RECOVERING DRAMATIC LOSSES:
READING NTOZAKE SHANGE'S SPELL #7
THROUGH AFRICAN-AMERICAN DRAMATIC TRADITIONS

A Thesis

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by
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DEDICATION

To Mom, Hely, Patrick, Viola, Tracey and Kemp

and especially to all the saints and ancestral spirits who have

been with me every step of the way.
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Introduction

This study is an analysis of Spell #7, a theatre piece by African-American female writer, Ntozake Shange, within a context of critical theory as set forth by advocates of Black Theatre in the United States. It is both a textual analysis of Shange's work and an overview of African-American dramatic theory of the Twentieth Century. Such an examination is justified for three distinct purposes.

First, Shange is a writer who has been acknowledged by advocates of both feminist theatre and Black theatre. Her theatre piece, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf, became a commercial Broadway success and garnered critical acclaim. With this work Shange introduced a new performance style to mainstream culture, the choreopoem. She has been considered an innovator in the development of American theatre practices since that time, making examination of her writing style important to on-going developments in American Theatre. Secondly, examination of Shange's work is particularly important as an example of developing trends in the specific realm of African-American dramatic tradition. Her stylistic innovations express African-American dramatists' continual search for a Black stage identity that is both elementally and fundamentally distinct from Eurocentric
dramatic traditions. Third, and more importantly, such an evaluation also provides an opportunity to acknowledge a tradition of African-American dramatic theory as a distinctive critical field. Some critics and reviewers have attacked Shange for her rejection of Eurocentric dramatic principles. These critics are united in their insistence on attempting to use Eurocentric criteria for the evaluation of her work. Such criticisms deny and reject, either by choice or by ignorance, a tradition of Afrocentric literary and dramatic critical theory. The present study identifies specific African-American traditions of evaluation for African-American drama and integrates a reading of Shange through those traditions. Spell #7 is used as representative of Shange's style and direction for that specific reason.

Shange's first published dramatic stage presentation, For Colored Girls, focuses on a theme of Black women. Her next "poem play," A Photograph: Lovers in Motion/ A Photograph: Still Life with Shadows, experimented with attempts at a more formalized structure. It was in Spell #7 that, according to director Oz Scott, Shange came into her own as a dramatist of independent means.1 In Spell #7, aspects of the past, present, and future prospects of African-American theatre can be seen. The piece is also an expression of Shange's theoretical philosophy on the development of African-American dramatic tradition. In the essay, "Unrecovered Losses/ Black Theatre Traditions," Shange expresses concern for the continued loss of Black identity in the American theatre. She

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1 Oz Scott, Telephone interview, 2 February, 1992.
recalls elements of Black heritage that distinguish the potential of African-American dramatists and expresses need for an independently created aesthetic for African-American theatre. This study focuses on Spell #7 as her expression of such an aesthetic. While it is acknowledged that Shange is recognized as a feminist writer, this study is directly concerned with the development of African-American aesthetic perspectives and highlights that focus over feminist issues.

It is this focus on African-American dramatic aesthetics, rather than the general fields of Black aesthetics or feminism, that makes this study different from others. Previous studies on the dramatic work of Shange have fallen primarily into one of these two camps (Black aesthetics and Feminism). Major studies by Elizabeth Brown ("Six Female Black Playwrights: Images of Blacks in Plays by Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, Sonia Sanchez, Barbara Nolette, Martie Charles, and Ntozake Shange," The Florida State University, 1980)² and Serena Anderlini ("Gender and Desire in Contemporary Drama: Lillian Hellman, Natalia Ginzburg, Franca Rame and Ntozake Shange," University of California at Riverside, 1987)³ are part of feminist approaches to Shange. In both cases, Shange is viewed within a context of other women playwrights. Brown looks at the particular realm of African-American females while Anderlini looks at a more varied sphere of American, Jewish and Italian female dramatists. Most feminist analyses of Shange’s drama center on For

³ Washington, 12, 29.
Colored Girls. One notable exception is Karen Croanacher's, "Unmasking the Minstrel Mask's Black Magic in Ntozake Shange's spell #7 [sic]." Croanacher provides a critique of Shange's reversal of the White male created minstrel image of Black Americans. This article is also one of the few specific examinations of Spell #7. Another is Margaret Wilkerson's brief introduction to the text in *9 Plays by Black Women.*

As part of the broader fields of Black literary and dramatic aesthetics, Shange has been mentioned in most published studies since the late 1970s. Sandra Richards has analyzed "Conflicting Impulses in the Plays of Ntozake Shange" with a focus on Shange's "call to divinity," relating aspects of Black African oriented religious traditions to three dramatic works. "'The Poetry of a Moment': Politics and the Open Form in the Drama of Ntozake Shange," by John Timpane, is a discussion of Shange's use of the "open text" and her rejection of Eurocentric desire for structured form and closure. Tejumola Olaniyan discusses Shange as part of a group of African, African-American, and Caribbean dramatists in his identification of an Afrocentric and Post-Afrocentric dramatic

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discourse in "Difference, Differently." 8

There have also been examinations of Shange that concentrated directly on her innovations in dramatic style and structure. The major work in this area has been done by Neal Lester in a 1988 dissertation at Vanderbilt University entitled, "Ntozake Shange's Development of the Choreopoem." 9 Deborah Geis, in "Distaught Laughter: Monologue in Ntozake Shange's Theater Pieces," 10 explains Shange's use of the monologue as a dramatic narrative device and my own earlier essay, "Theatrical Expressionism as Exemplified in the Structure and Language of Ntozake Shange's Spell #7," 11 looks at Shange's rebellion against the tradition of the well-made play.

The missing focus in all previous discussions of Shange's work has been a connection to the specific tradition of African-American dramatic theory. The goal here is to address such a void by reading Shange's Spell #7 through a historical perspective rather than through a moment in time. This study is therefore a twofold analysis. First, in the historical context, the African-American dramatic traditions of Nineteenth Century Minstrelsy, The Harlem

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Renaissance of the 1920s, and the Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s will be surveyed. Secondly, but not separately, a critical analysis of Shange's Spell #7 is undertaken in relation to each of the specific historical epochs discussed. Spell #7 is analyzed as an example of Shange's historical and theoretical philosophy at work in relation to the ongoing African-American tradition of dramatic theory, criticism and production.

Shange's background and innovative style are addressed and explained in Chapter I. Biographical data aids in understanding some of her artistic choices and provides perspective for the historical overviews presented in other chapters. Chapter II looks at the development of the American Minstrel Tradition. In this Chapter the creation of a national African-American image and the social implications which resulted are offset by Shange's (re)dressing of the issue. The theoretical focus of the Harlem Renaissance is discussed in Chapter III. The philosophies of W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke hi-light the potential of African-American spiritual nature paralleled with Shange's use of spirituality and magic in Spell #7. In Chapter IV the manifesto of one of Shange's major influences, Imamu Amiri Baraka, illustrates the goals of The Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement. In the latter part of Chapter IV, the revolt, assault and assertion of Black Power in Spell #7 is examined and evaluated. Chapter V asserts the continuing Revolutionary spirit of Shange and aligns her with a burgeoning Post-Revolutionary/ Post-Afrocentric/ Post-Modern Movement among
African-American dramatists. This Chapter presents new perspectives and suggests the need for further study.

The constant search for self identification and self expression among African-Americans is also manifested in terms of self address and altered use of general terminology. Throughout this study the terms African-American, Afro-American, Black, Negro and Colored are used interchangeably as indicative of changing historical perspectives. Wherever possible, African-American is the term of choice in referring to Black Americans of African decent and is hyphenated to illustrate the dual nature of that race. Black and White are capitalized whenever referring to racial groups.\textsuperscript{12} The word theatre will be spelled according to academic standard except when it appears as theater within a quote from another source. In such cases the spelling of theater is usually a deliberate rejection of the Eurocentric spelling of the term and the ideology associated with this action.

This study aims to prove that by using African-American critical theory to evaluate work by African-American dramatists, knowledge and insights which have been previously overlooked and mitigated by Eurocentric critics can be better illuminated, understood and valued. One objective is to unmask levels of meaning and expression in Spell \#7 that remain dormant when read through Eurocentric systems of evaluation. A larger objective is to show

\textsuperscript{12} Lynn Quitman Troyka, \textit{The Simons and Schuster Handbook for Writers}, (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1987) 493-30c. According to Troyka, when \textit{Black}, or \textit{Blacks} is used to mean a race of people it can be capitalized. Likewise \textit{White}, being substituted for \textit{Caucasian} can be capitalized.
the potential of Afrocentric perspectives in dramatic criticism for the (re)evaluation of the work of Shange and other dramatists. An historical overview of African-American dramatic theory and criticism illustrates progressive steps toward a creative aesthetic which is profoundly African-American. Analysis of Spell #7 illustrates Shange's importance and position as a leader toward the achievement of that goal.
CHAPTER I

She Who Comes Walking Like a Lion with Her Own Things

Ntozake Shange has been recognized by a number of sources as a leading writer of feminist plays. While she acknowledges and accepts the feminist role, she also always acknowledges and accepts the particular role of being an African-American female artist. In the foreword to her *Three Pieces* she outlines major concerns for the development of dramatic traditions based on an independently created African-American aesthetic. Shange's aesthetic is distinguished from traditional Western culture by its multi-disciplinary approach of mixing African-American forms of dance, music and poetic language. Her works are particularized within the traditions of African-American theatre by the inclusion of all of the aforementioned elements in combination with personal experiences and perspectives as both a feminist and an African-American writer. This chapter will present an overview of Shange's

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background, philosophy and dramatic stage works up to the 1979 production of Spell #7 in order to see her development as a writer for the theatre. In the latter part of the chapter Spell #7 will be described as a practical example of her philosophy of writing for the theatre.

Shange was born October 18, 1948 in Trenton, New Jersey, and is the oldest of Paul T. and Eloise Williams' three daughters and one son. She was given the name Paulette in honor of her father who expected a boy. Paul T. Williams was a medical surgeon and boxing physician and Eloise, a psychiatric social worker and educator. In 1961, while Paulette was eight years old, the family moved to St. Louis, Missouri, where the Williams children were provided a childhood of "material comfort and intellectual stimulation." The family's home life encouraged learning, achievement and artistic awareness with both parents highlighting significant aspects of African-American culture. Eloise concentrated on English-speaking artists and Paul "concentrated on the international sphere." Shange recalls:

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 because my father had friends from virtually all of the colonized French-, Spanish-, and English-speaking countries. So I knew I wasn't on this planet by myself. I had some connection

18 Vallesly, 44.
19 Betoko and Kowal, 374.
Ballets, especially those which featured African-American artists Carmen De Lavallade and Arthur Mitchell, were of particular concern for Mrs. Williams. Visitors to the Williams home included W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes as well as prominent musicians Dizzy Gillespie, Chuck Berry, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Chico Hamilton, Sonny Till, Lalo Schifrin, Mango Santa Maria, singer Josephine Baker and many different boxers. In the fifth grade young Paulette performed a solo violin concert. Sunday afternoon variety shows were a regular family event with Mrs. Williams reading from Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Shakespeare, Countee Cullen, and T. S. Eliot. Mr. Williams performed magic tricks and the four children comprised a musical quartet and danced soft-shoe routines.

Paulette became an avid reader at a young age and was influenced by authors Mark Twain, Simone de Beavoir, Herman Melville, William Faulker, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Shakespeare, Genet, Countee Cullen among others. She explained in *New Yorker* magazine, "I read all the Russians in English . . . and the French in French and the Spaniards with the aid of dictionaries."

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21 Tate, 157.


The five years that the Williams family resided in St. Louis were exciting to young Paulette because of the opportunities it provided her to enjoy opera, music, dance, literature and art.\textsuperscript{26} It was during these early years that she began writing stories.\textsuperscript{27} These were also traumatic years because she was bussed across the town’s invisible segregation line to integrate a German American school as a result of the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education desegregation decision.\textsuperscript{28} A racial incident at school, coupled with someone telling her that "Negroes" did not write, blocked her writing. Shange recalls that at this point her writing "just stopped."\textsuperscript{29} At the age of thirteen she returned to New Jersey with her family. She entered high school there and began writing again. Her poetry was published in a high school magazine, and she wrote several essays in English class. When she was told that she wrote too much about Black people she again stopped writing.\textsuperscript{30} She completed high school in New Jersey and would not resume writing until age nineteen.

In 1966, at the age of eighteen, Paulette married a Columbia University law student during her first year as a student at Barnard College. The marriage ended in divorce in 1967 and resulted in the first of several suicide attempts by the yet unknown author. Five

\textsuperscript{26} "The Talk of the Town," 18.

\textsuperscript{27} Tate, 171.

\textsuperscript{28} Brown, 241.

\textsuperscript{29} Tate, 171.

\textsuperscript{30} Tate, 171.
such attempts have been reported, including sticking her head in a
gas oven, drinking a can of Drano, slashing her wrist, taking an
overdose of Valium, and driving her car into the ocean.\textsuperscript{31} Each
tempt at death seems to have resulted from the frustration and
turmoil associated with the suppression of rage she felt against the
limitations of society. Channeling her energies into educational
pursuits, she focused on African-American music and poetry and
earned a B.A. degree in American Studies with honors from Barnard in
1970. In 1971, as a graduate student at the University of Southern
California in Los Angeles, Paulette Williams assumed the Zulu name
Ntozake Shange in an attempt to redirect her life and reinforce her
personal identity and African heritage. Ntozake (pronounced En-to-
Zah-ki) means, "she who comes with her own things." Shange
(pronounced Shong-gay) means, "one who walks like a lion."\textsuperscript{32} She
completed studies at USC receiving an M.A. degree in English
Literature\textsuperscript{33} and American Studies\textsuperscript{34} in 1973. Between 1972 and 1975
she taught Humanities, Women's Studies and African-American Studies
at Mills College and Sonoma State College, an extension of the
University of California.\textsuperscript{35} During this time Shange recited her
original poetry in and around Berkeley and San Francisco with Paula
Moss, Elvia Marta, Nashira Ntosha, Jessica Hagedorn, Joanna Griffin

\textsuperscript{31} Brown, 241. Also, Vallely, 44.
\textsuperscript{32} Brown, 241. Also, Vallely, 44.
\textsuperscript{33} Tate, 149.
\textsuperscript{34} Brown, 241.
\textsuperscript{35} Brown, 241.
and Third World Communications (The Woman's Collective). She studied dance with Raymond Sawyer and Ed Mock's Afro-American Dance Company, and Halifu Osumare's The Spirit of Dance. After "working in San Francisco [and] Berkeley public schools as an adjunct to Ethnic Studies," Shange and Moss began to develop a concept which Shange called the "choreopoem." Moss created choreography for a series of seven poems by Shange which, in the summer of 1974, became known as for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf. The piece was performed in San Francisco at the Bacchanal Bar, at Ed Mock's Dance Studio, Women's Studies Departments, Minnie's Can-Do Club and other bars, cafes, and poetry centers.

In 1975 Shange and Moss moved to New York City and began performing for colored girls in lower Eastside Manhattan bars. Shange's sister, Ifa Iyaun, introduced her to director Oz Scott who offered to help with theatrical development. The piece was later seen by producer Woody King, Jr., and produced as an Equity showcase production at The Henry Street Settlement's New Federal Theatre where King was Executive Producer. The production consisted of seven young Black women in bare feet, each wearing a simple dress of a different rainbow color. In many ways the work presents Shange's


37 Shange, Colored Girls, xii.

38 Shange, Colored Girls, xii-xiii.

own story of her search for self and five failed suicide attempts. In a larger sense the piece represents the real and stereotypical images and visions of psychologically and physically abused Black women through music, dance and poetry. Due to the overwhelming success of the work, producer King was able to convince producer Joseph Papp, of the New York Shakespeare Festival, to move the production to the Public Theatre in early 1976. Shange was critically hailed as a vibrant and innovative force in American theatre and "Off Broadway's most provoking new discovery."40 In September of 1976 For Colored Girls was moved to the Booth theatre on Broadway. The piece will forever be notable in American theatre history because "it introduced a new form, the choreopoem, to the professional stage and presented women's experience with a new intimacy and candor."41

In late 1977 Shange appeared at Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre Cabaret in Where the Mississippi Meets the Amazon. The title is from one of the poems in her 1978 book, Nappy Edges. This work was written and performed in collaboration with Jessica Hegedorn and Thulani Nkabinde with Shange as the leader of the group called "The Satin Sisters." The New York Times reported that the work was directed by Oz Scott and was like watching "The Supremes as poets, with Miss Shange as Diana Ross."42


41 Wilkerson, xxii.

The work was essentially a performance art piece in which each woman presented her own dramatic poetry "with occasional collaboration from their sisters, to music played by a spirited five-piece jazz band."\(^\text{43}\) The band, "Teddy and His Sizzling Romancers," was led by saxophonist David Murray, who would later become Shange’s second husband. *Mississippi* was considered a contrast to the distressing and anguished *Colored Girls* by offering soft, romantic, nostalgic images influenced and formulated by jazz. The tone of the show was based on a "feel good," relax and be joyful principle. It was presented for a series of Sunday performances.\(^\text{44}\) Other performance pieces created and performed by Shange include: *From Okra to Greens/ A Different Love Story*, performed at Columbia University in 1979; *It Hasnt [sic] Always Been This Way/ A Choreopoem*, performed with Diane McIntyre’s Sounds-in-Motion dance theatre ensemble at Symphony Space in New York City; and *Bocas: A Daughter’s Geography* (originally performed under the title *Mouths*) at The Kitchen in New York City in 1981. *Bocas* and *It Hasnt Always Been This Way* were later performed together under the title *Three for a Full Moon* at The Mark Taper Theater Lab in Los Angeles.\(^\text{45}\)

Shange’s second major piece for the theatre was an attempt at a slightly more traditionally structured work. *A Photograph: A Study of Cruelty*, subtitled a poem play, opened December 21, 1977, at the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre, Lu Esther Hall.

\(^{43}\) Gussow, 218.

\(^{44}\) Gussow, 218.

The work was again directed by Oz Scott with music composed by David Murray. Choreography was by Marsha Blano, and special visual material was provided by Collis Davis who worked in conjunction with scenic designer David Mitchell. Photograph was a work especially commissioned by Joseph Papp. Shange's original title was A Photograph: A Still Life With Shadows/ A Photograph: A Study of Cruelty. In its original form the play's central character was a female dancer named Michael who competes with three other characters for the love of a talented photographer named Sean David. The other characters include Nevada, a female lawyer with very Eurocentric perspectives on life and success; Claire, a cocaine junkie nymphomaniac model; and Earl, a prosperous upwardly mobile lawyer who wants to share a house with Sean. Richard Eder's New York Times review describes a violent scene in the original production in which Sean, suffering from the rejection of his artistic talent, destroys his lavish apartment and expensive equipment and punches Michael in the stomach. Eder goes on to say that the character of Sean is presented as one-dimensional and the other characters "lack even the one dimension; they are flat targets . . . every character, is really set up as a prop against which Michael can be wonderful." Later Shange rewrote the play. It was produced under the title, A Photograph: Lovers in Motion by Equinox Theatre in Houston, Texas.


47 Latour, 226.


in 1979. The Equinox production was directed by the author with choreography by Paula Moss. It is this form of the play which is published as part of *Three Pieces*.\(^5^0\) In its rewritten form, the plot centers more on the character of Sean and is somewhat less violent than the original text. Sean's dilemma is less concerned with the outside artistic criticism and more focused on personal choices. He must decide between Nevada's wishes to provide him with the finer things in life; Claire, who wishes to satisfy his sexual appetites as well as her own; Earl, who may have a homosexual relationship in mind; and Michael, who is concerned with helping him to build his self-esteem and materialize his dream of becoming a photographer of merit.\(^5^1\) In the end, Sean chooses Michael. The play is essentially true to the theme suggested by its several titles. It is a study in the cruelties of love and racial self-hatred. It is a look at one-dimensional relationships with shadows or illusions of depth. The linear progression of action and the greater use of a dialogue format make it Shange's closest attempt to date at formal Eurocentric derived dramatic construction.

On December 18, 1978 Shange presented a one-woman piece called *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* as part of the New York Shakespeare Festival's Poetry at the Public Theatre series.\(^5^2\) It presented the character of Layla, a young African-American woman who expressed her visions, dreams and memories in dance and poetry to musical


\(^{51}\) Brown, 249.

\(^{52}\) Shange, *Three Pieces*, 111.
accompaniment. In this performance Shange recalls that she presented herself with the problem of having her person, "body, voice & language/ address the space as if i were a band/ a dance company & a theater group all at once." The idea was to create "an emotional environment/ felt architecture." In 1979, Boogie Woogie Landscapes was presented in play form with the addition of six male and female night-life companions (n.l.o. – dream-memories). It was set in Layla's bedroom late one evening when she returns home from a night at the disco. The setting includes abstracted wall which allows the n.l.o. to enter and exit like ghost or dream spirits to assist in or present Layla's memories. The production was directed by Avery Brooks and choreographed by Dianne McIntyre. The setting was designed by McArthur Binion with sound by Sharon Combs. Baikida E. J. Carroll composed original music and directed a live instrumental ensemble. Elizabeth Brown has concluded that Boogie Woogie Landscapes is the most experimental of Shange's theater pieces to this time.

Much or Boogie Woogie Landscapes deals with Layla's difficulties during adolescence, and the biographical parallels between Layla and Ntozake Shange are apparent. Boogie Woogie Landscapes, with no traditional plot or theme, resembles the stream-of-consciousness style of James Joyce. Bits and pieces of Layla's experiences, memories, and dreams are presented in such fragmented fashion that it is difficult for audiences to find a theme.

Difficulties in understanding the seemingly fragmented style

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53 Shange, Three Pieces, 111.
54 Shange, Three Pieces, 111.
55 Brown, 250.
of Shange’s work is rather common, and Brown is not alone in her critique of this non-linear and disjointed arrangement of feelings. Part of the difficulty in understanding this form may lie in the inability of the critic or reader to acknowledge or accept the notion of a writer who expresses feelings so emotionally. The fallacy is to deny that, although Shange’s feelings are expressions of emotion they are also highly intellectual. She states: "I’m trying to change the idea of seeing emotions and intellect as distinct faculties. . . I have not segmented thinking from feeling."\textsuperscript{56} Brown, like many other critics of Shange, may be valid in her assessment of Shange’s work when read through the standards and perspectives of Eurocentric dramatic and literary traditions. What Brown and others fail to see or acknowledge is Shange’s deliberate rejection of such criteria for the evaluation of her work. Her goals do not always value themes and throughlines over her more important concerns with emotional impact. At the same time her works "refer to all kinds of intellectual disciplines and topics, such as psychotherapy, philosophy, music, literature, foreign languages and countries."\textsuperscript{57} She is a well read, well travelled, thinking individual and multi-dimensional artist (writer, director, dancer, actress, painter, and educator) with a unique expressive genius for perceiving the inherent in life and presenting its essence.

Shange's ultimate goal is the creation of "an independently

\textsuperscript{56} Tate, 156-157.

\textsuperscript{57} Tate, 156-157.
created afro-american [sic] aesthetic.\textsuperscript{58} This new aesthetic must include music, dance and speech as it has evolved naturally from African-American culture, so that it expresses the particular joys and pains of that culture. This aesthetic must identify what theatre is in an African-American sense rather than an Indo-European one. It must be an aesthetic that stands on the hyphen between the African and the American, illuminating the uniqueness of that position. It must be based on traditions that express the reasons and needs of a distinctive African-American sensibility. Toward this end, Shange's work attempts to show life in a highly personal and idiosyncratic manner and often takes on a politically radical temperament. Her personal struggle is one of finding objective means to project subjective ideas while avoiding obvious imitation of existing styles. In working against the constructs of European traditions, she is forced to reach deep into her psyche for a unique form of expression. What emerges is the personification of a fiery, emotional intellect and a heightened spirituality that is often beyond the comprehension of traditionalist thinkers. She has discovered that European developed laws of dramatic construction which characterize the well-made play, or the "perfect play",\textsuperscript{59} are in direct opposition to her instinctive needs and purposes. Her personal writing style illustrates a deliberate disregard for such notions.

An expressionistic use of language is immediately apparent in

\textsuperscript{58} Shange, \textit{Three Pieces}, ix.

\textsuperscript{59} Shange, \textit{Three Pieces}, ix.
the work of Shange upon seeing her printed texts. Her manner of writing everything in lower case lettering and her use of the virgule symbol, or slash mark (/), as the punctuation of choice is clearly abstract and non-traditional. She also makes use of other informal modes in writing, such as the use of the ampersand sign (&) or the letter "n" in place of the word "and", and the use of the letter "z" often in place of the letter "s" particularly as a word ending. She sometimes minimizes certain words to only the letters needed for their understandable pronunciation, such as "blk" for black, "abt" for about, "wd" for would, and "ta" for to, which gives this particular word and others like it more of the sound of Black dialect. She gives reason for this expressive mode:

i cant 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 of the world & the "self.".... /in order to think n communicate the thoughts n feelings i want 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.

She acknowledges the influences of many Black and Latin writers on her work. The most influential appear to be Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) works and the works of Ishmael Reed, expressing a particular like for Reed's use of diction. She states:

Basically, the spellings reflect language as I hear it. I don't write because words come out of my brain. I write this way because I hear the words... if I'm hearing a rumba, you'll get a poem that looks like a

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60 Shange, Three Pieces, xi.

61 Betsko and Koenig, 367.
rumba on the page. So the structure is connected to the music that I hear beneath the words.62

Writing for Shange is a "very rhythmic and visceral experience."63 Dance and music are major tools that she uses to aid the development of her dramatic communicative skills. Choreographers and musicians are always essential to the creation and development of all of her theatrical pieces. It is Shange's theory that theatre "is an all encompassing moment"64 and that writers for the theatre, specifically African-American writers, should use everything available to "move our theater into the drama of our lives."65 The idea is not to isolate the different aspects of fine art, but rather to bring them all together in the creation of a higher art.

The theatre piece Spell #7, subtitled, geechee jubara quick magic trance manual for technologically stressed third world people, is a perfect example of Shange's theory as art, making a particularly profound statement toward her personal philosophy for a distinctive African-American aesthetic. Spell #7 is neither a play nor a musical in the traditional Eurocentric sense. Within this piece can be found elements of the African-American theatrical past, present and future. According to Richard Eder, it is "a series of poetic sketches around a central theme; a set of variations that shift from comical to ironic to sorrowful, moving us all the while very directly and strongly."66 Don Nelsen believes that "Ntozake

62 Tate, 163-164.
63 Betsko and Koenig, 365.
64 Shange, Three Pieces, xi.
65 Shange, Three Pieces, ix.
Shange's 'spell #7' is black magic. It is a celebration of blackness, the joy and pride along with the horror of it. It is a shout, a cry, a bitter laugh, a sneer. It is an extremely fine theatre piece." 67 Marilyn Stasio states, "Through narrative bridges, she raises plenty of themes: the artist's gift/curse to 'make magic,' society's manipulation of its artists, the exploitation of blacks by whites." 68 These comments are interesting in that they refer to different stages of development of this work. Eder and Nelsen relate to a finished product while Stasio comments on a workshop production. The workshop opened at the Public Theatre's The Other Space in early June of 1979. Shange was one of the twelve performers who appeared in the show with Oz Scott repeating directorial tasks. Even at this early stage, Christoher Sharp felt that "this is more of a play than anything Shange has had staged in the past." 69 After a brief showcase the piece was returned to rehearsals at which point the text was pruned and focused, and the cast was cut to nine members. Shange cut herself from the cast at this time. Director, Oz Scott, recalls that a controversial poem in the piece about "white girls" was eliminated


from the script during this second rehearsal period. There was
talk of moving the show to Broadway. Producer, Joseph Papp, said
that if the poem was not taken out of the show it would not be
moved. Spell #7 did have an official Off-Broadway opening on July
15, 1979, at the larger Public Theatre/Anspacher space without the
"white girls" poem. This poem does appear in the printed text of
the piece.70

The show begins with the dramatic device of a minstrel mask,
which serves a dual purpose. The mask is a reminder that original
American theatrical forms stem in part from African-American roots,
and it is a reflection of an image with both positive and negative
connotations for African-Americans. A huge black-face minstrel mask
is hanging on the open stage as the audience enters. The authors
production notes for the opening of the show declares:

once the mask is all that can be seen, lou, the
magician, enters. he is dressed in the traditional
costume of Mr. Interlocutor: tuxedo, bow-tie, top hat
festooned with all kinds of whatnots that are obviously
meant for good luck, he does a few catchy "soft-shoe"
steps & begins singing a traditional version of a black
play song.71

The magician goes into a poetic monologue explaining that his
Father was also a magician who gave up the profession when a young
Black child asked to be made White. During the course of this
monologue, the rest of the cast enters dressed as tattered
fieldhands wearing black-faced minstrel masks. After the
magician's monologue the cast goes into a minstrel show production

70 Scott, 2 February, 1992.
71 Shange, Three Pieces, 7.
number with identifiable elements of every period of African-American entertainment. When the "song and dance" number is done, the magician delivers another monologue which counteracts the "automatic" audience applause. In this speech he illuminates the ironies of being a Black kid in America and invites the audience to live his life for him. One of the cast members removes his mask to the astonishment of the others and gives his personal account of growing up in St. Louis. The other cast members are moved to remove their masks at this point, revealing themselves to be human and contemporary. One of the female cast members who is revealed as a modern dancer in a laced unitard, does a lyrical but pained solo as another cast member speaks an abstract poem about his dreams. This complete, the magician repeats his challenge to the audience to "c'mon & live my life for me" then waves his hands commanding the minstrel face to disappear. As the mask disappears, the interior of a lower East side Manhattan bar is revealed. The magician goes to the juke box in the bar and plays the first of several Black and Latin recordings that will accompany the actors throughout the course of the evening: "We Are Family" by Sister Sledge. The bartender comes forth with a welcoming monologue, and as he delivers it "the other members of the company enter the bar in their street clothes, & doing steps reminiscient of their solos during the minstrel sequence. [As] each enters, the audience is made aware that these ordinary people are the minstrels."

72 Shange, Three Pieces, 9.

73 Shange, Three Pieces, 12.
finally, when [the bartender] calls for a boogie, the company does a dance that indicates these people have worked & played together a long time. As dance ends, the company sits & chats at the tables & at the bar. this is now a safe haven for these "minstrels" off from work. here they are free to be themselves, to reveal secrets, fantasies, nightmares, or hope. it is safe because it is segregated & magic reigns.74

These people are contemporary black artists-entertainers; a magician, a bartender-poet, a classically trained actor-director, two show chorus singer-dancers, an unemployed actress-barmaid, an unsuccessful actress with her street musician-singer boyfriend, and a well experienced actress. In this setting these characters move together as a whole, in smaller groups, and individually, through a series of poems, monologues and vignettes that alternately portray humor, anger, joy and pathos. The structure loosely follows the three part form of a minstrel show. Moreover, it is disjointed, non-linear, and broken into episodes of seemingly unrelated incidents, and tableaux, each making a point of its own. Instead of the dramatic conflict of the well-made play, the emphasis is on a sequence of dramatic statements made by each performer. There is no standard plot. Music and movement are both used as a form of enhanced expression in the piece. The actors are required to sing and dance in the course of the performance. In addition to the juke box present in the setting of the bar, the original production of Spell #7 included live jazz musicians playing an original score of incidental mood and accent music composed by David Murray and Butch Morris. The movement was, once again, choreographed by Diane

74 Shange, Three Pieces, 13.
McIntyre.

Shange's background as a child of post-war America, the privilege of her early acquaintance and association with notable African-American innovators and intellectuals, her educational preparation with degrees and insights into American popular culture, music, historical and contemporary issues, and her unquestionable intellectual and artistic talents make her a perfect emblematic figure and signal artist to study as an example of developmental changes in American and African-American dramatic aesthetics. In the following chapter Shange's Spell #7 will be analyzed as an example of her attempt to (re)define and (re)claim the tradition of Black theatre in the United States.
Chapter II

(Re)defining the American Minstrel Tradition

In the introduction to The Development of Black Theater in America, Leslie Catherine Sanders discusses "the traditional relation of black character to a white audience" as "a problem that has long hampered the development of black theater." Sanders explains:

In a predominantly white society, the cultural ground is white... In the theater, then, the stage reality, the conscious and unconscious assumptions mutually accepted by the theater and its audience, is white, unless white assumptions have been replaced by black assumptions, giving a black stage reality. Until those assumptions are replaced, black figures on stage exist in a white ground, and their color is charged with significance. Sanders goes on to explain how this configuration of Black-figure/White-ground has become a standard by which American theatre audiences, which are predominantly White, have traditionally found credible only those portrayals of Black characters which they have been prepared to believe. Consequently, images of Blacks on stage have traditionally been a way for Whites to see themselves, and have not primarily been concerned with the lived experience of Black


76 Sanders, 2.
people from Black perspectives. Rather, the Black image has been used as an expression of White experience, "both as metaphor of more general aspects of the human predicament and as mask for . . . personal experience and philosophy."77 Sanders believes that the continued challenge of contemporary African-American playwrights is to reverse the Black-figure/White-ground configuration and create a Black stage reality; "to demetaphorize the figure of the black and make that of the white metaphorical."78 This is a primary objective of Ntozake Shange in her desire for an independently created African-American dramatic aesthetic.

Spell #7 is Shange's expression of dismay and disdain for the negative African-American image created and instituted by the American minstrel tradition. In Spell #7, Shange attempts to (re)gain, (re)define and (re)institute a positive African-American stage figure and ground. She (re)dresses the notion of minstrelsy as the founding tradition of African-American theatre with the statement that "'coon shows' were somebody else's idea."79 She is correct to do so. For, while some believe that the blackface tradition of American Negro Minstrelsy is "the one purely native form of entertainment and the only distinctively American contribution to the theatre,"80 it is neither a true nor honest image of Black Americans, nor is it a form created or structured by

77 Sanders, 1.
78 Sanders, 3.
79 Shange, Three Pieces, x.
Black Americans. However, because minstrelsy is based on aspects of Black slave behavior, it may be possible to (re)claim it as an essential African-American tradition by (re)defining it from a Black perspective; providing a Black-ground and new meaning to its purpose.

The minstrel show, as promulgated throughout history, was a White male creation; a parody and burlesque of Black African slaves, and later, free Black Americans. It was a structure in which White males painted themselves black with burnt cork, broadened their lips with white or red paint, donned themselves in ridiculous outfits and created a stage voice and persona of African-Americans "based on no linguistic system besides the language of racism." By tracing the development of the American minstrel tradition and its social implications in the first part of this chapter, it will be possible to clearly see Shange's point. The second part of the chapter will analyze aspects of Spell #7 that illustrate her (re)dressing of the issue toward the establishment of a Black-ground or African-American aesthetic.

The origin of minstrelsy may be traced to the earliest recorded events presenting images of the African-American onstage. These images were doubly negative from the start. In 1769 Lewis Hallam played the role of a Black slave in the New York production of The Padlock by Issac Bickerstaff. When Hallam, in blackface, went on stage in a highly inebriated state, he was not seen as a drunken unprofessional. He was laughingly appreciated by the all

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81 Shange, Three Pieces, xi.
White audience, and he set a foundation and pattern for White expectations of Black characters on the American stage.\(^{82}\) Carl Wittke reports that Gottlieb Graupner later sang "The Negro Boy" in blackface make-up in a 1799 production of the play *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave* at the Federal Theatre in Boston to great audience approval.\(^{83}\) One may conclude that Graupner's portrayal was a low comic one, for Wittke further states: "For a considerable period in the early nineteenth century Negro clowns were extremely popular, and hardly a circus was complete without a blackface performer."\(^{84}\) There is knowledge of, yet little record of, several other blackface performers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Among these are George Nichols, Bob Farrell (popularly known as "Zip Coon"), Bill Keller, Horatio Eversell, Barney Burns, John and Frank Whitaker, George Rice, William M. Hall, James Roberts, George Washington Dixon and Thomas Dartmouth Rice.\(^{85}\) All were actors who became specialty performers or lowly clown figures noted for their abilities at playing Negro characters. Thomas Rice would achieve wide acclaim in this regard and later become minstrelsy's first and greatest legitimate star.

Rice's rise began when he imitated a crippled old Black man in a musical rendition of "Jump Jim Crow" sometime between 1828 and 1831. This enactment earned him fame in the United States and


\(^{83}\) Wittke, 10.

\(^{84}\) Wittke, 12.

\(^{85}\) Wittke, 16-19.
England and the titles, "Daddy Rice" and "father of American Minstrelsy." Rice's popularity and financial success spawned many blackface imitators of his style: Bill Keller, Barney Burns, Graham and Blakely, McQuire and Graham, Miss Wray (in 1835 known as the seven-year-old "young American phenomenon" performing in a Richmond-Hill circus), Thomas H. Blakely, Barney Williams, Jack Diamond, and J. Henry. These early White performer's impersonations of Southern plantation Blacks may have been clever and entertaining. At the same time, they established an image of real Black Americans as buffoons, clowns, and "joke book" caricatures.

Early minstrel performers did not represent or express the actual life conditions or feelings of Blacks in their theatrical performances. Most of the men who impersonated Blacks and appeared as minstrels had never actually met a Black person. Wittke explains:

Many of the famous minstrel men were Northern-born-and-reared, or foreign-born immigrant white men, who had almost no first-hand knowledge of the Negro's manner of life. The subjects and ideas of many minstrel shows, . . . were Caucasian, and not Negro. Moreover, most of the great minstrel songs of the decade when minstrelsy was the leading form of theatrical entertainment, were written by white men, and only some of the earlier of these "Negro" songs had any original Negro basis. Many showed closer relationship to other songs current in the 1810's and 1820's sung by early non-Negro "songsters," than to Negro folk music. The earlier minstrel melodies quickly established a conventional "Negro" song, which other minstrel composers were quick to imitate.88

Wittke helps us to see that while the images and ideas for

86 Wittke, 16-19.
87 Wittke, 33-34.
88 Wittke, 39-40.
minstrelsy were clearly based on Black Americans, the institution consisted primarily of "the thoughts, history, and artistic creations of white people."\textsuperscript{89}

Daniel Decatur Emmett formed the Virginia Minstrels in 1843 and presented the first show completely monopolized by blackface characters and performances. The company included Emmett, Frank Brower, "Billy" Whitlock and "Dick" Pelham. All the members of this troupe had been individual blackface performers with theatrical or circus experience and were noted for various Negro characterizations and musical specialties.\textsuperscript{90} The arrangement of these various specialties was given a recognizable and repeatable structure by E. Byron Christy and the Christy Minstrels in 1846. The Virginia and Christy Minstrels were imitated by several other groups in the years that closely followed. In the period between the 1840s and the 1870s "minstrelsy was the dominant form of American popular art" with "more than a hundred professional troupes in blackface."\textsuperscript{91} The majority of these groups performed mostly in the Northeast regions of the United States. Gary Engle reports that:

New York alone boasted ten resident companies by 1860, and professional troupes held forth at various times in Boston, Hartford, Washington, Richmond, Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, New Orleans, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Paul, and San Francisco.\textsuperscript{92}

Other groups would travel throughout all parts of the United States.

\textsuperscript{89} Sanders, 1.
\textsuperscript{90} Wittke, 39.
\textsuperscript{91} Engle, xix.
\textsuperscript{92} Engle, xix-xx.
entertaining "every class in American society" including "a long lasting love affair between America's presidents and its most popular entertainment form."\(^{93}\) the minstrel show.

As established by Christy, the minstrel show included two main parts. Part one was comprised of songs, jokes and dances "stolen" by Northern visitors to the Southern plantation regions. White men in blackface make-up were seated in a semi-circle on stage with the interlocutor, or straight man, at the center. At each end of the semi-circular line were two "end men" with the appropriate titles of Tambo and Bones. The end men were named for the instruments that they played, the tambourine and the bones (cleaned animal bones dried and bleached in the sun and used as castanets). These instruments along with the fiddle and banjo, also major musical requirements of the minstrel band, were authentic African instruments brought to America by Black slaves. "These end men were the essential minstrel clowns on the Jim Crow model whose rudimentary wit and childish antics constantly deflated the formal pretentions of the interlocutor,"\(^{94}\) who was the only minstrel character representative of Whites. It may be speculated that the interlocutor character was derived from plantation slave performances in which a house servant, most aquainted with the manners of the master, would impersonate the White plantation owner or overseer. However, it may also be argued that this character was a follow up to the circus ringmaster with whom minstrel characters

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\(^{93}\) Engle, xix-xx.

\(^{94}\) Engle, xviii.
were earlier associated.

The second part of the minstrel show, called the olio, offered a variety of specialty acts, comic skits, and monologues which came to be known as stump speeches. The stump speech had a basic intention of "lampooning the developing American folk art of spread-eagle oratory."\textsuperscript{95} While such speeches served as marks of intellect and political prowess in White society, the stump speech in the minstrel tradition served to burlesque African-American thought and speech. The minstrel stump speech was usually characterized by a well dressed or "overdressed" Northern Negro character who could not clearly articulate his thoughts and had no clear understanding of the highbrow words and concepts which he attempted to use. As minstrelsy grew in popularity a third part developed in the structure of its form. This was an afterpiece, in which the entire company performed a short farce, Shakespearean burlesque, political lampoon, or a comic parody of a contemporary fad or high cultural event. The afterpiece was performed with full costumes and sets. Thus, it was in the afterpiece that the minstrel structure was most related to the European tradition of the well-made play. Within a short time, however, the afterpiece became entwined with the olio.

American blackface minstrelsy is a unique paradox for several reasons. First, Wittke explains:

\begin{quote}
The source of Negro minstrelsy is to be found in the soil of the Southland. . . . The burnt cork artist of the United States of the nineteenth century could have originated in no other country in the world. His art was indigenous to the United States, and from here it
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{95} Engle, xviii.
was introduced, with only moderate success, to England, the Continent of Europe, and to other parts of the globe. If it did not flourish elsewhere as it did in the United States, the primary reason was that foreigners could not understand or fully appreciate the peculiarly American conditions from which this entirely new form of entertainment had sprung.\(^{96}\)

The peculiar American conditions of which Wittke spoke have to do with the conditions inherent to Black slavery in the United States. It is a paradox that the part of the population on the lowest spectrum of the social strata should produce the most popular entertainment form of that culture. The music and dance which became the basis of the minstrel art form sprang from a people attempting to release the pain and agony of being bound by servitude and systematic oppression. It is an additional paradox that laughter and enjoyment can be derived for one part of a society based on the suffering of another part of that same society.

Robert Toll offers an explanation of the historical and social relevance of minstrelsy as the United States' first professional popular culture medium. He contends that after the War of 1812, many Americans expressed the need for native forms, symbols, and institutions that would assert the nation's cultural distinctiveness as clearly and emphatically as the war had reaffirmed its political independence. The minstrel show was the most important new form to grow out of this process.\(^{97}\) In the process of institutionalizing itself, minstrelsy instilled and embedded images and symbols into


the structure and assumptions of American popular thought. These images and symbols became a type of national folklore or mythology, providing a standard of recognition for White Americans to share. It also provided a measure of comfort for the mostly European immigrants who were trying desperately to assimilate into American culture. Toll explains:

Minstrels helped audiences cope with their concerns, frustrations, and anxieties... They created ludicrous Northern Negro characters that assured audience members that however confused, bewildered or helpless they felt, someone was much worse off than they were... minstrelsy’s ethnic caricatures made America’s first “foreign” immigrants seem understandable. Their caustic jokes about such topics as women’s rights or the problems of urban living made threatening matters seem less ominous by letting people laugh at them. Their maudlin, sentimental songs reaffirmed traditional values while also providing emotional release.98

As Wittke explains earlier, many of the popular songs used in minstrel shows were European folk music. It was music familiar to immigrant audiences, allowing a type of sentimental and sympathetic bond with Black images to offset total rejection of Blacks as figures of acceptable entertainment. In the above passage, Toll highlights aims of the minstrel mythology for White society. What is not seen in his remarks is the ramifications of the mythology for Black society on whose image this folklore is based.

Perhaps the greatest negative of the social and psychological functions of minstrelsy as a popular culture institution was its way of encoding into White society the notion of the supremacy of the status of Whites in America and the rationalization of racial caste

"as a benevolent fulfillment of, not a contradiction to, the American Creed." Minstrelsy served to convince Whites that if Negroes were to share in America's bounty of happiness, they needed Whites to take care of them. In order to affirm this idea, "minstrels created and repeatedly portrayed the contrasting caricatures of inept, ludicrous Northern blacks and contented, fulfilled Southern Negroes." The romanticized plantation settings that became standard for minstrel shows and afterpieces provided "living" proof that Whites need not feel guilty about racial caste. Images of "a simpler, happier time when society was properly ordered and the loving bonds of home and family were completely secure" are still used today as a means of appeasing one segment of society while denigrating and humiliating another.

John Fiske labels elements of this device "Axis of Division," whereby the dominant social class attempts to "naturalize" meanings that serve their interests into the "common sense" of the larger society. Fiske's concept aids in understanding minstrelsy's function as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), working to establish racial caste as a social norm. The concepts of "Axis of Division" and the ISA are elements of the larger philosophy of cultural hegemony, which in this case is in direct relation to

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99 Toll, 272.

100 Toll, 272.


Sanders' concept of White-ground. The reversal of the White-ground
is a social struggle which Shange addresses in Spell #7. The
premise is to (re)dress the minstrel stage and form, converting it
to a Black-ground. Then the myth of minstrelsy as the one original
and indigenous American dramatic form and the basis of African-
American dramatic tradition may be (re)examined and (re)defined.

Edith Isaacs supports a theory that minstrelsy was the United
States' first original major dramatic form. She attempts to credit
African-Americans with the creation of this indigenous art by
stating that minstrel shows were, "born out of plantation playtimes
around the Negro cabins."103 She attempts to clarify her point by
explaining:

To perceive the significance of the Negro in American
theatre, it is well to remember that a native art grows
only on native roots... We [Americans] continue to
build on a base with little folk foundation, and almost
no peasant drama of the kind from which a "cultural"
theatre would normally grow. And that is the main
reason why, in music and dance, in rhythm and comedy and
pantomime, we [Americans] borrow so freely from the
Negro theatre which has developed from the earth up.104

While there may be truth in her comments, Isaacs' compliment to the
African-American race is a backhanded one. She identifies African-
American's as a peasant culture and reaffirms a negative notion that
all Blacks can sing, dance and are essentially comic figures. At
the same time, Isaacs provides an ironic basis of support for a
contention set forth by Eleanor W. Traylor that "the source of all
that can be called representative American theatre is

Incorporated, 1947) 19.

104 Isaacs, 14-15.
Aframericans," giving added meaning to the paradox of the minstrel tradition and added support to the establishment of a Black-ground for minstrelsy as an African-American dramatic tradition.

In order for minstrelsy to be claimed in light of an independently created African-American aesthetic, it must be viewed from a different perspective than that of Isaacos or Wittke. By establishing the foundation of American theatre as being rooted in African-American culture, a new mythology begins to develop.

Traylor outlines this assertion:

Once a mythology is formed, a temenos or magic circle is drawn around a culture, and literature develops historically within a limited orbit of language, reference, allusion, beliefs, transmitted and shared tradition... When one probes the Afro-American "temenos or magic circle" of creation, one discovers certain essential ingredients of a distinct shaping-process. That process does not seem to yield the same structures of tragedy, comedy, realism, expressionism, surrealism, or absurdity as those modes are understood within the European context. The process which nourished the first American dramatic form (the minstrel show) created the Blues and offers the continuing vocabulary of new world dance. It arises from "a tradition of confrontation and improvisation," of "grace under pressure." That process, which was forged in America by African peoples, offers modes or forms transcendent of those which it adapts and improvises.106

The mythology of minstrelsy created by Whites provided a negative historical perspective of African-American traditions. Traylor's


contention is based on the notion that Black slaves were misunderstood by Northern Whites who could not see the complex layerings of encoded meanings behind the masked acts of slave music, mime and dance or the independently created "pidgin" language that they spoke.\textsuperscript{107} Isaacs, a White woman, does not acknowledge the paradox of confusing slave "play" with slave rituals. Traylor, an African-American, reminds us that "the masking-miming rituals created by enslaved Africans on American soil was 'something entirely different and new' to the American ethos."\textsuperscript{108} She explains more of the paradox of minstrelsy by suggesting further: "What white performers spied down-field, up-field, or around the slave cabins was a masking performance. They 'borrowed' the masking feature but not the signification of the mask."\textsuperscript{109} Early White minstrel men, who Traylor refers to as voyeurs, did not realize that the songs and dances of the plantation were guises by which Black slaves hid their true feelings from masters who required, often under the threat of death, images of contented happy chattel. Plantation music and dance provided slaves an outlet for the release of oppressive stresses, fears, frustrations and anxieties. On another level, the "acts" of joy were also imitations of the White

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\item[108] \textit{Traylor}, 52.

\item[109] \textit{Traylor}, 51.
\end{footnotes}
masters which provided another degree of emotional release in the revenging act of parodying what the slaves considered a lack of spiritual vision and compassion of the White race. The sacred nature of these masking rituals will need deeper explanation.

The spiritual connection of the African soul was an important element overlooked by the voyeurs. Here, the spiritual significance and power of masks and masking in an African context, both literal and figurative, is revealed as Traylor quotes Henry Louis Gates, Jr.:

Of all the artifacts out of Africa, it is the mask which most compels... Obatala, the Yoruba sculptural God, is not the artist of Apollonian illusion; he is the artist of inner essence. The Yoruban mask remains only a piece of carved wood without iwa, or character... without the artist who bears it before his choral audience. In all African art, the audience is chorus, and the mask is wood until it becomes mask-in-motion. The Western concept of "mask" is meaningless... to the Yoruba. Precisely because "the doll in wood" cannot itself signify. Once [in motion], the mask is vehicle for the primary evocation of a complete hemetic universe... a world autonomous, one marked both by a demonstrably interior cohesion, as well as by a complete neutrality to exterior mores and norms. The mask with its immobilized features all the while mobile, itself is a metaphor for dialectic—say rather, itself contains the mediation of opposing motion.¹¹⁰

Gates makes clear in this assessment that the mask or masking device also acts as a protective shielding mechanism. It acts as a mirror and a fence at the same time, reflecting what one wishes to see on the outside while protecting what is private on the inside. The mask is empowered with truth or life only when it receives that

power from the wearer. Otherwise it is wooden and inanimate, untrue, unreal, and lifeless. Traylor helps make the connection of the masking device to slave song and dance. The voyeurs put on the smiling mask in the form of blackface. The burnt cork blackface make-up became figuratively hard and wooden as it became more institutionalized in the development of the minstrel tradition. It was through the filling of this inanimate, wooden device with falseness, lies, and mockery that Whites unknowingly committed racial and spiritual sacrilege. What Gates explains in the above statement, is the sacred nature of all artistry in the African context. When Whites blasphemed the sacredness of Black masking and miming rituals they helped to destroy part of the Black performers respect for his/her inherent artistic nature. The destruction of African-American artists self respect continues to suppress complete freedom of expression in their works and limits fully realistic portraits of the African-American experience.

The reality of this began as soon as Black performers were allowed to enter the minstrel tradition soon after the Civil War. Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer explain:

It was a quarter of a century after the birth of professional minstrelsy before a Negro aggregation came into being. This was Lew Johnson's Plantation Minstrel Company. Although many of this troupe's members were quite dark - being Negro - they nevertheless followed the custom of the white minstrel troupes and blackened their faces and circled their lips with red or white to make their mouths twice normal size. But, as a large group of Negroes performing for the first time on the American stage, they brought with them their indigenous qualities and the genuine basic beat. They revealed new dances, songs and comedy routines that the whites had
Even though Black performers were able to imbue their minstrel performances with a kind of authentic life and vigor, they were in actuality not performing images or concepts of themselves. The deeper paradox is that Black performers were impersonating poorly conceived White immigrant impersonations of Black experience. They became part of the already established tradition of the Black-figure on a White-ground. Toll further illustrates the deeper social implications of Black performers entering the minstrel tradition when he writes:

Black minstrels had to work within narrow limits because they performed for audiences that expected them to act out well-established minstrel stereotypes of Negroes. Within these restrictions, however, black minstrels began to modify plantation caricatures and first attracted large numbers of black people to American popular entertainment.\textsuperscript{112}

By falling into an already established framework, pioneering African-American performers making the first mass entrance into the entertainment industry were themselves aiding the establishment and institutionalization of the Black image as national buffoon. Even the developing African-American audience came to expect some of the same stereotypes as White audiences. Certainly it may be argued that Black audiences decoded these images in different ways from White audiences. To acknowledge such a reality is to highlight yet another paradox of the peculiar American institution called minstrelsy. It is the reversal of this very process which is the


\textsuperscript{112} Toll, 273.
ultimate goal of Shange in her quest for "an independently created afro-american aesthetic."113 Her method is to combine music and dance forms as defined through African-American traditions in an improvisational manner. Spell #7 is her improvisational adaptation of the minstrel tradition. By (re)dressing the minstrel image with new meaning she attempts to (re)claim the minstrel mode as a true114 African-American creation, providing a (re)shaped identity and a transcendent form.

One of Shange's reversals of the minstrel tradition is her use of the interlocutor figure. In Spell #7 the character of Lou functions simultaneously as interlocutor, ringmaster, shaman, witchdoctor, director, magician, priest and preacher. In the White tradition of minstrels the interlocutor is an upright "straight man," formal in manner and a director or controlling figure of the stage proceedings. Shange's interlocutor begins by doing "a few catchy 'soft shoe' steps" and "singing a traditional version of a black play song."115 His song is meant to amuse and to ease the audience into acceptance of the minstrel image and the spiritual magic that is about to come. His manner is obviously fun loving while his message is serious. Lou tells a story of his magician father (read: ancestors) who retired from the art of magic rather

113 Shange, Three Pieces, ix.

114 Truth here is defined by John Fiske in "British Cultural Studies and Television." Fiske says that truth must always be understood in terms of how it is made, for whom and at what time it is "true." In this instance I refer to true as pre-Thomas Rice, before the appropriation of Black music, dance and humor by White popularists.

115 Shange, Three Pieces, 7.
than become part of the political transformation of young Black children into White ones. Lou acknowledges his own study of the ancestral art of magic making, and proclaims that his task is to reverse the spell of the past by making Blacks love their own color. His goal is to make Blacks "love it/ bein colored." His deeper task is to exorcise the White-ground for the appreciation of Black dramatic figures.

Lou identifies a long line of ancestral magicians:

i come from a family of retired sorcerers/ active houngans & pennyante fortune tellers wit 41 million spirits/ critturs & celestial bodies on our side

In this way he informs us that his magic is very ancient, very powerful and very spiritual. The powers of his ancestry enables him to grant carefully selected wishes:

YES YES YES 3 wishes is all you get
scarlet ribbons for yr hair
a farm in mississippi
somone to love you madly
all things are possible

These wishes are equated with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as promised to all Americans by the Declaration of


117 A houngan is a priest of the voodoo religion of Haiti and other Caribbean Islands. Voodoo is a combination of African religions and Catholicism taught to the island slaves. It is characterized by a belief in sorcery, fetishes, and rituals in which participants communicate by trance with ancestors, saints, or animistic deities. Voodoo may also refer to a charm, fetish, spell, or curse believed by adherents to hold magic power. Versions and traces of this religion can still be found wherever Africans were transported to the Western Hemisphere and among Southern Black communities of the United States today.


Independence and the Constitution. Life in the guise of material gain which the red ribbons represent;\textsuperscript{120} liberty, represented by the freedom that land ownership allows in this country; and the pursuit of happiness, represented by the companionship of family and loved ones. "All things are possible" is a message of hope; "but," Lou continues:

\begin{verbatim}
aint no colored magician in his right mind
gonna make you white
i mean
      this is blk magic
you lookin at
& i'm fixin you up good/ fixin you up good & colored
& you gonna be colored all yr life\textsuperscript{121}
\end{verbatim}

Lou's task, once again, is to reverse the trend of Blacks wanting to assimilate wholeheartedly into White culture and society and accept and respect the spiritual inheritance of their own culture. He is a contrast to the traditional interlocutor in that the does not ridicule or degrade. He attempts to highlight the positive aspects of Blackness. The White interlocutor, as leader of the blackface minstrel company, was always about the task of encoding White (and Black) America with feelings of the superiority of common White men over all aspects of Black life. Lou also differs from the traditional interlocutor in his coaxing of the audience into an acceptance of themselves, thus, assuming that this work is intended for an audience of Blacks. This indicates a reversal in purpose of social intent. While the idea of encoding folklore and myth

\begin{notes}

\textsuperscript{121} Shange, \textit{Three Pieces}, 8.
\end{notes}
remains, the purpose and function of what is encoded is reversed.

Another reversal of the minstrel tradition is evident in a monologue by the actress character, Natalie, who declares: "today i'm gonna be a white girl/ i'll retroactively wake myself up/ ah low & behold/ a white girl in my bed."\textsuperscript{122} This characterization is a direct "about face" of the blackface tradition. In this monologue Shange is able to release her personal sense of pain and frustration with an art form and system that was used to ridicule and degrade Black men and ignore Black women altogether. Karen Cronacher explains in a 1992 \textit{Theatre Journal} essay the non-gendered status of Black females during the time of minstrelsy's popularity:

White women and African-American men are "present" in traditional minstrelsy as the degraded objects of the joke(s) . . . while African-American women are conspicuously absent, doubly excluded from this spectacle of white men posing as black men to make fun of white women, doubly excluded from the dubious pleasure of being in on the joke.\textsuperscript{123}

Cronacher makes it clear that White women and African-American males were present in early minstrel shows only as non-physical referents. In \textit{Spell #7} Shange address this issue head on.

Shange turns the jokes of the entire White minstrel tradition directly around in Natalie's monologue of multidimentional meaning. Natalie's ideas of what it must be like to be White are based on media images representing contemporary popular cultural ideals. Her images and ideas of the life of White women come mostly from television. Thus, Natalie assumes that among the first things that

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Shange, Three Pieces}, 47.

\textsuperscript{123} Cronacher, 178.
White women must do each day are: "get up being glad they ain't niggahs," or "worry abt gettin to work," if they are lucky enough not to have to work or blessed enough to have a job, whichever the case may be. She wonders if White girls, "play isadora & wrap themselves in sheets & go tip toeing to the kitchen to make maxwell house coffee," since this was a commercial image almost impossible to find a woman of color performing.\textsuperscript{124} Natalie deduces that "the first thing a white girl does in the morning is fling her hair," a gesture which the White girl repeats throughout the day. This would be in direct relation to television images of White women as carefree women of leisure with long silky, shiney (often blonde) hair, an ultimate symbol of White beauty. This action becomes associated with ignorance and ineptitude as Natalie, imitating a White girl, proclaims: "i cant/ i dont know how/ ouz i'ma white girl & i dont have to do much of anything." The White "sophisticated & protestant" suburban woman of priviledge is attacked for her superior exclusion of "other" women as Shange lampoons the stereotypical image of a Valium slugging, tomato-pie eating housewife:

\begin{verse}
\textit{in williams arizona as a white girl/ i od push the navaho women outta my way in the supermarket & push my nose in the air so i wdnt haveta smell them. coming from bay ridge on the train i od smile at all the black & puerto rican people/ & hope they cant tell i want them to go back where they came from/ or at least be invisible}\textsuperscript{125}
\end{verse}

\textsuperscript{124} The reader is reminded that \textit{Spell #7} was originally presented in 1979.

\textsuperscript{125} Shange, \textit{Three Pieces}, 47.
What Shange addresses in this segment is the neglect of White women who considered themselves feminist to include women of color in their initial plans for recognition by the American system. She calls them, the "women's movement faction of white girls" and points out that even while these women sought equality and individual rights during the 1970s, they remained part of a power structure that relegated women of color to positions of: "cleaning lady & the lady who takes care of my children & the lady who accepts quarters at the bathroom in sardi's."\(^{126}\) Cronacher concurs:

when Natalie pretends to be a white woman, she delivers a fiercely satiric and historically accurate account of white women's complicity in racism and imperialism that calls attention to the different positions of power occupied by white and African-American women.\(^{127}\)

Shange is however, not totally ruthless in her attack on White women. She makes it evident that her aim is to illustrate the continuing influence of White men: "all of this is the fault of the white man's sexism."\(^{128}\) She also separates the factions of White women: "all the white women in the world dont wake up being glad they aint niggahs/ only some of them/ the ones who dont/ wake up thinking how can i survive another day of this culturally condoned incompetence."\(^{129}\) For White women who may be part of the viewing audience for this piece, here is a chance to take account of their personal complicity in the perpetuation of the minstrel stereotypes.

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\(^{126}\) Shange, Three Pieces, 49.

\(^{127}\) Cronacher, 178.

\(^{128}\) Shange, Three Pieces, 48.

\(^{129}\) Shange, Three Pieces, 49.
Shange goes on, to imply that White women will certainly take differing routes to a personal sense of duty, if indeed they do make a move in that direction at all. What becomes important in Shange's vision is that in the act of attempting to come to grips with the issues of racism, sexism, imperialism, capitalism, and all the other isms's that constitute the American consciousness, White women may be awakened from their own trace which White-male dominated society has relegated them to:

everytime i attempt even the smallest ventity into the world someone comes to help me/ like if i do anything/ anything at all i'm extending myself as a white girl/ cuz part of being a white girl is being absent.\(^{130}\)

At times the attack on White women seems almost vicious. What must be remembered however, is the connection to the true and original purpose and intent of African-American masking and miming rituals. By putting on the White girl mask, (representative of the reversal of the blackface tradition), Natalie is able to release more than a hundred years of insightful anguish. On a surface level, Shange attacks White women and the White feminist movement which neglected issues relevant to women of color in the early days of the movement. Just below that level she attacks the sexism of White men, with its doubly stinging effects on women of color. It may also be said that she attacks the sexism of Black men as well, however, she deals with this issue more fully in another part of the piece. Moreover, the monologue is an attempt to relieve the author, personally and as representative of the African-American race, of the pain created by

\(^{130}\) Shange, *Three Pieces*, 49.
having to sublimate true feelings. The exposure of emotions and true feelings is a major theme in Spell #7. Shange expresses this reality when she speaks of the difficulties she confronted in writing the monologue:

I had fought through very difficult emotional tasks in order to allow myself to say: "Okay, as weird as this is, this is truly how I feel. Therefore, if I write anything else, it would be a lie. So as long as I'm thinking about this, and I know how I feel about this, you have to see it, too." In other words, my self-consciousness has nothing really to do with other people. It has to do with whether or not I'm going to confront what I'm feeling.¹³¹

Far beneath the mask of Natalie's monologue can be found other implications of Spell #7 as a critique of the American minstrel tradition and nineteenth century popular American culture. The fallacy of reading only the surface values of Shange's work will always create problems for the reader. Margaret Wilkerson explains this problem as related to Shange's earlier For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf, and how that problem relates to a reading of Spell #7:

Because For colored girls . . . addressed the choices made and forced upon young black women, it seemed that Shange's primary and only target was black men rather than the society that creates the pressure cooker of racism and sexism. In spell #7 Shange uses a giant minstrel mask onstage under which the actors perform to dramatize the oppressive character of society's roles for both women and men.¹³²

The major device of the minstrel face in the form of a mask expresses "the perceptual and psychological limitations which a

¹³¹ Tate, 152.
¹³² Wilkerson, 239.
racist and sexist society seeks to impose on women and men. "¹³³ Even before the development of minstrelsy, the mask has long been a traditional emblem for actors. It was a recognizable stage element as far back as the Greek theatre and for participants in Egyptian rituals before that. It therefore symbolizes imitation and imagination as requirements of thespian artistry, as well as the hypocrisy and covering of true identity also associated with the art of "acting." The mask that dominates the stage in the setting of Spell #7 literally represents for Shange, a "grotesque, larger than life misrepresentation of life."¹³⁴ Under the looming gaze of this ever present reminder, the company of actors dressed in the "tattered fieldhand garb" reminiscent of early minstrel images of Southern slaves, performs a minstrel-show-type routine of songs and dances. The irony of the appreciative audience response to this action during the original production of the piece is expressed by Shange when she writes:

> the minstrel may be "banned" as racist/ but the minstrel is more powerful in his deformities than our alleged rejection of him/ for every night we wd be grandly applauded.¹³⁵

Here is model example of the encoding power of popular culture devices and institutions. The image of smiling, singing and dancing Blacks continued to illicit the same type of response in 1979 as it had for two hundred years of American theatrical history. It is at

¹³³ Wilkerson, xxii.

¹³⁴ Shange, Three Pieces, 7.

¹³⁵ Shange, Three Pieces, xiii.
this point in the text of the work that Lou, in his capacity as magician, returns the audience to present day and decodes the irony of the song and dance by inviting the audience who have just loved the entertaining aspects of the routine without recognizing the deeper implications to:

\[
\text{o'mon & live my life for me/ since the dreams aint enuf/}
\text{go on & live my life for me/ i didn't want certain}
\text{moments at all/ i'd give em to anybody . . .}^{136}
\]

It is an invitation for any White person among the audience members to trade the safety of their skins and their societal position and experience the realities of life on the underside of the mask; to feel the realities of the suppressed anguish that must be born by those who have been degraded and ridiculed for the purpose of entertaining the American masses.

When the character Alec removes his mask, Shange indicates that "the rest of the company is intimidated by this figure daring to talk without the protection of blac[k]-face. [T]hey move away from him/ or move in place as if in mourning."^{137} Here can be seen the negative ramifications of popular culture inculcation. This action is directly related to the practice that Black men undertook upon entering the minstrel arena after the Civil War. We are reminded by Toll of the duplicitous role of early African-American minstrels when he states: "since they inherited the white-created stereotypes and could make only minor modification in them, black minstrels in effect added credibility to these images by making it

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^{136} Shange, Three Pieces, 9.

^{137} Shange, Three Pieces, 9.
seem that Negroes actually behaved like minstrelsy’s black caricatures.\textsuperscript{138} The tattered fieldhand actors who back away from Alec in Shange’s piece are not totally negative images in themselves. They are representatives of African-Americans who had their first chance to become professional entertainers on the American stage without value of training or awareness of expectations. On a larger-scale, they are representative of the confusion and uncertainty that continues to plague African-Americans attempting to enter the mainstream of American society.

It is Lou, the magician, who urges Alec to remove his mask. Remembering that Lou is endowed with the spiritual powers of the ancestors, it may be assumed that the message here is related to the overall message of Spell \#7. That is, empowering belief in and self awareness of African-American talent and inherent spiritual power. When the unmasked Alec reminds the audience and the other “fieldhands” of the struggles all Black people have survived having grown up in America, they are strengthened by his courage to reveal his true self. Shange indicates that they are “finally moved to tear off their ‘shadows’,” meaning their masks, and “all but two of the company leave with their faces bared to the audience.”\textsuperscript{139} The two who remain on stage are Alec, who is later revealed to be a classically trained actor, and Dahlia, who is revealed as a modern dancer. Shange’s stage directions express the symbolism of the unmasking action and what follows:

\textsuperscript{138} Tolll, 196.

\textsuperscript{139} Shange, Three Pieces, 11.
dahlia has, as if by some magical cause, shed not only her mask, but also her hideous overalls & picaninny-buckwheat wig, to reveal a finely laced unitard/ the body of a modern dancer. she throws her mask to alec, who tosses it away, dahlia begins a lyrical but pained solo as alec speaks for them.

The action here bespeaks of a total and complete rejection of the minstrel image and White expectations of Black artists. The poem which Alec speaks personifies this notion:

we will stand here
our shoulders embrace an enormous spirit

Shange and her characters are declaring their independence from the constraints of a White Eurocentric aesthetic. The Black-figure behind the mask is exposed and free to express the realities of its existence. The material White-ground is transformed into a celestial Black-space, open to improvisation and discovery. The enormous spirit of the African-American ancestral heritage, both artistic and metaphysical, gives guidance and power to a continuing struggle toward the (re)definition of the African-American aesthetic identity.

\[140\] Shange, Three Pieces, 11.

\[141\] Shange, Three Pieces, 11.
Chapter III

African-American Artistic Spirit and the Veil of the Seven

For African-Americans the era of the 1920s in the United States, commonly referred to as The Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Renaissance, was "a period of undeniable excitement and artistic development."\textsuperscript{142} The musical comedy \textit{Shuffle Along} by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle appeared in 1921, providing "a concrete reflection of the 'New Negro's' determination to reject outwardly imposed restrictions upon black creativity."\textsuperscript{143} In 1923, Willis Richardson's \textit{The Chip Woman's Fortune} became the first non-musical drama written by an African-American presented on Broadway, although this distinction is often given to Garland Anderson's 1925 production of \textit{Appearances}.\textsuperscript{144} More important, the 1920s is a notable epoch in the study of African-American dramatic tradition because of the proliferation of positions taken by theorists and practitioners of Black culture as evidenced by the publication of journals such as

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\textsuperscript{143} Johnson, 126.

The Crisis and Opportunity Magazine. There was widespread recognition of African-American writers, creative artists, literature, and dramatic theory, establishing a written tradition of African-American creative aesthetics. The essays and manifestoes of this period have a particular focus in the realization of the need for African-American artists to define and assert themselves by their own standards and in their own words. The Harlem Renaissance was the beginning of African-America's intellectual search for self-expressive identity in the Arts and Humanities.

A continual search for self identity is evident in Ntozake Shange's quest for an independently created African-American dramatic aesthetic in the 1980s and beyond. In this Chapter, aspects of Shange's Spell #7 will be analyzed in relation to the artistic spirit of African-American artists which developed during the 1920s. By looking at Harlem Renaissance theories of African-American drama posited by W. E. B. DuBois, Montgomery Gregory, and Alain Locke, Shange's work may be seen as a contemporay catalyst for new expression of African-American images and ideas. The latter part of the Chapter will correlate the ideas of the Harlem Renaissance with the ideas and images offered in Spell #7. By analyzing some of the theoretical and philosophical insights presented in Spell #7, the spiritual and artistic power that Shange provides as a leader in the continuing search for African-American theatrical self identification may be brought to light.

One of the major instigators and prominent leaders of the Harlem Renaissance was the Harvard-educated Ph.D. and director of
the NAACP, William Edward Burghardt DuBois. The tone and dilemma of African-Americans' attempts to project their own images in a universe which had been hostile toward such an endeavor was established by DuBois in his 1903 text, *The Souls of Black Folks*.

DuBois explains:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.145

The anguish that DuBois exhibits in this work is surpassed by the acknowledgement of a special duality inherent in the very idea of the African as American. This duality combines elements of ancient African notions of intuitive power and spiritual destiny with New World ideas of progressive materialism in the dialectical manifestation of the African-American. In DuBois' opinion, the dual nature of the African-American makes it possible to view the complexities of the world, and especially the United States, through unique eyes. With this dual vision, the curse of material degradation is overshadowed by a clairvoyant gift for "second-sight" or intuition. The physical and psychological oppressiveness of an American hegemony is eclipsed by the African's "dogged strength" and

will to survive. The Americanization of the African motivates a new spirit that aspires not merely to survive, but to live freely in the pursuit of happiness. According to DuBois, living within the dual consciousness of an African-American (Black)–ground, does not totally reject all other ideas, but allows for the enrichment of those ideas with the insightful spirit of subconscious understanding. The challenge of DuBois' statements is to expose that potential which dwells within the dual spirit of the African American.

Contemporary playwright and theorist, Paul Carter Harrison, provides assistance in explaining DuBois' points concerning the spiritual nature of African-Americans and the relevance of spirituality in African-American art. In his essay, "Black Theatre in the African Continuum: Word/song as Method," Harrison discusses the study of African philosophical systems as "crucial to an understanding of the aesthetics of black cultures (including the black cultures of the New World, which are essentially Afrocentric in their aesthetic sensibility)." He goes on to explain a study by W. E. Abrahams of the Akan system of thought which points out that:

[Man/woman is an 'encapsulated spirit,' the materialization of the nonmaterial; and since spirit is a constant element in the nature of man/woman, it is


147 Harrison, xiii.

irreducible, though it is often manipulated or profaned by the conceits and capricies of the material world. 'The physical world,... seems valuable only as spirit's exemplification or repository. And spirit subtly becomes intelligence, or mind.'\textsuperscript{149}

In other words, spirit is an ingrained part of material human beings. The physical body is nothing more than a manifestation of that spirit or soul. The release and exposure of emotions from the inner soul allows intellectual development of the individual spirit and provides spiritual gifts or insights to the physical/material world. Since drama is an outlet for the expression of emotions and insights, it follows that, exposure of the African-American spirit through drama could provide insightful gifts to the present material world. Harrison further contends that the dramatic depth of the African-American aesthetic spirit is best explored through sacred experience:

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
since most people of African descent are first and foremost responsive to spiritual values, even when they are not affiliated with organized religion. Few blacks in the Americas are able to resist the groundswell of feeling and transport when the spirit is aroused in the formal exercises called church. Irrespective of affiliation,.... profound spiritual feelings cannot be suppressed "when the Saints come marchin' in"! And while the church experience may appear to be unchanged in form, the execution of the ritual is never static or otherwise predictable, largely due to the irrepressible magical incantations of the preacher's performance style.... such an exercise, at least in form, should be a natural source of inspiration for the secular ritual we call theatre.\textsuperscript{150}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

In this way Harrison makes clear his agreement with DuBois that spiritual awareness is an essential element in the formation of a

\footnotesize
\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{150} Harrison, xv.
\end{flushright}
Black-ground and framework for artistic and theoretical existence and evaluation. Calling on Amiri Baraka to further explain a musical connection to this spiritually-informed approach, Harrison quotes his contemporary:

You'll find [a] contrast between say, the dionysian mode which is African, a complete emotional outlet, whether it's Black church or Black art . . . as opposed to the apollonian kind of Post-Greek, European approach where it's restraint. Nietzsche goes so far as to say life has to be kept separate from art because you might get too excited, it might stop you from being able to think. We look at them as two extremes, in that sense. I think that what the Afro-American has always been trying to evolve is an art that comes out of the basically dionysian, basic African spirit possession, because the Black church has always been about spirit possession. You know, they say the spirit will not descend without song. So you got to have music to make the spirit come down, and you gotta get the spirit, you gotta actually get the frenzy, you gotta get happy like they say, to actually have participated in that religious experience. 151

Baraka contrasts Eurocentric and Afrocentric approaches to theatre. While agreeing with Abrahams' emphasis on the importance of emotional release to the development of Afrocentric artistic spirit within a Black-ground, Baraka also points out the Eurocentric proclivity for conservatism and restraint. Baraka indicates the importance of music and dance or frenzy to the theatrical experience in the Black-ground. The connection of spirit to music and dance is not a new one. Music and dance has been a major part of African performances and rituals since ancient times. Music, song and dance were definite elements of the American minstrel tradition. The connection of spirit to music and dance in an African-American

dramatic context, however, may have had its theoretical foundation with DuBois.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois wrote a great deal about the relation and importance of music in the lives of African-Americans. Chapters One and Fourteen of the work, which deal most directly with artistic endeavors, are entitled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and "Of the Sorrow Songs," respectively. Spiritual music was and is a unique phenomenon drawn from the emotional and experiential realms of Black American slaves. It is a music of sorrowful strivings that expresses profound determination and faith in things hoped for but impossible to see through materialist, positivist eyes. Spiritual music would later evolve into blues, jazz, gospel, and rhythm and blues or soul music, all of which express expectations of or belief in a magical mode of escaping physical and psychological anguish. The expressiveness presented in all forms of African-American music and dance is a form of material manifestation of the unique spiritual nature of Africans as Americans and should be acknowledged and accepted as such.

Literary theorists of the Harlem Renaissance sought to establish acceptance of these modes of expression by championing the development of authentic African-American dramas. The major literary manifesto of the era, Alain Locke's *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), articulated the view that "young [Negro] writers would express their own self-concepts rather than be defined from the outside."152 In "The Drama of Negro Life,"153 Montgomery

152 Jessie Carney Smith, *Images of Blacks in American Culture*, (New York:
Gregory chronicles the development of this quest during the early Twentieth Century, up to 1925. The focus of Gregory's discussion is given to achievements in acting. He explains that, since most serious plays about Black life were written by Whites, it was only the African-American actor who had the opportunity to gain prominence on American stages. In 1926, Locke, in a further discussion on the potential of the African-American actor outlined the "possibilities for deeper, subtler influences on the technical aspects of the theatre." Locke praised outstanding African-American actors of his day and questioned the influences that might be produced if they were artistically liberated from the dominating influences of White culture:

Transpose the possible resources of Negro song and dance and pantomine to the serious stage, envisage an American drama under the galvanizing stimulus of a rich transfusion of essential folk-arts and you may anticipate what I mean.  

Locke, following the point made by Gregory, continued the argument that actors provided a better potential for revolutionizing American drama than did dramatists, since drama is rooted in action and emotion - which seemed to him a natural part of the make up of African-Americans. Locke argued that modern drama, as presented on the American stage of his era, lacked a vitality of action and

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155 Locke, 112.
emotion. He felt that since "primarily the Negro brings to the
drama the gift of a temperament, not the gift of a tradition."\textsuperscript{156} Black performers, by expressing the emotional realities of Black
life, might provide self-conscious psychological development for the
entire African-American race as well as stimulating vitality for the
whole American drama.

Locke's statement on the lack of an African-American dramatic
tradition was an attack on the status quo. He argued that the
status quo served to prevent the full participation and development
of African-American actors. His statement was not an attempt to
slight the artists who had graced American stages since the time of
James Hewlett and the African Company at the African Grove a century
before his writing. Locke attacked the common notion of Blacks as
"natural born actors." While giving attention to the inherent
abilities of African-Americans for the expression of action and
emotion, Locke was well aware of the necessity of discipline and
training. His statement was directed against those who used the
"natural born actor" label as a disparaging remark about the
limitations of the Black actor. He challenged those who felt that,
African-Americans only had potential for second rate talents of
imitation, mimicry and clowning; that at best, their talents were
restricted to interpretive rather than creative aspects of drama.
To these kinds of critics, Locke pointed out that instinct and
emotion are vital aspects of drama and interpretive passion is its

\textsuperscript{156} Jeffrey C. Stewart, \textit{The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection
creative force. He argued that the training of African-American actors would provide new insights to "the narrow diaphragm of fashionable acting and the conventional mannerisms of the stage."  

This speculation on the potential for new style and manners in acting was evidenced by experiences gained by African-American artists in the fight against stereotypical character requirements of the minstrel tradition. In 1926, Crisis sent out a seven-part questionnaire to ascertain from the "artists of the world" how African-American images should be portrayed on the stage. The prevailing focus of such inquiry was centered on the quest for an African-American self identity in contrast to the overshadowing negative images created by a White minstrel tradition which continued to permeate American society even after the decline of minstrelsy's reign as the country's number one popular culture medium. The results of the survey were published in issues of Crisis dating from March through November, 1926. One of the most interesting responses came from the young Langston Hughes who concluded: "It's the way people look at things, not what they look at that needs to be changed." Hughes' statement signaled a need to begin the serious task by Black artists of reversing the White-ground of African-American dramatic tradition established during the minstrel era. According to Hughes, what American drama needed was a new perspective, a new and different way of seeing and presenting

157 Look, 113
158 Sanders, 4. Also, Smith, 152.
159 Smith, 152.
things. Sterling Brown later pointed out that although successful White writers such as Ridgely Torrance (Three Plays For a Negro Theatre, 1917), Eugene O'Neill (The Emperor Jones, 1920) and Paul Green (In Abraham's Bosom, 1924) made attempts at presenting serious aspects of the drama of African-American life, the image of Blacks in the American theatrical mainstream remained primarily contained in three major stereotypes: "the exotic primitive, the comic stooge and the tragic mulatto."\textsuperscript{160} Locke wrote of the emotional power of the serious African-American actors of his time (Opal Cooper, Inez Clough, Evelyn Preer, Rose MacClendon, Sidney Kirkpatrick, Charles Olden, Francis Corbie, and others) and of the possibilities that lay beneath the superficial exteriors of his contemporary Black artists of the vaudeville stage (Bert Williams, Florence Mills, Bill Robinson, George Stampler, Josephine Baker, Eddie Rector, Abbie Mitchell, and Ethel Waters). He explains:

Pantomime... is a natural forte of the Negro actor, and the use of the body and voice and facile control of posture and rhythm are almost as noteworthy in the average as in the exceptional artist. When it comes to pure registration of the emotions, I question whether any body of actors, unless it be the Russians, can so completely be fear or joy or nonchalance or grief.\textsuperscript{161}

He supported his argument with quotes from the renowned German director, Max Reinhardt who, while on a visit to the United States, also saw the potential and the possibilities of contributions by African-American actors to new techniques in drama. In the words of


\textsuperscript{161} Locke, 114
Reinhardt:

The drama must turn at every period of fresh creative development to an aspect which has been previously subordinated or neglected, and in this day of ours, we come back to the most primitive and the most basic aspect of drama for a new starting point, a fresh development and revival of the art — and this aspect is pantomime, the use of the body to portray story and emotion. And your people have that art — it is their special genius.\(^{162}\)

It appears that Reinhardt and Locke agreed in their feelings about the unique nature of African-American acting potential. Edith Isaacs would express these same sentiments some twenty years later in *The Negro in the Theatre*.\(^{163}\) Locke explains this unique nature when he speaks something:

> dramatic to the core that flows movingly in the blood rather than merely along the veins that we speak of as the racial endowment of the Negro actor. For however few there may be who possess it in high degree, it is racial, and is in a way unique.\(^{164}\)

Locke makes obvious the connection of the inner spirit of African-American artists to their "otherness." He further warns of the danger in imitating Eurocentric theatrical conventionalism. His charge is that African-American dramatic art must be liberated from the disparagement of external or internal limitations; have the courage to be original and experimental, and develop its own idiom, free of the confines of the established dramatic conventions.

As a way of insuring creative autonomy and originality in African-American artistry and to provide safe ground for

\(^{162}\) *Locke*, 115.

\(^{163}\) *Isaacs*, 19.

\(^{164}\) *Locke*, 116.
experimentation, Locke joined DuBois in calling for a "new birth" of the African-American theatre.\textsuperscript{165} However, the focus now centered on dramaturgy rather than performers. DuBois felt that attention to actors, who were achieving more visibility than other theatre artists, was of lesser concern in the longterm establishment and stabilization of a new theatrical tradition. His major concern was with the development of dramatists who would record the expressive truths of African-American life. Here he expresses what he sees as unique qualities for a theatre of American "others":

It is customary to regard Negroes as an essentially dramatic race; and it is probably true that tropical and sub-tropical peoples have more vivid imagination, are accustomed to expressing themselves with greater physical and spiritual abandon than most folk. And certainly, life as black and brown and yellow folk have known it is big with tragedy and comedy. The home life of Africans shows this natural dramatic tendency; the strides of the native African, the ceremony of home and assembly, the intense interest in music and play, all attest this.\textsuperscript{166}

This statement hi-lights the potential of drama inherent in the private, communal realms of peoples of color. Differences in ethnic demeanor and cultural customs make honest expression of personal dramatic tendencies difficult to expose in mainstream society, particularly when critical evaluation by the dominant hegemony has historically been negative and degrading. Seeing this problem, DuBois' plan sounded the need for a theatre physically removed from the American mainstream. This was a view in agreement with Locke's call for African-American actors to have a theatre of their own with


\textsuperscript{166} DuBois, "Krigwa," 134.
the safety and freedom to express the actions and emotions of their existence. Until this time, Black performers had been required "to entertain [a] more or less alien group." The demands of "alien" White audiences, with their preconceived notions of acceptable images, had established a norm and expectation for African-Americans in theatre. Major efforts to combat such images usually resulted in productions of Shakespeare or contemporary Broadway successes with all Black casts imitating White productions. This had been the case just prior to the 1920s with the Anita Bush Players and the Lafayette Theatre of Harlem, and most especially for the acclaimed and respected Pekin Players of Chicago, who were known for performing White plays in whiteface. 167

The new movement that DuBois called for began in Harlem and established four fundamental principles for companies in cities with large African-American populations such as Cleveland, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. The four fundamentals are still held as hallmarks of dramaturgical criteria for "serious" African-American theatre. The rules dictate, that in order to qualify as "true" or "serious," African-American theatres and dramas must be:

1. About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. By us. This is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people. 168

DuBois felt that adherence to these rules was the only way in which serious and authentic dramas of African-American experience could be developed. Using the four fundamentals as required criteria, literary contests conducted by The Crisis, under the editorship of DuBois, mined a substantial number of serious plays about African-American life for publication and performance. Throughout the era, prevailing theoretical themes attempted to focus African-American artistic aspirations on creating a new image of Black life. Potential was seen as possible only if African-Americans could tap into their inherent spiritual power and expose positive and realistic images of themselves in situations unplagued by the dominating influences of White society.

Following the philosophies outlined by DuBois, Gregory and Locke, Shange acknowledges the expressive potential of African-American actors by presenting the characters in Spell #7 as contemporary African-American performers and entertainers. They are characters who express introspective depth and multiple dimensions of African-American experience. One reviewer noted that these characters are:

acted with the kind of natural spirit that has to come out of actor’s enthusiasm for the material. What might slip past you is that extra tanginess that comes when you see actors playing actors: There’s a special zip in the subtext, because what you’re also getting is fictional actors performing for each other’s approval. . . . it makes it easier to understand some of the exaggerated emotionalism and the jokier asides.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ DuBois, "Krigwa," 194

The actors portray actors, who are simultaneously representative of inner and outer spirits and emotions of Black experience. The performer-actors are able to feel and project experiences of the character-actors with a special sense of knowing and caring, a special sense of spiritual connection. The performers simultaneously represent the characters and the African-American race, and all of metaphorical levels of implication. Each character's story can be taken as an allegory for African-American conditions and each performer may imbue the characterization and interpretation of the story with personal understanding of that condition. This process is related to DuBois' notion of inherent duality. In this sense, the character represents the (African) spirit and the performer represents the (American) physical. The coming together of the two in the materialization of the performance is indicative of Harrison’s and Abrahams’ insightful gifts of African-American actor potential.

Adhering to DuBois and Locke’s call for a theatre removed from the mainstream, Shange’s characters meet in a small barroom setting. It is a safe, familiar and comfortable Black-ground. It is a place to rest, relax and reflect. It is a reclusive hideaway from a technologically stressful world. A place where they can be free to analyze and express “themselves.” Lou, the ministerial magician explains:

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you have to come with me/ to this place where magic is/
to hear my song/. . .
in this place where magic is involved in
undoing our masks/. . .
i discovered a lot of other people who talk without
mouths . . .
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Lou, as the unofficial host for the evening's party, reminds the audience that it is only through him that they are able to know the private thoughts of these people and to see what exists in the realities behind the masks. The music for their entrance into the bar is symbolic: "We Are Family" by Sister Sledge, a top 1970s disco group. Eli, the bartender and a poet, identifies this place as, "MY kingdom." The "MY" to which he refers may be interpreted as the private reality of Black existence behind the masks. It may also be a direct link to Shange the poet. Eli explains:

i am mantling an array of strength & beauty
no one shall interfere with this
the construction of myself
my city my theater
my bar come to my poems
but understand we speak english carefully

This poem is performed as a transition from the opening minstrel sequence of the piece into the communal bar setting establishing a new locale and setting a new scene. The change of scenes relates to The Harlem Renaissance aim of creating a "New Negro" image to offset the one established in the Minstrel era. On another level it is the author speaking as theorist and philosopher. Shange declares her right to construct an aesthetic independent of prescribed Eurocentric dictates. She will construct it on her own way and in her own language. Eli/Shange continues:

170 Shange, Three Pieces, 27.
171 Shange, Three Pieces, 12.
172 Shange, Three Pieces, 12.
you are welcome
to my kingdom    my city    my self
but yr presence must not disturb these inhabitants
leave nothing out of place/ push no dust under my rugs
leave not a crack in my wine glasses
no finger prints
clean up after yrself in the bathroom
there are no maids here    no days off
for healing    no insurance policies
for dislocation of the psyche
aliens/ foreigners/ are granted resident status
we give them a little green card
as they prove themselves non-injurious
to the joy of my nation

This may be read as Shange's warning to critics of Eurocentric
literary tradition, that she intends to continue her independent
style and manners. All are welcome to her work, but they must
accept her terms. She declare that there will be no subservient
roles and no apologies for use of themes that may be thought too
"intense." Eurocentric ideology is considered alien and foreign
in the world which Shange creates in Spell #7. Karen Cronacher
explains:

White is the Other in spell #7. Shange foregrounds
"whiteness" as an ethnic category, centering the
construction of whites as natural, inevitable
subjects.

The authority of Whites must be decentered because they represent
status quo. Locke warned that it was the constraining conservatism

173 Shange, Three Pieces, 12.

174 Shange, Three Pieces, xiv. Shange comments: "the most frequently
overheard comment abt spell #7 when it first opened at the public theater/ was
that it was too intense. the cast & i used to laugh. if this one hour n 45
minutes was too much/ how in the world did these same people imagine the rest
of our lives were/ & wd they ever be able to handle that/ simply being alive &
black & feeling in this strange deceitful country."

175 Cronacher, 180. Take special notice of her footnote (12) on David
Savran's discussion of the Wooster Group's use of blackface as a critique and
deconstruction of liberal humanism.
of status quo which prevented full participation and development of African-American actors. Locke had argued that the potential of training and adequate opportunities for African-American actors might produce new insights to conventional styles of acting and stageing. Shange's characters show that fifty years after Locke, even with training, opportunities to develop their full potentials are still limited at best.

The denial of adequate opportunities for African-American actors to develop their potentials and skills is addressed in Spell #7 by several characters. When Dahlia, the dancer, asks Alec, the director, what might be the motivation for her drinking, his reply is: "if you didn’t drink you wd remember that you’re not workin."176 When Lily, the part-time barmaid, expresses her desire to play a classic role such as Lady Macbeth or Mother Courage, Eli responds: "how the hell is she gonna play [sic] lady macbeth and macbeth's a white dude?"177 The point made by Eli is that African-American actors are hardly ever cast in classical roles since such roles have been historically encoded as "White." His point is substantiated when later Lily expresses confusion and dismay concerning the dilemma of mulatto actors:

they say i'm too light to work/ but when i asked him what he meant/ he said i didn't actually look black. . .
i said so let me play a white girl/ i'm a classically trained actress & i need the work & i can do it/ he said that wdn't be very ethical of him. can you imagine that shit/ not ethical.178

176 Shange, Three Pieces, 13.

177 Shange, Three Pieces, 14.
Lily's dilemma could just as easily have been that she was too dark complexioned for another part. The character Natalie expresses another problem particularly associated with African-American actors, that of speech and dialect usage. Often Black actors are told that they are not adequately trained to meet the vocal standards and criteria for classical Eurocentric dramas. In Natalie's case, "standard American" and classical voice training over-qualifies her for Eurocentric expectations of Black image roles. She explains:

i swear we went to that audition in good faith/ & that man asked us where we learned to speak english so well/ i swear this foreigner/ asked us/ from the city of new york/ where we learned to speak english.\textsuperscript{179}

Shange makes the frustration of African-American artists doubly clear by making the director for whom Natalie must audition a foreigner.\textsuperscript{180} Shange extends the point by identifying the director as an Englishman, clearly associating him with White America's high regard for British standards of speech. Shange makes her rejection of such standards clear by having Natalie respond to the director in Portuguese.

all i did was say 'bon dia/ como vai'/ and the englishman got red in the face\textsuperscript{181}

This response is given even greater dimension when one remembers the historical fact that the Portuguese were dominant in slave trade

\textsuperscript{179} Shange, \textit{Three Pieces}, 47.

\textsuperscript{179} Shange, \textit{Three Pieces}, 33.

\textsuperscript{180} Here may also be seen another correlation with the minstrel tradition of foreign immigrants in black-face, misrepresenting Negroes and profiting from degradation by managing minstrel companies.

\textsuperscript{181} Shange, \textit{Three Pieces}, 33.
ventures between Africa and the Americas.

Alec expresses another dilemma. While this dilemma is not particular to Black actors alone, it is mostly prevalent among them. It is the dilemma of maintaining artistic integrity and self respect. When Bettina suggests to Alec that he put aside his integrity and accept a certain role, Alec responds: "i'm not playing the fool or the black buck pimp circus/ i'm an actor not a stereotype/ i've been trained. you know i'm a classically trained actor." 182 Alec rejects both the stereotypes of the minstrel era and the counter stereotype of "the big Black buck." This counter minstrel image, created for the Black dramas of the twenties and thirties, emphasized dark skin, physical strength, courage, and a noble yet rebellious nature. 183 Shange addresses a newer Black-male image of "sexual stud" in a vignette which can be called, "The Brown Woman From There." This scene presents Alec, Lou and Eli as gigolos, representative of Black men throughout the Diaspora 184 who prey on African-American women who travel alone. The men are presented as suave romantics, well aware of the emotional vulnerabilities of African-American women who travel alone. The misfortune of the Black-male "stud" persona is revealed when romance turns to violence.

a night in a pension near the sorbonne. pick her up from the mattress. throw her against the wall in a show of

182 Shange, Three Places, 44-45.


184 Referring to, a dispersion of an originally homogenous people. Here it refers to Black African people residing in countries throughout the world.
exotic temper & passion:
'maintenant/ tu es ma femme. nous nous sommes
mariés.' 185,186

Shange shows the complexity of this dilemma as Lou and Alec continue by explaining:

unions of this sort are common wherever the yng black women travel alone. a woman traveling alone is an affront to the non-european man who is known the world over/ to european & non-european alike/ for his way with women . . .
his sense of romance/ how he can say:
aw babee/ you so pretty . . . and even a beautiful woman will believe no one else ever recognized her loveliness187

The Black stud's "way with women" is a stereotype which both Alec and Shange reject. Alec desires to express his greater potential: "i've been trained. you know i'm a classically trained actor." His desire to play classical roles is another complex dilemma for African-American actors.

The African-American actor's desire to perform classical roles is another expression of their inherent dual spiritual nature. Shange expresses an understanding of this desire and spiritual nature when she writes:

why aren't the talents & perspectives of contemporary third world artists touted in the same grand fashion successful revivals of dead white artists are?188

These remarks are taken from an essay conceived while Shange was still at work on the script for Spell #7 and it is easy to surmise

185 Translation: "Now you are my woman. We will be married."
186 Shange, Three Pieces, 38.
187 Shange, Three Pieces, 38.
that Aleo's expression of desire is Shange's own true feeling. In
the essay she goes on to explain:

one thing that doing classics allows us/ that is such a
relief/ is to do an evening of dialogue without having
to restrict ourselves to the pains & myopia of racism in
America. the power of white folks as we know it poses no
boundaries in *Caiolanus* or *Julius Caesar*. they are not
in it and hold no power—what escapism.  

She further suggests that performing certain classical dramatic
works allows Black actors an opportunity for nobility. She
concludes that this is one reason that White society is generally
unaccepting of such a notion, since accepting regal images of Blacks
demythologizes their own sense of the supremacy of White
intelligence. Shange suggests that the spiritual sensibilities of
African-Americans provides better potential for intellect when she
states:

if i had to struggle to identify with Anna Karenina & Blanche
Dubois/ why odnt white folks learn that skill. that great leap of
imagination that lets another person of another color become
oneself.  

Shange believes that in order for a work to be considered a true
classic it must be able to "function for other people in other
times." She explains how she accepted her own spiritual destiny
and fulfillment of Aleo's desire by adapting Bertolt Brecht's *Mother
Courage* for Black actors. She felt that Brecht's "use of politics &
passion/ music & monologues/ were not so different from [her] own

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189 Shange, "Fierling," 35.
190 Shange, "Fierling," 36.
191 Shange, "Fierling," 37.
approaches to the theater." She moved the setting of the play from the battlefields of war torn Europe to the Southwest territories of the United States in the years that directly followed the American Civil War.

In this way Shange can be seen as a manifestation of Locke's and DuBois' dream for the potential of African-American dramatists. By adapting *Mother Courage* for African-American actors to an African-American context she becomes an example of a Renaissance artists ability to give new life and new meaning to old ideas and images. She explains an underlying motive in the Renaissance move when she writes:

> now i wd move what waz sacred to them/ to something sacred for me. manipulation of symbols is not unlike big game hunting. learning the habits, expectations & reflexes of other animals allows us to slay them. i wd have my chance to hunt the cherished words of dead white men & using all my Afro-American reservoirs of magic, hate, & understanding of my people/ undo one myth & replace it with my own.\(^{193}\)

Such a philosophy is in perfect keeping with DuBois' claim of the dogged strength of the African as American. It (re)expresses the notion of enriching the ideas of others with the insightful spirit of African-American understanding. Shange exposes that potential by bringing all of herself, past and present, to the stage in her attempt to "move [African-American] theater into the drama of our lives."\(^{194}\) She explains her understanding of the task and her acceptance of the challenge:

\(^{192}\) *Shange*, "Fierling," 37.

\(^{193}\) *Shange*, "Fierling," 36.

\(^{194}\) *Shange*, *Three Pieces*, ix.
the fact that we are an interdisciplinary culture/ that we understand more than verbal communication/ lays a weight on afro-american writers that few others are lucky enough to have been born into. we can use with some skill virtually all our physical senses/ as writers committed to bringing the world as we remember it/ imagine it/ & know it to be to the stage/ we must use everything we’ve got.195

The interdisciplinary culture of which Shange speaks is African-American culture. The dual spiritual nature of that culture, and the subconscious and subtextual abilities that such a nature makes possible, are the magic waters that fill Shange’s reservoir of understanding. The magical or spiritual water is a metaphorical electrical conductor or conduit to Locke’s notion of something “dramatic to the core that flows movingly in the blood,” and Harrison, Abrahams and Baraka’s notion of spirit possession, emotional frenzy and release.

Shange expresses this kind of spiritual connection with her use of music and dance in Spell #7 to “make the spirit come down,” to make the experience sacred in an African-American context. The minstrel music in the prologue is provided by the actors dressed as slaves. It is a connection to the origins of African-American music and dance; to the misunderstood sacred rituals “of our spiritual strivings.” The Sister Sledge song that begins the contemporary setting, “We Are Family,” is like an uptempo gospel to get the service started; to induce the “happy” dance and the “ring shout.”196

195 Shange, Three Pieces, x.

196 Setting “happy” and “shouting” are terms that describe responses to spirit possession in the Black Church. The “ring shout” was part of sacred slave religious rites. These sacred movements evolved and became entwined with secular dances known as “jigs” and “jubas.”
Music creates moods and spells throughout the performance of Spell #7. A Butch Morris uptempo rhythm and blues helps to extend the fun and frenzy during a group discussion about Black and Latin entertainers appearing at Madison Square Garden. The character, Ross, provides soft mood music on his acoustic guitar to underscore Natalie and Alec’s bizarre story of Sue Jean, who has a child then murders it. Brazilian samba music accents the encounter of speaking Portuguese with the English director. The men of the cast perform a rendition of Smokey Robinson and the Miracles singing, "Ooh Baby, Baby" to induce romance. Bob Marley’s "Is This Love" provides a Reggae mood. In the end, the company joins in a chant that Shange tells us becomes "a serious celebration, like church."\(^{197}\)

Although music plays a large part in creating a spiritual environment in Spell #7, it is not the only spiritual element. Lou, the magician, is himself a spell maker, a sorcerer, a voodoo priest, a shaman and a spiritual guide. He is a constant reminder of the African-American connection to celestial and ancestral spirits and powers. It is possible that Shange’s childhood acquaintance with Dr. DuBois may have inspired her use of his reference to "second-sight" of the "seventh son," for this connection is specifically apparent in her selection of a title for this piece. At any rate, the choice of the number seven is not arbitrary. The spiritual relevance of the seven is an important philosophical aspect of an analysis of this work. The number and symbol "7" is important on several levels. In an

\(^{197}\) Shange, *Three Pieces*, 52.
ancient and African context the number has great spiritual powers. Its esoteric nature can be explained most clearly through the metaphysics of numerology or the science of numbers. Faith Javane and Dusty Bunker explain that numerology is a spiritual art with biblical references, developed by the ancient mathematician Pythagoras. Although Pythagoras is most commonly remembered for the Pythagorean theorem, he was primarily a mystic and philosopher, who "believed that 'all things are numbers' and that numbers represent spiritual entities whose presence is felt in all existence." According to numerological premises, seven is the number of dreamers and philosophers. It denotes clairvoyance and intuitive psychic abilities. It is an introspective number which seeks solitude for personal analysis of mind and thought. Pythagoras considered seven as the most sacred of all numbers. It is the principle number in the Bible. It is reportedly used over three hundred sixty times throughout the Old and New Testaments. According to Javane and Bunker:

7 Seeks Answers. It tries to establish a philosophy by which to live and attempts to penetrate the mystery behind its existence which it has never questioned to this point . . . It looks for friendship with those of an elevated

198 Faith Javane and Dusty Bunker, Numerology and the Divine Triangle (Rockport, Mass.: Para Research, 1979) 9. Javane and Bunker further explain that Pythagoras, who was born around 582 B.C. in Greece, traveled to Egypt as a young man where he was initiated into certain mathematical doctrines. He is also reported to have studied with Zoroaster, the Persian sage, and to have learned the Kabbalah in Judea.

199 Javane and Bunker, 141-142.

200 Javane and Bunker, 113.
consciousness that can match its own. And on the seventh day God rested. All things rest under the 7 because time is needed in which to think. 7 ushers into the cycle a physical completion without apparent effort. Goals that have been long sought are now magically attained. Perfected thinking is the goal of 7. The physical facet of 7 also relates to the health of the body which is highly sensitized through this vibration.

The insights that are revealed about the aspects of the number seven are in direct agreement with those implied by DuBois in The Souls of Black Folk: the notions of mystic intuition and private introspection, the magical attainment of wholeness, and the need for self awareness and self analysis. These are all elements of Shange's message in Spell #7 as well. The complete title of the work identifies this intent. Spell #7: [sic] geechee jibara quik magic trance manual for technologically stressed third world people. A studied examination of the terms used in this title aid in understanding that the work is:

a manual, in which Shange spells out a magic formula or incantation that will allow all peoples of the African Diaspora to rest for a while; rest in the inspirational, introspective, intuitive spiritual power of the number 7; rest from the stresses of repressive, positivist Western technological thought; delights in being themselves, in all the fullness of their singular and collective beings, discovering the positive power of being "colored" and taking joy in the process.

Spell#7 is in complete compliance with the theoretical philosophies of the Harlem Renaissance. It adheres to the fundamental criteria established by DuBois in The Crisis. The motif is clearly about African-American life. It reveals African-American

\[201\] Javane and Dunker, 12.

experience in its most personal and private elements. It is written by an author who has first hand understanding of the complexities of maturing as an African-American. The work is intended for the entertainment and education of African-American audiences and is more likely to be produced by theatre companies catering to such audiences than by mainstream theatres. Spell #7 is part of Shange's connection to Harlem Renaissance ideals in the (re)birth and (re)establishment of an independently created African-American dramatic tradition. She understands and makes use of African-American spirituality as outlined by DuBois and others. Her use of music and dance as integral elements of dramaturgy is a hallmark of her work and tribute to her aesthetic heritage. She not only provides African-American actors an outlet for the expression of their inner emotional depth, she requires it of them in the portrayal of her characters. She is a Renaissance writer of the present era who exhibits the potential and possibility for the development of an African-American theatre of the future.
Chapter IV

Asserting the Power of Spirit: The Revolutionary Black Aesthetic

The concept of Revolution has certain similarities to the concept of Renaissance. Both concepts are concerned with the creation of a new order, with providing new approaches and establishing new criteria of aesthetics and operations. One major difference between the two concepts is the element of revolt that is inherent in Revolutionary philosophy. Moreover, Revolution is often associated with radicalism and extremism in its efforts to achieve newness. The primary distinction between the two concepts may be seen in this radical extremism of Revolution in contrast to the Renaissance aim of rebirth and revival. In this regard, defining an American epoch of the 1960s and early 1970s as The Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement becomes slightly complex. This era is often defined on the basis of its pervasive alliance with the most militant factions of the American Civil Rights or Black Power Movement. Too often, the Renaissance elements and aims of the Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement are overlooked. This chapter will look at the theoretical role of theatre as part of the Black Arts – Black Power alliance, explaining The Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement as a developmental outgrowth of The Harlem Renaissance. The conclusive argument will focus on Ntozake Shange’s
use of revolutionary tactics in the forms of rejection and assertion, and describe Shange's position as leader in the continuing revolt against the hegemony of Eurocentric aesthetics.

The idea of protest and revolt in Black drama did not begin with the Revolutionary Movement of the 1960s. This practice can be traced back to the first known plays written and performed by African-Americans. These include King Shotoway, written by Mr. Brown, performed by James Hewlett and the African Company sometime in the early 1820s, and The Escape: or, A Leap for Freedom by William Wells Brown, published in 1858. Protest against racism has remained a dominant theme in the works of Black dramatists ever since. Errol Hill chronicles and analyzes the development of these facts in the 1986 essay, "The Revolutionary Tradition in Black Drama." Although revolutionary protest dramas are easy to find in the history of African-American Theatre, the The Revolutionary Black Theatre era takes focus in this regard because it was such a prevailing and pervasive movement. An estimated four hundred plays were produced by nearly two hundred playwrights. The overwhelming majority of these plays where unashamedly propaganda for the larger cause of the Black Arts - Black Power alliance.

The more general Black Arts Movement of this era included the aesthetics of African-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, and novelists. The distinction between this new movement

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203 Mr. Brown was the Black Caribbean-American owner and manager of the African Grove Tea Room and African Grove Theater, ca. 1820s. His first name is not known.

and the criteria established during the 1920s involved the use of the term "radical." Poet and essayist Larry Neal, in a 1968 manifesto for the umbrella Black Arts Movement, explains that: "Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept . . . radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community." 205 Like the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement sought to change artistic perspectives by use of drastic measures. It was a concept which proposed "a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic" including "a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology." 206 It attempted to create an artistic expression that spoke "directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America," 207 rather than trying to assimilate African-Americans into White society. Neal states:

The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors'? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors? . . . In a context of world upheaval, ethics and aesthetics must interact positively and be consistent with the demands for a more spiritual world. Consequently, the Black Arts Movement is an ethical movement. Ethical, that is, from the viewpoint of the oppressed. 208

It was during this period that the term Afrocentricity began to emerge on a large scale as a way of identifying this "viewpoint of

206 Neal, 29.
207 Neal, 30.
208 Ibid, 30.
the oppressed," the establishment of a new positive identity and a return to traditional African spiritual values and ethical behavior. This was a Renaissance concept. And, only slightly different from The Harlem Renaissance, The Black Arts Movement sought to create a completely separate Black world rather than a Black-ground within a larger American framework. The concepts of Black Arts and Black Power rejected the notion of a White world or a White audience altogether. The aims were to create a separate framework with separate rules, and address itself entirely to a Black audience with Black awareness and Black sensibilities. In the specific realm of theatre, the major debate among African-American dramatists and critics was centered around "the function and structure of Black theatre"\(^{209}\) and what would distinguish it from that of Eurocentric theatre.

LeRoi Jones, who later became known as Imamu Amiri Baraka, held positions as both dramatist and critic and emerged as the spiritual and intellectual leader of The Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement. In the early 1960s Jones/Baraka wrote an essay entitled "In Search of the Revolutionary Theatre,"\(^{210}\) which became a manifesto for the Movement. This manifesto declared that The Black Revolutionary Theatre was to be a theatre of assault; that it would

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\(^{210}\) LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), "In Search of the Revolutionary Theatre," *Negro Digest*, 16.6 (1966): 21-24. This essay was originally commissioned by *The New York Times* in December 1964, but was refused, with the statement that the editors could not understand it. *The Village Voice* also refused to run this essay. It was first published in *Black Dialogue*. Later printed in *The Liberator*, 7.7 (1965).
show the cruelty that Whites had bestowed on Black races throughout history. Baraka’s aesthetic theory outlined new politically militant criteria for African-American drama. In addition to the four fundamentals prescribed by DuBois during the Harlem Renaissance, Baraka stated that: "The Revolutionary Theatre should force change, it should be change." This change was to be on all levels but directly focused on the social status and conditions of Black Americans. Through theatrical means, Baraka wanted to "EXPOSE" the racial ills of Western society and teach Whites the ramifications of hatred and denial of what he called "the supremacy of the Spirit." His doctrine states:

This should be a theatre of World Spirit. Where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling. The language will be anybody’s, but tightened by the poet’s backbone. And even the language must show what the facts are in this consciousness epic, what’s happening. We will talk about the world, and the preciseness with which we are able to summon the world, will be our art.

In addressing the notion of the spirit or the spiritual nature of African-American people, Baraka was making direct connection to DuBois and Locke who both saw potential in the depth of an esoteric metaphysical connection between the souls of Black Americans and cosmic universal forces. This spiritual consciousness, Baraka suggests, is developed by listening to ancestral voices that speak to the soul or spirit in silent moments. In those moments the world

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211 The four fundamentals of DuBois’ criteria for Black Theatre were discussed in Chapter Three.

212 Jones/ Baraka, 21.

213 Jones/ Baraka, 21.
outside of the spiritual connection can only see craziness, because they can only see life and the world on a material plain. They are denied the "second-sight" of the gifted Black soul.

Baraka was calling for the same focus on African-American spirituality as the aesthetic theorist and philosophers of The Harlem Renaissance. In Baraka’s view, the loss of African-Americans’ connection to intuitive spirit and power was due to their victimization by Whites. Baraka saw his theatre as a theatre of victims. Everyone involved in this theatre was to see the world from the eyes of the victimized. He wanted to show African-Americans and White Americans what had been created by White Western domination of the world so that the world might change. He wanted to show that the very existence of African-Americans as descendants of slaves makes them victims. The circumstance and conditions of slavery and the untold suffering, degradation and death bestowed on such people makes them victims. He argued that the fraud, swindle, trickery and manipulation of Blacks by Whites and White power structures continue to victimize. Baraka wrote:

Our theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they themselves are victims, if they are blood brothers. And what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught. We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be. We are preaching virtue and feeling, and a natural sense of the self in the world.\textsuperscript{214}

\textsuperscript{214} Jones/ Baraka, 22-23.
This is passionate revolutionary radicalism. However, it also fulfills its purpose of showing the powerful underlying effects of prolonged victimization on both the victim and the victimizer. For Baraka and the majority of Black Americans, social victimization was the true reality of Western hegemony. Baraka wanted to expose that reality from the perspective of the abused. He felt he was fulfilling a moral obligation to the spiritual essence of African-American existence. He expressed an expectation and awareness of the effects when he wrote:

[White] Americans will hate the revolutionary theatre because it will be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real.\textsuperscript{215}

The Revolutionary Theatre saw Whites and their ancestors as victimizers. The White world, as represented by Western society, was seen as evil, corrupt and totally consumed by materialistic desires. The Revolutionary Theatre accused and attacked Western society for its preoccupation with the material aspects of existence and its rejection of spiritual virtue. Again in the words of Baraka: "The Revolutionary Theatre must hate them for hating. For presuming with their technology to deny the supremacy of the Spirit."\textsuperscript{216}

It must be remembered the the catalyst for this revolutionary ideology was the pursuit of liberty and the quest for social and racial equality. With that vision at the forefront, the plays presented in this theatre were calls to action. While the primary

\begin{footnotes}
\item[215] Jones / Baraka, 23.
\item[216] Jones / Baraka, 21.
\end{footnotes}
goal may have been a call to political action, the ultimate goal was to move Black Americans into a philosophy of positive personal action. Baraka suggested that plays be used as tactical weapons in the psychological war against White hegemony; as "bullets to be used against the enemy."\(^{217}\) The practicality of this philosophy is expressed in the following segment from the manifesto:

The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality. It must isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality. But it must be food for all those who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind. But it is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on.\(^{218}\)

There are two aspects of this statement that need closer scrutiny. Those aspects include: 1.) The Revolutionary Theatre as a theatre of reality; and 2.) The Revolutionary Theatre as a theatre of assault. By looking at two dramatists of the Black Arts Movement these points become more clear.

Ed Bullins emerged as a playwright during this era out of San Francisco to become resident dramaturg at Harlem's New Lafayette Theatre. Bullins, along with Baraka, is now considered one of the Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement's most profound and prolific dramatists. In 1966, Bullins published an essay which defined his approach to writing for the Revolutionary Theatre entitled "Theatre of Reality."\(^{219}\) In this essay, he rejects White theatrical tradition


\(^{218}\) Jones/Baraka, 21.

and dramaturgy in radical revolutionary fashion with the statement: "Aristotle and his aesthetic dogmas are not of this time and never had been meant for the black artist anyway." Bullins explained, that method and technique were not the immediate goals of the Revolutionary Movement. The exploration and creation of new characters, new themes and new definitions were far more important. He was concerned with exposing the negative realities of humanity by presenting honest, rather than perfectly structured, African-American characters and themes. In order to dramatize the radical psychological journey being experienced by Black Americans, Bullins thought it was necessary to utilize a variety of theatrical styles and methods. He writes:

> It is not a call for a return to realism or naturalism that this theater calls for; it is the exposure of illusion through exploding myths and lies that are disguised as reality and truths. These myths, and especially those concerning the black man, clutter the heart of his existence, his humanity.\(^\text{221}\)

The theatrical reality which Bullins sought is a Black sense of reality and is counter to what White society may see as truth. It is bent on exposing the ills of such a society, especially as it relates to that society's degradation of Blacks. The aim of Bullins' Theatre of Reality was to create characters with "metaphysical yearnings"\(^\text{222}\) and use them as propaganda in a war of mind and spirit. He would later identify his focus on African-American characters as part of what he called *Black dialectics* with

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\(^{220}\) Bullins, 64.

\(^{221}\) Bullins, 65.

\(^{222}\) Bullins, 66.
two branches: dialectic of change, which he associated with protest and Black revolutionary writing, and dialectic of experience,\textsuperscript{223} which was the experience of "being" and expressing the realities of the African-American "self."

Another radical playwright of The Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement, Ron Milner, articulated the sentiments of several African-American dramatists in agreement with Baraka. Here Milner outlines his view of the aesthetic image of what Black Theatre should be. He gives new definition to the term Black Theatre, which until this time had been called Negro Theatre. Milner writes that Black Theatre is:

The ritualized reflection and projection of a unique and particular way of being, born of the unique and particular conditioning of black people leasing time on this planet controlled by white-men; and having something to do with the breaking of that "leasing syndrome." A theater emerging from artists who realize that, for black people of this world, and, specifically, this country, every quote "universal" human malady, dilemma, desire, or wonder, is, by the heat of the pressure of white-racism, compounded and enlarged, agitated and aggravated, accented and distilled to make that omni-suffusing, grinding sense of being we once called the blues but might now just term: blackness. From this peculiar and particular extra-dimension of being, of experiences, of conditioning, will come the kind of theater I'm looking for... It will be a theater having to do with love of one's self, and one's personal, national, and international family; with wariness and hatred of one's personal, national, and international enemies; with, ideally, points as to how to break their grip and splatter their power.\textsuperscript{224}

The theatre that Milner envisioned was undoubtedly revolutionary.


The fight for psychical, mental, and aesthetic liberation of its artists and audience was at the forefront. This was a revival of Renaissance notions of artistic spirituality. By associating the struggle for this aesthetic goal with blues music, Milner makes another connection to the earlier Harlem Renaissance theorists in understanding the importance of music as a primary element in personifying the uniqueness of the African-American artistic identity. Milner joined Baraka in attempting to focus African-American artists, specifically playwrights, on their psychic connections to a universal self: to understand the repetitive nature of history; that as artists who understand the possibilities of the repetition of experiences in history, they should:

try to find the terms, and the pictures, which will most simply clarify those experiences and that knowledge for the you’s who do not, or could not, understand what is, or was, happening to you, and to future you’s who will need to be warned and directed in terms from inside that level we call: blackness - for it is within that level that most of the added, making or breaking, weight comes.\textsuperscript{225}

Milner suggests that in order to find this possibility, the Black artists must “go home,” in every way, figuratively and literally. He felt that aesthetics can only be developed in an environment which is familiar and comfortable, and that artists must be within the environments of “home” in order to feel indigenous and organic. Only in this way could they master the techniques of detailing the Black existence. This was his call for separation from the American mainstream; another argument for the need for separate theatres, for

\textsuperscript{225} Milner, 309.
a theatre "near us" as Dubois had already concluded.

The ideas of Bullins and Milner merge with the manifesto of Baraka in the search for a means of expressing the ethical humanity of African-Americans in a positive theatrical aesthetic. For all three the Revolutionary Theatre Movement required a combination of ethics and aesthetics in its presentation. It recognized creative imagination and its relation to "image" and "magic" as an essential element. As Baraka claims:

What is called the imagination (from image, magi, magic, magician, etc.) is a practical vector from the soul. It stores all data, and can be called on to solve all our "problems." The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as "things." Imagination (image) is all possibility, because from the image, the initial circumscribed energy, and use (idea) is possible. And so begins that image's use in the world. Possibility is what moves us.226

Baraka speaks of the potential for African-American artists to couple innate spiritual power with the magic of creative imagination in opposition to Western notions of "high art." The dramatic theorists of the Harlem Renaissance had already pointed out that magic and spirituality are distinctive elements of African-American creativity. They are not distinctive to African-Americans, but aspects of a long standing association with ideas of ancestry shared with other Black cultures, Native-Americans, and tropical peoples and cultures seen as primitive and savage by Eurocentrics and positivists. Baraka sought a functional art form that could express the internal anger and frustrations of African-Americans while at the same time utilizing their spiritual energies to create

226 Jones/Baraka, 23.
imaginative positive change. He wanted to expose the ills of society in order to correct those ills and establish new virtues for humanity. In his words: "All men live in the world, and the world ought to be a place for them to live." 227

It remains ironic, but understandable, that the Eurocentric encoded image of Baraka defines him as a radical racist militant who preached only separatism, hatred and anger in his work. This is a problem which arises from narrow readings of Baraka's writings and out of the biases and shallow perspectives of White critics and audiences who continually fail to see or understand the multiple functions of Black Art. For while most Black Art developed during this era was revolutionary protest, it was also focused in and on the Black experiences of its creators. What most Eurocentric criticism seems to focus on is the overwhelming feelings of anger and hostility which most Black Art projects without analyzing the reasons for the revolt: the oppression that suppresses spirit and innate artistic awareness. All volcanoes at some point in history must erupt, and faults in the earth's crust must quake at some point in order to relieve tension and settle. Anger in Black Arts can be a positive connection to the passion and emotion that sustains it. It is understandable, and sad, that White critics and audiences trained in the Eurocentric traditions of emotional restraint seem unable to grasp this concept.

The fundamental difference in proponents of the Revolutionary Black Theatre and Black Arts Movements from those who came before

227 Jones/Baraka, 23.
was the complete and total rejection of the White audience and White standards of criticism. Black artists realized that when they created work for the consumption of Whites, "the result was usually an artistic creation filled with half truths." 228 The larger society was not interested in or capable of accepting Black views on the nature of America's problems. In order for the Black artist to succeed in the larger society, their works had to be guised in myths, morality, folklore, and "plain lies" about their own nature. Even at this point in history, images and ideas of African-Americans established during the minstrel era continued to prevail in the minds of many Americans. With the freedom to speak directly to an audience of African-American peers, it was hoped that Black artists would be more inclined to develop a uniqueness and honesty in their works.

In 1971, Addison Gayle, Jr. attempted to provide a critical dimension to the aesthetics of African-American art and culture with the publication of a book of critical and theoretical essays entitled The Black Aesthetic. 229 In the introduction to this work, Gayle addresses the issue of emotional passion in Black Art. His comments indicate the different perspective of Afrocentric criticism from that of White critics:

"The black artist in the American society who creates without interjecting a note of anger is creating not as a black man, but as an American. For anger in black art is as old as the first utterances by black men on"


229 Gayle, xxi.
Gayle, like Baraka, acknowledged anger and frustration as factors in African-American art. He also echoed the need not to extinguish this passion, but to use it in full conjunction with positive creative imagination in order to portray the humanity of the African-American race. Gayle's anthology pointed out the need for new criteria of criticism for the evaluation of African-American artists. **The Black Aesthetic** identified Gayle as a prominent leader of the new Black Aesthetic Movement, which became the theoretical and critical arm of the Black Arts and Revolutionary Black Theatre Movements.

The Black Aesthetic Movement focused on artistic methodology. Its aim was to revive the role of the critic in Black aesthetic tradition and raise critical awareness to a higher level than did the 1920s Harlem Renaissance era. It sought to get beyond evaluation of art "in terms of its beauty" and focus more on "the transformation from ugliness to beauty that the work of art demands from its audience."²³¹ In this way the Black audience would be educated and moved to new awareness and self respect, instilling a more positive identity and a more ethical and spiritual character. Gayle explained the ideals of the Black Aesthetic Movement as follows:

The question for the black critic today is not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single black man? How far has the work gone in transforming an American Negro into an

²³⁰ Gayle, xvi.

²³¹ Gayle, xxiii.
African-American or black man? The Black Aesthetic, then, as conceived by this writer, is a corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism. This passage also helps to illustrate the important role given to artistic endeavor in the cause of liberation of African-Americans in the era of Civil Rights and Black Power. Hoyt Fuller, then editor of Black World magazine, explained the difficulties of aligning Black Arts with politics and attempting to establish a Black Aesthetic Movement:

The movement will be reviled as "racism-in-reverse," and its writers labeled "racists," opprobrious terms which are flung lightly at black people now that the piper is being paid for all the long years of rejection and abuse which black people have experienced at the hands of white people—with few voices raised in objection... Is this too harsh and sweeping a generalization? White people might think so; black people will not; which is a way of stating the problem and the prospect before us.

Revolutionary writers were indeed labeled racist. The revolutionary protest in their themes and the characters they created who revolted against White authority and status quo was considered shocking and profane by most White Americans. For dramatists, it was a busy and productive phase in the developing history of African-American dramatic tradition and the continuing struggle to reject and erase the ever-prevalent minstrel image. It is the same struggle that Shange assumes in her search for an independently created aesthetic.

An overview of the theoretical history of The Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement reveals an on-going struggle for self identity and the establishment of an African-American dramatic

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232 Gayle, xxiii.

aesthetic. The struggle takes on new guises and repeats a cycle of protest and experimentation, revolt and rejection, and the assertion of new ideas in an attempt to crush the domination and limitation of Eurocentric structures. The intellectual background of Shange leads one to surmise that she is well aware of the history and tradition of Black Theatre in America. This can be seen in her use of many of the same creative tactics suggested by the Renaissance and Revolutionary eras. It can be seen in her general revolt and refection of Eurocentric standards of form, structure and use of language. It can also be seen in her use of protest themes, although all of these methods may also be seen as a form of self assertion rather than protest of revolt. She has identified Baraka as an influence in her work and much of his theory can be found in Spell #7.

Baraka's theory said that victims must be shown in order to change their status. Shange shows us victims, first in the form of the minstrels in tattered slave garb. They are clear representations of the victimization of slavery. They are also example of the victimization of early African-American entertainers. The status of these victims is changed by the symbolic revolt against the constraint and limitations of the minstrel masks that are symbols of false and forced identity. Also hi-lighting victimization, when Maxine, as Fay, hails a cab in Brooklyn and heads to Manhattan to have "a good ole time," Fay is shown as a victim of cultural illiteracy, both her own culture and that of her victimizer. Likewise, the character Natalie enacts the story of Sue
Jean, a victim of repression, abuse, neglect and ignorance. In this scene, the tragedy of continued victimization is foregrounded when Sue Jean murders her infant child in order to control and limit his quest for knowledge and freedom. Near the end of Spell #7, Maxine reminds us of the victimization of South African Blacks and the connection thereby to the history of world victimization of Black races. In a monologue which impersonates "White Girls," the victimization of the victimizers is given focus as well. In another scene a White British director appears shocked and even victimized by his ignorance of the fact that Black Americans can not only speak English clearly and articulately, but they have also travelled the world and mastered other languages. All of these situations may fulfill the assault criteria of Black Revolutionary theory. In each case, the lesson is harsh and revealing for both the victim and victimizer.

Shange is also a revolutionary in her own right. By her own admission she has learned to make conscious use of the revolutionary term coined by Frantz Fanon, "combat breath." She explains that the term was developed as part of Fanon's revolutionary rhetoric in the fight for Francophone African colonies. She quotes Fanon:

There is no occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of final destruction. Under this condition, the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing.234

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Fanon is recognized as an inspiration to Black Power movements all over the world, and his statement personifies the Revolutionary Black Theatre and Black Arts call for the rejection and separation from White traditions. For Shange, the notion of combat breathing gives inspiration and direction to all of her work. She suggests that in Spell #7 can be found examples of:

the throes of pain n sensation experienced by my characters responding to the involuntary constrictions n amputations of their humanity/ in the context of combat breathing.235

The amputations of her characters' humanity is evident in their victimization by White society and traditions. By setting her Spell#7 characters within the segregated confines of a segregated barroom, Shange allows them open space for the freedom of self expression dictated by Revolutionary theory. Their performance becomes the symbolic manifestation of dreams by African-American artists to express their forceful spiritual feelings in a spontaneous ritual of metaphysical aspirations and realities. It is spiritual food for "technologically stressed third world people," and "daring propaganda for the beauty of the human Mind." It is also a powerful political weapon in a war for artistic independence.

The force, spirit and freedom of emotional feeling of Shange's characters are expressed in the spontaneous camaraderie of the poem piece "We Dress Up." This freewheeling segment exposes the communal nature of Black pride and the joyful and celebratory spirit of music, dance and Black celebrity. Together the characters proclaim:

235 Shange, Three Pieces, xii.
we dress up
we dress up
cuz we got good manners... it's not cuz we got money
it's not cuz if we had money we wd spend it on luxury
it's just... when you gonna see one of them...
they gotta really know...
we dont do this for any old body
we're doin this for you
we dress up
is our way of sayin/ you gettin the very best
we cant do less/ we love too much to be stingy...
we simply have good manners
& an addiction to joy. 236

The African-American tradition of "dressing up" is an example of Bullins' Theatre of Reality concept. In the African-American world of realities "dressing up" expresses the "metaphysical yearning" for social status and respectability. This includes respect for self and respect for other members of the race. It expresses Bullins' idea of the dialectic of experience, in which the experience of being an African-American survivor of continued historical victimization is celebrated, both in the self and in the honoree who has achieved celebrity status. The characters explain:

od you really ask dr. funkenstein to come all that way & greet him in the clothes you sweep yr kitchen in?
NO!

od you say to muhammad ali/ well/ i just didnt have a chance to change/ you see i have a job/ & then i went jogging & well, you know its just madison square garden
my dear/ you know that wont do
we honor our guests/ if it costs us all we got when stevie wonder sings/ he don't want us lookin like we ain't got no common sense/ he wants us to be as lovely as we really are/ 237

In the White world of realities the relevance of the "dressing up" ritual may seem ludicrous and trivial. Such a reaction provides

236 Shange, Three Pieces, 18-20.

237 Shange, Three Pieces, 18.
strong support for Bullins' point. In contrast to such a reaction, Shange's characters offer negative comparison by assaulting White modes of dress and lack of style, appreciation and respect:

when ringlin' bros. comes to madison square garden/
dontcha know the white people just go
in their ob radios
in their mcdonald's hats/ with their save america t-shirts.
when the hockey games absorb all america's attention in
winter/ they go with their fists olenched & their
tongues battering their women.
they go & sweat in fierce anger.
their factories
these middle management positions
make madison square garden
the temple of the primal scream
Oh how they love blood
& how they dont even dress for the occasion/ all
inconspicuous & pink 238

In this way Shange is able to reverse the frame of reference to that of a Black world. In her world, Black culture is seen as sophisticated "high art" while White culture is reduced to that of the primal and savage indicating a reversal of traditional realities. The poem also illustrates the ability of a community to create something of harmonious beauty and imagination when the experiences of that community are shared in a positive way.

Harmony and imagination are illustrated in several of the vignettes presented in Spell #7. This is apparent in the improvisational duet scene, "A good time with Fay." The character Ross outlines the situation of a lower class woman from Brooklyn who Maxine begins to act out. The skit is particularly revealing when Fay is not able to fit into the sophisticated realm of the Manhattan

238 Shange, Three Pieces, 15-16.
bar where she comes to "have a good time." One is able to see the character of Fay move from the happiness of being herself to the private pathos of societal rejection and isolation. Through the character of Fay, the stage and the theatre become "an analytical forum which exposes bourgeois illusions and stimulates audiences to think objectively about the causes of social and personal ills."\(^{239}\)

What one begins to see then is the greater potential of the African-American dramatists who couples Revolutionary theory with creative imagination. At the same time, Shange's departure into a perspective that begins to transcend all previous traditions of African-American dramatic thought may be seen. Sandra Richards explains a Brechtian slant on Shange's work when she writes:

> By constructing most of her plays as a series of poetic monologues, occasionally interrupted by conventional dialogue, [Shange] takes advantage of the telegraphic, elusive quality of poetry to encourage audiences to listen with close, critical attention.\(^{240}\)

Shange thus does her part for the Black Aesthetic tradition by stimulating increased critical awareness and enlightened perspective. She begins to transcend the modern perspective into something new and different. The actress character Maxine reveals a complexity of African-American existence when she states after having improvised Fay so well: "aw ross/ when am i gonna get a chance to feel somethin like that/ i got into this business ouz i wanted to feel things all the time/ & all they want me to do is put


my leg in my face."\textsuperscript{241} Shange, in the guise of Maxine, declares that she wants to go further in the expression of her feelings and her talents. To this statement by Maxine, two other female characters respond: "at least yr workin," and "at least yr not playin a whore."\textsuperscript{242} These characters portray the anger and frustration of not being able to exhibit their full potentials. This rage is expressed again by the actor/director character Alec, who becomes enraged during an argument with his girlfriend character Bettina, when she suggests that he take a job which he thinks is beneath his talents. Alec replies: "i cant stay in these 'hate whitey' shows/ cuz they arent true."\textsuperscript{243} This exemplifies Bullins' point concerning the change of the Black dialectics - from the dialectic of change or revolt to the dialectic of experience or being. It is toward the continuation of this change that the particular talents of Shange show outstanding potential in the guise of Spell \#7.

The spiritual connection to a dramatic ancestry shines through in this special work by a gifted artist of the contemporary African-American Theatre. Spell \#7 teaches the love of one's self, and one's personal, national, and international family. It also suggests how to break the grip and splatter the power of one's personal, national, and international oppressors. The way is to move beyond the realm of the past and the present and into the realm of the possible. Shange reminds that "all things are possible,"

\textsuperscript{241} Shange, Three Pieces, 23.
\textsuperscript{242} Shange, Three Pieces, 23.
\textsuperscript{243} Shange, Three Pieces, 45.
illustrating the power of hope. She continues, "but aint no colored magician in his right mind gonna make you white," reminding that there is power in the knowledge of "being" who, and what, the present has brought one to be. Potential and possibility are aspects of African-American aesthetics that have always been taught, yet rarely fully appreciated. What remains now is to utilize all of the positive elements of what African-American dramatic tradition has taught and move past the negatives onto the higher spiritual plain of the possible. The challenge of the present is to accept the possibilities of the future.
Chapter V
Entering the Realm of Possibilities: The Post-Afrocentric Discourse

Geneviève Fabre identifies African-American theatre as a theatre born of historical conflict, always in quest of identity. The previous chapters have provided a general overview of African-American dramatic traditions from the late Eighteenth Century through the 1970s and substantiate Fabre's conclusion. The goal of this chapter is to set forth a need to move into another phase of artistic development; a Post-Afrocentric Movement. The Post-Afrocentric Movement will be defined and outlined in relation to other contemporary Post-Movements using the ideas of Shange and Spell #7 as an examples of this new ideology in practice.

In order to understand the notion of a Post-Afrocentric Movement it is necessary to understand three competing discursive formations of African-American dramatic practice. Tejumola Olaniyan has identified these formations in the context of Black (African, African-American and Caribbean) dramatic practice. He labels these formations:

- the hegemonic, colonialist EUROCENTRIC discourse, the counter-hegemonic, anticolonialist AFROCENTRIC discourse, and an emerging POST-AFROCENTRIC discourse that subverts both the EUROCENTRIC and the AFROCENTRIC,

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while refining and advancing the aims of the latter.\textsuperscript{245}

For the purposes of this study I shall make use of Olaniyan's terms and posit here my understanding and use of them as they are to be read throughout this chapter. The Eurocentric discourse is defined as that which utilizes standards of Western (European and/or White American) traditions as established by Enlightened Rationalism. This discourse asserts or implies that there is no such thing as indigenous traditions as related to the aesthetics of Black drama. It assumes that any dramatic tradition that may call itself Black is nothing more than a developing imitation of Western forms and traditions. It holds fast to the hegemonic concept of the ideological dominance of a controlling elite class. The Eurocentric discourse will only legitimate "other" forms that exhibit elements of "universality" as defined by its own traditions and viewpoints.

The counter-hegemonic, Afrocentric, discourse is a relativistic concept which is in constant opposition to Eurocentric ideology. The Afrocentric discourse insists "on privileging the presence, point of view, and self-determination of Africans, Continental or Diasporan.\textsuperscript{246} Its major objective is to define and empower itself as worthy (if not more worthy) of being, as compared to the Eurocentric, which it sees as arrogant, condescending, and evil. The Afrocentric discourse is generally in binary polarity with the Eurocentric. It is fostered by metaphysics rather than positivism, and spirituality rather than materialism. It is

\textsuperscript{245} Olaniyan, 2.

\textsuperscript{246} Olaniyan, 2.
revolutionary, nativistic and nationalistic, and is propelled by an aggressive combative urge to free the identifiable self from the danger of abusive physical or ideological attack. Within its own discourse it is most closely related to the tradition of The Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement. However, by its very nature the Afrocentric discourse has a built-in preoccupation with the Eurocentric which bares deeper analysis. Part of such an analysis is inherent within a definition of Post-Afrocentricity.

Olaniyan provides an explanation of the emerging Post-Afrocentric discourse. He writes that the major distinguishing characteristic of this Movement is:

a more or less singular insistence on working through the excessive manichaeism of the Eurocentric and Afrocentric discourses and affirming instead the more difficult foundational premise of an irreversible imbrication of histories between Europe and Africa. This premise is “more difficult” because it displaces, and is incompatible with the easy, smug satisfaction of a binary apprehension. What it suggests is an agonistic terrain, proposed as shared but from which a distinct identity must nevertheless be forged, for the sharing is in grossly unequal terms. It is thus a zone of the most complex, challenging, and dynamic conceptions of difference; a zone of endless critical questioning which subverts the culturalist notion of difference that animates both the Eurocentric and Afrocentric differences: an issue of an eternal white=civilized against black=barbaric; or in some passionate Afrocentric voices, a case simply of a “white aesthetic” against a “black aesthetic,” all with a more or less . . . quiet disregard for, or a hazy comprehension of, the complexity of their own enabling conditions. The post-Afrocentric discourse not only quests for different representations but also, simultaneously, queries the representation of difference.247

In other words, the histories of Europe and Africa are so entwined

247 Olaniyan, 3.
that it is fruitless and fatal not to focus on the commonalties of human existence rather than the polarities which separate European and African talents. As complex as such a quest may seem, the potential results promise alternative revelations to ideologies that continue to dominate both Western and Black aesthetics of the past. The Post-Afrocentric discourse is an emerging force resulting from the simultaneous dialectical convergence and opposition of the White Eurocentric and the Black Afrocentric discourses. Olaniyan points out that what is needed is recognition and acceptance of the distinctive elements of each and recognition and acceptance of the inescapable conditions which bind the two polarities. In other words, the existence of each is reliant on the other and therefore is part of a perpetual cycle of complex negative reactions which undermines the positive development of either. It is thus necessary to see the differences between the two realms of thought in a different more positive way. Consequently, the need to (re)identify and (re)define the African-American image, as well as the aesthetic which personifies that image, is paramount.

In relation to critical theory enterprises, Post-Afrocentric thought is directly related to Postmodernism, Postcolonialism and Postrevolutionary thought. It is like Postmodernism in its concern with decentering assumed antecedents. Postmodernism is a term which came into prominence in the United States during the 1980s and describes a theoretical and representational mood in the theorizing of art, literature, political science, philosophy, geography, media and sociology. Patricia Waugh suggests that the term entered
American critical discourse in the 1950s and was "used extensively in a literary critical context" to describe an idea of "story telling" whereby "the stories are now indistinguishable from what was once assumed to be knowledge." Waugh explains that one of Postmodernism's tendencies has been to "bridge the gap between high and mass culture and undo the elitist 'autonomy' of Modernism." According to Waugh, the term now appears "more frequently in feminist debates, government papers on education and even in tabloid newspapers." Patrice Pavis discusses Postmodernism in relation to classical and modern drama. He states:

In the light of postmodernism [the text] is no longer the deposit meaning awaiting the mise en scène that will express, interpret and transcribe this unproblematic meaning that theatre (dramaturge, director or actor) may bring to light through erudition and patience. The text has become signifying matter awaiting meaning, an object of desire, one hypothetical meaning among others, which is tangible and concretized only in a situation of enunciation resulting from the combined efforts of audience and mise en scène (where the audience is the recipient of the enunciation).

Pavis' explanation allows for (re)valuation and experimentation with texts of the classical and modern traditions of theatre and a change in the dominant paradigm of theatrical identity and representation. He further states that "rhythm and parody become the system of meaning in the mise en scène on which all others rest" indicating the importance of emotion and intellect to the Postmodern mode.


249 Waugh, 2.

The insights of both Waugh and Pavis illustrate the openness of Postmodern thought to perpetual contemporary interpretation making it possible to always see the present relevance of theatre and drama from the perspective of almost any culture at any time. A Post-Afrocentric aesthetic takes these ideals to another level by infusing them with the perspectives and the experiences of colonialism and enslavement. In this regard Post-Afrocentric and Postcolonialism become terms which may describe African-American Postmodernism and African Postmodernism, respectively.

Post-Afrocentric and Postcolonial Movements are alike in their efforts to decenter Europe as the framing-ground of intellect, dispassion and analysis in the forms of Enlightenment, Rationalism and Modernism. In the case of Post-Afrocentricism the decentering focus becomes more specifically White American hegemony as representative of imperial Eurocentric ideology. To borrow from Anthony Appiah, these Movements can be seen as "a retheorization of the proliferation of distinctions that reflects the underlying dynamic of cultural modernity, the need to clear oneself a space."\(^{251}\) In the space that is provided by the decentering of Eurocentric ideology and tradition a (re)definition of native culture and tradition is free to experiment and develop. The experimentation process becomes a (re)examination of native traditions toward the establishment of what Appiah calls "neotraditional" ideology. He comments:

Postmodern culture is the culture in which all postmodernisms operate, sometimes in synergy, sometimes in competition; and because contemporary culture is... transnational, postmodern culture is global — though that emphatically does not mean that it is the culture of every person in the world.\(^{252}\)

Appiah points out the synergetic nature of Post—movements of all kinds. He invokes the sociological and anthropological narrative tradition of Max Weber, as a proponent of Western Rationalism, to prove a serendipitous point. In a statement by Weber concerning the significance of modernity as the "rationalization of the world," Appiah is able to focus the Postmodern resistance to claims of universal value versus universal significance.\(^{253}\) His statement above also aids in explaining the idea of neotraditionalism. It means that native traditions are to be recalled for self-conscious (re)evaluation and (re)interpreted in light of new insights and understanding of the native culture in its contemporary clearing space. It is not a regressive move backwards into the past, rather, it is a progressive move which brings the past into present perspective and uses the power of ancestral insight or hindsight as fuel for forward propulsion. Appiah argues that the creation of new (neo—) traditions are necessary in order to challenge the notion of reason and rationalization as distinctions of human value and to close the gap between high culture (defined by Western—style formal education) and popular or mass culture.

Challenging Eurocentric rationalization and high culture was

\(^{252}\) Appiah, 342—343.

also an aim of the Revolutionary Black Aesthetic Movement in the United States. The Black Revolutionary Theatre was designed to illustrate and articulate the ills of White society. The aim, then, of a Postrevolutionary Movement is to decenter the particular Euro-American-inspired victimization and assault narratives of "The Revolution." The focus no longer needs to center on Eurocentric valuation or acceptance. The concerns of "the man" should no longer consume the artistic energies of progressive intelligence. A time has arrived to move beyond the spiritually and intellectually consuming discourse of revolution into the mind-expanding realm of proving the possible. Cornel West explains that the neotraditions of the Postrevolutionary Movement will call for:

a new generation of black intellectuals, self-confident, no longer anxiety-ridden, no longer looking for the kind of approval and legitimacy in the eyes of their white peers, but willing to flex their intellectual muscles and move in whatever directions and trajectories that they choose. It is a very new movement, a very new movement of black intellectual life.\textsuperscript{254}

West asserts that the new theories of Postrevolutionary aesthetics will call for new alliances in the mobilization of meanings and structures of domination. He expresses a need for enlightened focus and a new kind of revolution when he states:

\begin{quote}
The Marxisms, the feminisms, the various anti-racist, anti-homophobic forms of social theory begin to come back with power, and we're concerned with the degree to which operations of power are still hidden, are still concealed... the one way of beginning to come to terms with this is having to historicize and pluralise and contextualise the postmodernism debate... and try to come to terms with what precisely is at stake.\textsuperscript{255}
\end{quote}

West feels that "issues of difference, of marginality, of otherness, of alterinity and subalterinity, of being subjugated and subordinated" are important parts of the problematics of postmodernism that make it "a profoundly American phenomenon."²⁵⁶ He sees postmodernism as:

a set of responses due to the decentering of Europe – of living in a world that no longer rests upon European hegemony and domination in the political and economic, military and cultural dimension which began in 1492.²⁵⁷

Post-Afrocentrism, then, is a particular set of responses to the decentering of Eurocentric values as the dominant philosophy of America. The saturation of American culture with Eurocentric values and sensibilities set in place institutional apparatuses which now must be reshaped. West sees the postmodern debate as a cultural debate since cultural artists are "the true apostles of equality." He also sees cultural tradition as something that cannot be inherited but must be obtained by great labor. Forging a neotraditional Post-Afrocentric aesthetic out of the postmodern discourse will indeed be a great and, as Olaniyan reminds, agonizing labor. It is a task that must be accomplished first within the confines of the Black-ground then transmuted into the larger realm of the spiritual universe.

A Postrevolutionary African-American aesthetic must be created independently from the common-ground because of the historical "grossly unequal terms" mentioned by Olaniyan. The creation and development of such an aesthetic is a highly complex challenge that

²⁵⁵ West, 3.
²⁵⁶ West, 5.
²⁵⁷ West, 6.
must first be concerned with clearing a space for its own imaginative experimentation and discovery. In its marginal and developmental stage, the Post-Afrocentric discourse personifies radical and militant characteristics of the Black Revolutionary tradition brimming with the excitement and insightful pioneering nature of the Harlem Renaissance. Finally, it must be a means by which the uniqueness of the African-American soul can speak to all mankind and illustrate its multi-dimensional depth of character.

In the quest to find the universal nature of the African-American character some will question the possible loss of personality. The loss of personal identity in the quest for a "universal" consciousness within this discourse is contradictory to its true purpose. Rather, difference is an admired essential and worthy of praise. The aim of the discourse is to allow difference to be viewed differently. Difference begins to be viewed as individual nature and perspective. At the same time, the goal is to appreciate and celebrate a common spiritual connection rather than difference, by using the means of difference to show the commonness of humanity in the form of universal spirit. Artists must use their difference to illustrate to their different (individual) factions the fruitless and fatal ramifications of separatism (including elitism, homophobia, nationalism, racism, religion, sexism) and move them toward the common-ground. Thus, it remains important to maintain factional cultural traditions in order to bring enlightening insights into the universal sphere. For, within the Post-Afrocentric discourse the space clearing act is not for self-
indulgent egocentric purposes. The clearing becomes a larger open
terrain where all cultures and discourses may develop a new all-
inclusive tradition; a tradition without "Others." In the new
tradition the "Other" becomes the past; the "other tradition" of
limitation, separation and discord. The Post-Afrocentric discourse
is a new world order; a realm of hope and sharing. It is not
without Eurocentric or Afrocentric value or tradition — it is of
them necessarily by history.

A Post-Afrocentric African-American aesthetic should stand on
the bridge (or hyphen) between the two extremes of the Afrocentric
(African) and the Eurocentric (American). It should be connective
tissue which fuses the two within a theoretical framework making it
possible to understand the unique hybrid nature of Africans as
Americans and African-American theatre as an all encompassing
element of American Theatre. Thus, the new aesthetic becomes the
basis of a gestalt which expresses African-American dramatic
identity as a cathartic abreaction\textsuperscript{258} of inherent artistic potential.
It changes the dynamic of "all Black folk can sing and dance" to,
"there are great possibilities of inherent dramatic potential in the
backgrounds and experiences of African-American people." Dramatic
potential becomes the African-American contribution toward a new
focus on the collective universal positiveness of human intellect
and spirituality.

Establishing critical theory of the Post-Afrocentric African-
American aesthetic is a necessary challenge that must accompany this

\textsuperscript{258} Definition: The release or acting out of repressed emotions.
Movement step by step. The aim of such theory is to set forth a framework that allows alternative insights to be heard, seen, understood and judged by their own standards while at the same time, presenting those insights in such a way that they may be shared and understood by all. It requires clear and insightful demystification, transfiguration and transmittal of the often austere epistemic theories of the past and the creation of new critical and theoretical essays, theses and dissertations which analyze from the African-American perspective.

Henry Louis Gates has identified a theory of criticism that allows the African-American tradition to speak for itself rather than be analyzed and spoken for by and through other traditions. His theory, based on the Black English vernacular tradition of "signifyin'" makes it possible to understand the "levels of meaning and expression that might otherwise remain mediated, or buried beneath the surface." The concept of "Signifyin(g)" as Gates has labeled it, is a way to show "how the vernacular informs and becomes the foundation for" understanding differences and levels of subtextual meanings in the writing of African-Americans. It allows for the defining of what is particularly Black about a text. Gates' theory also points out the repetitive nature of African-American literature. However, this repetition is a deliberate act of positive pastiche; of revision and critique. It is repetition with a difference and related to the aims of the Post-Afrocentric

Gates credits academic critics of the Black Aesthetic Movement for the nature and shape of his theory. Until this point the primary focus of Black criticism had been focused on the text as an expression of the Black experience. Black writers and critics alike thought of themselves as crusaders in the race's war against racism. Texts were generally analyzed almost exclusively in terms of their content rather than by any kind of literary form.\textsuperscript{260} Gates' background in literary theory is rooted in traditional Western ideology, having been educated at Yale and Cambridge. His theory is a variant of formalist, structuralist, and post-structuralist theories of literary criticism. The term "signification" is taken directly from the critical discourse of semiotics and linguistics. Semiotics is defined as the study of how meaning is generated, produced and exchanged, and in what way things come to have meaning. It is concerned with systems of signs and codes at work within a society and the messages produced from those signs. Linguistics is the aspect of semiotics that focuses on words as signs and codes of language systems. Semiotic theory is then a vehicle for looking at meanings in writing.

Ferdinand de Saussure is generally regarded as the developer of the theory of the arbitrary nature of the sign. Saussure contends that the sign has two parts: a signified, which represents a concept and a signifier, which represents an image. The sign has

meaning in a linguistic domain in which it acquires meaning in
difference, based on what it is not in relation to other things.
Into this discourse Gates introduces his altered notion of
"signifyin' ." Signifyin' is an instigating term derived from the
African-American folkloric myth of the "signifyin' monkey," who hung
from a tree and constantly instigated confusion among those on the
ground. Signifyin' is a trope by which suggestive meaning is
extracted from formal language. In the vernacular of Black
traditions it is a way of decoding formal language constructs and
restating the ideas, usually in a critical fashion interjected by an
outside commentator. Signifyin(g) as critical theory allows the
critic to understand the figurative complexities of the Black
writer's use of double-voiced meanings derived from the oral
traditions of the African-American past.

Gates (re)interpretes Eurocentric tradition by taking the
Saussurean sign, "signification," and (re)shaping it into the Black
rhetorical sign, "Signification." He signifies the difference by
"arbitrarily" writing the traditional signifier in lower case, while
writing the Black signifier in upper case. Similarly, he writes the
Black term "Signifyin(g)" with an upper case "S" and a bracketed
final g, and writes the traditional term "signifying" in lower case.
This (re)naming ritual consciously points out the difference created
"by supplanting the received, standard English concept associated by
(White) convention with this particular signifier, ...[disrupting]
the nature of the sign=signified/signifier equation."261 In the

261 Gates, Monkey, 46.
tradition of standard English, signified=concept or connotation and signifier=sound-image or denotation. In Gates' theory signified=rhetorical figures or the vernacular, and the signifier "Signification" becomes a concept that represents the inherent semiotic and linguistic differences of the Black vernacular. By retaining the identical spelling of the (White) standard English "signification" for the Black vernacular "Signification," the sign demonstrates that a simultaneous, previously negated, parallel universe (ontological and political) exists within the larger hegemonic universe, and that the most important differences in the Black-White discursive universe is the difference of connotation or meaning. The potential application of the Gates theory of Signification becomes an exciting one. In the standard tradition of "signification" the sign relationship might read signified=drama (concept) and signifier=theatre (sound-image). Remembering that in the Gates theory of "Signification" that the signified=drama (rhetorical figures of African-American vernacular) and signifier=theatre (sound-image), it is possible to see the complexities of the drama itself and of the analysis and critique of the work. The text in this system is to be judged on its ability to speak comfortably to a Black audience familiar with its linguistic lilt and double-voiced subtext. The prospect of using this theory of "Signification" as a framework for an analysis of Shange's theatre piece Spell #7 shows outstanding promise. This theory allows the concept of the drama to be translated into easily identifiable terms for Black theatrical artists.
This then, is the aim and task of the Post-Afrocentric discourse. Like Shange, it attempts to open new vistas to the African-American mind and open the world to the vistas of African-American imagination; moving humanity into new realms of awareness. The multi-dimensionality of Shange (discussed in Chapter I) place her among the select field of, what West calls, the "new breed of black intellectuals." Consider Shange's Spell #7 character, Lily, who says: "my dreams mean things to me."262 Lily's monologue is a discourse on imagination and expresses the vast intellectual cravings of the Post-Afrocentric artist. She says: "i'm gonna alter my social & professional life dramatically." We are immediately clued in to Shange's possible deeper intent here, for Appiah informs that Lily's attempt at "alteritism," is defined as the construction and celebration of oneself as "Other."263 Lily indicates that she will work tirelessly in order to achieve her imagined dreams; she speaks while continuously working. She is in the process of brushing her hair: "i will brush 100 strokes in the morning/ 100 strokes midday & 100 strokes before retiring. i will have a very busy schedule."264 The hair brushing is a symbol of opening up her head, of feeding her mind and stimulating her imagination. As a result, visions created by the strength and vigor of full-bodied imagination fall from her hair. The hair can be seen as knowledge, which can be aquired from the diligent act of dutiful and continuous

262 Shange, Three Pieces, 26.

263 Appiah, 354.

264 Shange, Three Pieces, 26.
brushing. Lily assures us that she will utilize every possible moment to develop and strengthen her knowledge through the symbolic act of brushing her hair:

i will have a very busy schedule. between the local trains & the express/ i'm gonna brush. i brush between telephone calls. at the disco i'm gonna brush on the slow songs. . . . i'm a brush my hair before making love & after. i'll brush my hair in taxis. while windowshopping. when i have visitors over the kitchen table/ i'm a brush. i brush my hair while thinking abt anything. mostly i think abt how it will be when i get my full heada hair. like lifting my head in the morning will become a chore. i'll try to turn my cheek & my hair will weigh me down.265

With the acquisition of knowledge from the search for self awareness and (because the Post-Afrocentric discourse dictates it) cross cultural study, which the brushing represents, she will feed the world with abundant returns:

my hair'll grow pomegranates & soil/ rich as round the aswan/ i wake in my bed to bananas/ avocados/ collard greens/ the tramps' latest disco hit/ fresh croissant/ poully fuisse/ ishmael reed's essays/ charlotte carter's stories/ all stream from my hair. & with the bricks that plop from where a 9-year-old's top braid wd be/ i will brush myself a house with running water & a bidet.266

Lily's dream vision allows her to see past Black and White and into a new realm of possibilities:

this head fulla hair i have in my dreams is lavender & nappy as a 3-yr-old's in a apple tree. i can fry an egg & see the white of the egg spreadin the grease like my hair is gonna spread in the air/ but i'm not egg-yolk yellow/ i am brown & the egg white isn't white at all/ it is my actual hair/& it wd go on & on forever/ irregular like a rasta-man's hair. irregular/ gargantuan & lavender. . . though i never admit it/ i really do

265 Shange, Three Pieces, 26.

266 Shange, Three Pieces, 27.
believe in magic/ & can do strange things when something comes over me. soon everything around me will be lavender/ fluffy & consuming. i will know not a moment of bitterness/ through all the wrist aching & tennis elbow from brushing/ i'll smile. now regrets

Lily is of course an alterego of Shange. What she proves in the quote above is how the awareness of the universal self need not require the abandonment of the personal self to a universal cause. Rather, the unique aspects of that self identity, of that difference, may provide added insight and new perspective to the universal. When Lily sees her hair as lavender it is an indication of the universe as a beautiful place that is neither black or white, nor brown, red or yellow, but lavender; something else, other than, and pastel, not harsh. Yet, in her vision she remains brown (Afrocentric) and her hair is still textured "nappy," indicating that her "emotional soul" is still ontologically and psychologically African-American. Her hair (mind expanded through knowledge), however, is "lavender/ fluffy & consuming" with no bitterness and no regrets. She is ready to flex her intellectual muscles and move in a new direction.

There is a post-, pre-, nature in Spell #7 expressed by the openness of Shange's text. It is post-realism, post-naturalism (Renaissance), post-modern, and pre-neorealism, pre-neonaturalism, pre-neoclassic in terms of what will become classic in the contest of Post-Afrocentric drama. In that sense it is pre-neotraditional. Shange's "space-clearing gesture" is the establishment of the choreopeom as a legitimate dramatic form and her focus on music and

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267 *Shange, Three Pieces*, 26-27.
movement as "universal" valuable and significant elements of that form. The bringing of that gesture into the mainstream is a Postrevolutionary/Post-Afrocentric gesture. Post-Afrocentricity acknowledges the African-American's role as a part of the human race rather than the Black race. It is not to deny Blackness, nor what Blackness includes, but rather to include the totality of Blackness — the African and the American as well as the hyphen between — into the realm of cosmic existence. In this way the work of the Post-Afrocentric/Postrevolutionary artist becomes transnational, transglobal, transcultural and neotraditional. The new tradition becomes a tradition created in a cross-cultural context. Toward such an end, it is necessary to open the artistic consciousness to metaphysical realms of the cosmos which can make spiritual connections with the widest spectrum of humanity possible. In this way the blind fallacies of "cultural imperialism" may best be avoided.

Postrevolutionary/Post-Afrocentric is also Post-nationalistic. Consequently, this new movement, like Postmodernism, moves beyond the realm of aesthetics and into the realm of politics in a very real way. It opens new avenues by producing visual proof of possibilities. This notion is expressed by Shange's experienced actress character Maxine, who reflects:

slavery is not unfamiliar to me. no one on this planet knows/what i know abt gold/abt anything hard to get & beautiful/anything lasting/wrought from pain. no one understands that surviving the impossible is sposed to accentuate the positive aspects of a people.268

268 Shange, Three Pieces, 51.
It then becomes a peace-seeking mechanism. Even in the presentation of disparaging historical propaganda, the form and structure of its presentation - because of its spiritual basis and context - makes revenge and retaliation worthless and ridiculous. Case in point: Near the end of Spell#7, when Alec calls for an apology from all the White people in America for the degradations suffered by the African-American race throughout history, the response is thus:

(there entire company looks at him as if he's crazy/ he tries to leave the bar/ but bettina stops him)

bettina
you're still outta yr mind. ain't no apologies keeping us alive.

lou
what are you gonna do with white folks kneeling all over the country anyway/ man

(lou signals everyone to kneel)\textsuperscript{269}

Bettina's action of stopping him from leaving the bar shows concern, understanding and support of his frustrations and anger. Her words are intended to show the worthlessness of his request. "Ain't no apologies keeping us alive," she says. The implication is that "if our lives depended on such an action, imagine how easy it would be for them to wipe us out! It is our own 'dogged strength' and self determination that has enabled us to survive that same degradation throughout history." Bettina's sentiment reminds Alec, and all the African-Americans that he symbolizes, that whatever it is "keeping us alive" is the essence of what "us" is to begin with, and that his energy might be better spent in the positive awareness of his

\textsuperscript{269} Shange, Three Pieces, 47.
self essence rather than dwelling on the negative memories of "the slave [he] once waz/ who got away." Lou's command to the rest of the company to kneel shows Alec the ridiculousness of such a gesture. Lou's question has multidimensional implications: "What are you gonna do with white folks kneeling all over the country anyway/ man," he asks. "What are you gonna do!" He reminds Alec that once the initial request is met, a reciprocal action is expected. The challenge is for Alec to consider the reasons for and ramifications of his request. In the realm of Post-Afrocentric discourse, personal gratification is not enough. The Post-nationalistic transcultural nature of the discourse makes service to universal humanity all important. Lou ends his question/ statement by calling Alec "man." The larger ramifications of that call are numerous and, I think, intentional. It adds to the multipurpose dimension of the Postmodern/ Post-Afrocentric realm.

Spell #7 is Post-realist and Post-nativist on a small scale, expressed by the polyglot use of other languages (Portuguese, Spanish, French, Black English, Standard English) et. al. The same is true of music and musical language. The mix is marvelous. Spell #7 is transnational in the realm of the African Diaspora yet it does not yet move totally into the realm of Colored cultures. A great attempt is made to include Latin cultures while those of India, Pacific, Polynesian and Native-American cultures are not fully included. Asian inclusion should be next. Yes, this is highly visionary work, which is why the arts have the largest part to play.

270 Stange, Three Pieces, 46.
in the realization of such an effort. In the long-run, "it matters little whom the work was made for; what we should learn from is the imagination that produced it."²⁷¹

²⁷¹ Appiah, 357.
CONCLUSION

Ntozake Shange is an ideal example of the bountiful potential inherent to African-American theatre artists. The theatre piece, Spell #7, is an example of her philosophy of such potential in practice. Her background as an individual, coupled with her training and development as a writer, makes her an important contributor to American theatre and worthy of study as an innovator in the development of aesthetic principles of world drama. Throughout the history of Black people in America African-American Theatre and its artists have been constantly concerned with the reversal of White standards and modes of evaluation. This study illustrates a tradition of that attempt to reverse the White-ground of theatrical aesthetics into a Black-ground. In Shange’s Spell #7 the potential of a new focus on an independently created Post-Afrocentric African-American aesthetic signals a new epoch in the continuing search for identification and appreciation of the special artistic nature of Black Theatre in America.

Shange’s background as a child of middle-class American values with Afrocentric perspectives definitely influenced her work. The intellectual and cultural training provided by her parents stimulated a thirst for knowledge and a quest for achievement. Early associations with Black intellectuals of previous generations made obvious and lasting impressions on her sense of artistic awareness. Early exposure to the arts, particularly music, dance
awareness. Early exposure to the arts, particularly music, dance and poetry, became hallmarks for her work and aided in the development of her own unique style and focus. Her training at the finest schools of Western traditions of higher educational humanities and her personal quest for self-identification have enhanced her accomplishment. Surviving five suicide attempts has given Shange a sense of destiny that allows for unbridled freedom of expression. All of these experiences come together in her writing of Spell #7. The piece is creative and non-traditional in both form and structure. It is presented in the choreopoem style of her earlier successful For Colored Girls with a structure loosely based on that of the Minstrel Show. Spell #7 presents characters who are highly intellectual, each invested with multiple dimensions which are expressed by their abilities to take on many issues, topics and personalities in improvisational vignettes throughout the piece. The characters are both reflective of the past and cognizant of their immediate and future potential. In their imaginative states of being they are representative of Shange's philosophical views on the potential of Black Theatre.

Understanding this potential is dependent upon understanding the development of American Minstrelsy. This early American stage form functioned as a device for the establishment of racial identity and ideology in the United States. As Eleanor Traylor notes, early Minstrelsy is a blasphemy of sacred Black rituals. However, the ideological myth of Minstrelsy as a White male tradition needs to be reversed and (re)defined as a founding tradition of African-American
Theatre. By pointing out facts concerning the creative rituals of African slaves on early American plantations and the distortion of these "stolen" rituals, Traylor concludes that the source of American Theatre at its indigenous roots can be attributed to African-Americans. In Spell #7 Shange shows the ironies of the distorted tradition of black-face Minstrelsy as a misrepresentation of life and (re)claims the value of Black performance practices. Previously negative connotations of Black slave dance, music and language are given new value in Spell #7 by presenting elements of the Minstrel tradition in new and innovative ways. The White-ground of the Minstrel tradition is transformed in Spell #7 through the expression of African-American perspectives within the framework of a Black-ground.

The establishment of a formalized African-American literary and theoretical tradition during the 1920s also plays an important role in the reading and understanding of Shange's theatre piece. Beginning with DuBois' The Souls of Black Folks in 1903, the potential of African-American creativity was focused on the inherent spiritual nature of Black people in America. This spiritual potential was given a critical and theoretical frame during The Harlem Renaissance. The publication of Crisis and Opportunity magazines provided exposure for essays and critical analyses of literature and drama. Essays by Montgomery Gregory and Alain Locke highlight the potential of African-American actors for great dramatic depth while DuBois expresses that same potential for African-American dramatists. However, almost all Black theorists of theatre
during this era concurred on the need for an African-American Theatre removed from the influence of White American hegemony. Shange makes a connection to the philosophies of The Harlem Renaissance in several ways. Her sense of the spiritual power of African-American artists is expressed throughout Spell #7 by references to the individual and collective ancestral past of her characters. Her choice of the title of the piece is another prime example of spiritual awareness. The number seven and the idea of spells, incantations and intuitive knowledge are other examples. The setting of most of the piece is an example of Shange's adherence to the notions of privacy and separation from the mainstream in order to achieve creative independence. By locating the action in a segregated bar, Shange provides her characters a safe haven to freely express their inner emotions. A symbolic and practical relation to alcoholic spirits is also apparent since alcohol frees inhibition and induces the expression of otherwise covered emotions.

The spirituality of Spell #7 also recalls another Black Movement which sought to affirm Black Power or empowerment. This was the Revolutionary Black Theatre Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. In this Movement, theatre was seen as a weapon of protest and revolt to be used as a means to show the victimization of Black people in White society. The development of African-American creative aesthetics was closely aligned with this radical political movement for Black Power. It was during this time that ideas of Afrocentricity emerged on a large scale in the United States. The Black Revolutionary Theatre sought to (re)assert African-American
spirit just as artists and theorists of the Harlem Renaissance had done. The difference was in the radical revolutionary means of achieving that goal. The manifestoes of leaders such as Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins again called for separation from Whites and Eurocentric dramatic standards. Plays aligned with this Movement were figurative assaults and attacks on Black and White audiences. They attempted to degrade and debunk the White audience and White traditions and standards. They attempted to persuade and enlist the support of the Black audience. In all cases the plays of the Black Revolutionary era were calls to physical and philosophical action. In Spell #7 Shange expresses different forms of protest and revolt. She shows-up the racism of a White tradition in the form of the Minstrel Show and illustrates victimization of all of humanity through several individualized characterizations and situations. She asserts individual spirit by protesting and revolting against all forms of oppression including that rendered by Black men. Spell #7 may be considered an assault on White standards. It is a clear rejection of Eurocentricity. The difference lies in Shange’s total disregard for Whites altogether in this piece. This is not to say that Whites may not view and learn from the ideas and issues presented in the work. However, Shange’s focus is clearly on empowering African-American spirit by advocating self-acceptance and praise and (re)focusing African-American artistic potential.

The (re)focusing of African-American artistic potential is a primary objective of an emerging Post-Afrocentric Movement. As framed by Tejumola Olaniyan, three formations of Black dramatic
practice can be identified: the hegemonic Eurocentric, the revolutionary Afrocentric, and the Post-Afrocentric, which "subverts both the Eurocentric and the Afrocentric, while refining and advancing the aims of the latter."272 This new Movement seeks to move beyond all realms of limitation into achieving the potentials and possibilities that have been discussed since the beginnings of African-American dramatic aesthetics. In this Post-Afrocentric Movement the focus is on allowing all of the African-American spirit and awareness to be utilized, both the African, the American, and all that lies between. It is an inclusive theory with acknowledges the new world order of multiculturalism and transculturalism. It brings African-American Theatre into the discourse of Postmodernism and Postcolonialism. It brings the past into the present for the formation of a new tradition for the future, a tradition of inclusiveness rather than separation where "otherness" is considered the old way of doing things. It is a Movement which deals with the positive ideas that propel forward movement and rejects the negative which are stagnating and regressive. Post-Afrocentricity is a Movement which appreciates and honors imagination. Imagination is the realm of potential, or dreams, and it is in this realm that Shange shines. Spell #7 is an example of African-American imagination at work. In a monologue by the character Lily, Shange provides a discourse on imagination, illustrating the positive possibilities of physical and psychological work. Lily acquires knowledge through work and returns it to the universe in the form of

272 Olaniyan, 2.
imaginative creation. A greater potential of African-American artists to provide the world with bountiful creative gifts is expressed by another of Shange's characters, Maxine, who states: "surviving the impossible is posed [sic] to accentuate the positive aspects of a people."273 The historical conditions which created the African-American race have provided Black Americans a cultural heritage fertile with possibilities.

The richness of the African-American artistic heritage combined with imaginative intellect in the realm of Post-Afrocentric thought makes for exciting future prospects. Potential and possibility have been as constant in the search for an African-American dramatic aesthetic as the search itself. This study could only begin to see the depth of such potential. What this study has offered is a background to Shange's contemporary quest and a framework for an emerging potential. There is much left to be done in the development of this aesthetic. This study has shown that Shange is an artist at the forefront of this new realm and Spell #7 as an example of the developing theory of that potential in practice.

273 Shange, Three Pieces, 31.
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