my age, who did not react visibly to my joining them. After the first short round three men, Djubale, Ndanga, and Duambongo, surrounded me, smiling broadly. They shook my hand vigorously and thanked me, "merci, merci. . . ." Then, to my bewilderment, Duambongo suggested that maybe I'd had enough. He might have been worried that something could happen to me for which they would be blamed. I did not think of this possibility at the time, and wondered instead whether despite his apparent enthusiasm, he just wanted me to stop.*
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> *But as the dancing started up again Ndoko immediately called me to join. She addressed me as "beka," a friendly term that BaAka usually reserve for each other.*[14] *Ndoko led me through some* Mabo *variations, along with pregnant Kwanga, and*

young Mbouya and Ndami in front of them. Mbouya introduced a variation, keeping up the heel-sole stepping to the dance beat emphasized by every third stroke of the drum. She crossed her wrists and swivelled them to the beat, crouching down progressively lower as she continued stepping, then gradually straightening upright again. Those of us behind her copied the movement in follow-the-leader-style, breaking into separate upright dancing when we tired of the variation.

Ndoko glanced at me, called my attention again by saying beka, and suggested that I move my neck more, loosen it up. She demonstrated, letting her own supple neck follow through as she stepped. This was the most specific dance instruction I ever got. After a while the distracting novelty of my dancing seemed to wear off. The focus shifted from me to the whole group, or maybe I just relaxed to the point where I could notice the whole group. Oka, oka! people called out, meaning "let's go!" [literally, "listen!"].

My senses tingled; I was finally inside the singing and dancing circle. The song was "Makala," and singing it came more easily to me while I danced. As I moved around the circle, the voices of different people stood out at moments, affecting my own singing and my choices of variations. Ndami sang a yodeled elaboration I had not heard before. I could feel fully the intermeshing of sound and motion, and move with it as it transformed, folding in upon itself. This was different from listening or singing on the sidelines because, while moving with the circle, I became an active part of the aural kaleidoscope. I was part of the changing design inside the scope, instead of looking at it and projecting in.

The physical task of executing the dance step melded with the looking, listening, smiling, reacting, that kept us all dancing. Since our camp was built on a hill, it took extra effort to dance the full-soled steps while going up or down hill. Running the bottom of my foot inchworm-like across the ground required the sturdy support of all the muscles in my leg. All this while trying to stay loose enough to follow through with my whole body—including my neck—and keep up with the beat. As I continued to dance, trying to refine my step, I noticed more fully the inward and delicately grounded concentration of the movements, like the mboloko [blue duiker] antelope. Someone cried out, sukele! ["sweet!" an interpretation of the French, sucré].[15]

Suddenly, a few people shouted rhythmic exclamations that suggested a shift to the esime [the percussive break section], and the singing stopped. Tina stepped into the center of the circle and walked in the opposite direction to the one in which we were dancing. He shouted Pipi! [imitating a car-horn], and the group answered Hoya! [an exclamation]. He continued, O lembi ti? ["Are we tired?" in the Minjoukou language], and we answered O lembi (o)te! ["We aren't tired!"]. As the esime continued people "got down" in their dancing, crying heeya, heeya, repeatedly on the dance beat, and sometimes jumping forward with a scoot instead of stepping to the beat. At one point the women grabbed the shoulders of those in front of them in line and began chugging ahead on the beat. I joined in, finding it hard to jump up the hill while trying to stay as close as possible to Ndoko, whose shoulders I held onto in front of me. Someone was behind me, I don't recall who, but she had to grab my waist because she could not reach my shoulders comfortably. It was unavoidably

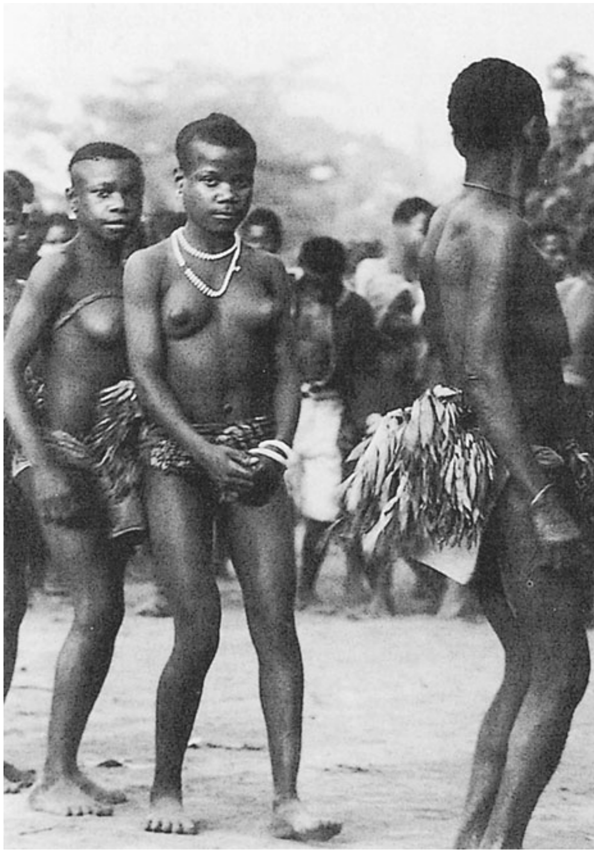

Fig. 12.3. BaAka women dance Mabo *in 1988 in a camp near Bagandou, not far from the author's home camp. Festive* mandudu *leaves that bob while dancing are tucked into the woman's G-string. The men's part of the circle can be seen in the background. Photograph by Michelle Kisliuk.*

clear at this moment that I was much bigger than everybody else [Ndoko, one of the taller women, comes up to my chin], and I didn't exactly blend in.

I sat beside Kwanga and other women who were taking a break from dancing to sing from the sidelines. I noticed that some singers repeated only one or two variations of a melody during a given song, or dropped out for a while and then rejoined the chorus later. Other singers skipped around between several elaborate variations and then joined friends in emphasizing and repeating one particular melody fragment. As a song continued, the entire group sometimes focused on only a few overlapping variations at a time, leaving out the initial melody entirely. This was sometimes confusing to me because I could not always recognize the variations as having been inspired by an underlying but now silent theme, and could no longer recognize the song.

During this eboka *I realized that at least some individuals have signature song and movement styles, phrases or tendencies in movement or melody that suit them, and to which they return periodically. I first noticed this as I sat beside Kwanga while both of us were taking this break from dancing. Though I had noticed her singing a number of times before, this time I was fully conscious of her specially "bluesy" style.*

> *When the evening of dancing was breaking up, several friends crowded excitedly around me. Djubale told the women to show me all the* bisengo *[pleasures, i.e., of the dancing] because this is my* ecolie *[school, from French]. As I fell asleep I noted that it had been one year since that first dance at Ndanga when I had pictured what I might learn, and had determined to do so.*
>
> *The next morning people were very quiet. When I crawled out of my tent I felt eyes watching me from inside the huts. Duambongo came over and tentatively said* bala èe *["hi"]. When I responded in kind as usual, he reported aloud that I was* bodi bona *["still like that," still myself]. Sandimba also greeted me with a relieved smile. Considering all the rumors, they must have wondered about the effects of my dancing. They were clearly glad to see that I was safe and sound, and that no blame for any harm would fall on them.* (Kisliuk 1998b: 99–103)

How should we proceed when we have experiences or flashes of insight that are essential to understanding, but which do not lend themselves to prose description? Occasionally metaphor can bridge the gap, for example at moments in Feld's ethnography, *Sound and Sentiment* (1990:216). The use of metaphor raises the question of whether we can presume to translate experience from one domain into another, possibly foreign one. But ethnography itself is such a translation—we're already in that game in other words. By moving directly into the realm of metaphor we boost the risk of missing the mark ethnographically or obscuring rather than clarifying experience. But if we proceed with caution (and practice) we can use poetics—steeped in experience—to convey in writing what otherwise might never come across.

Certain junctures in our writing can call for full poems rather than brief metaphors. Anthropology has a relatively long, if marginalized, history of poetics (see, for example, Brady 1991), but such efforts have been rare in ethnomusicological writing (with the more recent exception of authors such as Hagedorn [2001]). This seems surprising because one would think that music lends itself, even demands on occasion, embodied poetic description (e.g., Cantwell 1984). The avoidance of poetics could have been part of the effort by ethnomusicologists to legitimize our young field in the eyes of those who tended to see music as frill rather than as core culture, and a reaction against unsubstantive but flowery music writers, travelers, or dilettantes. Now, however, especially since an academic green light of legitimacy has come with the acceptance of interpretive and literary anthropology (e.g., Geertz 1973 and later Narayan et al. 1993, among others), we can begin to tackle the ineffable but crucial aspects of experience that can only be addressed poetically. Following is one attempt I made, early in my research time, to try to crystallize my field experience up to that point:

> *"To Ndanga and Back"*
>
> *A stream to wash in.*
> *On my way I displace three blue*

Birds of paradise.
Through soapy hair

A monkey eyes me from above.

BaAka children run singing down the path
To the stream,
Leaving tiny raffia skirts
Perched on bushes.

At midnight I wake to a mother's
Heart crying mourning songs.
Later, sprawled on her daughter's grave:
"Ame na wa na mawa, mawa na mwana wa mou."
"I die of pitypain, pitypain for child mine."

Milk still drips.

The moon lights a dance for the baby's
Returning spirit.
Women move together,
Singing the collective mother's pain:
"Mawa na mwe,"
"Pitypain mine."

On the return trail we eat
Antelope dinners,
Pass villager hunters who
Hold a baby chimp
Captive—
Pieces of its mother packed in a
Basket of smoked
Meat.

The last day of walking,
Too tired to reach the village,
We camp near a stream.
Dangerous spirits
Move by in the night.

By morning we remain, the
Big green of the forest
All around. (Kisliuk 1998b: 44–45)

One challenge that often comes with the description of aesthetic phenomena is to walk the thin line between romanticization on the one hand and irony on the other. This issue is particularly present regarding descriptions of African pygmies, because writing in this area has been heavily romanticized. Following is an attempt I made to achieve a balance between romance and irony in an early description:

> *Periodically the forest path passed through BaAka camps and settlements. This being my first time in the deep forest, I was enchanted when I heard a falsetto BaAka melody,* diyenge, *ring out through the trees as we approached one camp. A few steps later I saw the man, singing from high in a tree where he was cutting palm nuts. This is it, I thought, this is that romantic "pygmy-singing-in-the-forest" image I had come to expect from reading Turnbull, Lomax, and Arom. The clearing was actually fairly barren and dusty, but the path led to a shady stream that ran through the center of the settlement. As we approached to cross the stream, a teenage girl who had not seen us coming was singing a brief, open-throated song that echoed on the water and into the trees.* (Kisliuk 1998b: 37)

When writing about field experience we want to get as close to a truth as possible, but evocation means selecting among experiences and choosing among a variety of ways to convey them. When we move beyond an objectivistic style of writing, boundaries between fiction and nonfiction can become blurred. This blurring does not mean that we are now writing "fiction," it means that the *construct* of "nonfiction" has begun to crumble along with the objectivist model.[16] The more explicit we are in our efforts to evoke experience, the closer we can come to communicating that experience and what it might mean.

Ethnography: What's In and What's Out?

Critics of reflexive ethnography often point to the sin of self-indulgence as the fatal flaw of such efforts. These critiques have often been justified, since early attempts at reflexive writing often did not distinguish between a "confessional" mode and an experiential ethnographic mode.[17] The fear of self-indulgence and the label of unprofessionalism created an implicit taboo against writing that seemed too personal, but in the 1980s there was a turning point for some anthropologists. In his essay, "Grief and the Headhunter's Rage" (in 1993[1989]:1–21), Renato Rosaldo struggles with his realization that he only came to understand what Ilongot headhunting meant in the Philippines when Michelle Rosaldo, his wife and research partner, tragically fell from a cliff to her death. At that moment he understood for the first time the grief and rage underlying the Ilongot practice. Even then, Rosaldo worried that he was being self-indulgent by invoking in his writing this realization and his personal loss. Most anthropologists and other ethnographers have not been trained to distinguish between self-indulgence and ethnographically relevant experience, and have thereby impaired themselves and their readers. The way to distinguish, I suggest, is to ask ourselves whether an experience changed us in a way that significantly affected how we viewed, reacted to, or interpreted the ethnographic material (and to write with those connections in mind). For example, my choice to include my grappling with the issue of the presence of missionaries among BaAka was linked to a sense that my own struggle

paralleled how BaAka themselves were confronting the politics of expressive culture, power, and identity. My own confrontation with the situation significantly affected my interpretation and my choices while in the field.

Sometimes, however, we can sense that certain experiences are relevant to an ethnography, even though this relevance is not obvious at first. Field experiences can be like dreams or poems—overdetermined in pertinence to issues and ideas, but existing within a realm of intuition. In ethnomusicology we also may wonder whether our experience is pertinent to an understanding of "music." Musical expression is usually so interlinked with the very life that music and other expressive forms embody, that the intuiton of the ethnographer who lived a particular field experience is sometimes the only determining factor. The following passage and poem provide an example of an experience that I felt was relevant to my ethnography but which took place in a physical realm unconnected to BaAka. I had been on a journey to a different region of the forest to meet BaAka who live near the Cameroon border, and was on my way back:

> *I returned toward Bagandou from the west, obliged by the limited road system to travel far out of my way to the north. Riding in the crowded vehicle through the barren north country, I began to miss the trees. I sat in the cab next to the Chadian driver, the singing of the BaAka still filling my mind. We had left the town of Carno early in the morning in a blinding rain storm, and now we were whizzing down the road. I was apprehensive because I had just heard about a head-on collision between two* trafiques *[passenger vehicles] in this area. There had been no medical aid available and many people had bled to death. I breathed a bit easier, therefore, when the driver slowed as we approached a small village lining the road. The village looked eerily empty. We slowed more when we came upon a huge truck stopped by the side of the road. From behind the truck sprang nine armed bandits—their faces disguised by charcoal—who halted us. They pulled the driver out of the cab and then began shooting at us. . . . When I returned to Bagandou I told some BaAka about this ordeal, and they covered their mouths in horror.*
>
> *"Dream or Not"*
>
> *A dream:*
>
> *A smooth antelope, immobilized*
> *Surrounded by hunters.*
> *An antelope woman*
> *Brown, gentle, strong,*
> *Wearing fresh green leaves*
> *Bent forward, hands behind her,*
> *Moments pulsing into a final sinking capture.*
>
> *Waking:*
>
> *Cringing in a bus*
> *Seized by thieves.*

Motor running, knee on the gas.
Two sickening pops,
A quick breath,
Glass, blood, bullets
Aimed at someone
Black, gentle, strong,
Wearing leafy green fatigues,
Shot into
Unimagined death.

Me—but not the leafy ones—waking
briefly back to life. (Kisliuk 1998b: 171–172)

Why include this in my ethnography? My experience on the bus influenced profoundly how I remember my research time, especially at that juncture. Moreover, the metaphor in the dream connected the bus ambush to my experience among BaAka and their cultural struggles, and on yet another level with the hunting that I witnessed (I had tried to suppress my reactions to the undeniable brutality of slaughter). All these factors together determined my decision to include that passage. We continually move back and forth from experience to a perspective on cultural processes, and back again, until the intellectual and experiential come together. Trusting our intuition to tell us when occasionally to describe experiences that are not obviously relevant can help us later when we discover why they were relevant indeed.

Since the publication of the first edition of this essay, I have encountered critics who have asked why it is that I did not describe in detail in my book my relationship with Justin, which eventually became intimate (we married in 1998). Kofi Agawu in particular (2003) has challenged this aspect of my research and writing. The topic speaks directly to the question of "what's in and what's out" that this essay poses, so the second edition of this collection offers an opportunity to respond and expand briefly on the issue. When I prepared to write the dissertation version of the ethnography (1991), I spent a great deal of energy asking myself if or how my relationship with Justin should figure into the writing. I eventually decided that the intimacy of the relationship should figure inasmuch as it directly affected the topic at hand, BaAka musical life, but, given the attraction and distraction to readers of including a "love" narrative written by a female ethnographer (I allude to this issue in the text itself, 1998b:106), I decided that such detail would likely weaken the focus of the central narrative. In addition, at the time of publication of the book version of the dissertation (1998b), the future of our relationship was still uncertain; I was intent on protecting Justin's privacy as well as my own (at the stage of final page proofs—when I was still allowed to add a small footnote, it was clear that we would finally marry and I did make note of this—which Agawu noticed). Broader issues in ethnographic research and writing, in this

case feminist and ethical issues, are foregrounded by questioning "what's in and what's out," and the answers often fall within gray areas of judgment and aesthetics at the time of writing.[18]

Conclusion

In summary, a focus on field experience is clearly essential to performance ethnography. The challenge to ethnomusicologists is to create ethnographies of musical performance that are fully experiential. To that end I have developed a checklist that can encourage interactive, performative writing: There are at least three levels of *conversation* (literal or metaphorical) in the ethnographic process, and they each need to be addressed. The first is an ongoing conversation between the field researcher and the people among whom she works. This does not imply, as some critics have contended, that power relations are somehow level in such conversations. To the contrary, power relations are continually shifting, multileveled, and resonant with history and circumstance. A focus on conversation (or dialogue)—during which power relations are in fact negotiated—obliges the researcher/writer to address and examine those relations. (I discuss this paradigm in more detail in Kisliuk 1998b.) The second level is the researcher's "conversation" with the material of performance such as song, dance, storytelling, and ideas about politics, social life, and aesthetics. The third—the ethnography—is a re-presentation and evocation of the first two conversations, within an overall meta-conversation among the ethnographer, her readers, and the material and ideas she addresses. As noted earlier, there is no definable border between the field and the space of writing—we write when we are doing research, and we research while we write. An awareness, therefore, that field experience and ethnography are inseparable must infuse both.[19]

A final excerpt from the end of my ethnography might synthesize the three interrelated issues addressed in this essay: the identity of a field researcher, ways of writing about field experience, and the problem of sifting and determining the relevance of those experiences:

> *I had thought, at first, that I could exist as a lone researcher/apprentice, outside the legacy of colonialists, missionaries, and anthropologists. But I found instead that I had constantly to confront my predecessors, even at the end of two years of research. I spent my final week [of that research period], in June 1989, with the BaAka of Kenga—the first BaAka I had ever met. They were living in a hunting camp several hours into the forest from Kenga village. One afternoon the women in the small camp were sitting by a fire weaving baskets. Mumbling something among themselves, they turned toward me. Makanda asked me pointedly whether, where I come from, we have animals with bones, and, if so, whether we eat the animals and throw away the bones. Confused, I answered yes to both questions. They gasped in surprise. Soon I comprehended the reason for the question: An American archeologist had collected*

Fig. 12.4. Makanda, wearing globe earrings, prepares palm-nut oil in a forest camp near Kengan in 1989. Baby Molube steadies himself behind her. Photograph by Michelle Kisliuk.

animal bones in their abandoned camps a few years earlier and had left them perplexed as to what she was doing and why—were bones worth something where she came from? This conversation led us to the question of where "white people" come from—they thought that we all live in Bangui. When I explained that the place I come from is so far away that even Mongosso [Justin] had not yet visited my home (they knew he sometimes traveled to the capital with me), they were flabbergasted. I said that I have to take two airplanes to get to where I live (they sometimes see planes flying above). I took out a pair of globe earrings that I had brought as a gift, and I tried to use the little globes to illustrate this new concept. Makanda donned the earrings.

That night, after we had all gone to sleep, a violent storm began to stir. I lay in my tent listening to the wind roar in the canopy. Suddenly I heard Mabambo in the next hut call out my BaAka name, Masoï, oupa, oupa! ("get out!"). Lungoo! *("violent winds that can fell trees"). I tied my sneakers and crawled quickly out of my tent. Everyone was outside the huts, looking up. Lightening flashed intermittently, revealing the turbulently swaying trees. Handing me a stiff duiker skin to hold over my head against rain and falling branches, Makanda lamented how frightful it was that we should have such a storm while I was visiting. Her husband, Mabambo, stood holding their little baby Molube. Clutching Molube affectionately, Mabambo looked up at the swaying, roaring trees with a concerned, expert eye, occasionally telling me to move in one direction or another. Although I was afraid, I felt I could trust Mabambo to know what best to do. Gradually the winds subsided, the rain pelted down heavily, and we all got back inside our shelters. Still shivering, I had gained a visceral understanding of BaAka vulnerability and resilience. For me, Mabambo's vigilance was a lesson and a metaphor: survival depends on knowing*

> *how, when, and in which direction to dodge in the political and cultural "forest" that sustains us.* (Kisliuk 1998b: 174)

By the time I finished writing the ethnography, I learned that my friend Mabambo, young husband and father, had passed away from a sudden illness. The fragility and ephemerality of his life and our own became even more evident. My ethnography came to serve as memorial to those who had passed away since it was written, and the quality of my effort to capture the life they lived and shared with me was all the more important to me. Coming to "share the same narratives" also means that we have come to affect other people's lives, and that we ourselves have been fundamentally affected, often in ways we cannot control. Field experiences become worth writing about and reading as a result of full participation in the life of research. The challenge and opportunity of performance ethnography is to focus thoroughly on that aliveness.

Notes

1. Ethnographies such as those by Feld (1990), Chernoff (1979), Berliner (1978), and A. Seeger (1987b) began to fill the void. Others have followed, such as by Reed (2003) and Wong (2004).

2. There is an argument that a focus on "experience" simply relocates constructed authenticity or authority from an idea of an "original," to irrefutable claims about "experience." I suggest, however, that the critical evocation of "experience" can be used to strategically re-naturalize and thereby throw into continuous question constructions of experience and identity, and therefore hopefully to illuminate in detail the politics of cultural production and reproduction.

3. The term "pygmy" should read here as "so-called pygmy." "Pygmy" is a problematic term often carrying a derogatory or belittling connotation until Colin Turnbull's loving celebration of the Mbuti pygmies of Zaire (1961). Nonetheless, it is the only term in English inclusive of the many socially, culturally, and historically similar peoples of the African equatorial rain forest, including the Efe, Mbuti, Twa, Baka, and BaAka, among others. These current or former seminomadic hunters and foragers name themselves in many different languages, but often use the general expression "forest people" (literally "offspring of the forest") to distinguish themselves from their village-dwelling neighbors. I use "forest people" and a variety of other terms here, but the term "pygmy" also becomes apt when invoking issues and attitudes that engage "pygmies" as a social and cultural category, defined both regionally and globally. "Pygmy" as a racial label is objectionable, however, and therefore I lowercase it.

4. Journalists often refer to being in the "field" as "on assignment," but do not use the term "fieldwork," which is associated more with the social sciences and some natural sciences (where the "field" is opposed to the "lab").

5. I have chosen the spelling BaAka instead of Aka—the root word used in much of the scientific literature to refer to these pygmies of the western Congo Basin (e.g., Bahuchet 1985; Hewlett 1991). BaAka themselves never say "Aka" but use a prefix, "Moaka" singular, "BaAka" plural, and I feel most comfortable using terms closest to theirs. BaAka have

varying accents; some call themselves "Biaka" (a spelling I formerly used), others say "Bayaka." BaAka is a spelling that accommodates these accents while indicating the prefix/root structure of the term (the second A after the prefix is capitalized so that readers will rearticulate that A). The BaAka language, classified as a Bantu language, is called Diaka.

6. For transcriptions and analyses of the music I refer to in this chapter, please see Kisliuk (1998b).

7. I had at first resisted showing BaAka in my home camp my bias against the missionaries, but I was eventually obliged to enter the debate myself (see Kisliuk 1998b).

8. I was at first confused about this transition from hymns in "church" to dancing, and asked a BaAka man whether, as some claimed, Bala-bala had taught them this dance. He said, yes, and when I asked incredulously if she actually *dances* he answered in the affirmative, demonstrating by imitating her bouncing body movements as she played the guitar to accompany the hymns.

9. BaAka have coincidentally associated dead ancestors—traditionally white—with people with white skin. Bala-bala's reputation and instruction, therefore, held a supernatural sway which, unknown to her, had nothing to do with the nature of her preaching.

10. The issue of distributing cigarettes to BaAka was already a burning one for me, since I had struggled at first to break with the longtime convention of trading cigarettes for hospitality, knowledge, or meat. I preferred to reciprocate with gifts such as spearheads, axeheads, salt, and first aid (see Kisliuk 1998b), and had asked explicitly that this visitor comply with my program in exchange for my help.

11. I have also found that readers, especially student readers, are much more likely to care about the people and the expressive culture described if the process of learning is an explicit and constant part of the ethnography.

12. Interviews, preferably informal ones, and direct quotation have their place in our research and writing. But, particularly when addressing the first few years of research using a new language, among new people, the focal point of an ethnography must firstly be with the experience of the researcher.

13. Months and years later, when I became generally known as someone who joins BaAka dances, people did venture to suggest I dance.

14. To the west, in Bayanga, the term *beka* is used by villagers to refer to pygmies, but has a derogatory connotation. Not so in Bagandou.

15. A metaphor in wide use in Africa, the concept of "sweet" or sugary is applied to good music and dancing (see, for example, Stone, 1982). While BaAka often shout *sukele!* during Mabo, they do not use the Diaka word for sweet and/or spicy, *bolembeiembe*.

16. Carlos Castaneda's early (fictional) work obliquely addressed this very question.

17. One of several notable exceptions is Colin Turnbull's classic book, *The Forest People* (1961), though the book is problematic for other reasons.

18. Babiracki's essay in this volume addresses related issues.

19. I address this question further in the introduction to Kisliuk, 1998b.