

Playing Diaspora as Sidney Bechet: A Meditation on Performance as Research

How do we play diaspora? This question persists on and beyond the pages of *Jazz Diasporas: Race, Music and Migration in Post-WWII Paris*, wherein I investigate African American jazz saxophonist and clarinetist Sidney Bechet's sense of play and agency in his diasporic journey.¹ I argue that the New Orleans born musician manipulated his Creole French, American, and African descendant subjectivities to his own advantage when he finally settled in Paris in 1950. In order to successfully assimilate and rise to fame in post-WWII France, Bechet played to, on and between multiple subjectivities.² But even with the agency his mixed heritage afforded, the limitations of racialization created obstacles; for others read race on his body in ways that counteracted his agency.

While researching Bechet, I found it helpful to accompany archival and ethnographic jazz research with embodied performance. As a performance studies scholar I have oft drawn on solo-embodied performance as a research tool, a way to step in the footsteps of the other and to empathize and increase my awareness. I longed to delve into the emotional and psychological experience of the African diaspora. What did Sidney Bechet's diasporic experience look, sound, and feel like? This experiential knowledge could only be envisioned through imagination and embodied learning. So, in March 2016 I created the original one-woman show *Me & Monsieur Bechet* as a way of researching Bechet's diasporic subjectivities through my live, moving body. The show privileged movement and featured walking, dancing, sliding on the floor and pushing against the wall. It also included dialogue and singing. It ran fifteen minutes and was created as a

¹ Along with Louis Armstrong, his contemporary, Sidney Bechet was one of the most influential solo improvisers in jazz history.

² In *Jazz Diasporas*, I defined subjectivity in the following way: "Like identities, subjectivities are shaped by one's personal experiences and opinions, but they are also influenced by external forces" (Braggs 31).

performative text for Williams College students in Africana Studies and Dance. The show culled multiple research materials such as Bechet's autobiography, recordings, reviews, interviews, comments from bandmates, radio and TV shows. The students were tasked with investigating a selection of these texts as well as chapter one of *Jazz Diasporas* before attending the performance. They filled out a questionnaire about what my performance added to their impressions and the performance was followed by a class discussion.

This essay is a meditation on one significant performance moment from the show and how it addressed the opening question: *How do we play diaspora?* Two key themes emerge in experiencing Bechet's diaspora: double consciousness and the middle passage. In the end these themes represent not only the life of Sidney Bechet, but also my own life as well as collective experiences of the African diaspora. The significance of this performative meditation is that it presents answers gleaned through my own embodied experience as well as my students' observations. This performative research elicited particular aspects of the physical and psychological experiences of the African diaspora that I may never have articulated so clearly otherwise. Thus, in addition to a meditation, this essay is an argument for performance as a powerful research tool.



The show commences as I start to kneel on the piano bench.³

Me and Monsieur Bechet is the story of me, an African American scholar, performing the African American musician Sidney Bechet's diasporic migrations as well as my relationship with the musician and my struggle to capture his story. The show starts with me kneeling on the piano bench with a book in hand. Through a series of gestures I demonstrate a system of investigation as well as a physical and vocal struggle with writing about Bechet's subjectivity in my journal. Finally I write "subjectivity" into the book and move from the bench, transitioning into performing Bechet. I begin this transition by walking upstage to a mirrored wall, confronting it, and then sliding on the floor backwards to the central device of home, the piano bench. After reaching the bench, I pull out a hat from inside and place it on my head. In this donning of the hat, I now transform into Sidney Bechet. He then takes center stage at the piano bench and from it

³ The photos in this essay were taken by Raquel Douglass, who has granted copyright to me.

migrates to multiple locations: his birthplace and development in the U.S., his post-WWII residency in France, and last his journey to an imagined Africa of his ancestors before slavery. These shifts in location also represent negotiations in subjectivity for Bechet, in which he speaks, performs, moves and addresses the audience in different ways. Each migration commences with Bechet's circular route between the piano bench and the mirrored wall, followed by his pulling out of a new hat from the bench and donning it atop the last. He then addresses the audience. The performance ends with his final circling, this time through dance. In the end, Bechet stops downstage and center in front of the mirror, pulls himself down and slides backwards toward the piano bench—repeating the movements that commenced the performance. After reaching the bench, he takes off each hat, puts them in the bench, kneels on the bench and returns back to the position of the scholar, to me.

In *Me and Monsieur Bechet*, I attempted to test black performance theory through my body by playing diaspora. In *Black Performance Theory*, Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez suggested that one could embody theory sometimes in the simplest of performances: "Performance theory can be delivered through a hand gesture or sketch, embedded in a lecture, or disseminated within the pauses of a sound score" (7). Their words on the page seemed idealized, and I wondered if I could really theorize diaspora through embodied performance. DeFrantz's and Gonzalez's defining of diaspora as a multiplicity of performances provided some support:

Diaspora is continual; it is the unfolding of experience into a visual, aural, kinesthetic culture of performance. Like skin, it is porous and permeable, flexible and self-repairing, finely spun and fragile. And like skin on a

body, diaspora palpably protects us. [...] we wear memory on our bodies;

we see each other in skins that go together or sometimes belong apart. (11)

Could I wear Sidney Bechet's memory of diaspora on my skin, in my gait, in my regard, in my voice? I attempted.

A Mirror into Double Consciousness

One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,--this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.

W.E.B. Du Bois 3

My attempt began with a walk. I had a number of steps in mind. My journal recalled the preconceived score and choreography: *Stand. Walk to mirrors starting with right foot. Slowly begin 8 count x 8 steps.* The 8-count made half of the 16-count of each musical phrase in the recording of "American Rhythm." Though this musical undergirding of the choreography may not have been obvious to the audience, it was purposeful. I was slowly transitioning into Bechet and giving the audience time and space to absorb this transformation. Walking with measured pace I advanced toward the mirrors, staring. I could see present, future and past in that mirror and in the students' reflections as they looked on. Bang! Standing tall, looking at my personage, I slammed my hands into the

mirror. And then I pushed back. It was almost as if I was doing standing pushups against the mirror as I leaned against the mirrored wall and pushed myself hand by hand, step by backward step down and onto the floor. My body was suspended now a foot or two from the ground. My taut biceps held me in a yogic plank and my head arched up still looking at myself in the mirror. The students' reflections added another frisson of hyperawareness. I could not escape myself. But it was not only myself that I was seeing but rather me as Bechet.



After pushing my body down the mirror in front of me, I held the yogic plank form before commencing the next movement.⁴

My students discerned complex themes as I held my body poised on the brink of a new series of movements. Bailey Bana observed, “You’ve moved to the wall, saw

⁴ Please note that this photo is actually taken from a later moment at the end of the show where I return to these gestures. There was no photo from earlier in the show without the layered hats on my heads. But I include this as it is helpful to see and the hats on my head are the only difference from the moment discussed in the passage.

yourself in the mirror as if you knew your place but then you push yourself away representing a movement and migration [...] I viewed the mirror section as a relation to racial identity because of the movement towards and away.”⁵ (Braggs, “Sidney” 11).

Karen Gillum noted, “The mirror contrasted the audience as I felt like there was a soul-searching quest for identity with the deep approach and distance from the mirror, in comparison to the part that engaged directly with us” (9). Both students noticed a tense questioning of self. The distance and movement to and from the mirror suggested a tense push and pull. Their observations foregrounded the relation of diaspora to the self; for throughout history the African diaspora has prompted a splitting of the self.

As W.E.B. Du Bois describes in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, the attempt to assimilate into American culture caused a rupture in the African American wherein she had to negotiate her remembered African heritage with the culture and mores of a white American environment (3-4). Du Bois detailed this rupture as a split and doubling of consciousness; in order to survive in this African diaspora, the African American had to be doubly aware and had to confront the challenges to assimilation and social uplift in the U.S. with “dogged strength” (3).

As I stared in the mirror and pounded my hand into the glass to push myself down, I confronted that rupture. With every push down the mirror, my doubled self in the mirror and my quest to keep moving, to get on the journey, underlined a resolve for self-consciousness. The mirror made visible a rupture in myself, between myself as scholar and as performing Bechet. My head held the count based on his music, attempting to create a rhythm, a gait, a push fueled by his rhythms. My stare in that mirror pulled forth

⁵ While all students consented for their comments to be used in this study, I have slightly altered the names to protect their anonymity.

Bechet's well-known cocky bravado, trying to hold onto blankness but being overtaken by his "dogged strength," his always-asserted confrontation of any doubters. My hands remembered my goal of creating intriguing shapes, of making use of vertical and horizontal space in new ways so that I did not bore the viewer in this transition into Bechet. While the content of this choreography drew on all the Bechet source material I had investigated for years, my live movement was concerned with accurately repeating my performance choreography and score. I had drawn on years of theatre and performance studies courses, with their attention to use of space, dramatic structure, and characterization to create the performance. Additionally, auditing a choreography course that semester with visiting fellow and renowned choreographer Will Rawls introduced me to new choreographic theories and strategies, which influenced my explorations in rhythm and movement vocabulary.

But the students noticed that there was something more that undergirded that stare and push down the mirror. Whereas I was concerned with the physical and mental transition between my character and Bechet's, the students saw the journey between places, between past and present, between our bodies and our own diasporic ruptures. These dualities were merged under a diasporic skin that we at times shared, for we both imagined African homelands so distant in our pasts but still prominent in our hearts (DeFrantz and Gonzalez 11). Our diasporic skin also at times could not contain our difference, my femaleness to his maleness, my current life to his past life, my voice to his horn. Still in that stare lay the tension between my own diasporic journey and Bechet's.

The student comments taught me that diaspora was all about relationship. *Me and Monsieur Bechet* was obviously about our relationship as well as the relationship between

Bechet's multiple subjectivities. But I also learned that Bechet's diaspora was interwoven with my own. Dylan Mac made that clear in his confused reaction: "There were a few points in the performances at which I wasn't sure who was speaking. These include the very first internal struggle with the term 'subjectivity,' as well as the two moments of sliding (migrating?) your body across the floor and under the bench" (Braggs, "Sidney" 5). It was clear that I was not a separate bystander objectively performing Bechet. Instead I was performing him, myself, and a collective sense of rupture--of double consciousness.

Actually, I learned just what I always hope to teach my students, that performance research (whether archival, musical, ethnographic or embodied) is especially useful because it foregrounds the relationship between the researcher and the subject. I teach students to pay attention to the distance and conflict between the researcher's interpretation of the text and the text itself. Dwight Conquergood explains this relationship well when he writes, "The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another. It is a kind of performance that resists conclusions; it is intensely committed to keeping the dialogue between performer and text open and ongoing" (9). But even with this knowledge, the blurred subject that I produced in this moment of me-as-Bechet seemed problematic to me at the time. After some reflection, however, I realized that this blurring of beings and subjectivities was not a performative problem but rather an important result of the African diaspora. For diaspora can produce divisions between subjectivities. I had literally shown a layering of subjectivities, via the multiple hats that Bechet donned atop one another. But rather than easily taking them off or switching the order, the students'

comments reminded me that that while one may have agency to perform subjectivities, there are also moments where one exists in-between or in multiplicity. Moreover, Du Bois reminded me that this blurring was not a peaceful or easy survival strategy for African Americans but rather a “warring of ideals” that takes “dogged strength” to successfully employ (3). Memory of this diasporic confrontation, great geographical distance from it, and even the imagination of it in my case, all created confrontation and friction.

Slap-Sliding through Diaspora



This moment occurs in the first third of the performance, where I slide under a piano bench as I transition into performing Sidney Bechet.

Slap, Slap, sliiiiiide. Slap, Slap, sliiiiiide. Both hands pounded into the ground then pushed my body backwards away from the mirror. Angry sound hit out in the room, stinging my ears near where hands stamped into the ground. My palms stung. My legs and torso slid across the earth as the dust on the floor scratched and dug into my sliding body. The room reverberated with a rhythm of slaps and slides as I forced my body back and under the place of origin—the piano bench. Would I clearly make it through its lean wooden legs? Would I hit my head as I squeezed beneath the tight passage? The rhythm,

the sting, the questions all bounced in my head as I continued the journey into Sidney Bechet. Again my mind was on the performance logistics. The slap-slide movement originated from my questioning of how to get from the mirror to the piano bench. I could walk again or walk backwards even. However, I strived to challenge myself to come up with new ways of using the space. Hence, the plank slide was born as a style of transitioning between characters and subjectivities.

But what it evoked was so much more: the labor of the middle passage, the still resonant memory (or imagined memory) of that labor, the pain and discomfort of diasporic migration, and the determined force it took to move away from home and to an uncertain future. Bechet had known this himself when he wrote, “There’s so much to remember. There’s so much wanting, and there’s so much sorrow, and there’s so much waiting for the sorrow to end. My people all they want is a place” (202–4). In this transitional space between places, people and subjectivities there was much pain. And it did not seem to matter if it was the original source of rupture, the middle passage, or a voluntary migration to Europe as was the case with Bechet. It didn’t even matter that it was imagined migration as with my body’s sliding from mirror to bench. In all cases, that rupture created by the original tearing away from an African homeland was repeated. That pain was remembered.

This haunting of the trauma of the middle passage is integral to DeFrantz’s and Gonzalez’s concept of diasporic skin: “In this reminding—this bringing into consciousness of the intangible experience of a mythic past—we wear memory on our bodies; we see each other in skins that go together or sometimes belong apart” (11).

Thinking of diaspora as skin reminded me of that collective pain—that it was shared even when not experienced together.

Given this clear rendering of pain, one of my students questioned my articulation of *Me and Monsieur Bechet* as *play*. Through this performance I had attempted to *play* diaspora, to experiment with movement and sound techniques so as to step into the experience of diaspora. But Dylan Mac observed that it was not *play*, but rather purpose and pain that he saw in my performance: “I’m now further intrigued by the sliding moments. The two moments struck me as powerful, deliberate, pained, all of which seem antithetical to playfulness. I thought that these deliberate moments served to represent the deliberateness with which Bechet made and remade his multiple subjectivities” (Braggs, “Sidney” 5). Dylan’s response questioned whose motivation, whose intent was powering my movements, and what they meant. For him, *Me and Monsieur Bechet* primarily demonstrated the pain, determination, and purpose it took to persist in the African diaspora despite resistance, suppression and objectification.

And that was true, but in this performance I also *played*. The slap-slide backwards kinesthetically imitated some of the characteristics of blues music. The music’s attention to raw, gritty timbre was paralleled in my slide against the rough dust covered floor’s surface. So many blues elements privilege sliding from the blue note to the guitar slide. As I pushed my body backward and the sound resounded, I was playing my body as an instrument. There was also a definite choreography and score undergirding my kinesthetic music making—a return to the second half of the 16 count I’d commenced with my slow steady 8-step walk to the wall. My score was inspired by counting beats in “Summertime” and “American Rhythm.” 2s and 8s were at the center of each musical

phrase before each musical turn. Creating my score was primarily a way to organize and repeat the performance faithfully as well as a way to physically riff on Bechet's music by creating my own.

I didn't know until much more reflection, however, that my musical play also demonstrated a tried and true cultural strategy for African Americans. The playing of my body fit within a tradition of African American musicians transforming struggle and pain into artistic expression. For these musicians didn't wallow in pain. No, they figured out how to survive the African diaspora through confrontation and still keep a smile and steady head under duress. In that echoed slap-stamp-pound of palms in the ground, I was "stomping out the blues" in Albert Murray's terms. In *Stomping the Blues*, Murray explains that blues music and dance are not just sorrow but rather affirmation of life; they have a therapeutic function of turning one's pains into "irrepressible joyousness, the downright exhilaration, the rapturous delight in sheer physical existence" (20). Most relevant to this essay, Murray foregrounds the existential strategies inherent in the blues, writing that "it has been achieved through the manifestation of grace under pressure [... it] also consists of rituals of resilience and perseverance through improvisation in the face of capricious disjuncture (20, 42). So, in answer to Dylan's confusion the slap-slide was a response to the rupture of double consciousness and the pain it produced. But, it was also play, a stomping out of sorrow of the blues and a movement toward joy. Perhaps it was not joy and laughter from levity. Still, slap-sliding through the African diaspora forged a path towards self-affirmation and the joy of surviving despite the odds.

Making a Case for Playing Diaspora

How do we play diaspora? My creation and performance of a one-woman show, the students' observations about it, and writing about one performative moment in this essay all generated distinctive answers to this question. Creating a performance and trying to articulate Bechet's diasporic experience allowed me to get past what was documented, to jump right into it rather than continuing to struggle with traditional methods of interpretation. I had struggled with how to articulate his multiple subjectivities in writing. Performance helped me embrace and play with that difficulty. It revealed even more than in my writing the impact of my relationship with Bechet upon my interpretation of him and his life. In fact, it blurred those lines in problematic and productive ways.

The students taught me about the limits of intention and agency. That is, although I had one sense in my mind or sometimes no particular ideology, the students came up with their own interpretations. Their comments distinguished learned, remembered, and imagined experiences of African diaspora, of which I was not even aware. Their observations also underscored the significance of blurred subjectivities as a response to the diaspora.

Last, in writing this essay I looked for theory to help me understand and question African diasporic experiences. But I discovered that rather than finding new material, I returned to knowledge I had already unconsciously absorbed. I went back to groundbreaking texts from Albert Murray for example that had long ago helped me set a foundation in my research. This performative meditation demonstrated the ways I had absorbed some of this knowledge to such an extent that I lived it, or that these theories were true and accurate because they represented lived experience and sensibilities of the African diaspora.

In conclusion, my students and I gained much from this performative meditation on African diasporic experience. My performance, questionnaire, and class discussion made clear to students how research is about relationship and interpretation. It more clearly showed them my relationship to the material. It also illustrated, through their own performance exercises with the texts, that they could perform theory too. For all of us this play with performance as research demonstrated that imagining diaspora was a productive exercise, which spurred distinctive and critical engagement with ideologies and experiences of the diaspora. In this way, we were all thrown into confrontation with double consciousness. I hope that this essay may also be a call for more work on performance as an impactful tool for pedagogy and research. For, my play on diaspora helped me and the students deconstruct and analyze the diaspora with a depth that we may not have otherwise experienced.

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