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Caleigh Pope

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Caleigh Pope
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The Deconstruction of Patriarchal Narratives in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls*

Ntozake Shange redefines what is traditionally considered the long poem by experimenting with form and voice in her poem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*. The inclusion of stage directions, dancing, chanting, and referencing popular songs of the time contributes to reimagining the long poem. Shange distinguishes her work from traditional western poetry using these features, all part of her newly christened genre the choreopoem, an art form that does not contain traditional epic features but instead draws inspiration from theatre. The choreopoem is characterized by the importance of nonverbal communication and movement in the performance of the written word to expand past poetry to a theatrical piece. Shange embraces the idea of a community through her description of black female experiences in a poignant and raw vernacular with shared language and references. Through the use of the choreopoem, Shange places emphasis on movement and depicts the body as an active presence, as well as resists traditional elements of the epic and theatre. Shange rejects both white and black male poets' depictions of black female experiences in historical narratives by creating a believable shared narrative, while not erasing the identities of the women or overgeneralizing their experiences. Poetic form, and more specifically, the use of the choreopoem, resist and enables the deconstruction of historical narrative regarding black female bodies by replacing it with realistic images that validate the experiences of women in the community.

Through the inclusion of diverse stories surrounding black women's experiences and in highlighting stories told by women, Shange actively resists one of the earliest narrative roles for black women. The "Jezebel" figure in direct reference to biblical context, is a woman whose sensuality is the antithesis of innocence and piety attributed to white women and is framed as seductive and cunning. When white poets invoke the image of "Jezebel", it directly references the history of using this stereotype to "allow oppressors to justify their use of black women as slaves, servants, and prostitutes" (Eck 12). Christine Eck argues that although this is an older stereotype, "Jezebel" continues to place expectations of what black women are or should be. This role invoked by white poets reduces black women to being promiscuous and objectifies black female bodies. Defining a woman as a "Jezebel" figure classifies her as someone who is not innocent and is therefore deserving of whatever happens to her, strips her of her humanity. Although Shange constructs a poem that conceptualizes the body as an active presence within the performance and an imagined presence in the form of stage directions, the ladies in the rainbow resist the "Jezebel" stereotype. In the section "a layin on of hands" the women's bodies are used as a symbol of unity. The women "enter into a closed tight circle" as the poem comes to an end, and both the reader and audience witness the solidarity that comes from the sharing of stories (Shange 88). The women's bodies are not described in sexual details, rather Shange emphasizes the physical movement of the body. Although *for colored girls* mentions black female bodies often in stage direction or in the retelling of stories, the focus is turned to performance and how it could be witnessed by an audience. Shange resists the "Jezebel" stereotype by shifting attention away from overtly sexual bodies, to how the body can be used in performance.

Not only does Shange resist narrative roles imposed on women by white poets, she rejects how black women are portrayed by black male poets. The role of the outraged mother has

been used to portray black women as the “sassiest woman on the face of the earth, with good reason” (Braxton 380). Joanne M. Braxton describes the outraged mother as someone who is the muse to black male poets and the driving motivation for any of her actions is fueled by anger at the abuse of herself and of her people. This role for black women in some traditional narratives, such as in the slave narrative genre, confines them to specific actions and motivations. They can be reduced to a caretaker, a source of inspiration, or even an outlet for comic relief because of their “sassy” behavior. Defining a woman as sassy classifies her as someone who is impertinent and insolent, thereby stripping her of the ability to display other emotions, or able to interact with others in a meaningful way. As an outraged mother, a black woman is not given the same importance as a man in the narrative but is instead pushed to the side and used as a tool in the narrative of men. Shange resists this role of the outraged mother for black women not only in the very nature of writing a long poem based solely on women’s diverse experiences in *for colored girls*, but in the celebration of divine womanhood in the section “a layin on of hands”. The ladies of the rainbow realize in this section that the validation of their experiences that they seek lies within themselves, “the holiness of myself released” (Shange 86). In rewriting the role of black women as people who are capable of deep emotions and clarity in self-identity, Shange resists the historical narrative of the outraged mother as synonymous with black female bodies, affirming of the divinity in black women. Shange elevates the ladies of the rainbow past limiting and marginal roles in literature to positions of holiness by repeating that the women find god within themselves. The divine elevation of the ladies in the rainbow beyond secular description departs from historical images of black women seen in slave narratives and places them in a position of veneration, which the women of the rainbow give to each other by repeating this phrase to one another and later give to the audience as the actors turn to them in the performance

of this poem. In both solitude and togetherness the ladies find god within themselves, as an inner aspect of their identity which grants them freedom to reclaim how they are represented within their own stories and in the stories of others.

A meaningful contribution the structure of the choreopoem has to the overall impact of *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* is the emphasis on movement to create meaning within the poem. In this work, the concept of the body transcends theme as it is an active presence within the performance of the poem and acts as an imagined presence as readers take note of stage directions. There is a physicality to the poem that is seen somewhat through the stage directions for a reader but seen and felt even more through the performance of the long poem. This physicality is seen in the section of the poem directly after the traumatic experience the lady in red contributes to the overall narrative. As the lady in red says that “i waz missin somethin” the other ladies of the rainbow say, “a layin on of hands” (Shange 84). In this first line, the lady in red feels broken and incomplete due to the experience she shared with the other ladies in the rainbow. The performance of the poem is more important here than the text because the staging of the poem shows that the lady in red starts this part of the poem standing alone in the middle of the stage. As each of the women contribute to the conversation by interjecting a word or two, the lady in red begins to feel comforted as seen in the lines, “a layin on of hands/ the holiness of myself released” (86). In a singular textual analysis of this poem, we as readers would not be able to see the image of the women laying their hands on the lady in red as it is not explicitly stated in the text nor in the stage directions. The choreopoem’s performative nature is crucial in understanding this moment of the poem because the laying on of hands is a physical motion that starts to heal the lady in red. Stage directions are integral in staging *for colored girls*, but the implications made in the written text of the poem is

equally important. It is implied in this section as each of the ladies in the rainbow repeat “layin on” of hands, that each woman actually puts her hand on the lady in red. The women soothe each other and help one another to heal in a physical way; it would be difficult, if not impossible, to grasp all of the implied power of healing if Shange employed a traditional form of the long poem instead of the choreopoem, with its stage directions.

Shange does more than resist traditional rhetorical devices found in poetry, she disregards traditional concepts of differentiation between audience and performance in the theatre. As Sarah Mahurin points out, the women in the written work are not easily differentiated by the reader, but this lack of distinction is what enables the performance of the long poem to be so powerful. Mahurin criticizes Shange in that “this facet of the production seems to suggest a measure of... human interchangeability” (Mahurin 329). Although Mahurin argues Shange presents black women as interchangeable and not individualized, she fails to take into account the performative nature of the poem. Mahurin takes a strict textual analysis in regard to characterization, analyzing the color name alone while disregarding the performance studies approach, which is what is actually seen on the stage and not necessarily described in the text. Mahurin also makes human interchangeability synonymous with the generalization of black women. This is something Shange actively tries to avoid even though *for colored girls* develops a concept of self that moves from the individual to a kind of a communal self, made of individual experiences and voices. In a poem that focuses deeply on the women’s bodies, what they choose to do with their bodies and what is done to them, there is a shift between the textual and the performative aspects of Shange’s narrative. In the written poem, the women are only differentiated by the color they wear as the seven actors are all black females. But in performance, the audience is able to see what is unspoken: that the actors are of different height, weight, skin tone, hair, age, and other

distinguishing features. Shange's use of the undefined names is different than conventional undifferentiated characters in traditional theatre, such as the chorus or background dancers. The fact that the main "characters" and essentially the narrators of the overall poem remain relatively nameless with few physical descriptors demonstrates how little physical differences matter to Shange when describing the black female experience: any woman can be raped, any woman can be sexy or funny, any woman can sing. The lack of description of the women places less restrictions on who is allowed to perform in the role. There are no stage directions that prescribe a certain type of black woman to a specific color in the rainbow, which contributes to Shange's overall message, validating stories from multiple types of black women who may have experienced life differently, but who can all contribute to a shared narrative. Undifferentiated characters' performing as narrators and the source of the stories is thus a kind of resistance and destabilizes the traditional practices of theatre in terms of explicit character descriptions. Shange also destabilizes traditional standards in poetry as she substitutes poetic devices for stage directions and other unconventional features associated with performance in the written text of the poem, creating a complex hybrid. Black female bodies are the only constant in the written text of the poem which implies that what makes each of the women unique is not necessarily the focal point when discussing their bodies. This interchangeability of the actors within the seven roles disrupts the concept of a stable character identity, which is central to the theatre goers' understanding of a traditionally linear and cohesive narrative. But human interchangeability in Shange's poem is not the same as the generalization or essentialization of black women's experiences; this concept is instead a means to express that the women in the poem could be anyone within the community. Using this tool, Shange is able to effectively create a feeling of community and validate the experiences of black women by demonstrating that a situation is not

only applicable to one type of woman. While Shange does not give the reader highly specified characters or a cohesive and constant narrative, she instead explores a shared or communal experience that the seven women contribute to in their own turn.

This by no means implies that Shange erases the identity of the black female by overgeneralizing their experiences. Shange does not allow the identity of black women to be lost in a blanket statement that is meant to describe a singular black female existence. Shange does not essentialize or stereotype black women, but rather focuses on community as a different way of theorizing the self. Through the relationship between the collection of individual narratives and the lack of specific identification of the women in the textual form of this poem, Shange creates a collaborative narrative that is able to depict and validate experiences black women encounter. Instead of creating outlandish experiences for these women to go through, Shange draws from her life and the lives of women she knows to articulate the wide variety of experiences black women face in life, grounding the stories being told to reduce the chances the women's identities are lost to an overgeneralization of theoretical experiences. The women in *for colored girls* become active narrators in the interwoven facets of a cohesive narrative, providing the voice that other women can identify with because Shange validates the real-life experiences of black women, rather than losing the ladies of the rainbow in a narrative of unrealistic or unbelievable experiences. Instead of focusing on what each of the women look like in the text, Shange draws the reader's attention to the actions of the women and more importantly how their bodies interact in the space emphasized in the stage directions. For example, Shange refers to the women by color but specifies how they are using their bodies when "the lady in green, the lady in blue, and the lady in yellow do the pony, the big boss line..." to the description of the music (Shange 21). The dancing the ladies of the rainbow are doing in this scene is the focus of the

stage directions, rather than what they physically look like. In both the textual and performative models of *for colored girls* it is not as important to Shange to describe how each of the women look as they dance, but rather to emphasize the movements of the women. During a performance of this scene, the audience would not require a description of the ladies in the rainbow dancing as they are literally watching them dance to the music. The subtleties of physical appearance in the women do not impact the joy of their dancing but would instead put unnecessary emphasis on how they look and further emphasize the differences in black women rather than celebrate in shared experiences.

Throughout *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, Shange incorporates the vernacular of black women when the ladies of the rainbow take turns retelling their stories as they create the shared narrative of gender-specific experiences. As Thallum Sarada points out from the theoretical lens of Erik Erikson's argument on identity formation, Shange's taking control of linguistic forms marks a revolt against repressive cultural and linguistic learnings. This implies that by using vernacular English throughout the long poem, Shange repurposes the language that is used to generalize and oversimplify the black female experience to fit her own goals. Shange uses the written English language and the variety in the spoken language to create both a unique linguistic identity in the predominantly white field of literature, and to develop a work that is artistically satisfying and meaningful to the audience. By distancing herself from traditional poetic linguistic forms commonly used by white poets, Shange creates space to experiment with depicting a variety of realistic images that validate the experiences of black women. The non-traditional forms Shange uses contribute to existing linguistic structures that are available to her when writing this choreopoem. When analyzing how Shange validates realistic experiences of black women, it is important to discuss the vernacular

as an extension of her linguistic choices. Shange gives voice to the experiences of different women in this collective narrative to actively avoid essentializing or stereotyping black women by pigeonholing them to one example of vernacular or educational background. For instance, in the poem “now i love somebody more than”, Shange employs both vernacular slang and Spanish in the lady in blue’s narrative. When describing her family to the other ladies in the rainbow who were in disbelief that she spoke Spanish, the lady in blue said “olà/ my papa thot he was puerto rican & we wda been/ cept we waz just regular” (Shange 25). Despite the fact that she is able to say a few phrases in Spanish, the lady in blue believes her family to be average. The lady in blue’s vernacular reflects her belief that she is a “regular” black woman. Throughout the rest of her story, the lady in blue speaks almost exclusively in vernacular representative of her African American community. In the poem “toussaint”, Shange employs both vernacular slang and the longhand spellings of the famous Frenchman which differs from other narratives in *for colored girls*. The lady in brown tells the story of her childhood and her experiences reading about Toussaint L’ouverture, who “didnt low no white man to tell him nothin/ not napoleon/ not maximillian/ not robespierre” (Shange 40). This section of the long poem is particularly interesting because there is vernacular side by side with French historical figures, which is a symbol of the lady in brown’s educational status. While the lady in brown does not directly mention her education level, it is implied that she is well educated due to the fact she read about Toussaint at the age of eight. In this retelling of an experience, the lady in brown is a middle-class girl who goes into the library all day and is more interested in reading than in playing with other children. Here, Shange demonstrates another type of vernacular, as the girl interjects bigger and more complicated words with her slang. This is important because it contributes another

voice to the collective narrative of stories but also because it depicts and validates another form of experiences.

Shange employs voice through more than just the vernacular of the women in the rainbow. In the section of “a nite with beau willie brown”, Shange uses silence as an aspect of voice, both linguistic and metaphorical voice. The linguistic voice is that which can be studied through textual analysis of *for colored girls*, the conscious decisions Shange made when choosing what experiences to share, how they would be shared either through vernacular English or other language choices, and who would be contributing to the narrative. The metaphorical voice in Shange’s long poem is the culmination of all the narratives and is at the subject of debate when it comes to voice within *for colored girls*. The point most argued by critics is the effect of a shared narrative on the individuality of black female experiences. As argued above, the shared narrative does not serve as a tool for overgeneralizing the experiences of black women, but rather Shange uses the metaphorical concept of voice to validate these experiences and to showcase the solidarity that is a result of vocalizing a story to one’s community. This section with Crystal and Beau Willie Brown, in which Beau Willie, an abusive vet struggling with PTSD and drug abuse, kills their children when his girlfriend Crystal will not publicly commit to marrying him, is most interesting because Shange experiments with speech and silence as a function of the choreopoem. Silence is a function of the choreopoem in this circumstance because the loss of words in Crystal’s narrative is most deeply felt when viewing this as an audience. The powerful voice of Crystal lends itself to the creation of realistic life experiences, but when powerful speech works alongside features of the choreopoem such as silence, it validates another type of life experience. Crystal’s transition from speaking powerfully about herself plays a role in conveying the culmination of pain in her narrative where she slips

into the first-person: “i stood by beau in the window...but i cd only whisper” (Shange 84). The use of the first-person pronoun contributes to the crippling and overwhelming feelings Crystal/the lady in red experiences in the face of Beau Willie’s committing filicide. This is not a circumstance where the lady in red literally fails to form words, but rather a moment that illustrates how hard it is for a woman to stand up to her abuser even when her children are the one at risk. The speaker in this narrative switches between the first- and third-person point of view when describing what happened to the lady in red and her children. There is movement in the point of view, something that is visualized in the performance of this poem. The shift to the “i” in this section emphasizes this experience as one of individual tragedy. This transition into the individual emphasizes the unique experience of witnessing the horror of your children dying, and meaningfully takes a step back from the collective shared experiences to allow the lady in red the space to grieve on her own. The removal of the lady in red from the narrative by switching back to the third person, the outsider’s perspective, takes over the story when she falters, removing the burden of carrying the narrative forward on her own. Removing herself from the story enables the lady in red to retell this life event. In this, Shange creates an extremely poignant and realistic view of a woman’s survival of abuse. In her focus on a “whisper” at a moment when speech is critical, Shange realistically portrays the difficulty and almost inhuman amount of strength it takes to stand up to an abuser. The lack of authority in the lady in red’s voice reveals the authentic representation of how a person would actually react in this situation. Shange could have easily made the lady in red speak powerfully enough to save her children, but in the moment her voice faltered, which is something that could happen when a woman who had previously been abused by a partner was forced to witness what was happening to her kids. As readers, we are able visualize Crystal moved to whispers and silence as a result of the experience

she is retelling, but it is more keenly felt as a performance. In the performance of the choreopoem, the audience is able to witness Crystal's self-silencing as she watches the violence, and the actor who plays the lady in red is able to express the horror of not being able to speak up at such a moment through her body language and facial expressions.

In addition to the point-of-view switches in this section, there is a move from speech, to silence, back to speech. Crystal returns to speech as she retells this story to the ladies of the rainbow. The retelling of the story allows the lady in red to reclaim her voice while being comforted by sharing her experiences to a supportive group of women. Although the voice the lady in red finds is not triumphant by any stretch of the imagination, it sets her on a path to healing by being able to verbalize her experiences. The healing comes when the community with which the lady in red shares her story comforts her by validating her experiences and uses movement and the body as a way to physically put her at ease. The second way the lady in red finds comfort would not be possible without the choreopoem's performance, which is why the linguistic and movement-based concepts of the self are tightly intertwined and are of equal importance.

The triumphant images of powerful black female bodies delivering a message of self-love and self-sufficiency are a direct result of Shange's usage of the newly minted poetic form, the choreopoem. The stage directions tell the reader that the ladies sing the affirmation of black female divinity to each other, then to the audience, and contribute to the deconstruction of stereotypes surrounding black female experiences. Shange uses the stage directions as a celebration of the community that was established in the sharing of experiences. The affirmation grows into a song with the ladies "sing[ing] first to each other, then gradually to the audience...the ladies enter into a closed tight circle" (Shange 88). Through the choreopoem's

inclusion of stage directions, Shange increases her resistance to patriarchal narratives by showcasing an extremely unified and cohesive community of women uplifting women. The patriarchal narrative Shange resists here is that of women who are unable to support each other. Women are too often turned against each other for the sake of competition, which is explored in several poems such as: “one” and “pyramid.” Shange disrupts this by creating a moment where the women do nothing but lift each other up and support one another. Without the performative choreopoem, the impact of the phrase “i found god in myself” is lessened because as readers, we cannot begin to fully imagine the tone, emphasis, and overall effect of hearing seven women chanting the phrase. The ladies of the rainbow use the affirmation to uplift both themselves and each other as a song of joy, which rebels against narratives by men where women antagonize each other and are not a source of support for each other. This phrase serves as another source of deconstructing the historical patriarchal narrative, as it verbalizes the concept that the ladies of the rainbow and the audience are sufficient on their own, and that they do not have to turn to an external source of gratification to feel content. Using the performance studies approach, readers can expand this phrase once more as the actors sing the affirmation to audience members.

In addition to experimenting with traditional poetic form and gender roles to deconstruct patriarchal narratives about gender-specific experiences, Shange uses the choreopoem to create a triumphant image of the powerful black female body at the end of the narrative. Through the use of the choreopoem’s distinguishing features, Shange seeks the liberation of black women from double hegemonic subjugation. Black female bodies are oppressed by two levels of patriarchal expectations and stereotypes placed upon them by society, the first being gendered expectations placed on women and the second are performative roles placed on black women. This makes Shange’s distinct narrative validating the experiences of black women more empowering and

impactful. Shange does more than resist patriarchal narratives, she claims that women have the right to an empowered voice, which is seen in the lines of affirmation, “i found god in myself,” that grow to a resounding chant and culminate in a healing song. Shange uses the choreopoem’s added elements of stage directions and song to create comfort and, as an extension of that, to establish a community within the ladies of the rainbow. In this final scene, the choreopoem at this point moves from an individual voice to a communal voice that is created through the shared narrative in the poem. This empowered voice is emphasized in the reiteration of the phrase, “i found god in myself & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely,” which later builds into a song of repeating only this phrase (Shange 87). This phrase is especially interesting as it is one of the first times we, as the readers, get a truly empowering image of women. The collective narrative that is shared between these women allows the reader to catch glimpses of the women defined by their relationships with men and by societal pressures, but in this statement Shange embraces self-love. This self-love is wholly that: when the ladies of the rainbow repeat this phrase, their love and self-worth are a result of introspection and self-reliance. This phrase stems from the profound discovery and belief which rose naturally from the healing nature of sharing stories. The ladies find god in themselves on an individual basis as it is initially said by a solitary speaker and, as the other women first speak, they repeat the phrase to themselves. The use of stage directions following this phrase, “*all of the ladies repeat to themselves softly the lines*” is a function of the choreopoem, serving as substitution for repetition (Shange 87). Instead of using traditional rhetorical devices found in poetry, Shange includes features typically associated with theatre to distinguish her work as the newly christened genre of the choreopoem. In using unique methods to accomplish the same goal of repetition in poetry, Shange seeks to differentiate her work from traditional poems and enable performative choices. Writing out the repetitions of the

phrase as it might be seen in other poetic genres would limit the number of times it could be said within a performance of *for colored girls*. By not specifying how frequently the phrase is repeated, Shange allows for the actors of the poem to find a natural cadence and frequency to repeating the phrase. Shange's replacement of traditional poetic rhetorical devices, such as repetition, in favor of stage directions distinguishes *for colored girls* as a work that transcends conventional poetry.

In Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, she redefines what had been traditionally considered a long poem by creating her own experimental form. The form-altering choreopoem includes stage directions, dancing, chanting, and referencing popular songs of the time contribute to the reimagining of the long poem as a way to remove Shange from traditional western poetry. The choreopoem in *for colored girls* emphasizes the importance of movement and the role of the body in creating meaning. The use of her own form enables Shange to deconstruct and resist the historical narrative regarding black female bodies by replacing it with realistic stories that validate their experiences. Shange uses form to create powerful images of black women and their ability to create community from the telling of shared experiences. The women share these stories using vernacular and in the retelling of their stories, reclaim their voices. The discussion of human interchangeability in *for colored girls* is most interesting due to the performance of the choreopoem. Shange's conscious choice not to assign descriptive definitions to the women in the poem other than assigning them a color of the rainbow is deeply intriguing. This discussion is highlighted by the differences between the written text and the performance of Shange's work. The life that the actors give to each of the ladies in the rainbow contributes most to the argument that Shange validates real life experiences of black women.

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