Journal of Popular Music Studies, Volume 25, Issue 4, Pages 537–552

"Queering the Jazz Aesthetic: An Interview with Sharon Bridgforth and Omi Osun Joni Jones"

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Sharon Bridgforth[1] and Omi Osun Joni Jones[2] have been collaborating as performers and writers for over a decade. The heart of their collaboration is the theatrical jazz aesthetic, a multimedia approach to jazz performance that brings out jazz's inherently queer, inherently black spirit—what scholar/poet Fred Moten calls "the groundedness of an uncontainable outside . . . liberatory, improvisatory"(Moten 26)—jazz's drive toward freedom.

In March of 2013, I had the chance to watch one of the first "Experiments" of Sharon Bridgforth's newest performance piece, *River See*. The space of the performance was key—it took place at "Pow-Wow," a monthly queer woman of color meeting space for performance, spoken word, dancing, greeting, eating, and flirting, run by Chicago poet and activist C. C. Carter. These events occurred in a small neighborhood bar, located in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood. This night was one of the final meetings of Pow-Wow, and you could feel it in the room: the sense of loyalty, warmth, affection, and immediacy. Before Sharon's performance, C. C. warmed up the room with some of her own poetry, and then with an open mic section where we were all invited to write an erotic haiku and share it. The space was warmed up, too, by the smell of fried chicken and French fries and hot sauce, purchased with the last of Pow-Wow's proceeds, and which are a part of every gathering. Women sat at the bar in their most stylishly casual clothing: crisply starched and ironed shirts and suspenders, jeans tight under flowing silk tunics, sundresses to taunt the unseasonably warm Chicago air. Folks, if they didn't know each other, were beginning to make eye contact and talk. By the time that *River See* began, the audience was buzzing with energy. Sharon, our conductor, invited the audience to be part of the experiment, some of us singing, some instructed to laugh or to repeat a phrase, some invited to translate sections in our native tongues, if we didn't speak English. We became part of the performance, along with dancers, including Omi Oshun Joni Jones, dressed in white. In the midst of movement, music, and our layered voices, began talk story: a narration,

sometimes a child's voice, sometimes older and beyond us. We as an audience traveled through a layered past: mamas and uncles and aunties; cousins and neighbors from way back; and then even further back to the ancestor spirits swirling behind, beneath, and in between the beats.

This past June, 2013, I had the chance to talk to performer/writer scholars Sharon Bridgforth and Omi Osun Joni Jones about their work in the theatrical jazz aesthetic, their vision of its queerness and its "working" of African Diasporic traditions, and the ways that it has created new spaces for black freedom on the stage as well as on the page.

– July 31, 2013

Francesca: **Sharon, can you talk about the ways that you see your work as queer: your vision, your method, your approach?**

Sharon: Queer people and trans people are holy people in my work. So I situate the juke joint as a holy site. So the same things that you see in a grove or in a black church when its swinging, its what's happening in the juke joint. So there's dancing, there's singing, there's deep deep feelings and intentions, there's smoke, there's liquor—well, maybe there isn't liquor in the church, but there are these things happening all at the same time, which, when collectively people are present for that transformation, gets—there is an invitation for the divine, for transformation. There is an opening for *something* to happen. And I feel that queer people or transpeople have traditionally always been part of the people responsible for those transformations. So holy people in ritual, the closeted choir leader, you know, the Bessie Smiths, the Ma Raineys, the Lucille Bogans. So in my work, the queer and trans folk are central, and part of the community or what's going on in it in an organic way. So it's really important to me.

So yes, [my work is] queer in the way that queer is to transgress. I feel queer gendered, and I'm a lesbian, so I'm queer. So I think it's gonna be queer just because I am. But I think the method and this way of working is so transgressive that [that] makes it queer, too.

I think my work is rooted in African Diasporic earth-based traditions. Earth based traditions share a truth, because they're all looking at nature. So always building on—both in the text and in the room—the embodied practice in the work, how to layer things with the living and the dead, the ancestors and the flesh people. And the guardian spirits and the unborn. And how they use language, because each of those entities in my work uses language differently. And how they get represented in bodies embellishes the way that they get represented on the page.

And it's a very black way. My actual role model is my family. And so I remember growing up and it was during that time when the kids could be present—they didn't want you in grown folks' business, but you could be there. You could take it all in. And I used to love just being in the room. And so you had food cooking. So you're hearing, you're smelling the food. You have people dancing. People, laughing, crying. Stories are being told. Lies are being told. People are singing. All happening at the same time. That is how we tell stories. So I feel like what I'm doing is very black. And that is also very transgressive because this culture we live in is always trying to deny our existence, the validity of who we are and what we do. And I think queer is the same thing.

F: **Omi, as a scholar of the theatrical jazz aesthetic, do you see queerness as central to this art form?**

Omi: I do think that there are some important connections between queer and the jazz aesthetic as some of us are using it in theater, especially if we take queer to mean non-normative. And I know that if we only look at queer as non-normative that we might have lost some things, but that's my jumping-off place. When I think about queer, queer as an aesthetic, as well as queer as a way of life . . . I think part of the power of jazz as music is the way that it has resisted various categories, and in fact reimagined itself in order to continue resisting categories and resisting even musicians' ability to jump in and connect, at times. The bebop artists, as I understand it, were interested in moving the music in such a way that only the folk who were really interested in being apprentices, who were really willing to explore a kind of speed and a certain kind of rhythmic virtuosity would be able to do it. So I think the idea of queer and jazz go together in that they both are sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, pushing against traditions. And you know, I do like "norms"—I said pushing against traditions but pushing against "norms" is better because . . . the idea of norm feels like a constriction, and the idea of norm suggests that it's the dominant way, the expected way, the legitimate way. And I think queer is challenging all that.

It is clearer to say pushing against norms because there are actually traditions that are being invoked, when one is working in queer aesthetics. And I think many societies around the world have these kind[s] of queer traditions: people, groups that are pushing some boundaries, asking for a different kind of exploration, moving us forward in a kind of really profound way—precisely what we expect art to do.

F: **Sharon, can you tell us a little about the ways that the theatrical jazz aesthetic gets embodied in your work? How is it distinct from the ways that we generally think of theater?**

S: As a practitioner, I feel like I've been training in the art of being present, which is a life practice, and in the making of art it's a way of listening that is just very profound. And it is for me in the way I work, it's an invitation for multiple forms, mediums, and aesthetics to come together to help tell the story. So [for] me as a writer, the text is the structure. So I write the text. Once the text is developed it doesn't change. So the text becomes the structure for improvisation, and often the improvisation happens during rehearsal, so we can do the same piece with the same elements but based on the cast and what they bring to it, it can be absolutely different. So the aesthetic and the way I've been changed, we bring simultaneity, so there's multiple things going on at the same time. We use polyrhythms and dissonance, and a layering and exploration of time. So in my writing what that looks like is the past, the present, the future/the living, the dead, the unborn coexist. And often, you don't know who's flesh and who's spirit. And the way that I use language, at least in my mind, is to create music out of the text [so] that there is a sonic journey that takes us in and out of different time realities. So I like to play with the journey of the text, as opposed to giving stage directions, because what I'm really interested in is what my collaborators are going to do with that. And so working with collaborators who can take the text and make songs out of it, or can take the texts and understand which and what form of dance is necessary, and then the layering of that. And then working with visual artists to kind of help create an environment that it all happens in. So those are the things that I've been doing, but this is a little different because now the improvisational aspect is happening live and it's happening through me. So it's in it, because I'm the one conducting it. And the audience is—I've always done audience engagement in the process. But this time, the audience is intentionally, specifically, and in a very planned way invited to perform in different ways. So translating texts, doing gestural language—you know, it depends who's in the room—possibly sing. And so I think this requires me to show up fully and completely myself, being present. And part of what that means is that my history of being a healer, trying to heal my own life comes forward. And I've had to, I'm still working on what that means.

So I'm working on a piece called *River See*. I received a commission from the National Performance Network, with Links Hall here in Chicago as the lead commissioner, Diaspora Vibe in Miami, Living Tulsa in Tulsa,

Pilsbury House Theatre in Minneapolis, and the Theater Offensive in Boston. And so I'm using the commissioning funds to visit each commissioning community several times and to just play. So in the play, part of what I'm working on is developing the text and developing the technology for activating the performance. And one of the reasons that's necessary for me is that I'm working in a slightly different way than I've worked [in] before and I think that this piece is asking me to do something different. I think it's asking me to put my body central in it and to kind of conjure whatever the experience is going to be that we have each evening. The piece itself is a series of blues stories that are told by an actor, so myself and one actor travel to the various cities and then locally we cast singers, dancers, and people who are able to translate texts into multiple languages, so I'm creating a language choir in each city and sometimes I'm lucky enough to have a healing gong player or this time we have someone who's a shaman trained in the singing bowls. So an instrument that's used for clearing space and sound is another element that I get to work with. And so the performers, along with the audience, in response to my signals, create a moving soundscape that helps the actor tell the story. So we all therefore go on the journey with her and are responsible for the experience together.

F: **What do you think has led you to this moment, prepared you to do this work in this way?**

S: I think it's all the work I've been doing in my own personal journey. So I had cancer in 2005, and after I got my strength back—which took a year, I don't care what they say. It took me at least a year before I felt like I had normal enough energy to really do a day. And then after that I felt better than I have felt for as long as I can remember. It was amazing to have that thing out of me. But one of my questions was how do I make sure I don't get this again. And of course, it runs in my family, I understand the environmental aspects that might be at play and all that, but metaphysically, I felt more empowered—it felt like an empowered action to ask myself what do I need to release in order to make sure that my insides are not toxic. And so resentment, anger, shame, fear, regret, you know, those things. It took an awful lot of work. And so I became focused on love as a higher form of life, as a way of tapping into higher power, as opposed to—I've been in a lot of different spiritual practices and traditions, but at the end of the day what became clear to me was that I could simplify it by just focusing on love. And that basically took me into the dark night of the soul, because then I had to love myself, I had to love my parents, who I was angry with.

It was just deep. And so I started that work around 2006, and I feel like I came out of that dark night a couple of years later, and since then it's just life. So every day I get to practice growing and discovering new things that I need to work on. But I do think that's what got me here. And a lot of the reason that I contained all of that resentment and anger was because I was queer. And how I was treated as a young black girl, the child of the Great Migration, coming of age at the time that I came of age in and not having any accessible—and working class, inner city, South Central LA. And in the time that I was growing up there was not queerness that I could see. It was there. But I couldn't see a reflection of myself. All that I saw was what was being imposed on me, which was that I was wrong. Something wasn't right about me. Because I've always been more of boy than a girl. I've always had crushes on women, all of that stuff. But there was no language or path to freedom, and so I internalized all of that stuff. And then I just got pissed!

F: **You had a fighting spirit.**

S: And then I drank. Yes, I had a fighting spirit. And thank God, because I survived. But then I had to switch it. I self-medicated for many years. I stopped drinking in 95, you know, all of that is part of this. All of that is part of this. So for me to have to be central with my queer self, and be all of the healer that I am, and the healer that I am because of my journey of healing myself, was also kind of shocking. Because I've been more private about that. I think it's apparent in my work, and people who might have taken workshops with me may be able to see that, but its not something centrally placed.

F: **I admire that. Because putting that in your work means trusting the audience to be there.**

S: And that's the greatest thing. I really look to jazz artists to understand what to do and how I want to be. Because the greatest jazz artists are so uninterested in doing what's been done, and the way they move into a new sound is that they are completely, absolutely, vulnerably open. And I think that's the only way they get to that new thing. The thing they're reaching for. So I do a lot of reading of autobiographies of jazz musicians and singers and blues musicians and singers.

F: **Who are the people who are central to you in that?**

S: Duke Ellington, for many, many reasons. For one, he did that series of sacred concerts. And he did that thing—at Carnegie Hall, *Black, Brown*

and Beige, and in its original version he had singers, he had tap dancers. It was a multimedia, synchronized event! That he created the score for. And people didn't receive it well, and he wasn't used to that, and so it hurt him. And he never did it in its fullness again, but you can find short clips of other versions of it, and so people started doing it later. And Mary Lou Williams, who also did a series of sacred concerts. She used to do sacred jazz concerts in the Catholic Church. Her manager was a priest, in the latter part of her career. Jimmy Scott and all of the gender complications in his life.

F: **Tell me more about him.**

S: Well, he's straight. But if you hear Nancy Wilson, you hear him. If you hear Frank Sinatra, you hear him. All of the great singers—they were really studying him. But he never became mainstream. He was a musician/singer and famous in that realm but he didn't really become a household name. Partially because he had a disease where he stayed in puberty kind of. But he was believed to be gay, but he was straight, and loved him some big rowdy women! [H]is voice was astonishing, and what he was able to do at the time as singer was just astonishing. [H]is journey as a performer was phenomenal. And that was during the time period where black artists were really taken advantage of by their labels and stuff like that, and he ended up in this label that he couldn't get out of. He was terribly mistreated.

He's still alive—he's probably close to 90 right now. And Madonna has "rediscovered" him, and he ended up doing some tours in the late 90s, so he's been able to get back out there right now. I think he may have been born in the 20s. And started singing right away as a teenager. Ray Charles signed him, he made a record under his label and he was so busy, but this label did some dirty business, wouldn't let him out of his contract, and then Ray Charles had to pull it. And, because he sounded like a woman, they used to put black women on the covers. So people would think he was a woman. Check him out. It will blow your mind.

F: **And for you, Omi? What are some of the ways that you see the theatrical jazz aesthetic pushing what we think of as "jazz"?**

O: Improvisation is the heart of the work. I have been really moved by Fred Moten's understanding of improvisation as a space for black folk for freedom. So if we think of improvisation acknowledging a structure and within that finding new possibilities, theatrical jazz does a lot of that work. And it is interesting: audiences . . . witnesses or participants who come to

a theatrical jazz performance may not be immediately aware of how much improvisation is going on because, at least with Sharon's work—well this would be with Sharon, Daniel (Alexander Jones) and Laurie (Carlos), as well as other theatrical jazz performers—they're certainly not the only three—but [the] three of them have a written text, and they are very particular that the written text be adhered to. Around that, however, particularly with Sharon's work, there are going to be people who are moving in the space who came to the performance thinking that they were only going to sit and watch. Or sit and watch and listen, but they are invited to get up and move at Sharon's direction. They are going to be people who are asked to sing, and all of that happens as Sharon conducts the performance. And that springs out of her own intuition and her own training around what is needed in that moment. And that will be different every time the work is done. So what I get to witness when I get to see these productions is that space of freedom. Some people are delighted to be called upon to sing, or called upon to translate a bit of text into a non-English language, so that they can bring their ancestors very fully into the space, and their traditions very fully into the space. I see that improvisation working as a space of freedom. But in rehearsal—oh! Improvisation is required. I've done theater for a number of years and I've had directors in what I'll call traditional theater forms say to me that they want to see what I'm going to bring the experience, but I don't really believe that. I think that they have the thing that they're trying to see what I can achieve. But in theatrical jazz it is very clearly, "What do you want to offer in this moment as a performer?" And in rehearsal, we get to all share our offerings in performance. Our offering of a little bit of gossip . . . a song that we want to offer up. And then that, or a piece of that works its way into the overall piece. So I love this notion that it's a place for black people to find freedom, that improvisation . . . . What we see in so many ways of black folk—in styles of dress, in music, in how we construct families. And you know, I've often felt we've had to improvise because we were not the rule-makers and the rules could change at whim. So we had to be able to spin on a dime, we had to be able to improvise in order to survive and thrive.

One other thing that I might add is that the work opens up a space for a very complex blackness and I think that is another place of freedom. That black doesn't look or sound or feel a particular way. It is all kinds of things. And it can make space—as many black communities have—it can make space for any persons who are willing to appreciate, respect, applaud blackness in. Pearl Clegg has this article called "Hollering Place," where she talks about creating a theater where black people are free to be

ourselves, and then anyone else can be a part of that space if they're willing to applaud those truths. So theatrical jazz gives us an opportunity to let all kinds of black in the door—and other folk who are willing to be inside of those black moments. One of the concerns that I've had with some kinds of black theater in the United States is that it tends toward a certain idea of what it can be. And theatrical jazz busts that open in really exciting ways.

Sharon often imagines ancestors as living beings supporting us, guiding us in the present time. So an audience viewing these works, it may take a minute, or maybe they'd never understand that all of those things were going on, but they're likely to know that these are not characters in the traditional theatrical sense—a character with one personality, rooted in one particular time and place. So that's one of the ways in which time happens across space, across understanding even, in the works in theatrical jazz. With that in mind, there's also often a simultaneity of space, where multiple locations kind of bleed inside and out of each other, and in terms of production, often a minimalist staging is useful so that the imagination can go with the locations . . . fluidly, as they move in and around and across each other. Another important feature of theatrical jazz is that it allows for multiple truths. Rarely is there a single "this is what you are to get from this." Sharon's work often has prayer involved in it, and a prayer may seem to imply that one is looking for one thing, but in Sharon's world, the prayer is for that Divine thing to come forward, and being humans we do not always know what that is. So even in that prayer wish, multiple possibilities are being invoked. Another thing that I find really exciting about theatrical jazz is that when it is staged, there are some audience members that are going to get some things and some that are not—depending on where you sit. And rather than that being a problem, it is just part of the form. So if you are—to use traditional theatrical forms, if you are far stage, or even house right, and something is going on that is way upstage left, you may only see a piece of a performer rather than his or her body, whereas other people sitting closer are going to get the whole full expression, and see all of the movement. Laurie Carlos is famous for staging her work where some audience members are privileged at different times over other audience members. So it becomes a real individual kind of experience. It is communal, but it is also very individual in that not everybody is going to get the same thing. So this idea of sight lines . . . gets disrupted because the director, the choreographer, the performer, are aiming to give people an individual experience.

F: **That sounds powerful, Omi. When you said, "Where you sit," I thought socially, or in terms of identity, but you're really thinking more spatially, more literally.**

O: That's right. But what you've said brings up another way that this work is queer. Because it brings everybody in the room. What I mean by that is [that] at its best, theatrical jazz allows people across all kinds of social lines to sit in the room together, to be confused together, to ponder what's going on together, all of that can happen at the same time. And the more socially diverse the audience is, the richer the overall experience. Sharon had done a fair amount of her work in university settings, so obviously you'll get professors, staff, students, people associated with the university. But because of the nature of her work and that she has often does such community work in the cities where she's produced, you're going to get community organizers, you're going to get queer activists, you're going to get people from community centers that are also there. And these are not groups that the university communities and then community-communities—that usually share space. Especially in a moment where they can be equally vulnerable. Nobody has to make a speech, nobody's having to take a side. They all get to sit there or stand there and have this incredible experience together. And so I think that the work encourages a kind of dissipation of social lines, where we can all be wide-eyed in the moment together.

F: **Sharon, what's been the most difficult or surprising aspect of this work for you?**

S: I was shocked to find that I really had to be in it. Because I thought I could kinda be on the side . . . . And it's been fantastic because—if I'm not absolutely present, it's terrifying. So what's been fantastic is that it's kind of like the thing I've asked for as I grow. Because the life and the art are not separate for me, and so my whole focus is to just grow. And of course, I got what I asked for. So as long as I'm absolutely present and available—kind of like in that way that the Buddhists speak of when they say be empty, then it's fine. But I had to step into it, and that shocked me, because I thought I could avoid that.

F: **It's a scary place!**

S: And I'm really shocked—and I just discovered this last night—that I need to undo the narrative even more. I'm really shocked about that, and excited. I'm tickled! But I'm already so nonlinear. It's new territory, in a way, but it's exciting.

In rehearsals—sometimes we have one hour, sometimes we have two hours, sometimes we have a week, but no matter how short or long the rehearsal process is, I've noticed that it takes me a while to find it, because part of what I have to find is what is it that the people in the room have to contribute to the gumbo. Who has the file? You know, so part of it is finding it, and then what I've noticed is [that] that determines which set of stories we do. So I've noticed that there's always this moment where I go in and I have to be completely open and available to find it. And if I'm not present then it's scary, but if I'm present then eventually we find it and then it clicks and then we just move on.

F: **Omi, as someone who has both written on Sharon's work and also participated in performances, how do you think of the role of presence or being in theatrical jazz aesthetics?**

O: In an interesting way it is fundamental to doing the work and the hardest thing about doing the work. As a performer, what I and I think others end up relying on is what we've done before. So the way that we moved our bodies, the way that we've used our voices in previous performances and productions, not even moments of that production itself, but just out in the world other productions—especially if we were rewarded in some way for that. So somebody saying "Ooh, Omi, you have such a rich voice." And so I say, "OK. I'm going to use my rich voice!" And what that does is clamp down the very sense of "Be here. Right now. Be here. Don't be in that show that happened a month ago that you got great reviews for. Don't be in, "Oh wow, they've got trained dancers, and I'm not." Be right here, with your body, and your history, and your truth, and let all of that come forward. Ooh! I can't tell you how hard that is to do! And when I think when we hit it, there's a way that it can seize us, and we just—it's almost like a joyous madness. Just to be inside and to be able to play in abandon. Without thinking "Oh, that looks silly." Without using filters all the time. And it doesn't mean abandoning training. So you know, you still, your training tells what it means to move in space. Your training tells you how to use your voice. You don't abandon that. But you don't let that training eclipse the spontaneity of the instinct in the moment. So the thing of being present is really a foundation to the work. [P]art of what we would do in the Austin project week after week after week is to encourage yourself to be present. And when you're present you know what you really like, what really brings you joy. What is it that you really dislike, because we are required—or encouraged to do a whole lot of things that we really don't like and pretend to like things that we really

don't. Once you peel all of that back, it's like, "Oh, wow! Is that who I am? Really?!" And the work says, "Do that. Do that thing. Be that thing."

F: **That's such a powerful thing to watch, and as a witness I can sense those moments, because it's the moment of surprise and terror sometimes for the audience member too, when you're really seeing something revealed. Very beautiful!**

Omi, tell me more about how the theatrical jazz aesthetic has informed your writing, as well as your theorization?

O: So my book, *The Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic*, is looking at what theatrical jazz is, focusing on three very different practitioners of the form: Sharon Bridgforth, Daniel Alexander Jones, and Laurie Carlos. What's wonderful is that all three of them have worked together, so their work has informed each other's work. But they retain a distinctive way of moving in it. And I think there's possibly some controversy among them whether this term "theatrical jazz" is even appropriate and I discuss that in the book too, that there's something that can become instantly codified once you name a thing. And I try to resist that in a number of ways. Making the layout of the book nontraditional, encouraging readers to pick up the book at page 50 if that's where they want to start, trying to be nonlinear with the book—even though the book is ultimately nonlinear, right? But trying to encourage a nonlinear experience to approximate the nonlinear time that's associated with the art form itself.

And I hope it can happen. The control of the page, starting on page one is so ingrained—talk about a normative practice, right? Opening the page and starting on page one. What if you flip it open and you find a painting in the book that strikes you, and you rest there and still start reading? So I'm hoping that the book does those things—that the book itself will be an example of the aesthetic.

F: **That's so powerful. So one of the reasons I'm so looking forward to the book is to hear your thoughts as both a scholar and a performer/practitioner. And I was just wondering how you move between those roles—either in the book, or generally speaking?**

O: One of the things I did in the book, I use autocartography—it's a term that was introduced to me in Kim Benson's work, but I know a lot of people use it, and it's critical/personal narrative. So I make a space in the book to tell my own story and some of that writing is very personal

and private and somewhat poetic in its style. That's contrasted with a more traditional scholarly voice that I use in the writing, and then there's places where I think those two moments blend. I am at a place where I feel just so happy to bring all the various aspects of who I am to bear on a given moment, so that I don't compartmentalize "this is the artist, this is the scholar, this is the activist, this is the queer partner, this is the mother." All of that stuff is happening together, and I recognize that I *can* do that now. I can do that now because of my chronological age, because I've been in the academy for a long time. Those who are just entering the academy, well, they're going to bump into some of those constraints, and they have to figure out how to let themselves fully be inside an academic world that is often very, very rigid. So in the book I've tried to do a lot of letting all those parts of who I am be there and be present. It's taken a long time. It's taken a long time, and theatrical jazz I think has been instrumental in helping me to arrive where I am now, because the art form is forever asking performers and audiences to be themselves. It's like, "We're not asking you to pretend to be a character right now. We're asking you to be you. All of this, but bring that! Bring that!" . . . . So that was excellent training for me to begin to get comfortable with declaring my own truth on the page. As unorthodox as some of that telling might be.

F: **That makes a lot of sense. I can imagine that as you're playing with this writer's voice that speaks these multiple truths you're also maybe thinking about sound or voice or musicality. And so I was just wondering if you could speak to that—about the status of musicality in your writing or in general in the work that you're doing right now.**

O: That's such a fun question to respond to because I recognize that when I write I'm always sounding it. Always! And it's interesting—I know when I'm listing things I love to list—there's something about the sound of three—there's a this, this, *and* this. And I often strain to figure out what the third thing is, because it needs the sound of that third thing—even if intellectually it doesn't need that third item. It needs it sonically. So it's been really important to me to hear the work. One of the things I've been doing too, lately, which I've really enjoyed: I've been reading sections of the book out loud, as a thing that I'm calling now a lecture performance. I walk through the audience, I sit next to them, I sometimes sit close to the front, I have slides going simultaneously and I have jazz music in the background, and so I am very aware that what I've written on the page has to work (so to speak) as I actually give voice to it. In fact, I had the pleasure

of a Hedgebrook residency a couple of years ago and when I shared the work out loud with the other writers—Hedgebrook, I know you know, is a women's writing retreat—and it's a phenomenal experience to just be in the woods writing and then, as you feel comfortable sharing with the other women what you've been writing. When I shared it a couple of them did ask if I thought the work would be as powerful when people read it without me giving voice to it, and that's a really interesting question, because I can put the emphasis where it needs to be, I can create a tone here and there. So one of the things that I may do when I get these reader reports back from Ohio State University Press is to see if I've made it as sonically rich on the page as I imagine it to be.

F: **I bet that would be there, because when I was transcribing Sharon's interview, and this morning when I was reading *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic*,[3] that kind of sonic, musical, lyrical, rhythmic quality was coming out strongly in the rhythm in my head. So yes, I was just thinking about how you were shaping it sonically as you're writing.**

O: One of the things I do at the end of the book, I start to try to use the page of the book to try to suggest pace and rhythm by spreading the words out on the page, by using some ellipses, by centering some sections rather than having them flush left, that kind of thing, to give them a sense of the sound, the movement of the words, and we'll see what readers think.

F: **Have there been any surprises in the process of doing this work of exploring theatrical jazz, as a writer? Things that you didn't expect were going to come out in your writing?**

S: I think I'm finding out more and more . . . that the narrative or the melody, for me, is just the jumping-off point. What I've discovered—and I'm really having big discoveries about that here, with this process, is that I'm actually . . . . So *River See* is a performance novel, and so it's a really big performance piece and there are a lot of stories that will stay intact in the performance novel. And then from there I excerpt what I call a performance text, which is what we use in the performance. Well, what I have also discovered is that I have to undo that. So we used to tell the excerpted story straight through and then inside of the telling of that, as the actor is telling the story, then I would conduct the orchestra in. I have now found that I have to undo the text, and not try to tell the story in its entirety. So it really has gone off into some whole—it does feel like something like bebop where you just have to let go and if you really do

that, it works, and some people will get it and some people won't, but more and more, more than [at] any other point in my life, I've had to release the narrative.

O: I think there's been more candor in the writing than I expected—these pieces of critical personal narrative. I talk about being queer and my own responses to that. The phrase "coming out "doesn't quite characterize my writing, though there was indeed a moment when I told people that I was queer, but there's something about the writing and the doing of [the] theatrical jazz aesthetic that almost insisted that I say this out loud, that it no longer live as a private knowing, that it needed to be more public. I think that there's an honesty. In fact, there were some places of honesty, where some of my friends said, "You know, maybe you don't want to have that in print!" Not just about myself but the other things with some of the artists, because there are things in their personal life that made its way directly or indirectly in their work, and they give me permission, but others would say, "You know, this is a book that's going to last a long, long time. A hundred years from now is that the thing that you want?" [laughter]. So I've had to try to be judicious in my candor. And I guess another surprise is the pleasure of writing—that I really do enjoy the sense of discovery. I used to—especially when I started doing academic writing, I really railed against it. It seemed like an exercise to prove you were smart or something. I didn't find the value in it, initially. Now, when I write, there's a kind of deliciousness—it's a sensual thing. And I discovered another thing—it's like being in the studio and doing movements. There's a kind of "aha" that you get when you actually push yourself into new spaces in the writing. So there were things that I think I may not have discovered, intellectual and artistic and political truths that I may not have encountered had I not actually sat down to write! And maybe they would have floated around in my being in some kind of a way, but they got really sharp, really refined when I had to write.

F: **Yeah, I love that. And I've definitely found in my own writing that the post-tenure writing is much more possible. That you can take risks.**

O: Yes. It's such a profound way to live to take risks! And you know, when you're trying to get tenure, there's very little risk-taking. No one really wants you to take risks, you have to get through that moment. But you're right—after tenure it was sort of like, "Huh, I could do this thing differently."

Notes

1. Sharon Bridgforth is the author of *love conjure/blues* and the Lambda Literary Award-winning *the bull-jean stories*, from RedBone Press. She has released her performance text *con flama* and her workbook, *Silk Mantras: Activating The Divine Design For Your Life* as ebooks. She is a resident playwright at New Dramatist and is the Spring 2014 Playwright in Residence in the University of Iowa's Playwrights Program. Her current work in progress, *River See* has received a 2012 MAP Fund Award and a 2012 National Performance Network Creation Fund Award.

2. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones (PhD, New York University) specializes in performance scholarship that focuses on identity, ethnography, Yoruba-based performance aesthetics, Black Feminisms, and Theatre for Social Change. At the University of Texas at Austin, she teaches courses in African-American theater history and the performance of race, performance ethnography, performing Black Feminisms, Yoruba performance, and performance and activism. Dr. Jones was a Fulbright Fellow in Nigeria (1997–1998) where she taught at Obafemi Awolowo University and contributed Theatre for Social Change workshops to the Forum on Governance and Democracy in Ile-Ife. Her dramaturgical work includes *con flama* for Frontera@Hyde Park Theatre, *Clay Angels* for New WORLD Theatre in Amherst, Massachusetts, and *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* and *Pill Hill* for First Stage Productions in Austin, Texas. In Austin, Texas and Washington, DC she has received acting awards for her work in professional theater. Dr. Jones was the opening plenary performer at the Second Annual Performance Studies Conference at Northwestern University with "sista docta." That work has also been presented at the National Communication Association National Conference, the Pedagogy/Theatre of the Oppressed Conference, and the Black Women in the Academy II Conference. Her print scholarship on performance and identity has appeared in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *Theatre Topics*, *The Drama Review*, *Theatre Insight*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Black Theatre News*. She is currently completing a book on the use of a jazz aesthetic among theater artists with particular attention to Laurie Carlos, Daniel Alexander Jones, and Sharon Bridgforth.

3. Bridgforth and Jones, along with Lisa L. Moore, are co-editors of *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic: Art, Activism, Academia, and the Austin Project* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2010).

Work Cited

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