ABSTRACT

FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF: LIVING IN THE WORD
AN EXAMINATION OF THE TEXT AND TRADITIONAL PERFORMANCES OF FOR COLORED GIRLS… AS A STUDY FOR A MULTICULTURAL PRODUCTION

by John Nyrere Frazier

_for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf_ is a choreopoem performance play written and developed by Ntozake Shange. The piece grew out of an artistic collective which included Asians, Black Americans, Northern Continental Indigenes Peoples, European Americans, and Puerto Rican. The original west coast production included both Puerto Ricans and Asians. I believe that, that casting choice was as deliberate as Shange’s choices of language and content. Those multicultural women were bodied cultural references. In its move and further development, though, the casting changed to only include Black American women; narrowing the works physicalized cultural references. The major focus of my paper is to reconnect with Shange’s original casting choices as reasoning for re-widening casting and by extension, bodied cultural reference. My purpose is to lay the foundation for a return to the author’s original cultural intentions for the play which I assert were to write and perform a feminist piece that presented the lives and cultures of many “different kinds” (ethnicities/ cultures/ nationalities) of women. In addition, through the bodied references in the production, I intend to apply the work to the lives of more than just Black American and African American women; using the play as a feminist connective tissue between different women and differing feminisms that are all fighting again female oppression. I will pursue my objectives by reviewing the history of the author, the origins of _for colored girls…_, exploring feminist concepts, script research, examination of the play’s themes, and an examination of my production decisions as director.
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AN EXAMINATION OF THE TEXT AND TRADITIONAL PERFORMANCES OF FOR COLORED GIRLS… AS A STUDY FOR A MULTICULTURAL PRODUCTION

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Introduction

What were the specific origins of *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enough*? What did the work look like during its and the author’s formative years? Will the unity of the Black feminist position be pushed aside if other women perform the work? Does unity have an actionable mechanic? What does the practice of unity look like; what shape does it take? What praxis can be built to bridge communities that extend beyond cultural and national boarders? Addressing these and other questions will be no easy task. Neither will reviewing Shange’s work. Standing alone, *for colored girls...*, is a groundbreaking mixture of text, dance movement, and music which has produced volumes and volumes of responses, reviews, and analysis. The exclusive exploration of the author alone is also a considerable subject unto itself. Ntozake Shange has had a life of artistic and cultural experiences which began as a child in the early 50’s and reaches forward to her 2010 co-authorship of, *Some Sing, Some Cry*, with her sister, Ifa Bayeza and beyond. A career of this magnitude cannot fit into one thesis. Yet a close examination is the only process that will answer some if not all of these questions. Further still, my aim is not simply to engage in intellectual discussion on the play, but to promote a specific agenda. I wish to walk my readers through a theoretical and text-based praxis, based on *for colored girls...* being expanded to cast woman of all Cultures/Ethnics/Nationalities in application.1 *(CEN)* This will appear periodically where applicable. This assertion seeks to see *for colored girls...* not only performed by a mixture of different Black and African American women, but eventually by women from Mexican, African, Indian, Iraqi, European, West/East Asian, Island Aboriginals, etc.

The opening chapter will present an extensive analysis of Shange’s historical background as an author, performer, director, adapter, and co-author. The following chapter will be my theoretical analysis of the play as feminist literature. I will compare the author’s intentions for the work to Black feminist views and Third World feminism. I do so to discover whether the three can intertwine or clash. The third chapter will explore similarities between Shange, Boal, and the *Theatre of the Oppressed*. In that chapter, I will move from the theoretical into the application (mechanics). The exercises found in the *TO* genre will act as a bridge linking the motifs found in the play with motifs found cross-culturally. This will be a physicalized

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1 CEN: Culture(s)/Ethnicity(s)/Nationality(s). This phrase refers to how I am using the word “multicultural”. Sociologically speaking, multiple cultures can and do reside in an individual alone; not to mention, within an ethnicity.
application of the connective tissue I speak about in my theoretical chapter. In my production chapter, I will present my directorial decisions for the production’s bodied mise-en-scène, staging, and character motivations. In my conclusion, I will reassert my premise that a multicultural production of *for colored girls*... is historically, literally, and theoretically sound. In addition, I will request that the ritualized casting which has been a pillar of the play’s production history be altered to include a new practice; one which reaches to multiple cultured bodies and ethnicities to perform the text.

**Chapter One: Historical Background**

This chapter will explore Ntozake Shange “The Author”. I will chronicle her career in authorship, her public reviews, and then focus on *fcg*... The beginning of the chapter will be asking questions which speak to the heart of my thesis on a multicultural production of *for colored girls*... In addition, I will briefly review Shange’s youth and background. The following section will be a series of influences which had direct or indirect ramifications on the creation of *fcg*... This will include some of Shange’s artistic and personal relationships as well as the environment the work was created in. Moving further into the chapter, I will show a timeline of her work. Here, I will review and give examples of public reviews of and responses to not only *fcg*, but Shange’s body of work, and Shange herself. The playwright’s history will be my first section. This section will give us an inventory of the author’s cannon. In the middle portion of the chapter, I will examine Shange’s language choices and the reasoning undergirding those choices. In the following section, I will theorize on symbolic connections between Shange and Judy Grahn’s, *The Common Woman*; a work Shange credits with being the literary blue print for *fcg*... The next section will be a conclusion made up of three components: an abbreviated production history, a review of Shange’s literary predecessors and contemporaries, and a final section which will pose further questions about the plays intentions and potential.

Shange has written extensively and steadily for diverse audiences’ sense at least the early 1970’s. Her body of work is prolific. However, 1974 began a journey for Shange which created a literary footprint that spans more than forty years and encompasses books of poetry, stage plays, novels, children’s books, critical essays, interviews, and co-authorships. In addition, she has voluminous amounts of scholarly critiques, interviews, and reviews. Her literary body of work is a social, political, cultural, and artistic nexus. Both she and her pieces are located in pivotal and
overlapping periods of American history beginning with Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950’s and 60’s, Black Arts Movement of the late 1960’s- early 70’s with its ties to the Black Power Movement, and the beginnings of the Black Feminist Movement of the late 1960’s- early 70’s. This moves on to what I call the Feminist Black Power Movement of the early 1970’s on through to the late 70’s; with its victories being shown in numerous industries and fields of study today. She continues on through the proceeding decades up to her most recent release in 2010.

In exploring the motifs found in the works of her career, we start at elements of the beginning. The texts I will be drawing from for this chapter’s analysis will be her play, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf and Judy Grahn’s work, The Common Woman. I will be supplementing this material with additional articles from Ifa Bayze; Zake and Me and ‘for colored girls’: The backstage, backstory of how a contemporary classic came to the stage and now to film, and “Artistic Expression was Flowing Everywhere” Alison Mills and Ntozake Shange, Black Bohemian Feminists in the 1970s; a work by Harryette Mullen.

I will also pull from an interview I conducted with Dr. Halifu Osumare; a dance choreographer who worked closely with Shange during her development as a dancer. I begin my investigation with Ms. Ntozake Shange before she was Ntozake Shange.

Paulette Williams and the Beginnings of Ntozake Shange’s “Work”

In December of 1974 Shange brought women of different cultures together to perform what would become a prototype of her play, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf in a California women’s bar and performance space called the Bacchanal. The play was a compilation of poems referred to as choreopoems which reflected feminist notions of self- identity and self-agency as seen through the lives and experiences of seven women. We know them now as the colors and symbols of Ladies in brown, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. After its original premiere in California, the production was moved to performance venues in New York. Several months later, it moved onto Broadway and into history as one of the quintessential expressions of black feminist thought in American literature for the stage.
Before Ntozake Shange renamed herself in the South African language of Zulu, she was Paulette Williams; one of four children born Paul and Eloise Owens Williams in Trenton, New Jersey. Paulette lived in a middle class environment with a family that filled her young life with experiences of ballet, jazz, and multicultural interactions. In, *Black Women Writers at Work, Continuum*, Claudia Tate quotes Shange as she recalls her childhood,

> My parents have always been especially involved in all kinds of Third World culture. We used to go to hear Latin music, jazz and symphonies, to see ballets... I was always aware that there were different kinds of black people all over the world... (Tate, Shange 157)

Paulette had been introduced to artistic expression and cultural diversity early in her development. These components of her early life became cornerstones of her inner inspiration to create her own diversity driven artistic work.

In 1953 when Paulette was five years old, she and her family moved to St. Louis, Missouri where she became one of the first black children to integrate the St. Louis public school system. They lived there until she was thirteen. In 1961 she and her family moved back to New Jersey settling in Lawrenceville. In 1966 Shange enrolled at Barnard College and in 1970, she graduated with a degree in American Studies and was accepted to the University of Southern California at Los Angeles. One year later, Paulette changed her name from Paulette Williams to the Zulu name Ntozake meaning "she who comes with her own things," and Shange translated as "one who walks with lions." Two years later, Ntozake Shange earned a master's degree in American Studies.

After attaining her MA, she moved to California. From 1973-1975, she taught Woman’s Studies at California State University, Sonoma Mills College, and University of California Extension. While living in California and teaching at Mills College in Oakland, Shange became acquainted with other poets and performers who nurtured her talents. In 1973, she would come into contact with *The Oakland Women’s Press Collective*. This is the moment in her life where she began to process and create her new writing genre. The poetic works of *for colored girls*... were being formulated. At this same time, Shange is also dancing with Raymond Sawyer's Afro-American dancer company, Sounds in Motion, and West Coast Dance Works. In 74’, she begins to write and perform early versions of *for colored girls*...
Raymond Sawyer and Ed Mock: Dance, Dance, Dance

Such joy & excitement I knew in Sonoma, then I would commute back the sixty miles to San Francisco to study dance with Raymond Sawyer, Ed Mock, & Halifu. (Shange, xi/)

Dance and heightened movement are just as present in *for colored girls...* as the poetry. For Shange, dance-movement was a physical manifestation of the text. I use the hyphenated word, dance-movement to describe the range of physicality which exists in *fcg...* If she and her performers were not engaged in full out dance choreography, as in, *sechita*, they are projecting heightened movement to communicate emotions, events, and locations, as in, *i used to live in the world*. The idea of dance is so prevalent in her mind and intentions for the work that it appears throughout the play's stage directions. Movement even lives in the closing words of the script.

& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide / but are **movin** to the ends of their own rainbows (Shange, 64/)

Because of the kinetic nature of Shange and the entire play, I interpret the word “**movin**” in the line, “…movin to the ends of their own rainbows” as a double entendre. First, the external ‘movin’. This is locomotion; moving around -the dance-movement. Second, the internal ‘movin’. This is movement that happens deep inside while is locomotion. It is exemplified by the action of salvation, healing, etc. That movement exists as a frequency of being; or hue.

During Shange’s formative years as a performer in California, she spoke repeatedly about her dance experiences and the three main people involved in her training: Raymond Sawyer, Ed Mock, and Halifu Osumare. Each of these instructors moved Shange closer to the creation of the dance-text *for colored girls...*

The training and inspiration for the movement in *for colored girls...* originated from her instructors in the art of dance and Shange’s own desire to dance. It was the enhanced and amplified her-ness that she longed to “give voice” to and express. In the preface of *for colored girls....* she recalls how dance caused a change in her that she had never experienced.
The freedom to move in space, to demand of my own sweat, a perfection that could continually be approached, though never known, was a poem to me, my body and mind ellipsing, probably for the first time in my life. (Shange, xi/)

The term “ellipse” in this case, can be seen as a metaphor for several components of her life and art. In non-scientific terms, an ellipse is a circle or oval. She says that because of dance, “her body and mind ellipsed”, joined, or became a circle. The circle as a symbol is used throughout cultures and histories to represent life, endless bounty, spirit without beginning or end. These are concepts which are frequently the personifications of womanhood. The circle shape and the act of its creation also have West African symbolic roots. When the line curves back a round to meet its point of origin in order to make contact and form a circle, it can be said to be using its present to reach back into and realize its past. This act is emblematized by the Ghanaian symbol “Sankofa Bird”, which stems from the Ghanaian word sankofa meaning to go back and take. Go back to our own art, go back to our own experiences, go back to our own movement, take them from our past, our insides and bring them forward, bring them out to be expressed.

i waz cold / I waz burning up / a child & endlessly weavin garments for the moo with my tears / i found God in myself & i loved her / i loved her fiercely (Shange, 63/)

Using dance and movement in space, she reached back to origins, connecting body and mind to form a circle; finding God (eternity, endlessness, life, spirit) in herself and loving that woman-ness fiercely. In Shange’s heart, dance led to an unfolding and became a process of revealing that would directly affect the way she produced for colored girls…. The idea of the circle linking woman-ness, African-ness, and Shange’s expression is also echoed in her statements on how dance helped her to find and identify herself.

Just as Women’s Studies had rooted me to an articulated female heritage & imperative, so dance as explicated by Raymond Sawyer & Ed Mock insisted that everything African…, was mine. (Shange, xi/)

The depth of my past waz made tangible to me in Sawyer’s Ananse, a dance exploring the diaspora to contemporary Senegalese music, pulling ancient trampled spirits out of present tense Afro-American Dance. (Shange, xi/)
Dance, just as poetry, was a tool of self-exploration and expression. Just as Raymond Sawyer and Ed Mock were key in Shange’s spiritual unfolding as a dancer, so too, did Halifu Osumare help in her unfolding as a practitioner of dance.

Enter Halifu

Halifu Osumare is an internationally known and seasoned dance scholar and artist who has been dancing, choreographing, and teaching internationally for over thirty years. She is a 2008-2009 Fulbright Scholar who has taught dance at the University of Ghana, Bowling Green State University and Stanford University. She holds a M.A. in Dance Ethnology from San Francisco State University and a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Hawaii. In 2007, she authored the book, *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves* (Palgrave Macmillan) as well as several journals. She has also founded many dance and performance companies throughout her career as a dancer/choreographer. These include “The Spirit of Dance” in San Francisco, of which Ntozake Shange was a member, “CitiCentre Dance Theatre” in Oakland, as well as founding the national dance initiative, “Black Choreographers Moving Toward the 21st Century” that took place from 1989-1992 in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego. As a dancer in the 1970s, Shange toured schools and dance performances with her. Shange used those experiences to form concepts of how to intertwine dance and the spoken word. Dr. Osumare also directed many of Shange’s works including *for colored girls, From Okra to Greens---A Different Kinda Love Story, Spell # 7, and Boogie Woogie Landscape*.

The first experience of women’s theater for me as a performer waz the months I spent with Halifu Osumare’s The Spirit of Dance, a troupe of five to six black women who depicted the history of Black dance… (Shange, xi-xii/)

The relationship between Shange and Dr. Osumare has been long and beneficial for both women. In an email interview sessions I conducted with Dr. Osumare, we spoke about the relationship she had with Shange and the creative process they shared which helped Shange develop her own dance work. This is a verbatim excerpt from communications between Osumare and I which began July 20th, 2011 and ended on November 8th of the same year (hosumare@yahoo.com).
Halifu Interview

John Frazier (JF): When were you introduced into the process of refining for colored girls and who was the person who brought you to the process?

Halifu Osumare (HO): I met Ntozake in 1973 when I returned to the S.F./Oakland Bay Area after living in Europe for 3 years and Boston and New York for 2 years. She had migrated up from Los Angeles, after receiving her Masters in American Studies for USC (I think). There was a flourishing Black Arts Movement in the area, and we both became a part of a renaissance of music, dance, and theatre. She was a poet who was interested in dance and took a lot of dances classes, including my own. She began writing the poems that would be assembled into "for colored girls..." and performing them at various venues in both San Francisco and the East Bay (Oakland & Berkeley). I was really into dance improvisation and collaborations with writers, and I began interpreting the poems through dance in performance with her, between 1973-1974.

JF: What attracted you to the work?

HO: Her imagery. Zake's poems had dance woven into imagery, and I could see and feel it. It was also layered on many levels from person to political to cultural, and all of that appealed to me. I was doing similar things through my choreography. I put together a production called "The Evolution of Black Dance," and she became a dancer in that production, which I took into the public schools. Also, I wrote and produced a play called "Four Women" that she acted in. All of this gave her a sense of how dance and the word could work together. I think this was one part of her conceptualizing the "choreopoem."

JF: Shange writes with passion, pain, and mystery in the work. What were your muses as you choreographed?

HO: My muses were the same as many artists: my own experiences, feelings, and concerns. I was drawn to a strong spirituality, including African spirituality, and therefore wrote and danced a great deal about transcendence from the earthly realm, and getting beyond the trials and tribulations of life. In many ways this was different from Zake, and she often commented in public forums that my poems and writings were much more directly spirituals than hers. But we did coincide quite a bit.

In this interview, Dr. Osumare tells about the origins of their relationship, their similarities in spirituality, and possible inspirations behind Shange’s creation of the choreopoem. As a director/choreographer, Dr. Osumare was the bridge between Shange’s dance training with Sawyer and Mock and her professional performance presentations. Through several dozen performances with The Spirit of Dance troop in the school systems, Shange firmly placed herself on the path of polished performance.
Working in San Francisco and Berkeley public schools… I learned the mechanics of self-production & absorbed some of Halifu’s confidence in her work, the legacy of our visions. After 73 productions… I left the company to begin production of *for colored girls*… (Shange, xii/).

Though experiencing great public success with *for colored girls*... in bars and other devised performance spaces, Shange was in a place of artistic stand-still with the work. It was time for a change. In the spring of 1975, Shange and then dance partner, Paula Moss moved to New York.

**Enter Ifa Bayeza**

During this time in Shange’s artistic growth, her sister, Ifa Bayeza was experiencing her own success as a playwright in New York at the Henry Street Theatre. This is very important to Shange’s introduction into the New York theatre scene and the further sculpting of *for colored girls*... While Shange was refining her poetry and performance, she was also communicating her growth with her sister in New York. In the article, *Zake and Me and ‘for colored girls’: The backstage, backstory of how a contemporary classic came to the stage and now to film* published December, 2010 in an edition of *American Theatre*, Bayeza recalls that period in Shange’s life as a time of artistic highs and personal lows.

My sister’s poetry was getting better and better. But she was performing in bars for spaghetti and wine (sometimes just for wine). And she was in a relationship that didn’t sound healthy. (Bayeza, 43)

Because of Shange’s state of poverty, Bayeza called her to come to New York. In an effort to get her sister to let go of the west coast and explore opportunities in New York, Bayeza spoke about her own success as a playwright with Woodie King and the Henry Street Settlement Theatre.

Before Bayeza had asked her sister to join her in New York though, she joined Shange in San Francisco. But, because she couldn’t find steady employment in the west, she moved back east and joined a volunteer teaching organization called VISTA which was to train her as an educator. During one of VISTA’s training sessions in New York, Bayeza decided to answer an ad in the paper *Show Business* which called for plays for the Henry Street Settlement House. Bayeza send her play, *Drinking Water* in for the call. A month after she sent the work in, she
received an acceptance call from the company. She immediately went from a volunteer trainee to a first time playwright working with a well-known New York director and professional performers. Drinking Water and Henry Street Settlement Theatre became the foundation for Bayeza’s new life as a playwright and the means she needed to bring Shange out of her personal and profession rut.

Though Bayeza asked Shange to come to New York, the asking would have to intensify in order to get her sister to come and resettle in the east.

The situation prompted a proactive phone lobby on my part. “You need to move to New York”, I said…. “I just sent my play in from a newspaper ad and it’s been running for two months. If you’re leaving, why bring him a plant? Just leave!” (Bayeza, 43)

The phone lobby finally worked, and in the spring of 1975, Shange, her friend and performance partner, Paula Moss, and the newest version of for colored girls... arrived in NYC. Almost as soon as she arrived in the city, she booked a performance of for colored girls... at Studio Rivbea during the summer music festival. The play's reception at the New York venue was not what Shange expected or was accustomed to. She recalls the experience in the preface of for colored girls...

Instead of the Standing-Room-Only crowd we were accustomed to in San Francisco, my family & a few friends came to see our great project. (Shange, xiii)

It would seem as though her first performance in New York was less than a success. Undaunted by her first performance, Bayeza watches Shange finish the production and they both go to a production of The Wiz later on that evening.

Enter Osborne Scott, Woodie King, and Rewrites

In an occasion of serendipity, as Bayeza calls it, she met a young stage manager one night at a dinner party. Osborne (Oz) Scott was working right next to her production, Drinking Water. Bayeza and Scott hit it off. Interestingly enough, not only did they hit it off, but he also lived around the corner from her on Sixth Street. Later that night, Bayeza returned to her home to find the police roughly arresting some unknown young man in front of her door. She immediately
walked to Scott’s home. During conversations they had that night, she learned of his desire to become a director. The idea hit her then to introduce him to Shange and her work, *for colored girls*…

Soon after Bayeza introduced Scott to Shange, they began working on the theatrical adaptation of *for colored girls*… Bayeza recounts,

> While Zake fully imagined the title and concept of *for colored girls*... in San Francisco, the work as people know it today took shape in those formative months in New York. (Bayeza, 44)

Bayeza and Scott eventually gathered a cast together and began to run workshop productions. The piece also moved from The Rivbea Studio to Old Reliable on East 3rd street, and in December of 1975, it moved once more to the venue De Monte’s. During its run there, it caught the attention of Woodie King, founder and artistic director of Henry Street Theatre. Again, Bayeza stepped in to help propel Shange’s work further.

> Theatre artists have turned my sister’s poetry into a play! I jotted a quick drawing and Xeroxed a program just in time to hand to Woodie King Jr. (Bayeza, 44)

From there, King picked up the option to produce the show as a workshop showcase at Henry Street Theatre. Most people believe that this was the start of the success of *for colored girls*..., but there was still more work to do. According to Bayeza, Shange’s poems needed “segues”: transitions from one piece to another. Shange agreed and continued to write. The work finally had the form and shape that current audiences now enjoy. The arc was set, but the opening, in Scott’s and Bayeza’s view, was not as strong as the work’s body and conclusion. In an effort to solve this problem, Bayeza recalled a poem from Shange’s past that she knew would be the opening that *for colored girls*... was needed to make the play complete. Unfortunately Shange’s memory became a stumbling block with Bayeza’s plan. She didn’t recall which poem Bayeza was referring to, but Shange’s lack of memory did not dissuade Bayeza’s belief in this poem so she continued to search for the piece. Her search took her to Thulani Davis, a poet friend of Shange who was able to find the poem and give *for colored girls*... the opening we know today; *dark phases.*
According to Bayeza’s article, she was not only involved in every major part of developing the text, but she also had a major hand in designing the set and choosing the costuming.

I was sitting in on the production meeting when the original designers assigned by the theatre presented their idea. They suggested a fragmented set… I protested… It needs space, not clutter… they need space to move… you need a design that’s abstract… (Bayeza, 45)

Bayeza’s idea won her the set designer’s position and convinced Scott that she needed to be in the production meetings on costume design as well. This decision also proved to set production history.

Oz next asked me to sit in on the costume design session. “Tie-dye? Really?” Judy Dearing’s original concept might have been lovely, but I have a monochromatic sensibility. I suggested solid colors to reflect the “rainbow” and I urged that they draw the colors of the dresses from the swathes of color in the “mandala”. (Bayeza, 45)

Shange says clearly in her own words that Scott and her sister were “instrumental in the development of for colored girl’s… It is clear from this article that Ifa Bayeza was not only instrumental to the current creation of for colored girls…, but essential in its introduction to the world at large.

Language Style, Themes, & Structure

This section of my chapter speaks to a component of for colored girls… that is from Shange’s feminist view and, to some degree, sculpted as a response to many of her linguistic critics and their evaluations of her work. Because she found much of literature and its standardized structures to be formalized patriarchy from the white male gaze, Shange purposefully constructed a new form of writing. This particular literary stance gained her both notoriety and critique. Her response to those critics is concretized in the following quote.

shd I stop my own work to see a classic that has not been altered to fit the needs of my century or my people? shd I stop work on something I feel so tenderly & passionately abt in order to submit myself to the presence of critics who can only hear that Afro-American & Latinos have diction that is not the diction of white folks? (Shange, 34)
Shange uses language to express a new form of theatre arts. The sociolinguistic structure of her writing was distinct and put her in direct opposition with white and black literary patriarchs. In the preface of the collection, *Three Pieces: Spell #7; A Photograph: Lovers in Motion;* and *Boogie Woogie Landscapes*, Shange recalls past critiques of how she used language.

one New York critic had accused me of being too self-conscious of being a writer/ the other from the Midwest had asserted that i waz so involved with the destruction of the English language/ that my writing approached verbal gymnastics like unto a reverse minstrel show. (Shange, xi)

Her responds to this critique is swift and straightforward...

the man who thought i wrote with intentions of outdoing the white man in the acrobatic distortions of english waz absolutely correct. i can’t count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language that i was taught to hate myself in/ the language that perpetuates the notions that cause pain to every black child as he/she learns to speak to the world & the “self”… in order to think n communicate/ i haveta fix my tool to my needs/ I have to take it apart to the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/ leaving us space to literally create our own image. (Shange, xii)

Though Shange experienced many similar comments, not all examinations were derogatory. Neal Lester explains Shange’s unique style of punctuation and written vernacular further in his work, *Ntozake Shange, a Critical Study of the Plays*. For him, Shange is not only attacking patriarchy with her language but she is also attempting to break the standardized confines of language codification that she finds rigid and unfulfilling. Shange’s thoughts on this codification are not only clear in her afore statement of feminist and cultural repulsion, but also in the following quote that explains her technique from the stand point of artistic intellectual stimulation.

It bothers me, on occasion, to look at poems where all the first letters are capitalized. It’s very boring to me. That’s why I use the lower-case alphabet. Also, I like the idea that letters dance, not just that words dance; of course, the words also dance. I need some visual stimulation, so than reading becomes not just a passive act and more that an intellectual activity, but it demands rigorous participation. (Shange, Lester, 30)

Here it is clear that Shange has ingeniously interwoven a measure of regard into the very fabric of her work. You must *focus* on the writing in order to read it. You must *regard* the work to even
be aware of its content; acts that you might think would be automatic, for many, are not. She goes on to explain further how her writing style is built, in part, to disarm dismissive critiques.

Furthermore, I think there are ways to accentuate very subtle ideas and emotions so that the reader is not in control of the process...I can’t let you get away with thinking you know what I mean. After all, I don’t mean whatever you can just ignore. I mean what you have to struggle with…

(Shange, Lester, 30)

It seems, though, that the main focus of her writing style was, as the above quote states, to deconstruct a language that she associates with her cultural and literary captivity. The act itself is done to creatively deconstruct and reassemble her own image using her own language. The idea of language being used as tools of subjugation and liberation are a long-standing struggle for authors of African descent. From America to Africa, the idea that one must write down a people’s story in the vernacular of those people has been a crucial component to the reclaiming and celebration of that people’s story. This ideology was/is at the heart of Shange’s writing structure, and she is not alone in this perspective. It is also at the heart of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s writings on language as well.

Kenyan born, Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a scholar, writer and social activist who has written extensively on the issue of race, language, and post-colonial literary redefinition. In his work, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Thiong’o speaks about the necessity for writers to use the language and vernacular of the people they write about to most accurately communicate the lives of those people. For Thiong’o, the traditional English language, left unaltered, can never be able to truly encompass the stories, values, and attitudes of those people who culturally stand outside that traditional language.

Though Thiong’o’s work focuses on post-colonial writing in Africa, the two streams of thought – Thiong’o’s and Shange’s - follow alongside each other.

As a person who believes in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folklore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as a medium of expression…

(Thiong’o, 435)
This “translation of language” for Thiong’o refers to any number of languages native to Africa. For Shange, the translation refers to dialects, cadence of speech, and vernacular found in her choreopoems and other writings. Her words are written as they would be literally spoken. In this way, she as well as Thiong’o affirms their individual cultural / ethnic identities.

…For, from a word, a group of words, a sentence and even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people. (Thiong’o, 435)

For Thiong’o and Shange, the right of that group of people whose social norms, attitudes and values are being communicated, to speak and write in the way (language- vernacular, or both) which that group speaks and writes in, is absolute. Further, their language format should be free to stand outside of the European traditional writing format while still being located within its literary structures of language: i.e. European semiotics.

Shange’s use of language is largely based in a cultural response to colonialist writing styles and structures. It is also, as I have noted earlier in this section, a gendered response as well. They are at the heart of a literary feminism which is at odds with what Shange refers to as a "malignancy" which permeates American literature and criticism. In the twenty fourth volume of Black American Literature Forum’s fourth issue, Neal Lester’s interview entitled, At the Heart of Shange’s Feminism, Lester asks about this feminist voice.

LESTER: Is your writing particularly “feminist” or particularly “feminine?”

SHANGE: Hopefully it’s feminist, not feminine. I’m a consciously feminist person. I use tools that are available to me as a feminist reconstructing history…Everything I write and have written comes from being a woman-centered person…My woman-centeredness is not so much an exclusionary process…I know that my writing is feminist…my work is feminist for sure. (Lester, 22)

Shange’s use of language is born from her own personal creativity, her feminism, and her cultural desire to linguistically stand apart from European American writings. The words of Thiong’o could easily be the words of Shange. She and Thiong’o share the same post-colonial perspectives of story-telling and the format it takes in order to tell the story right!
Though I’m moving on to the next section, my language section does not end here. I will revisit language again in the following chapter using a word highlighting technique. This technique will expose ideas and themes in the text; giving clarity to poetry that sometimes pushes the edges of understanding.

THE TIMELINE: Plays, Poems, Periodicals, and Children’s Books

This section of my paper will be a detailed chronological examination of Shange’s work. Yet, because she has been writing, performing, adapting, directing, and co-authoring steadily since before 1974, my examination, though thorough, will undoubtedly fall short in some shape or form. In addition, because Shange was and still is a multi-project producer, some of the dates in this timeline will overlap. I will address these anomalies to the best of my ability as they arise.

*for colored who have considered suicide when the rainbow was enuf* was the first of its kind ever seen on Broadway. Therefore its reception was both celebrated and problematized. The majority of remarks made by the general public were overwhelmingly in favor of the work and the playwright. In a 1993 interview with the online magazine, Mutifest.com, Edward K. Brown asks Shange what she recalls about the public’s response to *for colored girls...* Her reply summarized the general response of the public and feminists.

NS: It’s a feminist play...the play was received wonderfully, but a lot of black males had a lot of problems with it...there was a lot of uproar and kinds of name-calling from black male columnists and black men in the audience. (Brown, Shange, 3)

NOTE:

Because *fcg...* was then and is now, a cornerstone of feminist literature and performance, I won’t be detailing feminist's responses. Though there were female voices of protest against the play, the majority of women and feminists’ responses were celebratory. Many Black men, however, had an almost allergic response and some used national platforms to protest the production; in addition to many White men who were steeped in Traditional European American Literary legacy.

The negative responses many white male critics and writers had was in the semiotics and the language. The negative response black men had, was in the imagery and phenomenology. For
them, the play was a condemnation; yet another attack on black men that, according to these men, was unwarranted and untrue. Shange’s response then and now was swift and without reservation.

NS: It’s because they’re sexist and they don’t like being called on it. You’re not supposed to say that. You’re just supposed to live with it and let them do that. You’re not supposed to call a spade a spade. (Brown, Shange, 3)

Though multitudes of black and white males had issues with Shange’s writing style or depictions of maleness, not all men anathematized her work. In the September 16, 1976 New York Times theatre review, Mel Gussow writes,

What does it mean to be a black woman in white America? The search for self, the struggle for singularity, the anguished urging to be loved is at the root of Ntozake Shange’s remarkable night of theater, “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf.” … Miss Shange’s “choreopoem” opened on Broadway at the Booth Theater, an event that was as much a joyful celebration as an opening night. (Gussow, 47)

Gussow uses the word, “remarkable” and the phrase, “joyful celebration” to describe the opening night. (Gussow, 47)

_for colored girls..._ appealed to a spectrum of audiences. Even prison system audiences were introduced and moved by Shange’s work. In ‘Colored Girls’ Goes to Rikers Island and Hits Home: Players and Inmates Chat, a January 14th, 1977, New York Times article, Laurie Johnson writes on Rikers’ response to the play.

The seven young women of the cast, who arrived in a Correctional Department bus, found the performance no traditional “ladies’ matinee”. In the institution’s chapel-auditorium, there was a sort of instant rapport between and there audience of 100 or so convicted women-uniformed in their own semi-rainbow of yellow, green, violet, or white prison wraparounds…(Laurie, 26)

_for colored girls..._ was touted as a marvelous success from all angels; the playwright, the production, the actresses. Even the minimalistic set by scene designer Ming Cho Lee was tacitly admired by Gussow when he remarked , “Having seen “Colored Girls” on an open, compact
stage at the Public Theater, one worried that its impact might be diminished when set in a Broadway proscenium. The worry was unwarranted”. (Gussow, 47)

The production received the same shining reviews in Chicago that it received in New York. In the Chicago Tribune’s Dec. 1977 review by Larry Kart, the headline read, “‘For Colored Girls’ is a golden slice of theater.” Referring to the production as magic, Kart explains,

What makes this play so intoxicating -- both to audiences whose experiences have conditioned them to except its black feminist message and to theatregoers starting from square one -- is that its magic is almost literal. (Kart, B6)

Though he critiques Shange’s feminism by saying that at times it “amounted to a heartless stacking of the deck…”, he seemed to walk-back his own examination with the final thought of his review.

…nothing can tarnish the theatrical brilliance of this play, even if its wisdom is suspect, “For Colored Girls” is a dramatic pot of gold. (Kart, B6)

With all the positive fanfare coming from theatre critics and audiences from Uptown, NYC, to the Blackstone Theatre in Chicago, to the cell block of Rikers Island, for colored girls… did not escape negative criticism in either city.

In the same Chicago Tribune review, Kart addresses some of the criticisms that began to crop up within the black male community. He writes that,

The target, except for one gentle shaft aimed at white societies supposed love of abstractions, is the black male -- his maltreatment, in Shange’s eyes, of all that is beautiful in black women. (Kart, B6)

This same sentiment is echoed and intensified in Rogers Worthington Chicago Tribune review of the production. He uses interviews with audience members in the article to chronicle a wider range of opinions. The following account came from students of the Hale Franciscan High School in Chicago. Worthington quotes Matt Formato, teacher of the students who viewed a matinee of for colored girls... and his student’s responses.

Now Formato was asking students, all black males, what they thought of the play. “It tends to over-emphasize black male faults,” said Book Jones, a tall 18-year old sitting at the front of the class. “The ladies in the play
make it seem like all black men do these things. It was a pretty good play, but they overgeneralized…” (Worthington, A1)

Worthington quotes a second student.

“I COULDN’T relate to it”, another student said. “I felt myself wanting to scream out, ‘We’re not all like that.’” (Worthington, A1)

Worthington also cites a fellow Chicago Tribune columnist Vernon Jarrett, who is a black male. Jarrett had described the play as a “theatrical lynching tree” in which “seven very talented young black women employed their gifts in the artful degradation of that same old victim, the black male…”(Worthington, Jarrett, A1)

Worthington continues to refer to scathing criticisms from Ouida Lindsey of the Chicago Sun-Times, Nathaniel Clay of the Chicago Daily Defender, Charles Sanders of Ebony Magazine, and Val Gray Ward of the Kuumba Community-Arts Program.

These local grievances found a national stage with Tony Brown, who was the former host of Black Journal and Tony Brown’s Journal television program. Brown’s issue with for colored girls... was the same as those espoused in Chicago papers. He viewed the production as a “putdown of black men”. Shange responded to all of her critics who may have labeled her an angry or bitter writer of black male characters in a 1987 interview with Brenda Lyons.

BRENDA LYONS: Colored Girls raised a furor in the 70s...you were attacked as a traitor to your race and put down as a writer and a black woman...how do you feel about having been positioned as an angry young black feminist?

NTOZAKE SHANGE: I think it’s O.K. to have been what I was. I’m not sure that I’m still not. (Lyons, 687)

Her opposition gained no ground with their criticisms. The production continued to grow in popularity and so did Shange. While the success of for colored girls... grew, Shange began a college and university lecture series which included New York University, Douglass College, Detroit Institute of Arts, Howard University, and Yale University.

Shortly after for colored girls… débuted on Broadway, Shange continued to write. She produced poetry (books), fiction, and critical essays. From 1976 – 1983, she wrote Melissa & Smith (1976), Sassafras: A Novella (1977), Natural Disasters and Other Festive Occasions
(1977), *Nappy Edges*; a collection of poetry published in 1978, and *Black and White Two-dimensional Planes* produced in 1979. Those works of poetry went largely unexamined and/or unreviewed by critics, but soon her art would be on stage and in the minds of examiners once again.

*Spell #7: A Geechee Quick Magic Trance Manual* premiered at Joseph Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival in May of 1979. Unlike *for colored girls…*, *Spell #7* opened to a lukewarm reception. Though Richard Eder of the *New York Times* reports that, “In the best of the sketches, Miss Shange’s wit, lyricism, and fierceness are marvelously evident”, he states very candidly that,

> Spell #7 is an uneven work; it's less unified and less tightly organized that “For Colored Girls”. Some of the sketches and the poetry are fuzzy; one or two don’t work, such as a long and rather turgid parody of white women, despite witty delivery by Mary Alice.

Carol Lawson, another reviewer for the *New York Times*, also reports Papp himself on the record as commenting on the play’s need for more work.

> We are working on it right now…I’ll admit for the first time, critics said things of certain value. This was a real workshop test. We know where the problems are. With a few revisions, we’ll have a damn good show.
> (Lawson, C22)

Before I move forward in my literary timeline, I must cover a section of overlap which is mixed with a multi-project moment; *Where the Mississippi Meets the Amazon*. This production was written and performed by 3 Satin Sisters; a group comprised of three performers: Jessica Hagedorn, Thulani Nkabinde, and Ntozake Shange. It was produced at the Public Theatre Cabaret. The piece was made up of multiple pieces of poetry which were complimented by a five-piece jazz band. In a Dec. 77, *New York Times*, reviewer Mel Gussow likens the performance to a hit Motown singing group.

> Although the authorship is individual, the evening…is in harmony. Imagine the Supremes as poets, with Miss Shange as Diana Ross.
> (Gussow, 42)
Gussow noted that, “while for colored girls… speaks with anguish and regret, “Mississippi” is more soft-hued, romantic, and nostalgic.” Gussow finishes his review by complimenting the production and the venue which produced it.

…it brings melodious sounds and considerable warmth to Mr. Papp’s cabaret. (Gussow, 42)

The next project in the timeline is A Photograph: Lovers in Motion: A Study in Cruelty which premiered on the Public Theatre Stage as a part of the 1976 New York Shakespeare Festival. The reception to Shange’s next major stage production was unambiguously cold. Richard Eder’s, a New York Times columnist, notes that feels the work was, “forced”. Eder’s critiques of the work continued and deepened in severity.

The perceptions are made to do the donkey work of holding up what attempts to be a whole dramatic structure, and they fail…The character of Sean has some reality, but it is one-dimensional. Avery Brooks plays him with verve and appeal, but suffers from having to run along the single track that Shange has allotted for him. (Eder, 51)

His evaluation of the production is spread out among the Nevada and Earl characters as well.

Nevada and Earl lack even the one dimension; they are flat targets, and Patonia Paley and Court Stovall are probably not to blame for the fact that there is no way to act such roles. (Eder, 51)

Finally, Eder states that, while the play has moments, ultimately, “It puts lead in her pockets”.

Now that the timeline has addressed the first overlap, I can readdress Spell #7. The revisit was Shange’s second chance to refine the production and respond to the reception of A Photograph: Lovers in Motion: In Study in Cruelty. The play’s revision and re-release produced more flattering reviews, but never really gained success for itself or came close to its game-changing predecessor, for colored girls..., at least not in New York.

The 1979 Chicago Tribune theatre review by Mary Campbell reported that, in the case of the revised Spell #7, Shange had “another engrossing play on her hands.” Her congratulations of the production did not stop at the text. She also honored Shange’s participation in the production as an actress by singling out her vocal performance of the Son Named Myself piece.
While all the acting in good, audiences most enjoyed the cadence of Shange’s voice in the one poem about a weird person who wanted a son named Myself. (Campbell, G14)

After many more accolades, Campbell finishes her review by saying that the play, “…has lots of humor, jabs of insight, and imagery that paints rich pictures.” This review marks a prominent difference between the Chicago reception of Spell #7 and its New York reception.

Shange continued writing for the stage and in 1979, the same year as the revised release of Spell #7, she produced Boogie Woogie Landscapes at the Symphony Space for the Frank Silvera Writers’ Workshop. The six-year old Harlem theatrical workshop’s primary focus was the development and showcase of black playwrights. After its presentation at the Silvera Workshop, the play went on to be included in the National Black Touring Circuit project in 1980; a tour initiated, by Woodie King Jr.

The next project for Shange came to her in the same year. She adapted Bertolt Brecht’s, Mother Courage and Her Children, on off-Broadway. On May 13, 1980, Shange presented the production on the Public Theatre Stage. In this adaptation, Shange decided to move the production away from its original setting in Europe during the thirty year war in the 17th century to the American frontier during the Reconstruction period of the late 19th century. Mother Courage was transformed into a, twice emancipated, free woman who sold supplies to troops during the plains wars with the indigenous peoples of the northern continent.

The project was considered an achievement. According to Gussow, the historical correlations between the thirty year war of 17th century Europe and the American plains wars of the late 19th century were sound and on solid ground. He goes on to say that the character’s performances were strong, the musical direction and the directorial focus were applauded. In short, In his May 14, 1980 New York Times review, Mel Gussow stated simply that, “Miss Shange’s vision of “Mother Courage” can stand alone as a considerable dramatic achievement.” (Gussow, C20) Though this review does not equal previous accolades that Gussow has visited upon Shange’s work in past projects, It is far from viewing the work as merely adequate.

Frank Rich’s following review one month later was less rewarding. In fact, according to Rich, Gussow’s assessment of the correlative historical account is questionable. In Rich’s view,
The text of Miss Shange’s “Mother Courage” amounts to a whole new show, and it raises some troubling questions. What is the adapter’s responsibility to the original work? What are the playwright’s obligations to history? Is it right to call a play “Mother Courage” when it in many ways violates the spirit of the drama we associate with the title? The motivations behind Miss Shange’s adaptation may well be pure, but the result is a case study of what can happen when an exercise in literary adaptation goes wildly astray. (Frank, D5)

His final perspectives, though, are counter intuitively in celebration of Shange’s reasoning for her challenge of white male patriarchy through language.

She adds that by tackling Brecht she would also resolve a personal dilemma: she had forgotten about her own work and was involved “in fruitless combat with myself” about “the works of dead white men.” On this point she is entirely right. Such combat is fruitless. A black writer indeed has no obligation to answer to white writers, live or dead, and for Miss Shange it seems a waste of talent and energy to do so. (Frank, D5)

Despite this and other tepid reviews, she won the Off-Broadway Award for her interpretation of the Brechtian play and moved on to her next project.

In 1981, she collected and published three of her poetic stage plays into one book called *Three Pieces: Spell #7; A Photograph: Lovers in Motion; Boogie Woogie Landscapes*. Though the book was comprised of two works which were not well received, she still won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Poetry for the work. In the same year of the *Three Pieces* project, Shange gave birth to Savannah Thulani Eloisa and released another stage work; *A Daughter's Geography*. This piece was a collaboration between Shange and Jessica Hagedorn, a bay area performer who had recently moved from San Francisco to New York. After its production on April 24th, 1981 at the Kitchen Center for Video and Music, Eleanor Blau of the *New York Times* noted that the play…

...incorporates poetry, dance and music. It is described as a fanciful and feminist about how Miss Shange relates to black people in various counties. (Blau, C1)

Shortly after *A Daughter’s Geography*, Shange went on to produce *Three for a Full Moon, Bocas,* and *Three Pieces* in Los Angeles, CA, 1982 as a part of the Mark Taper Forum
season. *See no Evil: A Collection of Prefaces, Essays, & Accounts* which was a compilation of writings which began in 1976 and stretched though 1983 was Shange’s next publishing effort.


This novel, which was an extension of Sassafras: A Novella written in 1977, was Shange's first attempt at a full length novel and though it was a first attempt, it was well received. The novel eventually made the New York Book-Of-The-Month Club. It was also described by Susan Isaacs and Laurel Graeber, in a 1982 *New York Times*, as having language which is,

“…rich and economical, and the three characters are compelling both as individuals and as personifications of black culture and the feminist spirit.” (Graeber, Isaacs, BR32)

In 1983, Shange then moved to Houston, Texas to become Associate Professor of Drama, for the University of Houston. During her time in Houston, between the years of 1983-1989, Shange wrote, *From Okra to Greens: Poems* and completed a second novel, *Betsey Brown*, the very next year. This novel was a *New York Times* 1985 bestseller. *New York Times* theatre reviewer, Mel Gussow, met the musical without his usual enthusiasm.

At present there is a wondering focus, which is not the case with Miss Shange’s novel…In the musical by Shange, Emily Mann, and Baikida Carroll, and directed by Ms. Mann, Betsey Brown has trouble distinguishing between what is important and what could be left as background. (Gussow, 14)

After she left Houston for the east coast once more, Shange’s works began to show up in anthologies and periodicals. Some of these anthologies included Wayne State University Press’s "*May Your Days Be Merry and Bright* and Other Christmas Stories by Women," compiled and edited by Susan Koppelman (1988); *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African*
American Fiction published by Penguin Books (1990) and edited by Terry McMillan; Yellow Silk: Erotic Arts and Letters, edited by Richard Russo and Lily Pond and published by Harmony Books the same year as Breaking Ice; Two years later, in 1992, three anthologies were released which included works from Ntozake Shange. Pantheon Publishing released Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology, edited by Margaret Bush by. Roseann P. Bell, Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Reginald Martin edited a compilation of erotic writings by several black female authors called Erotique noire-Black Erotica and released the works under Anchor Publishing. Resurgent: New Writing by Women, under University of Illinois Press and edited by Lou Robinson and Camille Norton were to follow. In 1993, Wild Women Don't Wear No Blues: Black Women Writers on Love, Men, and Sex, was edited by Marita Golden and released by Doubleday Publishing.


In 1997, Shange published her first children’s book. Whitewash was published by Walker Publishing and illustrated by Michael Sporn (1997-98). This children’s book was based on a true story about a young African-American girl and her brother who were attack by a gang who spray-paints the young girl’s face white.


The year 2010 brings us full circle, back to the beginning of this saga with an addition to for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf. She has added a new piece to the choreopoem; Positive, a poem about HIV and AIDS.

The Writers Circle: Literary Predecessor and Contemporary

Though Shange had created a literary form which was unique to American literature and to theatre, she was not alone in her subject matter or positionality. Her work has, at its core, the exploration and expression of human relationships; relationships between men and women, between women and themselves, and between women and the world around them. These subject matters were all communicated through the lens of Black female America; which is in itself a particular lens. This Black female American lens was based on the time in which she lived and the issues which she and other Black female American authors faced. They were choosing to tell the stories from the Black American spectrum of reality and the reality of other people of color. In this chapter section, I will be making connections between Shange’s work and the works of Lorraine Hansberry, Shange’s predecessor, and Alison Mills, her contemporary. I chose these two authors because I feel they both visit similar themes in their writing. I also believe that their subject matter is rooted in their race and gender, making them prime candidates for examination and the creation of correlations with Shange in a number of ways. The primary reference sources for this section will be Lorraine Hansberry’s play, A Raisin In The Sun, Shange’s play, for colored girls..., and “Artistic Expression was Flowing Everywhere” Alison Mills and Ntozake Shange, Black Bohemian Feminists in the 1970s, by Harryette Mullen. These works will aid in my presentation of the author’s connections with each other.

Hansberry and Shange: The Tree and its Branches

In March of 1959, Lorraine Hansberry’s play, A Raisin in The Sun (Raisin...), premiered on Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. Hansberry was a young playwright who had not had her work previously produced, yet her first play made her the first African-American woman to author a Broadway play. The production experienced instant critical and audience success.
This realistically-styled play, presented the lives of an African American working-class family that had been living in a cramped Chicago inner-city apartment for three generations. When the patriarch of the family dies and leaves an insurance benefit of ten thousand dollars, conflict within the Younger family arises as to the money’s use. Walter Lee Younger, the new patriarch of the family debates with his mother and his wife about whether to use the money for a business venture or to move the family out of the small Chicago apartment. The play encapsulates such issues as abortion, civil rights, women’s empowerment, class, gender, and race.

Though the two play genres are very different and Raisin... precedes fcg..., there are clear correlations between the two. The first being, Hansberry was the first African-American female to be produced on Broadway and Shange was the second. In 1976, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf premiered at the Booth Theatre. Shange experienced the same rocket-like rise to critical and audience acclaim as Hansberry once enjoyed. In addition, they both told a story from a particular African American perspective.

Their joint motifs carry even deeper correlations. They both had characters who were working class people struggling to survive, find and affirm self, all while in constant combat with their surroundings. In both texts, the characters find resolution in the reaffirmation and/or rediscovery of identity. The themes found in Raisin in the Sun are echoed in for colored girls... The only major differences between the two plays are the theatrical genres and the format which differentiates how the content is played out by the characters. The issue of abortion is found in both pieces yet obviously because of the theatrical format, the presentation takes a different form. In Raisin..., Walter Lee’s wife Ruth discovers that she is pregnant. Because the family is so poor and cramped into this little apartment, she seriously considers abortion as a resolution to her pregnancy. One could imagine Shange’s abortion piece being similar to some of the thoughts going through Ruth’s mind if she had decided to go through with the abortion without telling anyone that she was pregnant. Beau Willie and Walter Lee’s thieving business partner who takes his money are of the same character only separated by time, story line, and intention. Beneatha Younger is the very personification of the emotionally frustrated sentiments of Lady in Blue when she screams satirically, “i use to live in a world.” Her search for Africanness through blackness mimics Lady in Browns as she sits in a park reading about Toussaint L’ouverture of
Haiti only to be interrupted by Toussaint Jones, the playful personality equivalent to Raisin’s, Joseph Asagai.

Both Hansberry and Shange addressed issues of women’s empowerment by placing a spectrum of strong and expressive female characters at the heart of their text. In Raisin..., Hansberry gives us three women of with voice; Lena Younger, Ruth Younger and Beneatha Younger. Ruth is the home maker concerned with being a good wife to Walter Lee and though this may be seen as a role imposed by patriarchy, that patriarchy of the time does not stop her from saying what she needs to say to Walter Lee. Though rapped in a role, her feminist voice is intact. Beneatha, Walter Lee’s sister is the international, liberated woman; a representation more popularized in the late sixties, early seventies. Beneatha was a female character ahead of her environment. She strove to project herself onto the world with as much strength and rightfulness as any man. She can be seen as the prelude to women found in for colored girls...

Shange addresses women’s empowerment in much the same way Beneatha does; with dance, assertion, African-ness, intellect, and strong desire. Hansberry’s women represent a spectrum which presents three strong and distinct voices. In addition, though these voices are critical of the male/ maleness (Walter Lee) in the play, ultimately, they use their voices to mold and support him. So too do Shange’s women. With more than a surface reading, like Hansberry, Shange’s feminism seems not to beat men down, but rather beat them into shape. Her words are not meant to break men down, but break through the male gaze to show men that they’re made of more. Just as Hansberry’s women broke through Walter Lee’s anger to show him that he was made of more.

Mills and Shange: Bohemians in the Struggle

Ntozake Shange’s Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo (1982) and Alison Mills’ Francisco (1974) share as context and content the emergence of black and feminist consciousness within communities of bohemian artists in the 1970s…these authors created characters that articulated the political and cultural discord in which black women strove to define themselves as artists. (Mullen, 205)

Alison Mills is currently a writer and religious leader. But at one point in her life, she was a novelist on the west coast writing about love, sex, and life lived among a diversity of
characters. In 1974, Mills wrote a novel call *Francisco*. The book was published at an independent press on the west coast by Ishmael Reed; a well-known novelist, poet, and satirist. *Francisco* was a novel which told the story of a young actress moving from place to place staying with family and friends who were themselves roaming from place to place staying with family and friends. Despite my efforts, I have not been able to find the book in print or online. As a result, my primary source of reference about the novel, *Francisco* will come from a publication called *Meridians: Feminism, Race, and Transnationalism*. This article was written by Harryette Mullen and entitled, “*Artistic Expression was Flowing Everywhere*”: Alison Mills and Ntozake Shange, Black Bohemian Feminists in the 1970s.

The bohemian lifestyle of non-traditional political and social views and wondering from place to place was not only a major component of many of Shange’s “colored girls”, it was also a major component of Shange herself. During her early years as a writer, scholar, and performer, she drifted from job to job, venue to venue, city to city experiencing, learning, stumbling, and standing to walk again. She left the Black Arts movement on the west coast to become a part of the Black Theatre movement of the east coast. Shange was a Bohemian and so were her characters. From plays to novels, she wrote about - against the grain- relationships and - against the grain- women who railed against men they loved and loved the men they railed against.

In a paper published by Indiana University Press entitled “*Artistic Expression was Flowing Everywhere*” Alison Mills and Ntozake Shange, Black Bohemian Feminists in the 1970s, Harryette Mullen gives similarities between Mills’ 2000 film, Virgin Again and Shange’s, *for colored girls* ....

*Virgin Again* is notable for its multicultural cast with black leading characters… and cultural venues associated with the city’s latest “black renaissance” such as Leimert Park, KAOS Network, and jazz club Fifth Street Dick’s. (Mullen, 209)

The second of the similarities Mullen makes is the bohemian-based identity exploration that the female character in *Francisco* and the characters in *for colored girls*... went through from the beginning to the end of the production. In both, the book and the play, the female characters move from love being expressed to people outside of themselves to finding a more fulfilling love within. In a section of another paper by Mullen posted online entitled, *Not Struck*
Dumb but Logodaedaly Phonofounded: The Vernacular Heteroglossaries of Fran Ross’s OREO, she gives lines from Francisco which exemplify this evolution from love relations with another person, to love relations with ones’ self. At the beginning of the novel, the female protagonist speaks about a relationship she is having with her lover.

i got up at eleven this mornin after layin round, rollin round in the bed, huggin round in the bed with this friend of mine. i say friend cause i ain’t heard him qualify the relationship yet. (Mills, Mullen, 2)

At the end of the novel, she has broken up with her lover and is now talking about the new lover in her life.

I mean I woke up at eleven this mornin, after layin round rollin round, tossin and turnin round with this friend of mine. me.(Mills, Mullen, 2)

This evolution coincides with the beginning and end of Shange’s characters in for colored girls.

It was graduation nite & i waz the only virgin in the crowd/ bobby mills martin jerome & Sammy yates eddie jones & randi all cousins… (Shange, 7/)

By the end of the play, there was a shift from an external relationship of love into an internal relationship of love.

i found god in myself & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely (Shange, 63/)

This shift is most clearly expressed in the final lines of the play.

& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows (Shange, 64/)

These two authors’ writings are an example of feminist beliefs of self-exploration and self-fulfillment being found in self-awareness and the celebration of the feminine singularity.

for colored girls: An Examination of the Pre-Origins and Symbolism

In the summer of 1974 I had begun a series of seven poems, modeled on Judy Grahn’s The Common Woman, which were to explore the realities of seven different kinds of women. (Shange, xii)
To explain how connected Grahn and Shange are, I must give you an idea of who Judy Grahn is and was at the time Shange met and used her work as a part of her inspiration for her landmark play. Judy Grahn is a poet, writer, and social theorist who is best known for her work with the issues of women’s rights, feminism, and lesbian issues of equality. She was a member of the Gay Women’s Liberation Group, the first lesbian feminist collective on the west coast, founded in approximately 1969. The collective established ‘A Woman's Place’ Bookstore and The Women's Press Collective, an all-woman publisher which published The Work of a Common Woman: Collected Poetry, The Lesbian Reader, Edward the Dyke and Other Poems, The Queens of Wands, A Woman is Talking to Death, She Who; books which are collections of poems and short stories.

The book which Shange models, for colored girls… on, was a collection of illustrated poems which sought to name components of womanhood. These were reflections of womanhood meant to be outside and contrary to the male gaze; a gaze which distorted femaleness, making the woman either much larger than life or much smaller. Grahn explains one of the reasons behind the creation of her work.

I wanted, in 1969, to read something which described regular, everyday women without making us look either superhuman or pathetic. (Grahn, 60)

This sentiment was one of the pillars of Shange’s choreopoem. The regular-ness of womanhood which Grahn speaks about is echoed through each and every poem in the play. Just as Grahn uses illustrations to heighten the experience of her words, Shange heightens her expression with music and dance. The correlations in Grahn and Shange were not just found in their theme structure. Correlations were also in their themes of self-definition. In using this self-definition, Grahn moved women beyond a male gaze. They are no-longer simply a wife, mother, whore, or bitch because they wished to exist outside of those categories. In The Common Woman, they had become the crow, the rattlesnake, the nail, the thunderstorm, the reddest wine, the new moon, and finally, as the best of breads which will rise. Seven components: seven different kinds of women. Just as Grahn moved women into symbols that existed outside the male gaze categories, so too did Shange. Using seven colors- brown, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple, Shange turns women of color into light; a spectrum of woman-ness; a rainbow.
Abbreviated Production History Of *for colored girls…*

I use the word abbreviated with regards to the production history because of the volume of local and regional productions of the piece that are locally and not nationally recorded. This list is in order of date and only addresses a fraction of the major productions. This list is one compiled by Alexander Street Press and will not contain the entire history of productions performance. Each of the production notations will contain information on the author, director, location of production, and the year.

1) *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* - by Ntozake Shange - staged at Bacchanal, Berkeley, CA presented by Bacchanal, Berkeley, CA, ran December, 1974 to uncertain closing date.


3) *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* - by Ntozake Shange - staged at Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles, CA presented by Center Theatre Group, Los Angeles, CA, ran August 11, 1977 to September 25, 1977, directed by Scott, Osborne.


5) *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* - by Ntozake Shange - staged at Pittsburgh Public Theater, Pittsburgh, PA presented by Pittsburgh Public Theater, Pittsburgh, PA, ran 1979 (date uncertain) to uncertain closing date.

6) *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* - by Ntozake Shange - staged at unknown venue(s) presented by PBS’s American Playhouse, New York, NY, ran 1982 (date uncertain) to uncertain closing date, directed by Scott, Osborne.

7) *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* - by Ntozake Shange - staged at Towson University, Towson, MD presented by Towson University. Department of Theatre, Towson, MD, ran 1985 (date uncertain) to uncertain closing date.

8) *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* - by Ntozake Shange - staged at unknown venue(s) presented by New Federal Theatre, New York, NY, ran June 22, 1995 to uncertain closing date.
9) For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf - by Ntozake Shange - staged at Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago, IL presented by Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago, IL, ran December 31, 1995 to uncertain closing date.

10) For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf - by Ntozake Shange - staged at Center Stage, Baltimore, MD presented by Center Stage, Baltimore, MD, ran 1999 (date uncertain) to uncertain closing date, directed by Faison, George.


12) For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf - by Ntozake Shange - staged at unknown venue(s) presented by Portland Center Stage, Portland, OR, ran 2002 (date uncertain) to uncertain closing date.


Conclusion

Through this dramaturgical examination, it is clear that the play is the culmination of years of hard work on the parts of many people; Shange being only one. The production, in its origins, was performed in celebration of many movements; from the Black Arts movement to the rise of the Brown, Yellow, and Red movements, Black Feminist, and Feminist Black Power movements. The following theoretical chapter will pose and address more in-depth female activist questions of the play’s origins and theatrical applications. This will directly address one of the primary assertions of my thesis; which is that the piece can give voice to multiple feminisms from around the world.

In addition, because it is a feminist piece of work, the following chapter will discuss what that means within the context of shifting and differing feminisms which are based on different cultural experiences. It will pose questions about the various feminisms which exist: Can they live together? Are they fundamentally at odds with each other or can they move past the specific situations and circumstances which bore them to encompass other feminisms born of different situations and circumstances? If they are at odds, must they continue to be? These questions and their answers move us closer to the realization of a truly multicultural production of for colored girls...and more.
Chapter Two: Theoretical Analysis

In the summer of 1974 I had begun a series of seven poems...which were to explore the realities of seven different kinds of women. (Shange xii)

In California on December of 1974 on the stage of the Bacchanal Bar and Performance Space, Ntozake Shange’s “Staged Word” assembled women of many cultural affiliations to bring *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* to the world. The text and performance, which will be referred to as the ‘work’ in this chapter, eventually made its way from California to Broadway. On its journey from the west coast to the east, many of the work’s original performance elements were shaped, focused, or discarded. The work’s bodied mise en scène had changed. There were "Color-Cultured bodies" removed. These absences changed the production intrinsically. In particular, the phenomenological interpretation was made radically different. In addition to the stage, major identity connections, observations, and questions were removed from the interpreting audience when those colored and cultured bodies were removed.

In his work, “Bodied Spaces”, Stanton Garner codifies possible questions and connections that viewers ask about performances. He queries,

How does my life-world constitute itself? What are the modes of presence and absence by which this world manifests itself to me? In what ways do I come to know and interact with a world of which I am always, inescapably, and ambiguously, a part? (Garner 2)

With the use of the word "my", Garner is applying specific identity text. How does my reality form itself? How does my identity (I) perceive the modes of presence and absence that the world manifests to me? And how do I interact with that world which manifests those modes of presence and absence? Modes of identity, presence, and absence as experienced through the eyes, ears, and the minds cultural interpretation of those modes. These are important questions to my research into a truly multicultural presentation of *for colored girls*... This body change and theoretical perspective lead me to ask, “If the production started with multiple color- cultured bodies to represent multiple cultured bodies, why change the production by cutting out the other cultured bodies and leaving only the Black body representations? Its first productions in California were highly successful. Why change what was working?”

Well, in Shange’s words,
Every move we’ve made since the first showing of *for colored girls*... in California has demanded changes in text, personnel, & staging. (Shange xv)

From Shange’s words, we must accept that, indeed, the body changes had to be; then (Then, used in a temporal context). But do they have to be now? The New York run and succeeding runs created a clear tradition of performance which did not include the Puerto Rican-American, Native-American, European – American, and Asian- American cultured bodies that were a part of the work’s inception and/or original presentation. The text which was spoken by visually multicultural/multinational bodies was now only spoken by visually mono-cultured bodies (Black).

NOTE: Black is multi-cultured. I use the term Black in an encompassing sense to identify a state of being agreed upon and assumed by multitudes of Americans during the time period. Black was a sign of unity and solidarity with a way of thinking that was African and African American centered.

In semiotically perceiving the world of the play and the occupants of that world as text, the body’s presence or absence can theoretically be treated as a sign-symbol to be interpreted phenomenologically. This combines the two fields of evaluation into one process; a "Semio-Phenomic" process. Using presence/absence as a formula in exploration, I assert that removing the Puerto Rican-American bodies or sign-symbols removed the Puerto Rican-American cultural presence and Puerto Rican-American audience connection that that particular body would represent. In general, absence can change the phenomenological experience of Puerto Rican-American audience members or could remove a Puerto Rican-American phenomenological experience from those audience members all together. Much like when many African American science fiction lovers like myself watch movies based on the future or saving the world, and especially themes based on having to leave the world behind and move or flee into the stars. Very few people of color are visually represented in the future, or saving the world, let alone being a part of the great escape.

Puerto Rican-American identity as represented by body was absent from the theatrical discourse surrounding the work. That and other choices of absence, in particular, placed *for colored girls*... on the path of "color- cultured body" exclusivity in presentation. The body
absence goes even further than just removing what was once present. The Asian body which Shange wished to introduce for the New York run was not even considered.

The limiting nature of body absence and its impacts are further illumined when seen through Michel Foucault’s theoretical perspective of body/power found in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. Foucault asserts that the body in presentation is a location of power. If we applying Foucault’s perspective, the exclusive use of Black female bodies in the performance of the work only serves to empower the lives, experiences, and identities of black women. The production’s traditional presentation, through body absence, seems to overlook Shange’s stated and restated intentions for the work to speak to and empower the lives of all women. Though the changes in body presentation were adopted and celebrated by Shange, I suggest that her acceptance of those changes should not be viewed as a presentational mandate acting as the sole casting and contextual determinate for future productions.

**A Note of Understanding**

It is clear why *for colored girls...* was artistically, politically, and theoretically annexed by the Black Theatre Movement, Black Feminism, Black Expressionism, and the assertions of an exclusively Black American bodied presentation. Not only was its author a self-assigned Black feminist, but the work itself opens with a piece dedicated to the performative Black American body. To be clear, I do not suggest regret from Shange that her work was ritualized using Black bodies nor do I suggest a conscious and malicious intention by her, King, or Papp to disempower the voices of other women of color through body absence. I simply assert that the work was built using “the embodied cultural realities of seven different kinds of women” (Shange xii), and that those embodied cultural realities should have a bodied representation equal to the bodied representations of black women.

As the body is a sign which communicates content and a context for the work and its environment, through absence the mise-en-scène created from the text itself is altered. While the words stay the same, the text changes. How then can we use presentation to engage again with a multiculturally-bodied mise-en-scène? How can this text, again be a uniting space for the expression of multiple color-cultured bodies and realities? Because this work is, among other things, an expression of feminism, when we reintroduce different cultural bodies, does it change
the feminism of the piece? Can the different cultural feminisms that the presence of multicultural bodies insinuates be united together without the act of a feminist assimilation taking place?

To answer these questions, I will use one of Chandra T. Mohanty’s unifying feminist theories as a theoretical connective tissue that unites feminisms from around the world while simultaneously circumventing feminist assimilation. Then I will show strong correlations between Mohanty’s views on a transnational feminism and Shange’s original intentions for *for colored girls*... My last and primary focus, however, will be on the script itself; in particular the words in the text which culturally close the text to multicultural bodies and words that open the text to multicultural bodies.

*for colored girls* and Third World Feminism: too similar to be different

A major voice in the discourses on Third World feminist theories is Chandra T. Mohanty. In her book, *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), one of the views that Mohanty asserts is that there are western feminisms which seek to unite with Third World spaces and feminist paradigms by changing or ignoring the historical and material realities of those spaces and paradigms- feminist assimilation. Such an act turns a well-meaning effort for different feminisms to unite into an imperial command to unite. Mohanty advises against such an act. She posits that one does not need to change any part of a Developing World’s historical and material reality in order to join with its expression of feminism. To use such a change as a prerequisite to acceptance is an act of imperialism which is indicative of the same patriarchy that all feminisms summarily reject. The subjects of contention Mohanty writes about can be seen in the following quote. She writes,

> The homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals… Thus, the discursively consensual homogeneity of women as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women (Mohanty 22-23).

Though the homogeneity of female oppression suggests sociological and anthropological similarities, to Mohanty those similarities do not constitute homogeneity in experience. "Shared oppression" is not the connecting tissue that binds feminists the world around because that
concept mostly requires shared historical and material circumstances. Rather, it is the "shared resistance to oppression" that is the tie that binds. This slight augmentation to the phrase, “shared oppression,” is more in-line with Shange’s feminist ideology that women of different cultures can share in the resistance that her work offers against patriarchy. Mohanty endeavors to maintain the different feminist identities while in the process of connecting them together. In so doing, she extends or removes previously held boarders.

Shange also extends ideologies to encompass Developing World women when she attempts to make the word ‘colored’ more inclusive. In an interview held in December of 1977, Shange communicates:

I use the term “colored,” “yellow,” “nigress” & any other I can think of cuz they have a reality for me that extends beyond governments & territories… (Shange, Lester 24).

The parallel natures of Mohanty and Shange lay a foundation for a non-problematic feminist universality that mirrors Shange’s dictum, “When I wrote for colored girls..., I meant it for all women of color” (Power, Shange, 30-33). The core meaning that this statement communicates about for colored girls... and Shange’s transcultural vision for it also puts her in company with Mohanty as they both seem to perceive feminist issues within what Mohanty calls an “international context” and subsequently, multicultural context.

Lifted Words / Unified Themes

Please allow me to move from the theoretical to the practical for a moment with this section. I find it necessary to point to examples of how the script itself leans toward my assertions of multiple cultured body inclusion. I do this by pointing to culturally non-specific text in the play which leaves space for women of multiple cultures to safely and responsibly adopt, adapt, embody, and express its contents. The following section also fits into the Shange/ Boal chapter and my production chapter. Even so, I still chose to place it here because it acts as a textual representation of Mohanty’s assertions and Shange’s original intentions.

It is clear, with the way in which Shange constructs the text, that there is a conscious (Black) African- American voice in speech. I cannot debate such an overt fact. What I wish to do
is move beyond the culture vernacular of the writing structure and into an understanding of the contextual themes found in the writing.

The following exercise is meant to achieve this contextual understanding by determining which parts of the text are culturally specific (closed to cultural interpretation) and which parts of the text are not specific (open to cultural interpretation). I will do this by introducing the technique of highlighting/lifting words in the choreopoems. This exercise will be used to ascertain the main ideas in the pieces that express meaning. By heightening words and/or phrases in parts of the work that identify themes and concepts, primary ideas inherent in the work will be isolated and examined. I will limit my textual exercise to only a fraction of the pieces in fcg... work that express a text-based cultural ambiguity.

The following example will act as a baseline representation of how I will apply my textual exercise. The emphasis I create with the bolding of Shange’s words is my own interpretation as researcher and director of the work.

**LADY IN BROWN**

Dark phrases of womanhood of never havin been a girl… no tune distraught laughter fallin over a black girl's shoulder it’s funny...somebody/anybody sing a black girl’s song bring her out to know herself… (Shange 3).

This is as an example of a body specific text. The piece gradually moves into a cultural specificity that cannot be commandeered. A (Black) African- American body must be the presenter.

The first choreopoem I chose that shows an absence of culturally specific word choices, and subsequently is open to a multicultural / transnational bodied mise-en scene, is LADY IN RED’S monologue of scorned love. None of the words highlighted and lifted to communicate context have a specific cultural inclination. Though the poem does take place in a specific location – The United States, East Bay, California - the multicultural and transnational populations of this area makes cultural identification open to expansion.

**LADY IN RED**

*without any* assistance or *guidance* from you *i have loved you* *assiduously* for *8 months 2 wks & a day. i have been stood up four*
times. I’ve left 7 packages on yr doorstep forty poems 2 plants & 3 handmade notecards i left town so i cd send to you. you have been no help to me on my job. you call at 3:00 in the mornin on weekdays so I cd drive 27½ miles cross the bay before I go to work, charmin charmin but you are of no assistance. i want you to know this waz an experiment to see how selfish i cd be. if i wd really carry on to snare a possible lover. if i waz capable of debasing my self for the love of another. if i cd stand not being wanted when i wanted to be wanted& i cannot so with no further assistance& no guidance from you i am endin this affair. this note is attached to a plant i’ve been waterin since the day i met you. you may water it yr damn self (Shange 7).

This piece on scorned love is clearly not culturally specific in language or experience. The motifs of emotional neglect are familiar to many women in multiple cultures. The nationality that I assigned to Lady and Red was Indian. I go into greater detail about the nationalities I give to each color in my production chapter. I mention it here only as an example application; to show that this poem was open enuf to place a South Asian into the role.

The second piece set for textual examination explores the topic of abortion. Though abortion in this piece is presented from the positionality of a young Black- American girl, the issue of abortion resonates with many other cultures.

LADY IN BLUE

tubes tables white washed windows grime from age wiped over once legs
spread. anxious eyes crawling up on me eyes Rollin in my thighs metal horses
gnawin my womb dead mice fall from my mouth i really didnt mean to i really
didnt think i cd just one day off . . . get offa me alla this blood bones shattered
like soft ice-cream cones i cdnt have people lookin at me pregnant i cdnt have my friends
see this dyin danglin tween my legs & i didnt say a thing not a sigh or a fast scream to get those eyes offa me get them steel rods outta me this
hurts this hurts me &nobody came cuz nobody knew once i waz
pregnant&shamed of myself. (Shange 11)

Fear, shame, and embarrassment are a part of the human experience that cannot be assigned to one particular culture. The stigma of abortion and the responses to that onus exist as a physical and psychological reality in multiple cultures. Therefore it can be expressed through those multiple cultures in the performance of this work.
Conclusion

Because of the holistic nature of the content found in Shange’s play, I believe it can reach far beyond the Black American bodies that have become tradition and ritual in casting the production. A textual examination of the wide thematic nature of a number of Shange’s pieces in her choreopoem does more than justify the idea of the work being performed by multi-ethnic and multicultural bodies, they confirm the idea. Using my theory section and my textual analysis section, I argue that a return to the original multicultural casting is theoretically and textually solid ground upon which to build a performance which presents bodies of multiple colors and cultures.

With the following chapter, I move from the theory and text to the practice of how to combine women of differing backgrounds together in practice. Using techniques from Augusto Boal and his theatrical genre, Theatre of the Oppressed, I will outline how theatre exercises from TO can create the bonds necessary for women from multiple cultures to find the community needed to authentically stage sisterhood.

Chapter Three: Shange, Boal, and Theatre of the Oppressed

Introduction

_ for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf_, is a play which encompasses gender, ethnicity, and class based struggles for equality. This oppressed community (the Ladies) finds strength through gender unity, music, and dance. Because the production’s casting process has become ritual, in a sense, by the automatic casting of Black American women, rehearsing for such a production began on a mutually understood foundation of Black American culture and tradition. In many ways, a fictive kinship⁴ (Imagined Community) was a pre-existing construct. What if, however, the cast was not made up of all Black American women, but rather women from multiple cultures and traditions? What then? How does one use specifically waited text to activate a bodies that are not culturally or traditionally predisposed to see themselves in that specifically waited text? Further, because the themes in the text acts as connecting tissue, which binds the Ladies together, how does one then take seven women from

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⁴Fictive kinship is an interconnected relationship created by individuals who belong to a community [http://www.reference.com/browse/Fictive_kinship], 1.
differing and, in some cases, competing cultures and create a kinship which can be imprinted on to the cast and projected out from them to the audience?

Enter Augusto Boal and *Theatre of the Oppressed, (TO)*. *TO* uses educational concepts and community devised theatrical improvisation to give a performed expression to a particular community’s cultural, economic, and environmental issues. It is a theatrical town hall meeting from which to discuss, elaborate on, and eventually help to solve a community’s issues of external and internal oppression.

Through the use of Boalean techniques stemming from his book, *Games For The Actor And Non-Actor*, I plan to create a map toward embodied unity. By using these techniques to break down each poem into its component themes, I will remove the cultural specificities as communicated through the words in the text, leaving behind motifs which I assert appear in cultures where women are oppressed. My aim is to apply the culturally stripped motifs to those ladies in the piece who are not/ may not be traditionally connected culturally. In application, the information from this exercise can act as a unifying agent. Its first goal is to lay a mutual foundation with which, the ladies of differing backgrounds can respond to. Secondly, to chart how each lady physically manifests their own individual psycho-emotional responses to the foundation made of shared understandings of the motifs; an individualized unity. The third step after charting the physical expressions is to involve the physical products into the blocking of the play. The fourth step is projection; individual physicalized responses to their unified understanding of the motifs in the text should be projected to the audience.

NOTE:

My intent is not to deconstruct the cultural expressions of the *Ladies* or to homogenize their psycho-emotional, and thereby, physical responses to the text. Rather, the other way around. I am deconstructing; de-culturalizing the text itself to present it as a mixture of themes that each *Lady* can appropriate and respond to no matter what their cultural or traditional background. Once appropriated, the performers can then respond how they culturally and/or individually see fit. What will unite the performers is not that they will all have the same

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3Augusto Boal (1931-2009) was a performance artist, director, and activist in Brazil. Theatre of the Oppressed uses theatre and educational concepts and exercises to give a theatrical expression to a community’s cultural, economic, and environmental issues; ultimately to a larger purpose. See *Games For Actors and Non-Actors*. pgs. xxii-xxix.
response, but rather will all have a response to the same motif-based stimulus. In my conclusion, I will briefly explore a possible next step in the Shange/Boal collaboration.

The primary sources I will use to create my imagined community will be the play itself and Augusto Boal’s, Games For The Actor And Non-Actor. As stated earlier, my aims are as follows:

1) The first objective will be to show that applying TO methods to a multicultural production of fcg...can both activate, to a deeper degree, the bodies of cast members who have no direct cultural or traditional connection to the text.

2) My second aim will be to show that you can combine the individual body activations into a visual unity based on the unified responses to the play’s themes/motifs. Once the visual unity is solidified, you can then project that physicalized fictive kinship in performance. The imagined community comes into reality on stage.

3) My final purpose will be to examine how the components of TO can convert fcg... into an educational tool for communities and schools to approach and begin to resolve long standing issues of oppression against women in our society.

Reviewing the production from this perspective gives the work a new relevance for me, turning the production from a play into an outline for a curriculum. In addition, the fictive kinships that TO exercises promote are the very bonds needed for me to turn cast members who are strangers to each other and potentially each other’s cultures and traditions into a group of performers who not only express a connection to each other and project that connection, but also informs the audience that the devised union among them represents a larger imagined community of oppressed people from all over the world. This is the cornerstone of my assertion that Boal’s work can be used in rehearsal as a lesson plan to activate the actor’s bodies and project a physicalized fictive kinship in performance. I should note that though I reference theoretical terms like, imagined community, I must be clear that this is not a theoretical chapter. It is focused on the practice of rehearsal and the physics of the theatrical presentation of unity.
Why Shange & Boal?

In exploring the text for production, I find correlations between the themes in *fcg*...and *Theatre of the Oppressed (TO)*. The most prevalent correlation between the two is found in *fcg*...’s overarching and unity-driven struggle against oppression from a larger dominating society and Boal’s overarching intentions for *TO*. He states that,

*TO is always seeking the transformation of society in the direction of the liberation of the oppressed.* (Boal, 43)

This mission statement is in line with *fcg*..., primarily because the play, in many ways, is perceived and celebrated as feminist liberation text. It brought and still brings issues which women struggle with to a local audience and a national platform. Simply put, Shange uses the voices of the oppressed in producing content which deals with oppression and Boal has a process for using the oppressed to unpack their own oppression and find resolutions. This process of mining, presenting, and resolving is, in my view, very similar to how Shange uses poetry, dance, and memory to mine and present the oppression of these women to help resolve their oppression.

Both Shange and Boal share the desire to help the oppressed to end their own oppression. They both seek to create bonds through performance which did not exist previously. Lastly, but not finally, they both use their processes of resolution as a tool to reach out to and heal the greater society. They are just as strong together as they are standing as separate performance forms. Their collaboration enhances both of their works and introduces them to societies as viable partners in the struggle against oppression.

The Players

Ntozake Shange: poet, playwright, novelist, and essayist who is best known for her ground breaking play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. She is a feminist writer whose theatrical tropes revolve around issues of class, ethnicity, gender, oppression, and triumph.

Augusto Boal: a Brazilian director, playwright, and performance theorist. Boal began his theatrical career as a member of São Paulo's Arena Theatre. He is best known for his books *Theatre of the Oppressed* and *Rainbow of Desire*. These books, espouse that theatre can be used as a tool to express, discuss, and problem solve. His theatrical practice of how to use theatre
stem from the educational theories of Paulo Freire\(^4\). Freire is a Brazilian educator whose book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is an influential text in modern education. After being exiled from Brazil for more than a decade, Boal returned to become an active member of Brazilian politics while continuing on in his life’s work as an internationally known theatrical theorist, educator, and director for *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

**fgc... Themes and Objections**

*for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* poetically tells the stories of women in loss, love, abuse, fear, morning, transformation and awakening. The text of *fcg...* is a devised theatre piece which sprang from written and improvised poetry and movement. Through its widespread cultural themes of feminine struggle, Ntozake Shange gives voice to a people in pain; women and men.

*for colored girls...* explores the intense cross-sectionality of race, class, and environmental constraints on the feminine body, mind and spirit. Each colored girl poetically walks the audience through their unique aspirations, struggles, and experiences with oppression. The poems in the text focus the work’s themes into a world that each colored girl has to navigate. Because of the fluid nature of the choreopoem, the overall themes which the colored girls individually express are also adopted and adapted to represent each other’s themes as well. These themes which represent one become the themes that represent all of them, such that even though their individual circumstances may differ, the shared theme still allows them to create a fictive kinship. This process bonds the individual colored girls into a community whose members represent themselves and each other’s experiences. The bonding culminates in a synchronicity of responses and objectives shared by and between the community members (the colored *Ladies*); a synchronicity which is distinct only to them and those who they represent—oppressed women.

**TO Techniques and Objectives**

Over the life span of Boal’s activist, directorial, and performance career, he has been instrumental in creating and developing numerous theatrical techniques aimed at stimulating positive social, educational, political, and economic change for oppressed populations. Some of

\(^4\)Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator whose book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is a major source for Augusto Boal’s book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. See *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response*, pgs. 42-44
these techniques include, *Rainbow of Desire*, *Forum theatre*, *Simultaneous Dramaturgy*, *Spect(a)ctor*, *Newspaper Theatre*, *Invisible Theatre*, *Photo-Romance*, *Ritual and Mask*, *Legislative Theatre*, *Myth theatre*, *Analytical Theatre*, *Breaking repression techniques*, *Spect(a)ctor*, and *The Joker*. Though Boal has created a plethora of theatrical techniques and theatre genres which are work-shopped all over the world, I will only focus on *Image Theatre Model*, *Breaking the Oppression*, *Image of Transition Model*, and the *Multiple Images of Oppression Model*. Applying these techniques will act to illuminate the text and facilitate an active and visually projectable kinship in rehearsal and performance. Each technique will be explained in greater detail once applied to a particular poem. I will also use the concept of the *Joker* as facilitator. In most cases, this person would be a drama workshop leader. For Boal, though, they act as an initiator only. This person must not comment on or intervene in the content of the performance. In my case, however, as a director in rehearsal for a particular play, I must do the opposite. As a result, my correlation between *Joker* as facilitator and director requires adaptation so that I can and do comment on segments of performance.

**Play Rehearsals**

Due to the amount of space given for this section, I will work with four poems from *f cg...* to exemplify my assertion that Boal can be used in rehearsal to activate the actor’s body to a deeper degree and project the creation of a physicalized fictive kinship in performance. Though only four will be used in this section, the Shange/Boal overlay process can be used with each poem in *f cg...* In addition, because this paper is within the context of rehearsal, terms found in the Boalean exercise will have a production equivalent. The *Joker* will become, the director and participants will become either cast members or, in my case, Lady in...

**Shange/Boal Overlay**

*Image theatre* uses the imagination of the performer as the catalyst for physical improvisation. Each cast member is given a word, idea, or theme that they then encapsulate through pose. The first poem to be examined will be the opening poem for the play; *dark phrase*. I will bold phrases and words which give insight into a motif in the poem. After those motifs are listed, I will apply a Boalean exercise from his, *Image Theatre*, concept. This exercise is adapted and adopted from a Freireian educational concepts called *Generative (GT)*. GT is found in Paulo
Freire’s work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Through discussion, themes of oppression are generated and examined. I must be clear in saying that the words emphasized in the text are from my own perspective as a director and rational actor in the process of unbiased discovery. In rehearsal practice the cast would be the primary generators of the theme list, either individually or as a group.

*BROWN*

**LADY IN BROWN**

dark phrases of *womanhood* of never havin been a *girl* half-notes *scattered without rhythm* / no tune distraught laughter fallin over a black girl's shoulder it's funny/ it's hysterical the melody-less-ness of her dance don't tell nobody don't tell a soul she's dancin on beer cans & shingles this must be the spook house another song with no singers lyrics/ *no voices* & interrupted solos

unseen performances are we ghouls? *children of horror*? the joke? don't tell nobody don't tell a soul are we *animals*? have we *gone crazy*? i can't hear anything but maddening screams & the soft strains of *death* & you promised me you promised me . . . somebody/ anybody sing a *black girl's song* bring her out to *know herself* to know you but sing her rhythms carin/ *struggle* / know the sound of her own voice her *infinite beauty* she's half-notes scattered without rhythm/ no tune sing her sighs sing the song of her possibilities sing a righteous gospel let her *be born* let her be born & *handled warmly*. (Shange, 3)

Theme Summary

*Womanhood… girl… scattered… without rhythm… no voices… children of horror… animals… gone crazy… death… black girl's song… know herself… struggle/hard times… song of life she's been dead so long… infinite beauty… be born… handled warmly.*

"*dark phrases*” themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Womanhood</th>
<th>Girlhood</th>
<th>Horror</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortality</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resurrection</td>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>Infinity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenderness</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Silence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This poem introduces all the Ladies to the audience. To translate these ideas into physicalizations, I will use the *Image of the Word: illustrating a subject using your body* technique. The *Joker* (director) asks the *participants* (*Ladies* in…) to physically express a theme -- or what Boal calls, a “Subject”. This expression takes the form of a pose. Without the cast paying attention too and being influenced by each other’s poses, each word is called out from the list and a pose is generated. These poses create a rudimentary vocabulary with which to build
movements complementary to the motifs in the poems. This exercise places the text into the bodies of the cast before memorization begins. The words now have a physical language from which to launch.

The Fictive

Now that the cast member’s bodies are energized by the motifs in the poem, this individualized activation must reach out and connect to the other cast mates. To do so, I look to another Boalean Image exercise; *Image of the Word: illustrating a subject using other people’s bodies*. This exercise asks for one person from the cast to act as a sculptor to create a stage picture using the bodies of the other cast members. The sculptor uses the same list of subjects to create from. Ladies who were once, a solo representation of themes, are now being placed together to unanimously represent a themes. Each cast member picks a word to sculpt from and begins to build that word with their cast member’s bodies.

As the members are all being built to represent and project one idea, a unity is born; one which connects each body to the other. Each individual is being used as a part of a whole; that whole having the sole purpose of communicating one idea. Each person being conscious of the fact that they are a part of a whole begins a conscious connection process. If only one cast member is leaves the exercise, they know the communication of the theme is incomplete. They then begin to rely on each other to convey the themes of the poem. The acts of reliance on each other are visually projected to the audience as a physically realized unity among the Ladies.

RED

The next poem to be examined will be LADY IN RED’s, *no assistance*. This piece will explore the bonding concept in practice, but as there are no other Ladies in the poem with LADY IN RED, the “Fictive” bond will be applied between LADY IN RED and any other audience members who may find themselves in the work.
LADY IN RED

without any assistance or guidance from you i have loved you assiduously for 8 months 2 wks & a day i have been stood up four times. i’ve left 7 packages on yr door step forty poems 2 plants & 3 handmade notecards i left town so i cd send to you have been no help to me on my job you call at 3:00 in the mornin on week days so i cd drive 27½ miles cross the bay before i go to work charmin charmin but you are of no assistance i want you to know this waz an experiment to see how selfish i cd be if i wd really carry on to snare a possible lover if i waz capable of debasin my self for the love of another if i cd stand not being wanted when i wanted to be wanted & i cannot so with no further assistance & no guidance from you i am endin this affair this note is attached to a plant i’ve been waterin since the day i met you you may water it yr damn self. (Shange, 13)

Theme Summary

without… assistance or guidance… i have loved you… you have been no help to me on my job… i want you to know this waz an experiment… how selfish i cd be… if i waz capable of debasin myself for the love of another… i cd stand not being wanted when i wanted to be wanted… i cannot… i am endin this affair… you may water it yr damn self.

“no assistance” themes

Absence Love

Emotional oppression from loved ones Emotional self-oppression for love

The end of self-oppression for love Results of the end of the oppression

Often referred to as therapeutic theatre, I find the technique of Breaking the Oppression fits this work best. The exercise uses the imagination and action as a tool of healing for the oppressed. In this case, LADY IN RED’s oppression.

The exercise unfolds in three parts and requires a protagonist (the oppressed: LADY IN RED) and an antagonist (the oppressor: the absent/present lover). The first act is to “reproduce the event exactly as it happened” (Boal, 221). This step revisits the event of oppression for review. This is also where I begin my adaptation of the technique. The events in the poem itself will act as the "Event which is to be repeated with nothing added or taken away", one of the sections in the Breaking the Oppression exercise. The next section takes the shape of resistance to the oppression by the protagonist. The revisited event is reshaped during this second step. It is the transformation stage.
assistance i want you to know this waz an experiment to see how selfish i cd be if i wd really carry on to snare a possible lover if i waz capable of debasin myself for the love of another if i cd stand not being wanted when i wanted to be wanted & i cannot (Shange, 13)

In this excerpt of the poem, we see the second part of the exercise in action. LADY IN RED begins the act of resistance.

In the third and final part of the Boal/ Shange overlay, LADY IN RED changes roles and plays her opposite with the last few lines of the piece. (Boal, 221)

so with no further assistance & no guidance from you i am endin this affair this note is attached to a plant i've been waterin since the day i met you you may water it yr damn self. (Shange, 13)

Here is where we see her end and cleanly break from her emotional oppressor, and become his emotional opposite. LADY IN RED metaphorically switches places from a person who is ‘present’ in the relationship to one who is ‘absent’; “i am endin this affair” (Shange, 13). She moves from the position of nurturer to the person who will not nurture; the position her lover once held.

This act of role reversal has two effects. The first is on the oppressed. By virtue of the new positionality alone, her oppression ends. The second effect is on the oppressor. Their experience with oppression in the relationship truly begins. The oppression has changed and he now experiences the factors which emotionally oppressed LADY IN RED; absence and the lack of nurturing.

By taking on and applying the same acts of emotional neglect to her oppressor lover, she changes the oppressive power dynamic. She uses her self-realization (the new-found power) and leaves her prior oppression behind. Transference occurs. Moving to another state or status in the oppressed/ oppressor relationship, she asserts power through leaving and makes a final demand in her exit.

this note is attached to a plant i’ve been waterin since the day i met you you may water it yr damn self. (Shange, 13)
no assistance represents all three parts of Breaking the Oppression. She reproduces the event through memory in poetry. She then confronts her oppression, leaves the relationship, taking on her oppressor’s persona of absence. In my interpretation, "The Plant" (the relationship) is left for him to "water" his damn self. Water as investment into; or as water is life, "the plant" is left for him to put life into, as Lady in Red has put in all the life she is going to at this point. With no change in her mate, "the plant" dies. The death of "the plant" can be seen as a metaphor for the death of her oppression as well.

BLUE

LADY IN BLUE

tubes tables white washed windows grime from age wiped over once legs spread anxious eyes crawling up on me eyes rollin in my thighs metal horses gnaw in my womb dead mice fall from my mouth i really didnt mean to i really didnt think i cd just one day off . . . get offa me alla this blood bones shattered like soft ice-cream cones i cdnt have people lookin at me pregnant i cdnt have my friends see this dyin danglin tween my legs & i didnt say a thing not a sigh or a fast scream to get those eyes offa me get them steel rods outta me this hurts this hurts me& nobody came cuz nobody knew once i waz pregnant & shamed of myself. (Shange, 22)

Theme Summary

tubes… legs spread anxious eyes… eyes… womb dead… i really didnt mean to i really didnt think i cd… lookin at me… friends see… i didnt say a thing… eyes… pregnant & shamed of myself… abortion

“abortion cycle #1” themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxious</th>
<th>Being watched (seen)</th>
<th>Womb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortality</td>
<td>Sexual ignorance</td>
<td>Unplanned pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame from Community</td>
<td>Shame from friends</td>
<td>Abortion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: This section will move past the rehearsal process and reflect the scene as it was in the full production. The following exercise is specifically geared toward the way in which I directed the scene. In the play, LADY IN BLUE is left on stage alone. My directorial decision was to place all the Ladies on the stage. My aim was to create a visual unity; one based upon a unified stage picture made up of individualized presentations of anxious, feelings of being watched, the womb, mortality, sexual ignorance, unplanned pregnancy, and multiple forms of shame.
These motifs focus more specifically on ways in which women are often shamed and oppressed into silence with regards to abortion and women’s sexual health issues in general. The Boalean exercises which worked to physicalize these ideas best also come out of the *Image theatre* concept. It is a mixture of the *Image of Transition model* which asks the cast members to focus on, internalize, and show one subject (theme) and *Multiple Image of Oppression model* which asks the cast to focus on, internalize, and show multiple subjects (themes).

The mix of the two techniques in practice involves using only the first half of *Image of Transition model*, as my aim is to have each Lady individually concentrate and eventually embody the idea of one theme from the list. As a group, they all focus on that one idea; for example, feelings of oppression based on abortion.

The subject matter of this model must be an oppression, of whatever kind which the group has suggested. (Boal, 185)

The overriding theme that I see coming from the list is the ‘shame’ in abortion. Every cast member focuses, internalizes, and eventually physicalizes that subject. From this point, we move into the second ingredient in this adapted mixture, *Multiple Image of Oppression model*. In this section of the exercise, the list of themes can also be seen as a list of different perspectives. Though adaptation of this exercise has taken place, I am still well within the realm of Boalean consciousness.

Whatever the subject (theme), the aim is no longer to show one, but several images which represent it, either at several different moments in time, or from *several different perspectives*. Thus, instead of one image, the group can prepare five, seven, ten images. Preferably the images should not be too repetitive…the more varied the images, the better. (Boal, 187)

**The Fictive**

Abortion as a process is widely known if not widely practices around the world. That the Ladies all have the same perspective on that issue is not my intention with this exercise. My purpose is to place each Lady (physically representing her own cultural interpretation of the circumstances of abortion) in the abortion clinic with LADY IN BLUE. When in such an environment, right and wrong, disagreement or agreement with the act of abortion plays out in the physical lives of the Ladies.
Physicalized unity is indirectly generated and visually conveyed in the fact that every Lady on stage is having a response to the same event. Those responses may and will differ, but what they all share create connections to each other and the issue of the abortion act. The Ladies are in the space where the act takes place with others and thinking or responding to the same set of circumstances as each other. I reiterate, unity is not found in them all having the same responses, but rather that they are all responding, in their own unique way, to the same situation; the presence of abortion in their personal lives.

**RED**

The final poem I will use is from the finale of the play; *a laying on of hands*. This poem presents a bit of a challenge in connecting to a particular Boalean theatre technique. The piece, like *abortion cycle # 1* before it, requires an adaptation based on a mixture of techniques.

**LADY IN RED**

i sat up one nite walkin a boardin house scream/ cryin/ the ghost of another woman who waz missin what i waz missin i wanted to jump up outta my bones & be done wit myself leave me alone & go on in the wind it waz too much i fell into a numbness til the only tree i cd see took me up in her branches she held me in the breeze made me dawn dew that chill at day break the sun wrapped me up swingin rose light everywhere the sky laid over me like a million men i waz cold/ i waz burnin up/ a child & endlessly weavin garments for the moon wit my tears i found god in myself & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely. (Shange, 63)

**Theme Summary**

scream/ cryin/… ghost of another woman… missin what i waz missin… jump up outta my bones & be done wit myself… it waz too much… numbness… up in her branches she held me… made me dawn dew… sun wrapped me up…i waz cold/i waz burnin up/ a child… i found god in myself & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely. (Shange, 63)

“*a laying on of hands*” themes

Suicide Disconnection
Resurrection New/ Child-like
Self-realization Love of self

For the finale, the mixture of Boal I will use is the combination of *Breaking the Oppression* and *Multiple Images of Happiness*, in that order. In this section, we see the three stages of *Breaking the Oppression* in play: reproduction, resistance, and role reversal. The
exercise then culminates in *The Oppressor’s Confession*. This phase turns the prior stages of *The Oppressor’s Confession* on its head. At this point, the oppressed have ended their oppression without having to become their previous oppressors to do it.

The Ladies have re-experienced the oppressive event(s). Through imagination, they have resisted the inequality in the event(s), cast off their oppression through an identity shift into the role of the Goddess, and in a final stroke, gain realizations from the contemplation of being both the oppressed and the Goddess. At this point, for Boal, the exercise has come to fruition, but I ask, “what’s next?” In my application, after LADY IN RED moves through all stages, there must be a fifth stage; a resurrection; a move towards fulfillment beyond role reversal or breaking the oppression, contemplation, and realization; a move towards *Multiple Images of Happiness*.

This exercise directs the participants to ponder and act on happiness. They must use their bodies to sculpt their vision of that happiness. This marks the final stage of transformation in that the oppressed not only cast off their oppression, but they actually use their oppressed body(s) to build their new found happiness. Boal asks,

What is happiness? Without a doubt it is the absence of oppression. (Boal, 189)

In applying this concept to *for colored girls...*, the connection between Shange and Boal is reiterated. The finale encapsulates the contemplation, the transformation, and, for LADY IN RED, the ascension. Synonymous with this last piece in the play, this last stage of the exercise holistically transforms the oppressed. LADY IN RED ascends to find God in herself and love her fiercely. Because each woman is her own individual representation of the other Ladies, LADY IN RED is a proxy for all the Ladies who in turn represent Shange's "all women of color".

**Conclusion: The Next Step in the Process**

*for colored girls...* is not only a story about the struggles of womanhood in the American and/or global society, it is also a codified and ritualized product of techniques found in *Theatre of the Oppressed* itself. I want to be clear that I am not claiming that *fcg...* is *TO* in another form. I am asserting that elements of *TO* appear in a codified and ritualized form in the play and are interwoven into the play’s practice. As I understand it *TO* is, at its foundation, improvisational theatre devised by the oppressed to expose, mine, process, and resolve their oppression. This is
the same process the play engages with. In addition, this visceral and intellectual process has an inherently educational application. It can easily move from the rehearsal space into a pedagogical space. With Boal, *for colored girls...* can be modified into lesson plans which both publically discuss the rampant oppression of women and creates alternative solutions to end its continuance.

This examination can become a concretized process for problem-solving issues of oppression for that community (women). When used in a local community or school system, *TO* lesson plans developed from *fcg*... can create new fictive kinships within that community based on shared previously unknown and/or previously undiscussed circumstances. If used in multiple local communities and systems, the curriculum can eventually create a fictive bond between those local communities and systems, connecting them together. A society, a nation, indeed a global-wide discourse of local communities can be devised. Local evolution can outpace and eventually take control over national policies on oppression.

The following and final chapter of my thesis is an intense dramaturgical examination of the play, its characters, and my directorial decisions. I will review the play’s structure, given circumstances, character psychologies, set, costumes, blocking, lighting, sound, and my decision-making process for all the categories above.

**Chapter Four: Production Chapter**

**Introduction**

This portion of my thesis is where I practice my concepts. As such, my positionality as an African American male is important to address or at least to acknowledge. With this and the following chapter, I combine Shange’s play and my literal understandings of its text, subtext, and context, with my directorial perspectives in production. I examine the play’s environmental and cultural circumstances then move into postulations on the character’s psychological and philosophical motivations.

These interpretations are informed, to an unknown degree, by my gender. Though there are depths to this production that I may be, in some way, gender-blocked from fully perceiving, I offer my opinions and assertions within a respect to the feminist gaze; a gaze which is not fixed,
but is a spectrum. My intention is not to rewrite feminist interpretations of the play, but rather to offer my reflections with an awareness of that history. In other words, though the exegesis of this play is from a black male perspective, I will speak with a feminist-informed voice to the best of my ability.

This chapter is a more intense analysis of the play in production. It also stands as a line of demarcation which separates history/theory and practice. In addition, this chapter outlines character constructs and expressions. Then, moves on to examining how one may replicate these expressions through a practice. The content of each section ranges from the play's environment and circumstances, to a detailed analysis of character motivations, to queries on spiritual evolutions. The primary source of reference for this chapter will be the play itself and my perspectives on it.

Summary

Structurally speaking, *for colored girls who consider suicide when the rainbow is enuf (for colored girls... or fcg*) is an episodic avant-garde assemblage of dance-poetry texts which when combined are referred to as a “Choreopoem”. Each separate work in the choreopoem is a mini-play or a micro-play comprised of two, and in some cases, three performance components; poetry (text), dance (movement), and music (sound).

The number of mini-plays in *for colored girls*... can be noted in two main ways. Counting poems with more than six lines and leaving out the multiple character sections, twenty poems appear with approximately seven multi-character montage sections. As director, I treated each emerging thought that was fully formed as a mini-play. This meant treating the montage sections as amalgamations of mini-plays. In doing so, the number of poems in my view of the play’s table of contents jumps. The production becomes a combination of approximately one hundred and thirty mini-plays. Approximately seventy-five percent of the play utilizes both prose and verse-based writing structure. The remaining twenty-five percent of the play is made up of ensemble and multi-character montage sections. Each short expressive phrase in the montages connects, in theme, to the former and following phrase bursts, communicating unified and multi-layered thoughts, feelings, and/or themes.
The play speaks about what Shange refers to as, “seven different kinds of women” (xii). It presents their gender, racial, cultural, and emotional struggles to assert their identities, their loves, and their pains. The characters support each other’s voices, take on each other’s pains, and advocate for a constantly evolving acceptance.

These characters and poems interconnect with each other using themes that I assert are transcultural. It is my theoretical chapter in practice. Each poem uses elements of historiography and elements of the Avant-garde to express these women’s identities using music, dance, and everyday stories.

**Given Circumstances**

The given circumstances assembled to create the “worlds of the fcg...” are “complicated”. (Lady in Red, 48). Time and Place are not linear, but rather they are mutable and fluid. In this production, time cease being a thing which drives you; but rather transports you. Place ceases being a thing you are trying to arrive at and becomes where you find yourself. Because of the Avant-garde nature of fcg..., certain elements which would be concretized in a realistic play are much more malleable. Because Time and Place are layered functions, they will have more than one perspective. For instance, the “time” element will have two separate expressions; the time ‘of’ the play and the time ‘in’ the play. The time ‘of’ the play will be a brief overview of the time period in which the play was created. The time ‘in’ the play will be a more in-depth exploration of the temporal environment and how it changes.

**Time “of”**

*for colored girls...* was conceived in 1974, incubated for two years, and was born onto a Broadway stage in 1976. The time ‘of’ the play, the seventies, was a unique period in Black American history which showed the benefits of battles won, the costs of battles lost, battles yet to fight, and the new ways they would be fought. It grew from the ground that the civil rights movement made firm and fertile. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 created a major impact on political and economic power for the black community. Voting registration in the north and the south spiked. Outstanding changes in local politics occurred. Carl Stokes won a political seat from Seth Taft in Cleveland’s 1967 mayoral elections. The Joint
Center for Political and Economic Studies was founded three years later in the nation’s capital of Washington, DC.

While Black political power was on the rise, the Black population was still reeling from the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, the lack of state reinforcement of federal civil rights laws, continuously high unemployment rates, and an influx of Vietnam veterans returning to community all over the US. Though a large portion of returning veterans came back to lead productive lives, many returned from service suffering from what we now know to be post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These soldiers were met with a recession, unemployment, and neighborhood dilapidation. Though the state of Black America seemed bleak, definite change was to occur.

A new phenomenon in Black America, akin to the Harlem Renaissance, had emerged. The sixties and seventies brought the country commercialized Blackness. The American culture saw a meteoric rise in the packaging and the distribution of “Black”. The Black Arts movement launched Black writers like Ed Bullins, Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, and Ntozake Shange. Theatre venues like Henry Street Theatre brought “Black”, and launched the avant-garde onto the national scene. Artists like Earth, Wind, and Fire, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield, Willie Hutch and Minnie Riperton topped music charts singing songs with lyrics of identity, Black pride, and equality. Black art and literary publications reached from the California’s Bay area with Soul Book to east coast with New York’s Black Arts publications of The Liberator and Umbra. Movies like Shaft, Coffy, Cleopatra Jones, Hell up in Harlem, and Uptown Saturday Night painted a new, textured and more heavily marketed “Black”. The television dance show Soul Train also popularized many facets of “Black”. In addition to showcasing black pop culture, Don Cornelius developed and aired black commercials marketing black-owned products specifically for African American consumers: Afro-sheen & Afro-sheen Cosmetics for instance. Soul Train was a venue for the presentation of commoditized Afro-centricity.

Though still struggling for equal portions of the American dream, in late 1960’s to late 1970’s “Black” as a movement was experiencing an emergence. It was now in the company of movements like Reconstruction, the Harlem Renaissance, Garvey-ism, the Civil Rights movement, the Black Arts and Black Power movements. Commoditized “Black” was the new vehicle for placing Black and other minority issues at the forefront of the national discourse.
Time “in”

Using the music in the play as time/date stamps, the general time period of the play stretches from 1968 through to 1975-76. With that being said, time ‘in’ the play is more than general. It is both nebulous and specific. The way time is handled is as a narrative rather than a chronological constant; just as a narrative ebbs and flows back and forth, so too does time in the play. Each piece has its own temporal physics unique to the world in which that piece exists. For example, Lady in Brown’s opening poem introduces each of the characters to the stage space and uses no specific unfolding of time period to execute this action. The introduction exists outside of space/time. In contrast, Lady in Purple often speaks in poems which make use of chronological time.

In my examination of the production, I note that time manifests itself in three different and distinct ways; ambiguously, chronologically, and because of the mini-play montages, as a convergence of multiple and simultaneous time periods; a temporal collage. To give examples of each time expression, we first begin with the opening poem.

**LADY IN BROWN**

dark phrases of womanhood of never havin been a girl half-notes scattered without rhythm/ no tune distraught laughter fallin over a black girl's shoulder it's funny/ it's hysterical the melody-less-ness of her dance don't tell nobody don't tell a soul she's dancin on beer cans & shingles this must be the spook house another song with no singers lyrics/ no voices& interrupted solos unseen performances are we ghouls? children of horror? the joke? don't tell nobody don't tell a soul are we animals? have we gone crazy? i can't hear anything but maddening screams& the soft strains of death& you promised me you promised me . . . somebody/ anybody sing a black girl's song bring her out to know herself to know you but sing her rhythms carin/ struggle/ hard times sing her song of life she's been dead so long closed in silence so long she doesn't know the sound of her own voice her infinite beauty she's half-notes scattered without rhythm/ no tune sing her sighs sing the song of her possibilities sing a righteous gospel let her be born let her be born& handled warmly. (Shange, 3/)

This poem is an example of temporal ambiguity. The elements which concretize time: place, space, climate, etc. are not applicable. There are no words in the text which communicate
a time period nor does the text itself unfold in a chronological fashion. The landscapes and environments of the poems are often without the consistency of shape. The worlds of fcg...... cannot be clearly measured using time; as time is a measurement of objects moving or being affected, in some manner, in an environment. This second poem exemplifies how time is chronologically expressed in the play.

**LADY IN RED**

without any assistance or guidance from you i have loved you assiduously for **8 months 2 wks & a day** i have been stood up four times i’ve left 7 packages on yr doorstep forty poems 2 plants & 3 handmade notecards i left town so i cd send to you have been no help to me on my job you call at **3:00 in the mornin on weekdays** so i cd drive **27½ miles** cross the bay before i go to work charmin charmin but you are of no assistance i want you to know this waz an experiment to see how selfish i cd be if i wd really carry on to snare a possible lover if i waz capable of debasin myself for the love of another if i cd stand not being wanted when i wanted to be wanted & i cannot so with no further assistance & no guidance from you i am endin this affair this note is attached to a **plant i've been waterin since the day i met you** you may water it yr damn self. (Shange, 13/)

This poem, as we see, is full of time-based language. It expresses time using three factors; time periods, distance, organic life cycles. The phrases, “8 months 2 wks & a day”, and “3:00 in the mornin on weekdays” (Shange, 13/) marks the first way in which time manifests. It speaks directly to a specific time span and a specific time of day. Lady in Red also gives us an idea of time through communicating distance when she speaks about, “driving 27 ½ miles cross the bay……”, a representation of time spent using distance as the primary marker (13).

The next way in which time expresses itself in the piece is through the mention of a plant. Here she uses the growth span of the plant to refer to time as well with the line, “this note is attached to a plant i've been waterin since the day i met you you may water it yr damn self.” (Shange, 13/) The plant is a symbol of the affect time has on living objects, of which Lady in Red is one. The construction of the narrative is also systematic. Each action is furthered by a following action. This literary structure promotes progressive movement forward and insinuates
the movement of time in that direction while also using reflection and memory to move backward in time just as chronologically.

The third and final way in which time is presented in this play is as a temporal collage or convergence of times. One of the pieces which exemplify this concept is the choreopoem, latent rapist. For my production, I chose to have all the women share these lines.

LADY IN BLUE a friend is hard to press charges against
LADY IN RED if you know him you must have wanted it
LADY IN PURPLE a misunderstanding
LADY IN RED you know these things happen
LADY IN BLUE are you sure you didn’t suggest
LADY IN PURPLE had you been drinkin
LADY IN RED a rapist is always to be a stranger to be legitimate someone you never saw a man wit obvious problems
LADY IN PURPLE pin-ups attached to the insides of his lapels
LADY IN BLUE ticket stubs from porno flicks in his pocket
LADY IN PURPLE a lil dick
LADY IN RED or a strong mother
LADY IN BLUE or just a brutal virgin
LADY IN RED but if you’ve been seen in public wit him danced one dance kissed him good-bye lightly
LADY IN PURPLE wit closed mouth
LADY IN BLUE pressin charges will be as hard as keepin yr legs closed while five fools try to run a train on you
LADY IN RED these men friends of ours who smile nice stay employed and take us out to dinner
LADY IN PURPLE lock the door behind you
LADY IN BLUE wit fist in face to fuck
LADY IN RED who make elaborate mediterranean dinners& let the art ensemble carry all ethical burdens while they invite a coupla friends over to have you are sufferin from latent rapist bravado& we are left wit the scars
LADY IN BLUE bein betrayed by men who know us
LADY IN PURPLE& expect like the stranger we always thot waz comin
LADY IN BLUE that we will submit
LADY IN PURPLE we must have known
LADY IN RED women relinquish all personal rights the presence of a man who apparently cd be considered a rapist
LADY IN PURPLE specially if he has been considered a friend… (Shange, 17/)

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In this piece, time is a soup which is made up of multiple people, multiple places, multiple events, with no clear temporal language. Yet, all refer to a single happening; rape. Each person, place, and event combines into one poem and tells one story using multiple voices and perspectives.

With each time expression, environments change. If the time expression is ambiguous or is a convergence, then the place tends to be just as fluidic. If, as we see in the Lady in Red piece, when time is specific, places and even objects within places tend to be just as concrete as the times periods referenced.

**Place**

As I briefly referenced in the ‘Time’ section of the Given Circumstances, time is a major function in the determination of ‘Place’ and place can be as fluidic as time. Each piece in the play uses language that either, clearly defines Place or clearly does not. The environment of the stage conveys the concept of a Place made up of multiple places.

Another commentary on the fluidity of ‘Place’ is the structure of the pieces themselves. Each choreopoem is a production unto itself; a mini-play. Each mini-play has its own laws of physics. They are their own separate universes (realities). Yet, because the shared feminist struggles against abuse exist in all the universes (realities), the two - the Ladies and their share struggles - act as the connectors or bridges between the realities and allow the Ladies to travel between each other's universes. Similar to a wormhole, the Ladies connect immensely distant regions of space together. (For my assertions, in the play, each Lady's differing cultural positionality and set of circumstances represents different regions of space. We perceive these regions to be immensely distant from each other. And, superficially, they are (superficial is being used as an adjective for 'space/time'; the outer shell of reality). But, the connectivity shared between the ladies, through the internal feminine and the external shared struggles, exists outside of such trivial borders. These portals (Ladies) and their shared struggles form the basis for a sync of themes, times, and places throughout the different poems allowing seemingly different realities to act as one reality. In more simplistic terms, the Ladies themselves and their shared
struggles eradicate distance and allow for the physics of multiple worlds to exist in the same space at the same time.

Now for a less “Twilight Zone” description of 'Place'. Many Places in the production are defined only by their surroundings. For example, Lady in Yellow talks about her first sexual experience. She does so with all of her friends, the other ladies of color, in attendance. She is loud, dancing, and free with doing so. The story and her comfort with telling it, builds an environment that Lady in Yellow is very familiar with and most likely had a hand in creating; a bedroom, living room, etc. The place of the storytelling was not specified in the text, but rather suggested in the act of telling.

In contrast, Lady in Blue’s, *i used to live in the world*, is as replete with the language of place as Lady in Red's *no assistance*. It states the location of the mini-play as well as describes the environment of the location. These two elements work together to make Place exact and definite. This differs from Lady in Purple who says that she, “lived with myth & music was her ol man…” And Lady in Green who says, “someone almost walked off with all of my stuff…” place is indefinite. Pieces like some of Lady in Purple’s and Lady in Green’s are places which are not made up of measurable externalized conditions. The environment is an internal reality with no external expression.

**Society & Economics**

Society is defined as a group or body of individuals who may or may not live as members of a community, but who share similar cultural values. Though the ladies in the work don’t share the same living space within in a clearly stated community, a society can still be clearly defined; a society of “ladies”. The economics of *for colored girls*... however, is a clearer element. Working class, when they can find work, is the economic motif of the play. Weather Sechita dances to entertain clients, Lady in Blue has to take the New York train home to her dirty avenue neighborhood, or Lady in Red asks Beau Willie why he wants to marry her now, so she can support him, inevitably, they all speak to low income circumstances. Though the components of violence, neglect, and abuse know no socioeconomic boundaries, none of the dialogue in the
work speaks directly of upper class economic conditions nor does the dialogue locate any of the characters in upper class environments.

*Sexual Politics & The Law*

*fcg...* is filled with poems and/or lines in poems which have gender-based political and legal ramifications. The work is brimming with issues of sexual shame, frustrations, and struggles; all of which were and currently are, outgrowths of American cultural politics and legalities; a political and legal structure deeply rooted in inequities of gender, race and class. The political and legal moments that occur in the play are by no means, clear and straightforward. They are not seen in action, but rather inferred in the lack of action. Rape, child, and domestic abuse are realities for these Ladies. The lack of resolution and perpetuation of these realities is largely an outgrowth of the cultural, political, and legal dismissal of violence toward women and the poor.

The following section of text poetically explains the main issues with the prosecution of sexual assault charges; those being the definition of rape itself; rape committed by someone you know. These controversial types of sexual assaults can include date rape, rape by a long-time friend, and even rape by a spouse. To know your rapist often, counter intuitively speaking, can work against you in seeking justice against them in an assault investigation.

**LADY IN RED:** but if you’ve been seen in public wit him danced one dance kissed him good-bye lightly

**LADY IN PURPLE:** wit closed mouth

**LADY IN BLUE:** pressin charges will be as hard as keepin yr legs closed while five fools try to run a train on you. (Shange, 18/)

During my direction of *fcg...*, I distributed the lines of the *latent rapists* among all the Ladies. My explanation for doing so will be addressed further along in the chapter. Sexual acculturation and the politics which surrounds it in the production, however, does not just involve rape and/or other sexual abuses. It also involves how sexual identity in young Black ladies is even constructed. This sexual sculpting of identity in women starts as young girls and is rarely formulated outside of the male gaze. The sexual constructs which *for colored girls...*
presents start with Lady in Yellow’s story of the end of her virgin-hood, it follows through to Lady in Blue’s struggle to attain peace with her sensual desire and her acculturation into white America’s concepts of the ‘appropriate’ expression of sexual fulfillment and ends with Lady in Red’s story of violent abuse at the hands of the father of her children; abuse gone largely ignored by political and cultural society. From rape by someone you know to gang rape by a group of strangers, Shange expresses the sad oneness of sexual abuse that women around the world may experience for themselves or be connected to in knowing of someone who has been abused.

Characters & Analysis

This portion of my chapter will be an exploration of characters. I use Shange’s words to describe her character creation process and move from idea to personification. The language I use may become somewhat ethereal in nature. I will, however, endeavor to concentrate it to make my perspectives less obscure. I will refer to the author’s description of each character’s formation as described in the 1977 publication of, for colored girls…

thought:

In the summer of 1974 I had begun a series of poems… which were to explore the realities of seven different kinds of women. They were numbered pieces…(shange, xii)

The roles for this work are split into seven different female characters. This excerpt from the preface of fcg… gives us the general spaces of the characters while the following excerpt gives us more of a framework for their construction. Here, nebulous character forms begin to create more focused shapes.

thought become shape:

…the women were to be nameless & assume hegemony as dictated by the fullness of their lives. (shange, xii/)

Once cultural identities were formed and secured, seven ‘souls’ emerged. They inhabited the light bodies of Brown, Green, Orange, Red, Yellow, Blue, and Purple.

In the New York premiere at the Henry Street Theatre and subsequent productions on Broadway at the Booth theatre, the colors had come to rest in seven different kinds of black
female’s personas. Mel Gussow’s 1976 Stage review names those personas; Janet League (Lady in Brown), Paula Moss (Lady in Green), Ntozake Shange (Lady in Orange), Travana Beverley (Lady in Red), Aku Kadogo (Lady in Yellow), Laurie Carlos (Lady in Blue) and Rise Collins (Lady in Purple).

Though the women in the first production of the play were somewhat physically similar, in my production I wanted to show a greater physical spectrum. My characters would show different skin colors and body frames. I did so because I felt that much of the male gaze has been wrapped up in the fantasy of the female body being a certain size and shape. I wanted to dismiss this gaze and substitute it with the reality of the spectrum of size.

**Character**

**Looks**

The physical contours of my performers range from petite to full figured.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lady in Brown: African-American</th>
<th>Lady in Green: European-American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Height: approximately 5.7</td>
<td>Height: approximately 5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full figured</td>
<td>Full figured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Skin Color</td>
<td>Light Pink Skin Color</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lady in Blue: Dominican-American</th>
<th>Lady in Red: African-American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Height: approximately 5.6</td>
<td>Height: approximately 5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full figured</td>
<td>Average figure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark Brown Skin Color</td>
<td>Brown Skin Color</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lady in Yellow: African-American</th>
<th>Lady in Purple: African-American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Height: approximately 5.5</td>
<td>Height: approximately 5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average figure</td>
<td>Average figure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light Brown Skin Color</td>
<td>Light Brown Skin Color</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Lady in Orange**: African-American

Height: approximately 5.2

Petite figure

Dark Brown Skin Color

**Movement**

The movement of the play was developed using multiple sources. The first source of movement was created by the rhythm of the text. And dance forms found in the piece include West African dance and African American pop. Additional movement was developed from individual improvisations. Through improvisation, each performer came into contact with body movements which came from their own physical and emotional self-exploration.

…it is poets set to their own inner music.

(Gussow, 47)

The music in the text is a mixture of songs sung by recording artists who were contemporaries of the playwright, the play’s time period of creation, and rhythms generated by the breath and body movements of the actresses themselves. The breath and body sections of the music were also direct outgrowths of the improvisational movement developed by the actresses. The dance generates rhythmic sounds which become a part of the music found in the piece.

**Psychology**

**Needs & Wants**

The needs and/or wants of the different Ladies are to heal and be heard. Because of the linear and non-linear narratives in the work, the identities of the Ladies change. The specific needs and/or wants of each character also change to fit the new circumstances they are in. As a result of the combination of shifting realities that *for colored girls…* represents, I will systematically move through the play and chronicle the new identities and needs/wants of each character within the reality they are in at the time. In addition, I will review the color’s interaction with the male figure or maleness. I'll also theorize on correlations that each color has to its particular color reincarnations from the first poem the color appears in to the last poem it appears in. I hope to create a discernible connection to the identity that each colored girl starts the play with and the new identities they represent with each new poem-world they reemerge
into and out of up to the finale piece. For this exploration, I will focus on poem-worlds made of more than seven verse lines.

Lady in Brown, p. 3:

*Dark phrases*

In this poem-world, Lady in Brown introduces the different Ladies and advocates for, what she calls, “a black girl’s song”; to explain the delicate nature of young girls. This introduction is the foundation from which the play launches each Lady into the journey of their own individual histories. It is the primordial soup from which these colors are born.

**LADY IN BROWN:** sing a black girl's song / bring her out / to know sing a black girl's song / bring her out / to know herself / to know you / but sing her rhythms / carin/ struggle/ hard times / sing her song of life… (Shange, 4)

**LADY IN BROWN:** let her be born / let her be born / & handled warmly. (Shange, 5)

Lady in Yellow, p. 7:

*Graduation night*

Lady in Yellow is the first to step from Lady in Brown's primordial soup. In this coming-of-age story, she need/wants to graduate (ascend/attain). She expresses this with a story about “rites of passage”; and one rite in particular, the loss of her virginity. This is also the first time maleness appears in the text. Lady in Yellow tells a story full of young men; each one having a distinct character. Her relationship with each young man varies from dance partner to protector, to friend, to eventual lover.

She shares her tail with friends during a sharing ritual –sharing ritual in this context is defined as a purposeful gathering of women to story-tell where she publically announces her new found woman-hood. Lady in Yellow introduces herself to the play with symbols of progression and change; rites of passage.

**LADY IN YELLOW:** it was graduation nite & i waz the only virgin in the crowd…& danglin our tassles from the rear view mirror…all us movin from mama to what ever waz out there…cuz graduation nite had to be
The piece is full of text which not only speaks to rites of passage, but the objects that represent those rites. Lady in Yellow is charismatic and guiltlessly open to others with her story. In the end, she tells how she opened her body to a new physical relationship with maleness. Her physical interaction with maleness moved from the outside of her body and moved to place itself inside her body. The following excerpt is an example of the physical interaction with maleness becoming sexual in nature.

**LADY IN YELLOW:** ...started talkin real soft in the backseat of that ol buick WOW by daybreak i just cdnt stop grinnin. (Shange, 10)

**Lady in Blue, p.11:**

now i love somebody more than

In this piece, we are introduced to Lady in Blue; the third character to speak. In an interesting note, Lady in Yellow introduces men and speaks about how one in particular eventually physically enters her. Lady in Blue on the other hand, introduces the concept of carrying male inside her in a different way. It is not sexual, but it is still physical. An absent-present persona exists in her as an impulse; a rhythmic urge; papa the Puerto Rican.

**LADY IN BLUE:** my papa thot he was puerto rican & we wda been cept we waz just reglar niggahs wit hints of Spanish (Shange, 11)

In this story, Lady in Blue’s need/want is to tell us about the passionate and sensual dance movements and rhythms in Latin music which are adjacent and just as fulfilling as the penile penetration sex act. In this piece, she doesn’t define attaining her womanhood by objects of rites and symbols of passage (graduations, tassels, the end of virgin-hood, etc.). Her womanhood is found in dance, rhythm and music.

**LADY IN BLUE:** …some niggah sweating all over you…i never did like to grind…if dancin waz proof of origin / i was jibarita herself that nite…more than more than / when i discovered archie shepp & subtle blues / doncha know i wore out the magic of jiju / heroically resistin being possessed… te amo mas que te amo mas que / when you play / yr flute… (Shange, 12-13)
Lady in Red, p.13:  

*no assistance*

Lady in Red is the next full personality to be expressed. In this explosive poem, Lady in Red’s need/want is to express that emotional neglect feels like emotional abuse. This is the first male/female conflict in the play. This is also the first derogatory representation of maleness in the text. In this piece, she has decided to end her relationship. Up to this point in the production, the male has been a friend, protector, soft-lover, and father figure. Here, he has transformed into the harmful-lover. Lady in Red’s first entrance into the play is as a fighter. The two ladies before her, to a large degree, embraced the maleness they experienced. Lady in Red rejects and rebels against the maleness she has experienced and, it seems, has decided to end her love-servitude to him. I like to think that this Lady in Red lives in a parallel universe where she escapes the painful climax that we experience at the end of the play where there, "was no air”.

**LADY IN RED:** …with no further assistance & no guidance from you i am endin this affair(Shange, 14)

Lady in Orange, p.14:  

*I’m a poet*

Lady in Orange’s need/want is to dance with her heart and to get her sister colors involved in the dance of their hearts.

**LADY IN ORANGE:** i wanna sing make you dance / like the bata dance scream / twitch hips wit me cuz / i done forgot all abt words…i wanna whirl with you…(Shange, 14)

The harmful maleness Lady in Red separated from has been reincarnated. Willie Colon becomes the new maleness; one which allows maleness to be embraced again.

**LADY IN ORANGE:** …let willie colon take you out / swing your head / push your leg to the moon with me (Shange, 14)

The Ladies, p. 17  

*Latent rapists*

A major focus of the 1970’s feminist movement was a fight for the creation of more comprehensive rape laws and the prosecution of offenders. California was teeming with
feminists who put sexual assault at the forefront of their protests. In 1972, the Bay Area Women Against Rape organization opened a rape crisis program in San Francisco, CA; Washington D.C. closely following establishing their own. These were the first of their kind in the nation. In this section which rotates between Ladies in Blue, Red, & Purple, we are shown the tragedy of rape from multiple perspectives.

As I stated earlier in my chapter, I distributed the lines of this piece to all of the colors in the production. When referring to the new Ladies added, I will initial the line’s original Lady with (N.S.) for Notzake Shange. For the Ladies I redistributed the line too, I will use (JNF); my own initials. I redistributed the lines because I found them to be a representative of the direct or indirect experiences of each Lady on stage. In the work, Shange interweaves multiples types of sexual abuse: rape from a friend or acquaintance, abuse under the influence of alcohol, by a stranger, or multiple strangers. She explores traditional forms of rape and the society’s responses to the act in lines like:

**LADY IN RED (NS/JNF):** you must have wanted it. (Shange, 17/)

**LADY IN PURPLE (NS/JNF):** a misunderstanding. (Shange, 17/)

**LADY IN RED (N.S.)/ LADY IN ORANGE (JNF):** A rapist is always to be a stranger to be legitimate / someone you never saw / a man wit obvious (Shange 17)

These cultural attitudes toward rape also played themselves out in public polices which often placed race, class, and gender inequality at the heart of enforcement, or rather the lack of enforcement. A charge of sexual assault has historically been an extremely difficult charge for women to levy against a man. Particularly in cases where the Lady has befriended, previously dated, or been a part of public flirtation with that man. Their need/want is to speak out about the multiple faces of rape; stranger, associate, and even good friend.

**LADY IN RED:** a rapist is always to be a stranger / to be legitimate / someone you never saw / a man wit obvious problems…(Shange, 17)
**LADY IN RED:** these men friends of ours / who smile nice / stay employed / and take us out to dinner…(Shange, 18)

**LADY IN BLUE:** bein betrayed by men who know us (Shange, 19)

**LADY IN PURPLE:** & expect / like the stranger / we always thot waz comin (Shange, 19)

_Lady in Blue, p. 22_

*abortion cycles*

The need/want of Lady in Blue in this choreopoem is to tell her experience with abortion in the hopes that those who know will understand her story. Here, the circumstances change for Lady in Blue. It is not clear if the rape montage is connected to this poem and the abortion is a response to being raped or if the story stands alone as simply a circumstance where many women find themselves.

**NOTE:**

One can’t help but note a foreshadowing and sad irony in the chronological ordering of _latent rapists_ and _abortion cycles_. The foreshadowing in that rape victims often seek abortion services. Sad irony in that abortion rights are being attacked and/or revoked even in the cases of rape and incest. The _latent rapist_ reality being directly proceeded by the _abortion cycle_ poem coupled with the current legislative attacks on abortion rights and other women’s health issues make this play, and particular, this section more current and real time than ever.

This is the second time Lady in Blue indirectly refers to maleness. The first time was maleness as an impulse to dance with and love through a sensual admiration. This time, the relationship has changed. The maleness is no longer an ambiguous force that lives in a rhythmic sensuality. He is an absent/presentence who is realized in a result of sexual contact; pregnancy.

_Lady in Purple, p. 23_

*sechita*

Enter Lady in Purple. She appears as a person living and interacting in two worlds; her own and sechita’s. This piece speaks of the life of Lady in Green and explains that she is more than just an object to be presented to the male gaze. The need/want of Lady in Green is to survive through her world. Lady is Purples want/need is to live through Lady in Green’s life and
to transform it into something beyond mere survival. This is a change in the want/need of Lady in Purple. She enters into the play speaking about sex as a tool of oppression during the latent rapists’ poem. But, in this piece she tells the story of Lady in Green being more that a dancer. She is a conjurer of men. This new perspective is an inversion of the power dynamic which first existed for her with maleness; turning from the controlled into a controller. As maleness in earlier pieces has used intrusive physical coercion to gain control over the female body, Lady in Purple/Green uses physicalized rhythmic movement (dance) as a non-intrusive coercion to gain control of the male body. She takes the power of the male gaze from men and uses it as a tool to turn Lady in Green (a stage dancer) into a priestess (conjuror of men), and from a priestess into a Goddess. In the latent rapist, Lady in Purple condemns the intrusive sexual coercion of women, but in sechita, a women’s use of sensuality, to conjure men is not an intrusive force. It is actually a part of her goddess-hood.

**LADY IN PURPLE**: sechita/ goddess/ of love/ egypt/ 2nd millennium/ performin the rites/ the / conjurin of men/ conjurin the spirit/…(Shange, 25)

We meet Lady in Green in a substantive way for the first time in the work. She is not a voiced identity. She is sechita, an temporary avatar for Lady in Purple. Lady in Purple speaks of Lady in Green’s relationship with maleness.

**LADY IN GREEN**: sechita/ cd hear redneck whoops n slappin on / the back/ she gathered her sparsely sequined skirts…(Shange, 24)

Lady in Purple controls Lady in Green’s body through the act of storytelling magic and not physical force. She conjures sechita as sechita conjures men.

*Lady in Brown, p. 25  
Toussaint Jones*

In this second kind of coming-of-age story, different from Lady in Yellows’, Lady in Brown’s need/want is to find and connect with the love of her life, Toussaint Louverture. This poem seems to be an extension of Lady in Brown’s introduction where we see and hear the black girl’s song. Lady in Brown is reflected in this young lady who is born and handled with care.

Her playful interaction with maleness in the poem gives maleness a makeover. Toussaint Jones redeems the concept of the male gaze and makes it asexual or makes the attraction non-
physical. This asexualization process makes Jones’s physical interactions with Lady in Brown playful and not abusive even though, “de ol silly boy” was standing there “kickin milk cartons & bits of brick”. Maleness remains aggressive yet non-hostile. He is a coy presence who attaches himself to the young Lady in Brown as a play-lover; a companion to go down to the docks with to, “watch the ships role in and watch them role away again.”

As this work’s director, I chose to physicalize Toussaint’s maleness by casting a male to play the role. My motivation was simple and a bit selfish. With all that maleness had been before this piece, I wanted the first pour hearted (my words) maleness to be concretized by an actual figure. My hope was that the physicalized innocence of Toussaint Jones would act as a counter balance for the male personas that had come before and the ones to come. I want to note that my intention, again, was to counter balance. Not absolve.

Lady in Red, p. 31

one

In this piece, Lady in Red tells the story of a woman who uses sex to satisfy a deeper desire to interact. Lady in Orange yearns for more than just a sexually touch with a penis. She is seeking sexual wholeness in the touch.

LADY IN RED/ORANGE: & she didn’t let on she knew from behind her waist waz aching to be held… (Shange, 32/)

Unfortunately, the touches from the men she encounters have left her wanting. Because she is a multi-layered being with multi-layered physical needs which have gone unmet, bitterness takes hold and her response to that bitterness is to leave the men she seduces just as wanting as they have left and leave her.

LADY IN RED/ORANGE: ‘you’ll have to go now / I’ve a lot of work to do…I can’t see you again/ you got what you wanted didn’t you’ (Shange, 34/)

The tragic female figure, Lady in Orange has been transformed by male sexual predators into a female sexual predator.

LADY IN RED/ORANGE: she wanted to be a memory/ a wound to every man arragent enough to want her/ she waz the wrath of women in windows fingerin shades / ol lace curtains/ camoflagin despair & stretch marks…(Shange, 32/)
A figure who sadly moves from man to man, Lady in Orange is living a circle curse; one which pushes her to stalk, seduce, discard, rinse, and repeat.

Just as men build parts of their identity on their sexual exploits, so too does Lady in Orange. To Lady in Orange, being a sexual abuser is the great equalizer. As told through the words of Lady in Red, this is a radical change from her past commentary on sex and relationships. Lady in Red’s introduction was as a scorned and underappreciated lover. In her next incarnation, she condemns rape and the exploitation of sex. Yet in this piece, she speaks with an ease about Lady in Orange’s sexual exploitation of men. I don’t suggest that the exploitive act which Lady in Orange engages in is remotely comparable to rape, yet exploitation on her part is present. Lady in Red seems not to have a problem with it when it is committed in this fashion on a male by the lady. She even, to some degree, romanticizes the exploitive act in her verbal admiration throughout the poem culminating in the last lines of the piece.

…she wd gather her tinsel & jewels from the tub & laugh gayly or vengeful she stored her silk roses by her bed & when she finished writin the account of her exploit in a diary embroidered with lilies & moon stones she placed the rose behind her ear & cried herself to sleep. (Shange, 31/)

This work mirrors the relationship found in the sechita poem. Lady in Orange acts as the avatar for Lady in Red’s words as well. We see again how Shange plays with physics by allowing for Lady in Red to exist in two places at the same time just as Lady in Purple does. An additional correlation between the two pieces is that Lady in Red has no direct contact or relationship with the males in the world of Lady in Orange. She speaks about Lady in Orange’s contact with men as a level conjuration as well. Both sechita and passion flower (Lady in Orange) use seduction to take the male gaze and make it a tool to use against men, to regain some ownership of their own sexual bodies in some greater degree than once they may have had.

Lady in Blue, p. 36
I use to live in the world

The need/want for Lady in Blue is to express her feelings of geographic oppression. New York is a physically and mentally confining place for her; an outdoor prison.

LADY IN BLUE: i usedta live in the world / then i moved to HARLEM / & my universe is now six blocks (Shange, 36)
In this piece, men begin as faceless threats which are to be avoided and are eventually personified in a crude old man yelling insults to women who happen to pass by him. The general annoyance that maleness was to Lady in Blue during graduation nite and the absent/present personality maleness was during abortion cycle has transformed into an unambiguous persona to be feared and avoided.

**LADY IN BLUE:** wdnt be good / not good at all / to meet a tall short black brown young man fulla his power / in the dark / in my universe of six blocks…(Shange, 37)

This piece speaks about the unbreakable bond between sisters/friends that is tested by mistrust. The man in this piece is a loose-lover. This new incarnation of maleness ads to the list of male identities offered by Shange and will resurface in the *sorry* poem. Up to this point in the work, men have been friends, protectors, father figures, lovers, violators, play-lovers, and now they are loose-lovers. Through it all, the women see their way through the pain of betrayal and loss to reconnect with their sisterhood which is the greater want/need of each Lady in the poem.

**LADY IN PURPLE:** three of us like a pyramid / three friends…her friend cdnt speak or cry / they hugged & went to where he waz…she held her head on her lap / the lap of her sisters soakin up tears / each understandin how much love stood between them / how much love between them / love between them / love like sisters (Shange, 39, 42)

In this poem, Lady in Purple doesn’t speak about conjuring men, but rather a man who has conjured her and her friends; conjuration, while not physically violent was damaging all the same.

**Lady in Orange, p. 42**

*no more love poems*#1

Lady in Orange has let loose her anger. She echoes the sentiment found in *no assistance*. She is ending this affair citing a very similar reasoning as Lady in Red; emotional neglect.

**LADY IN ORANGE:** so this is a requium for myself/ cuz I have died in a real way/ not wid aqua coffins & du-wop cadillacs/ i used to joke abt when i waz messin round/ but a real dead lovin is here for you now…(Shange, 43)
Though this is a different relationship with men than was set up by Lady in Red’s *no assistance* piece, can this piece be perceived as two different sides of the same Lady? Can they be “before and after” representations of each other?

With this outburst, Lady in Orange maybe breaking her circle curse; finally realizing and walking away from the cycle of it all. This is her greatest want/need fulfillment.

**LADY IN ORANGE:** Li cdnt stand bein sorry & colored at the same time/ it’s so redundant in the modern world. (Shange, 43/)

*Lady in Purple, p. 43
no more love poems#2*

In this poem, Lady in Purple sheds all of her pretense. The mask is removed. She must be loved for what she is. Her want/ needs are to be free of the mask she made to hide from her mate and herself.

**LADY IN PURPLE:** & those scars i had hidden wit smiles & good fuckin lay open & i dont know i dont know any more tricks… i want you to love me/ let me love you/ i dont wanna dance wit ghosts/ snuggle lovers i made up in my drunkenness/ lemme love you just like i am/ a colored girl/ i'm finally bein real/ no longer symmetrical & impervious to pain (Shange, 44)

This is Lady in Purple’s first direct relationship with a male, though he is absent/present. This relationship is both rewarding and problematic, but there is a slight difference. Lady in Purple seems to be the person trying to take primary responsibility for many of the issues which exist in her relationship.

**LADY IN PURPLE:** & those scars i had hidden wit smiles & good fuckin / lay open / & i dont know i dont know any more tricks… & i cdnt let you in on it cuz i didnt know/ here / is what i have/ poems/ big thighs/ lil tits/ & so much love… i'm finally bein real/ no longer symmetrical & impervious to pain. (Shange, 44)

*Lady in Blue, p. 44
no more love poems#3*

Lady in Blue breaks into her physical sensual body with this poem. This is a major change in how she deals with sex in the play. She begins the work advocating that sensuality be expressed out through dance. Her following pieces deal with the derogatory nature of sex by
exploring abortions and rape. Here, though, the tact has changed. The sensual act is not expressed with dance nor is it shown through the lens of abortion or abuse. She crazes a sexual touch. It is the hunger.

**Lady in Blue:** we deal wit emotion too much…& maybe maybe tonite/ i’ll find a way to make myself come without you/ no fingers or other objects just that / which isn’t spiritual evolution cuz its empty & godliness / is plenty is ripe & fertile/ thinkin won’t do me a bit of good tonite/ i need to be loved (Shange, 45)

*Lady in Yellow, p.45*

no more love poems#4

This poem marks the second time that Lady in Yellow exclusively speaks her feelings. Much has happened in the time between *graduation nite* and *no more love poems#4*. Though she has not spoken a lengthy piece sense her introduction, her presence has been seen and heard enough for me to maintain a character arch stretching from her first poem on page 3 to her second poem on page 45. For my production, I placed Lady in Yellow in the *latent rapists’.* She was also a presence in, *I use to live in the world,* and the love focus in the *pyramid.*

By the time we get to *no more love poems#4,* Lady in Yellow has dealt with rape, lived in the huge and violent city of New York, shared a lover with her sisters, and experienced love loss. There is no wonder the poem begins as it does.

**Lady in Yellow:** I’ve lost it/ touch with reality…

Lady in Yellow’s want/ need is to communicate to the world what her love is not to be used for. Having lived through betrayal from both men and women, Lady in Yellow proclaims to both genders that her “love is too delicate to have thrown back on her face” (Shange, 46)

*Lady in Green, p.49*

*Somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff*

The last time we were in contact with Lady in Green, she was an active memory, dancing in the mind of Lady in Purple. Now, she is a fully realized body/mind/voice speaking about how someone almost stole her away from herself. This piece is unique among all the other pieces. In this work, Shange gives us two ideologies of interaction with maleness; the self-identity driven
refusal to let a man walk off with all of a woman’s “stuff”, i.e. her ‘self’- (her identity)…and the idea that she can be conjured into giving her "stuff" away to maleness.

LADY IN GREEN: this is mine/ this aint yr stuff… (Shange, 49) …and the opposing assertion that she is delighted with giving herself away.

LADY IN GREEN: I’ll give it to ya, yeh I’ll give it to ya. (Shange, 51)

Shange not only writes this choreopoem to affirm women’s rights and equality to men, she also bucks a popular feminist idiom that a woman should never belong to a man. Here, Shange takes a new perspective on women’s rights. In this work, women have the birth right to themselves and they can exercise that birth right to give themselves to another; a man. She seems to be saying that you can give yourself away to a man, if that man is worth of it and earns the right to have her. Possession is not a negative, but a right earned and paid for through the caliber and quality of the male's personage. This right didn’t exist in the feminism of the time and is still hotly debated in the feminism of today. Lady in Green’s want/ need is to let her lover know that he may possess her only with her permission. This is an idea largely unexplored by feminism and understandably so. In patriarchy, the act of possession has often meant the right to abuse as supposed to the obligation to care-take.

Lady in Blue, p.52

Sorry

Lady in Blue follows the “amen corner” section of the play. With righteous indignation, the ladies recall times when they’ve been given apologies for an egregious emotional violation from the men in their lives. The piece sorry, exemplifies the Ladies responses to those men excusing their offences away with the phrase, “I’m sorry”. Lady in Blue’s want/ need is to communicate very clearly that apologies, excuses, and ignorance are not hiding places where you can absolve deeds done. The ladies will accept no more apologies from their lovers.

LADY IN BLUE: if you called to say yr sorry / call somebody else I I don’t use em anymore’ / I let sorry / didn’t meanta / & how cd I know about that take a walk down a dark & musty street in Brooklyne. (Shange, 53)

Lady in Red, p.55

A nite with beau willie brown
In this piece, Lady in Red tells the story of 'crystal', her children, and her abuser; an off & on mate, beau willie brown. beau willie brown represents Shange's most bleak representation of maleness. He is a culmination of multiple personal abuses; from alcohol and drugs to PTSD\(^5\) to, he himself, being a victim of emotional, physical, and economic neglect.

**LADY IN RED:** ...he'd get up to make coffee, drink wine...wished one of his friends who knew where he waz would come wd come by with some blow or some shit/ anythin/...

**LADY IN RED:** ...he came home crazy as hell / he tried to get veterans benefits to go to school & they kept right on puttin him in remedial classes / he cdnt read wortha damn… (Shange, 56)

**LADY IN RED:** ...got himself a gypsy cab to drive / but his cab kept breaking down / & the cops was messin with him / plus not gettin much bread…(Shange, 56)

**LADY IN RED:** ...she waz gonna marry him / & get some more veterans benefits / & he cd stop drivin them crazy spics round / while they tryin to kill him for $15… ( Shange, 57)

Crystal is a complex mixture of emotional abuse and neglect in addition to class, and gender oppression. The poem is replete with examples of her emotional and physical abuse; abuse she self-destructively continued suffer. In looking at her abuse, the elephant question in the room is why. Why did crystal stay? Why didn’t she move? Why did she continue to interact with beau willie? This question can be answered without great debate; poverty. Similar to the people of New Orleans during hurricane Katrina, economics and class bar many from having or building the resources needed to escape a destructive situation. There is another, “why” question which has little to do with money or class. This question has to do with a personal decision. Why did she allow beau willie to get his hands on the children just before he dropped them out of the window? What lead crystal to make such a decision? To answer this question, I pored over, a nite wit beau willie brown. I found very little to help me understand crystal’s thought process. There are only scattered sections which speak to the length of Crystal’s relationship with beau willie and the extent of her emotional neglect.

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\(^5\) P.T.S.D.: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: Mental disorder which can possibly develop after being a part of or witness to a violent or terrifying event or set of events.
LADY IN RED: everybody wd know that crystal waz a no good lyin whore / and this after she’d been his girl sense she was thirteen…(Shange, 55)

LADY IN RED: …shit / she’d been on his ass to marry her sense she waz 14 years old & here when she 22 / she wanna throw him out cuz he say he’ll marry her…(Shange, 56)

LADY IN RED: …i can be a good father / now let me see my son…he coaxed her & he coaxed her…tol her she waz still a hot lil ol thing & pretty & strong…beau willie oozed kindness & crystal who had known so lil / let beau hold kwame…(Shange, 59)

Though these sections can give perspective to Crystal’s decision to trust beau willie temporarily, but they don’t give a clear reasoning for her choice to allow beau willie to to continuously visit her not to mention, allow him to hold Kwame and Naomi. Shange leaves us with a mystery in her ending to, *a nite wit beau willie brown*. She also sets the stage for that tragedy to lead to a transformation in all the Ladies of the play.

Beau willie's act of infanticide is an initiating event which triggers transmogrification. The “Critical Mass Event” creates such depths of emotional gravity that the weight of the experience causes all the women to blow off all surface realities and fall in on themselves; much as a star does in its process of becoming a black hole. This changes them from wormholes which link them together and transport them to different circumstances into a super dense singularity; the center of which contains the ultimate unknown. This implosion forces them so deeply inside themselves that their depths bring them into contact with the core of who they are; creator, creation, the Goddess. A reality beyond comprehension at our current stage of evolution. Once the Goddess in activated, the healing begins; *a layin on of hands*.

LADY IN RED: …i waz cold / I waz burnin up / a child & endlessly weavin garments for the moon with my tears / I found god in myself / & I loved her / I loved her fiercely…(Shange, 63)

The Performance

*Why for colored girls…I Decision to do This Piece?*

While I searched for my creative thesis topic, I made my way through many plays. I knew which ever play I chose, it had to attract me as a performer as well as a director. I'm a physical and word driven performer, so any text that I took on had to ‘Work!’ me in both ways. I
wanted to work hard and play with the piece. I wanted my cast to have fun with the piece, and I wanted my production crew to enjoy mounting the production. So with that being said, I went to my advisor, Dr. Paul Jackson, with my desires. It was kismet. He happened to be working on a paper about the film version of *for colored girls...* produced and directed by Tyler Perry. He suggested that the play would be all I was looking for and more. That is when my work on the play began.

The first thing to be done was research. I poured over hundreds and hundreds of pages about the play looking for a “question”; something about the work which had not been explored extensively. In the search, I came across many productions of and reflections on *for colored girls...* I even came across a production called, *For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Streets Were Too Much.* Further still, I came across an all European-American gay male version of *fcg...* (my advisor told me about that attempt). I thought to myself, has there been a LGBT production of the play? Can I queer this work? That thought came and went, not because I didn’t think it would be interesting, but because I didn’t feel that I could ask or answer any questions with that perspective which spoke directly to Shange’s intentions for the play. I was flopping around in ambiguity until… enter interviews.

I came across two interviews with Ntozake Shange. The first was a 1987 interview with Shange conducted by Brenda Lyons. The second was a 2007 interview conducted by Will Powers. The twenty year time span between the two interviews gives Shange enough time to claim a change in her views based on growth or a change in her public views, yet she does not take that chance. Her views in the twentieth century remained well into the twenty-first. In both interviews, she speaks about her multicultural intentions.

Brenda Lyons⁶

BL: Is there a link between the title Colored Girls and the change in language to "people of color"?

NS: I know that fifteen years ago when I said "colored girls" I meant "people of color." The first group I worked with was black, white, Asian, and native American. And in San Francisco that's what we meant. It was our own little tongue-in-cheek thing. When I moved back East, they couldn't deal with that. It was too difficult. "Color" meant

"black people," so that's what it became, but syntactically and in terms of what's in the piece itself that's not true. I think now when you say "people of color" that's another way of saying "colored girls" but getting away from the trap I fell into. I don't think we did anything to stir it on, but I think that's what we meant. BL: Between Colored Girls and Betsey Brown I read a movement (Lyons, Shange, 688)

Will Powers

WP: I know you also spent time in Los Angeles, but you have said that the Bay Area arts scene of the '70s and '80s had a powerful effect on your work. How was it different from what you might have found in another city?

NS: Well, as I remember it, the Bay Area was one of the few places in the country that was truly and actively multicultural. When I wrote for colored girls, I meant it for all women of color. When I took that idea to New York, they took out all my Puerto Ricans, and when I wanted to include Asians, they looked at me like I had lost my mind!

WP: Why do you think there was pressure in New York to make it specifically an African-American female experience?

NS: Because that's how Easterners perceived the world--in terms of black and white. You see, the history of the migration of black people to the North, and our integration (to the degree that we have any) into white society was very brash and abrasive. Other people from other places--until this recent immigration stuff started--weren't dealt with as aggressively as intruders as we were. (Power, Shange, 4)

Eureka! A multicultural version of for colored girls...! Everything fell into place after these two revelations. It was so clear. She wrote the piece for all women of color. I could now see this work as a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multinational piece to be produce with a theoretical and practical reason to do so.

At this point, what I wanted to do was expand the author’s, “all women of color” intention into a global perspective. Now you may definitely say to yourself, “Doesn’t all women of color entail women from around the world”? The answer is yes, in principle. In practical fact though, the work had been, and still is, seen as an African and American experience; locating

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the work in a specific people living in a specific place. My intention was to extend Shange’s trans-cultural origins of the piece into a shape which was both trans-cultural and transcontinental.

**Auditions & Casting**

My ideas on casting were built on presenting many different shapes and shades of feminine bodies. I wanted to show roundness, clear feminine curves. The shapes of the Ladies were just as important to me as the shapes on the set. They were just as a part of the set as they were the worlds that the set represented. I needed them to be both in the world and separate from it as well. As you will see in the design section of my paper, the Ladies were the curves lain against the lines of the set. I needed their curves to be strong so that they would break the lines I had created with the set.

To that end, I searched both inside and outside of the Miami University theatre department for a cast. Because I was multiculturalizing the work, I looked for a cast which could visually represent different continents and cultures on the Earth. I was lucky enough to be on a campus which had multiple performance organizations of color. I reached out to those organizations through my audition notice. The audition flyer featured pictures of a woman of African descendant, East Asian descent, European descent, Indian descent, and Indigenous descent as we see below.
At the same time I was developing the flyer with the assistance of the then production manager, professor, De Francesco, I met with my production committee so that I could request for my auditions to be held earlier than the committee had planned for them to be held. I use the term, ‘then production manager’ in referring to professor DeFrancesco because soon after production meetings began, he went on university sabbatical and was replaced by professor, Steven Pauna.

My reasoning for earlier auditions was that the text of *for colored girls...* was so dense and the performance so complex that I wanted to give the cast as much time with the material as possible. In my case, I asked to have my auditions before the university’s winter break as supposed to having them when the students came back from break. I could send my cast home with the script and they could have two and a half months before the start of rehearsals to work with the text. They accepted my point and moved my auditions up to an earlier time.

Professor DeFrancesco took the images and my design layout of the pictures, added the dates of the auditions and productions, and handed them off to marketing to be hung around campus. We were ready for the next stage. Auditions! Though I placed my multicultural intentions for casting in the audition flyer, my turn out was not as diverse as the actual flyer.
itself. I had twenty-two African-American women and two European-Americans women to come out and audition. I’ll take it!

The auditions had begun. They were scheduled as two, three hour evening sessions which I organized to examine each auditioner’s vocal and physical talents. I planned the first day of auditions to be text based. The candidates were asked to bring in and perform a poem which they felt connected to and moved by. After performing their own pieces, I would give them I piece from *for colored girls*... for them to read. One by one, my advisor and I auditioned each young lady. Out of the twenty-four who auditioned, ten were chosen for callbacks.

The callback audition was organized as a movement class that I would teach. During this class, I took the candidates through identity and community based exercise to evaluate how they naturally moved as individuals and as a group. I also measured group dynamics to note how each person bonded or connected with the other candidates. In the first section of the audition, each actress brought their favorite song to dance to. The instruction was to dance as though you were alone in your own house or room. They then danced to that song in front of the class. With this experience, I was able to see how comfortable each lady was with their bodies moving in space and moving through space. I knew that my rehearsals would be physically and, at times, emotionally strenuous, so I needed to get an idea of how this prototype cast would deal with multi-layered performance; talking, moving, thinking, improvising, feeling, and doing so while following theatrical conventions such as finding the light, not upstaging their cast mates or themselves, or cheating out so that the audience could see all of their performances. After two days of auditions, the cast had been realized and I ended up with eight cast members, six of which were not theatre or communications majors. Most were education majors.

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<tr>
<th>Lady in...</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Cultural Representation</th>
<th>Color</th>
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<td>Alexandra Short</td>
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<td>Europe Descent</td>
<td>Green</td>
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<td>Stephanie Harris</td>
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<td>Spanish Descent</td>
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<td>Ryanaustin Dennis</td>
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I know what many might be saying right now. Wait, did you just say eight cast members. Enter the actor.

**Who’s the Guy?**

His name is Ryanaustin Dennis and I gave him the role of ‘Male’ in the play. Many people asked me during my director’s talk back why I decided to use a male in a play written for an all-female cast? My answer to that was, "...embodiment". There were components of maleness that I wanted to use a male to project. His three major contributions were as a stage presence in *Toussaint Jones*, the males in, *I use to live in the world*, and as an absent/ present voice-over in the *sorry* montage.

In the *Toussaint Jones* poem, he played the role of Toussaint Jones. I took dialogue lines from Lady in Brown and gave them to Ryanaustin to turn the piece into a partner scene as supposed to a monologue. I wanted to show a playful and harmless side to maleness. to Now you can see a positive male role played out in front of you. In *I use to live in the world*, I wanted to separate out the negative maleness in the play and place it in Ryanaustin so the Ladies wouldn’t have to refer to each other in a demeaning fashion.

**MALE:** I SPENT MORE MONEY YESTERDAY THAN THE DAY BEFORE & ALL THAT'S MORE N YOU NIGGAH EVER GOTTA HOLD TO COME OVER HERE BITCH CANT YA SEE THIS IS $5’

(Shange, 38/)

I my view, for the Ladies to struggle to identify with each other and then have to refer to each other in the afore noted way would off-set the cohesion I was building. Similar to how hazing in fraternities and sororities can off-set the brotherhood and sisterhood that these social groups say they are trying to build. We worked very hard to see and create cohesion from the text. To turn around and have them speak and interact in the way the text would demand they do would take more training than a felt I had time for. My cast was very sensitive and I needed that sensitivity to be pointed towards each other without having to visit being hostile or harsh.

His final, and I feel, most textured performance was as a vocal layer to the women during, *sorry*. In that work, Ryanaustin was located off stage and out of sight of the performers
and audience. Without fail, he simultaneously vocally layered the Ladies while they talked about how their mates always used the phrase, I’m sorry as a tool to dismiss, trivialize, and/or ignore their needs and emotional desires.

**Cast Nationalities; Projected Nationalities, & Why**

I pondered about how to maximize or theoretically assign nationalities to each Lady and color. My reasoning for each match combines ideas from the text, and my visions of certain actresses speaking certain poems. Design decisions are based on limited research. For instance, the colors red and yellow are seen heavily in Indian and Central Asian cultures. Though the color green is seen throughout multiple cultures, I matched the color green with a European/Irish representation. This worked well as the European-American was casted as Lady in Green.

**NOTE:**

Because of the location of this production, (Miami University- Historically and predominantly European American), this particular choice for Lady in Green and the production itself, grew to exemplify one of the assertions I put forward about the potential for the production. Alexandra Short not only made Shange’s words live out loud, her presence also helped to take many European-American audience members into the work so that they couldn’t separate themselves from the experiences of the other women of color on the stage because ethnicities, cultures, or historical or material realities deferred. This was an example of how body presence helps to facilitate a bonding between differing populations.

I matched the color purple with an African American cast member. Purple is a color of dye that, at one time, came from sea shells found particularly in North/ East Africa, Persia, and China. With that in mind, I chose to couple that color with an African American actress. I expand my personal views of the colors into costuming which I will go into greater detail on in the costume section.

I matched African descent with Lady in Purple for many reasons. One of which is in the aforementioned paragraph. I also chose to match purple with an African descendent because of general west, north, and eastern African traditions of purple being a color of royalty and power; a royalty and power which is, somehow, spiritually ordained or bestowed upon the wearer. This bestowed power represents control over the actions and fates of others. Lady in Purple shows this
power most acutely in the *sechita* poem when she tells the story of the dancer/Goddess while
guiding sechita’s movements through the story as well.

Lady in Red was a hard color for me to match with a particular culture. I eventually
chose India for Lady in Red for one major reason; her involvement in the *latent rapist* scene.
During my time with the script, I was also following a story about arranged marriages in India
and how many of them were forced marriages which were enforced under pain of family
dishonor, community banishment, and even death. I saw many correlations between the lines
Lady in Red spoke in *latent rapist* and the issues that many Indian women were going through at
the time.

**LADY IN RED:** a rapist is always to be a stranger to be legitimate someone
you never saw a man wit obvious problems. (Shange, 17/)

The sad irony in this line fit the lives of many women. In India with arranged marriages.
For American women, in the fact that women still struggle to prove rape in cases of dating and/
or actually being married to their rapist. In the story I was following about the Indian women, her
marriage and her husband were forced upon her. This line, along with the direction of the poem,
sums up a popular misconception in society about what a rapist looks like; “a man wit obvious
problems.” As we see when we delve further into the piece, rapists come in all different shapes,
sizes, and relational connections. They don’t always come as a person with, what Shange calls,
“obvious problems”. In my view, they can also come in the form of arranged marriages.

**LADY IN RED:** women relinquish all personal rights in the presence of a
man who apparently cd be considered a rapist (Shange, 20/)

I do not suggest that all arranged marriages turn grooms into rapists and brides into rape
victims. I do however posit that an arranged marriage can turn into a forced marriage the
moment the bride has to continue with a ceremony she doesn't with to continue with. When this
occurs and the bride is forced to wed, any and all actions made within that forced coupling are
forced. That includes work to maintain the relationship and family affects; labor, habitation, and
of course, sex, which acts as a part of the forced coupling. It is not hard to view this as rape. As I
mentioned earlier, though 1972 saw the first rape crisis center in the United States, many states
in the country exempted husbands from being charged with rape well into the 1990’s.

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Meka Clifford embodied this reality of force, violence, and marriage most clearly in her gripping story telling of a *nite wit beau willie brown*

Lady in Orange would have been an American Puerto Rican or an American Afro-Cuban Lady had I had access to one. My reasoning for this statement is short, clear, and comes from the text itself.

*LADY IN ORANGE: i dont wanna write in english or spanish i wanna sing, make you dance like the bata dance scream twitch hips wit me… (Shange, 14/)

The Bata origins and the Spanish language reference in the piece speak of the Latin culture. With that being said, I could not have asked for a more delightful and captivating performer than Ms. Lauren Kelly.

The African-American actress, Cherith Scott was my choice to be Lady in Yellow and my choice to represent China. Her presence was as energetic as moving water. I chose yellow to represent China based on the geographic phenomenon which is the Huang He (The Yellow River). This world wonder is the second largest river in all of China and the seventh largest in the world.

Lady in Blue is, by the text, Latin or Spanish in nature. Though the poem does say that she was a, “reglar niggah”, she speaks in Latin about Latin culture. She would have been an additional Afro-Cuban cast member.

*LADY IN YELLOW: do you speak spanish?*

*LADY IN BLUE: olá… (Shange, 11/)

I also wanted to view Lady in Blue as Latin to speak to the issue of Catholicism in the Spanish community and how that affects views on abortion and health care for women; especially low income women. According to Legal Monument, “Women in America are still 35 percent more likely than men to be poor in America, with single mothers facing the highest
risk”. What happens to young Latin women raised in the Catholic church who face pregnancy, constantly defunded health care services, and the sharp rise in the incarceration of blacks and Latin/Chicano/ Mexican-American men; possibly making her a single parent? How do these circumstances inform whether Latinas decide to have a child or consider abortion? During the timeline of the play’s production, the answers to my questions were framed by the church more so than they are now. According to Maria Echaveste, former Deputy Chief of Staff for President Clinton, the views on abortion in the Latin community have become much more diverse. On the website, The Hill’s Congress Blog: Where Lawmakers Come To Blog, Echaveste reports, for instance, that 7 in 10 Latinos support a woman’s right to have an abortion if she so chooses. This view sharply diverges from the Catholic church’s opinion on the subject. In addition, the Pew Research Center’s 2013 National Survey of Latinos and Religion finds that a majority (55%) of the nation’s estimated 35.4 million Latino adults – or about 19.6 million Latinos – identify as Catholic today. Though the number of Latin Catholics are declining, this research still points to a paradox of faith and practical reality for Latinas faced with an abortion decision to be made.

I was lucky and honored to work with Ms. Angela Brito Silva, an Afro-Dominican-American who spoke fluent Spanish and used her Dominican accent to clearly communicate a Spanish presence in the for colored girls... world.

I placed Lady in Brown firmly in the African-American experience. She introduces the audience to all the Ladies asking them to, “sing a black girl song”. This may be asked by any person, but I feel that the words demand an attention to a history that has its roots in the Black Body and no other. There are other cultural markers in the text which lend themselves to the performative Black body. Mari Taylor was not only a talented Black body, but she also presented strength and nobility in her movements; attributes which were requirements for Lady in Brown.

**The Land on Which They Stand: Mini-Plays, Many Stages**

This concept of many stages for the mini-plays came to me once Kate Hawthorne told me how she planned to use multiple platforms to build the structures on set. Once I saw the platforms placed, my concept of mini-plays merged with the design. I now had multiple

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8Legal Momentum is the nation's oldest legal defense and education fund dedicated to advancing the rights of all women; younger and older. (http://www.legalmomentum.org/about/, 1)
platforms to act as multiple stages for performance. This new reality had a significant influence on my staging and blocking concepts for the show. Each mini-play now had many stages to project from.

(SET DESIGN)
As we can see here, there were two main sections to the set: the pyramid and mountain. These two structures ranged in height from 6 inches to 5 feet in the air, in the case of the mountain. Every angle of each structure points to large sections of the audience guaranteeing that the production is seen by the maximum amount of audience members.

The Land on Which They Stand: Black Box Directing in my Dreams

To give further context to this title, I should tell you about a dream I had. During Miami University’s Thanksgiving break, I dreamt about the production of *for colored girls...* It was a dream which involved told about the world itself; what it would look like. This world was full of
angels varying levels. Sharp triangles, rectangles, and squares were the shapes that appeared to me. In my dream, there were two structures on set, a pyramid and a mountain.

When I introduced this idea to my set designer, she went right to work realizing my vision and adding to it. She introduced the idea of connecting together the two structures in my dream; an idea which helped to create a physical connection between the two pieces. The set became just as visually in touch with itself as the Ladies would be with each other while performing on it. With precise interview questions, she developed model after model until the vision for the set was met.

Directing for Studio 88, the Black Box Theatre at Miami University, was a unique opportunity. Black Box theatres allow for nontraditional theatre to take place. Its dark emptiness is an invitation to fill the void with your universe as well as the spatial position from which we observe and are observed in that universe. To that end, I chose to rearrange the seating. The audience would now occupy a different place in the Black Box; an ‘L’ shape. Reorienting the seating in Studio 88 allowed me to pull the audience into the angles of the set and performance. I wanted the ‘L’ shape to prompt their eyes, heads, and bodies to constantly engage, adjust, and absorb the spectacle and content of the play.

**The Stage and Performance are Everywhere**

Black Box theatres have traditionally been places where the imagination of the director is expected to fill the stage. By uprooting the audience from their ritualized seating, I chose to fill the theatre space and not just the stage. The configuration also placed audience members in the sight-lines of the performers, other portions of the audience itself, and all their reactions and responses to performance: the Performing Audience (PA) and the Observing Audience (OA). The ‘L’ shaped seating angled the audience in such a way that portions of audience members became a part of the landscape of performance. Reactions to the play became interactions between the (PA), the observer audience (OA), and the performers in performance. Each time the blocking changed sending Ladies across, up, and down the stage, angles changed and the (PA) section would shift to another place in the audience and in turn, (OA) would shift as well.
The Angles: Realizing The Set

The dream to create the stage was vivid to me that I was able to recall and hold it in my mind. The longer I recalled and held it, the more I could intellectually analyze it. As I did, I realized partners and logic about those patterns. I began to be able to overlay theatrical techniques onto my dream that would help the production. My dreams, education, and experiences merged to give all three a deeper purpose in this project.

As an actor who directs, I am constantly in tune with how a set can help or hinder a performer. In my directorial vision, the set and its actors are extensions of each other. Sets are a part of the text in a script. Their hindrance or support of the actor/actress must be based on furthering the themes and motifs of that script. The set and its characters act as focusing lenses for the author's words. For this play, I had to be clear on the shapes and angles I was looking for and what I wanted them to do.

Practically speaking, I wanted the angles of the set to act as lines that the actresses could align themselves up with. In doing so, the performers would never find themselves closed to the audience. The angles of the set automatically pointed the actresses out and directly toward sections of the audience while leaving them open to the other sections not directly being addressed. My visual desire was to off-set the sharp, calculated angels and edges of the set with the curves and roundness of the women on stage.

Costume

NOTE:

"These clothing matches would mimic a style of garb indicative of that continent’s general cultural and historical traditions."

The concept behind this statement is meant to be general. I understand that it may even border the edge of stereotyping. The frustration of being stereotyped demands that I offer my regrets to any persons that comprise the cultures I am very limitedly representing who may be offended.

Just like the set design, my concept of the costumes was a product of a dream; a daydream to be exact. First, I knew I wanted to connect the wardrobe to the clothing styles from the different cultures and continents I was looking to represent. These clothing matches would mimic a style of garb indicative of that continent’s general cultural and historical traditions.
What I didn’t want to do was to keep each woman bound to their color. I was exploring the idea of a color based connectedness between the Ladies. To do so, the colors which each lady represented had to be mobile; interchangeable in a sense, among all the Ladies. The colors, which represented different ladies, lives, and experiences could be adopted and adapted to fit into and represent other lady’s lives and experiences. This meant that while the colored pieces of the costume were being shared or discarded, the color left needed to symbolize unity. In this, the Ladies, through a unified color, would represent different components of sameness; a costumed representation of a universalism. When they take off their culture colored costume pieces, they must have a color underneath which shows they share a unifying reality and interconnectedness. But how do I not confuse the audience? How do they know that when colors are taken that the color left signifies the universalism I spoke on in my theoretical chapter. Black under costumes, Eureka! So, the primary costumes would be black and detachable multi-continental design styles would be lain over and removable. That gave me the visual unity I needed.

The costumes would also be augmented with costume accessories like scarves, arm bags, etc. The experience exchanges would be expressed when the Ladies would wear accessories that were the other Lady's colors. For example, Lady in Yellow may have a red bracelet on; Lady in Purple may have on a Brown necklace. These costume pieces served as the second level of visual ties which bonded the Ladies to each other creating interconnectedness between them, as the black under costumes represented the first level.

I checked in with my costume designer, Grace Czerniawski. She was open to the idea and began to develop a line of clothing which communicated my intent. She also introduced the idea of colored accessories and was instrumental in helping me to determine the types of accessories I could think about. I explained to her that I needed the colors of the women to be physically transferable from Lady to Lady. I only thought of scarves and hang bags, but she opened me to many more costume additions and accessories. Necklaces were just one of her ideas. She added earrings and shoes as well. The costume section of my world took shape. The Ladies wore a garb which spoke to my perception of their particular culture while also adorning interchangeable accessory pieces which spoke to a costumed sharing. The base line costume was enlivened with the colors of each Lady and made mobile by the smaller costume pieces which were picked up from the stage or passed out by the ladies among each other.
Lights & Why

The lighting layout for the show was built by Miami University’s lighting/sound faculty member, professor Russ Blain. He worked in ways which enhanced the production tremendously. Because of the nature of the movement in the show, Professor Blain noted that more lights would be needed. Professor Blain had to light a space which contained multiple spaces and more than one world.

To address his challenge, he brought more lighting equipment to the theatre and completely switched out the old Studio 88 sound/light board and replaced it with a newer version that could do the job the sound and lighting plan asked of it. He even talked about adding a smoke machine, but we didn’t have the time to install it. I needed the lights to take both the audience and the performers themselves, to another place. My lighting needed to be yet another layer of text. Russ and I mapped out each lighting change and how it would change. With his help, I was able to give the lights a rhythm which was similar to the rhythm of the script and the blocking.

Of the many stage pictures created by the lighting, the one which seemed to catch the attention of many audience members is one which had no stage lighting at all. It was a complete black out. During my director’s talkback, many audience members either, asked me about, or were intrigued by, the lighting choice in that scene. They wanted to understand, why I didn’t want them (the audience) to see that scene or why I didn’t stage the violence of what the women were talking about? Why not use Ryanaustin in the latent rapist?

I decided to go to a black out in the house during the latent rapist scene for a few reasons. The first being that I didn’t want to personify the negative maleness in this piece. The images from the text were so vivid and sharp that I felt to add a body to those images would have been overbearing. I also felt that it would be insensitive and unnecessarily traumatic to the female population at Miami University and audience members. At the time of the production, Miami University had the honor of hosting fifty audience members from a local women’s shelter. Those audience members have lived with physicalized abuse of one kind or another for much of their adult lives. For them to have to sit through such a show with that level of violence would not only be morbidly repetitive, but also self-abusive in its irony, as the women would have been paying for their own visual torture.
Conceptually speaking, for me, the power and pain which lay in that scene came from the idea of not knowing. For me, the idea of knowing your rapist as a friend and never, once, seeing that they were planning to violate you, is terror. The poem talks about that mental non-sight. I wanted to externalize and present that internal process of mind blindness by creating sight blindness.

By staging the piece in a blackout, the words said by the Ladies literally come out of a dark and frightening place; a place unseen by the eye and by insinuation, unknown to the mind or heart until the moment of the horror event. The alternating lines being spoken by the Ladies turn into an echo chamber of anger, fear, doubt, and discontent. Voices are, at first, close, then, heard in the distance; they switch directions coming from the left then the right. The locations, direction, and levels of the voices modulate. I hoped to give a dramatic dynamism to the terror of the experience which would accentuate Shange's message of the piece; rape is a devastating attack on the mind and body, but rape coupled with the betrayal of being violated by someone you know is a devastating attack on the mind, body, and spirit.

**Sound**

Much of the sound and music in the production was given to us by the play itself. Professor Blain, who was also the sound designer, and I played with adding sound to a few sections of the script while primarily leaving the rest of the text alone. Sound helped in conveying memories and in creating environment.

The sound of memories being communicated to the audience worked especially well during Lady in Yellow’s story of graduation and through the stories of other Ladies recalling memories of dance and music. During the toussaint poem, Russ was able to create outdoor sound which turned the inside of the theatre into an outdoor park. Abortion, a story told by Lady in Blue, was underscored with pace changing heart beats which mimicked the physiological tensions in the heart beats of a young Ladies who are about to undergo the trauma of abortion.

**Blocking**

Blocking this or any versions of for colored girls... is a monumental task. The text, the images, and the sounds are ever-flowing. The physical movement in the play had to be just as fluid. My aim was to keep the audience constantly moving and adjusting to the new locations
and circumstances the play and its performers presented. To do anything else would have left the play static. The literary vibrancy would have been nullified by the physical stagnancy. With that in mind, I made use of as much physicality as I could. The dynamism of the set and the text gave me a rhythm which sparked thoughts in my blocking deliberations. With stage movement, the blocking had to securely set them into the space of the world they were in without permanently planting them there.

The play is made up of poems, but the performance is not a poetry set. The work lives, breathes, and must move with the same elegance and that strength it's spoken with. I encouraged my cast to find words in the text that made them move or at the very least, elicited a physical response from them. I took those and other movements that were found via rehearsals and crafted them into stage blocking.

The improvisational way in which I and the cast developed stage blocking, also informed entrances and exits. Through exploration, the text seemed to speak to the rate of speed we should take for moving from poem to poem. I listened to that speech. The energy of the Ladies mixed with the ideas of the text led me to clear moments when some poems lingered and other poems needed to role seamlessly from one to the other.

The stage blocking not only had to connect the performers to the text, but the performers to each other. This ideal is seen most crisply through the blocking in the final scene of the play. As seen in the set design, up center stage is covered by a five feet mountain made of platforms which peek at the top of the structure. The mountain, as a symbol of a barrier, struggle, as well as triumph is found in multiple cultures and faiths. I use this concept in the scene.

After Lady in Red finishes her story about Beau Willie Brown, I directed her to begin a slow motion climb towards the top of the mountain. I chose to use slow motion movement to communicate the heavy struggle Lady in Red had to endure to find God inside of herself. When she reached and sat atop the mountain, I then directed her to speak her final monologue while using an imagined connection to the other Ladies to pull them towards the same mountain top of self-realization she had just newly climbed and attained. While moving and being pulled up the mountain by Lady in Red, the other ladies reach out with their imagined connections to catch and pull their sister colors up the mountain as well. Each lady is pulling and being pulled by the other in the quest to find God in themselves. I decided to end the play with
the ladies still actively engaged in pulling and being pulled. As the lights faded, the idea of continued struggle remained active.

The appendix section of my thesis will be show another potion of my blocking decisions. It will give context to the portion of the play between sixty through sixty-four; the ending section of the play. I speak about this section (*Finding God: My Vision*) in my production chapter. My Appendix will map out the blocking while reiterating my perspective. The sections of the diagram which shows the stage will be marked A-G. The markings will match a particular Lady. The placement on the diagram will represent their placement at the top of the choreopoem, *a laying on of hands*.

**Finding God: My Vision**

In directing and choreographing this scene, my blocking consisted of perpetual movement. This movement sent, first, Lady in Red then her sisters steadily up the mountain structure in slow motion. The mountain represented both a mountain-like struggle and the summit upon which victorious struggle sat. My intention was not to communicate that the ladies finding God in themselves would end their struggle, but rather dignify it or make it a hallowed act. The holly act of climbing and sitting atop the mountain would play itself out through movement.

In reviewing the text, my own thoughts, and the doctrines of many faiths, I came to the belief that finding God is just as much, the beginning of great struggle as it is the beginning of great peace. In my view, the struggle of finding that within whom we call God, gives struggle itself a greater purpose and meaning. That quest takes an individual's struggle out of the hands of their abuser and situations it firmly in the hands of those who struggle. This concept of agency with one’s own struggle is most eloquently delivered in a film on Mohandas K. Gandhi named after the Indian civil rights activist himself, called *Gandhi* in which he tells the British that it is time they left the country.

*Gandhi*: All nations contain religious minorities. Like other countries, ours will have its problems. But they will be ours -- not yours. (Briley)
Once your struggle is in your own hands, it truly and officially becomes your struggle. You own and benefit from both its’ loses and triumphs. That is the power of self-realized Godhood. You now possess your struggle and it is no longer in the hands of abusers and fools; for your struggle is the only power over you that abusers and fools have. Once your struggle is yours, control over your own evolution is yours as well. No one can hold you back.

This chapter was an intense review of the elements of the play, its characters, and my directorial decisions which bore out in production. This section of my thesis acts as a more specific extension of the dramaturgical chapter before it, which was a wide sweeping analysis of the author and her additional works.

**Conclusion**

I began my examination of this play with a question; ‘What are the origins of *for colored girls...?*’ The aim of my question was to explore the possibility and the actuality of a multicultural production of the play. My extended intentions were to expand the concept of a multicultural production of the play to include new ideas of a multinational perspective and possibly a multinational adaptation of the play. I believe the production can become a transnational representation of not only black liberation text, but female liberation text which can flow from the mouths, paradigms, and realities of women of any and all hemispheres.

My justifications for the staging of a multicultural production of *for colored girls...* are as clear as I can make them. The play’s history speaks clearly. Black feminism and Third world feminism all speak clearly. My production speaks clearly. Shange has been very straight forward about the origins of the play’s casting and her intentions to make the work reach all women of color. Her desire to add an Asian woman to the cast in the Broadway debut is but one action which speaks to that. I believe that the future of the work lies in an expansion of its past. The play can remain tradition and ritual in the African American community or it can be reinvigorated with new nationalities, new perspectives, new audiences, and new possibilities.
Appendix A:

Excerpt from Prompt Book
A. LADY IN RED (L.R)  PLATFORM (P.F.)
B. LADY IN PURPLE (L.P.)
C. LADY IN GREEN (L.G.)
D. LADY IN BLUE (L.B.)
E. LADY IN YELLOW (L.Y.)
F. LADY IN ORANGE (L.O.)
G. LADY IN BROWN (L.BR.)

lady in red (A)  L.R. BEGIN A SLOW MOTION CRAWL AND BODY DRAG S.L. FROM PLATFORM
i waz missin somethin  #7

lady in purple (B)  L.P. STAYS IN PLACE ON PLATFORM
somethin so important  #7

lady in orange (F)  L.O. STAYS IN PLACE ON PLATFORM
somethin promised  #14

lady in blue (D)  L.B. STAYS IN PLACE ON PLATFORM
a layin on of hands  #8

lady in green (C)  L.G. STAYS IN PLACE ON PLATFORM
fingers near my forehead  #6

60/
lady in yellow (B)
strong

lady in green (C)
cool

lady in orange (F)
movin

lady in purple (B)
makin me whole

lady in orange (F)
sense

lady in green (C)
pure

lady in blue (D)
all the gods comin into me
layin me open to myself

lady in red (A)
i was missin somethin

lady in green (C)
somethin promised
lady in orange \(^{(F)}\)
somethin free
L.O. STAYS IN PLACE ON PLATFORM #14

lady in purple \(^{(B)}\)
a layin on of hands
L.P. STAYS IN PLACE OF PLATFORM #7

lady in blue \(^{(D)}\)
i know bout/ layin on bodies/ layin outta man
bringin him alla my fleshy self & some of my pleasure
bein taken full eager wet like i get sometimes
i waz missin somethin
L.B. STAYS IN PLACE ON PLATFORM #8

lady in purple \(^{(B)}\)
a layin on of hands
L.P. STAYS IN PLACE ON PLATFORM #7

lady in blue \(^{(D)}\)
not a man
L.B. STAYS IN PLACE ON PLATFORM #8

lady in yellow \(^{(E)}\)
l.y. STAYS IN PLACE ON PLATFORM #10

lady in purple \(^{(B)}\)
not my mama/ holdin me tight/ sayin
i'm always gonna be her girl
not a layin on of bosom & womb
a layin on of hands

the holiness of myself released

L.P. STAYS IN PLACE UNTIL SHE REACHES THE ENDING WORD OF THE LAST LINE.

SHE THEN BEGINS, ALONG WITH THE REST OF HER SISTERS, TO MAKE THE SLOW MOTION CLIMB UP THE MOUNTAIN THAT L.R. JUST FINISHED...
lady in red
i sat up one nite walkin a boardin house
screamin/ cryin/ the ghost of another woman
who waz missin what i waz missin
i wanted to jump up outta my bones
& be done wit myself
leave me alone
& go on in the wind
it waz too much
i fell into a numbness
til the only tree i cd see
took me up in her branches
held me in the breeze
made me dawn dew
that chill at daybreak
the sun wrapped me up swingin rose light everywhere
the sky laid over me like a million men
i waz cold/ i waz burnin up/ a child
& endlessly weavin garments for the moon
wit my tears

i found god in myself
& i loved her/ i loved her fiercely

All of the ladies repeat to themselves softly the lines 'i found god in myself & i loved her.' It soon becomes a song of joy, started by
the lady in blue. The ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks the ladies enter into a closed tight circle.

B, D, E, AND F ARE NOW ON P.F. # 11.
C IS NOW ON P.F. # 8. ALL THE LADIES, SAVE L. BR. ARE REACHING FOR L. R WHO REACHES FOR THEM

lady in brown (G)
& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows

L. BR REACHES WITH HAND STRETCHED OUT AND UP.
ALL OTHER LADIES ARE ACTIVELY REACHING FOR L. R. AND EACH OTHER IN SLOW MOTION. LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.

THE END.

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Works Cited


