Chapter

IV

"MOTHER TONGUES" AND CHORAL PERFORMANCE:

Re-presentations of Black Womanhood in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls*

or colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf features a collection of voices in place of a single protagonist. Ntozake Shange's chorus exchanges stories in conversation; the women speak to one audience on-stage (each other) and another off-stage (the paying public). In this way, the choreopoem uses layered language to re-present a demographic that has been distorted by the literary canon and American media culture at large. *for colored girls* breaks down these stereotypes: society's tendency to look for patterns in what is unfamiliar. Twentieth and twenty-first century media reflected these mores, depicting black women as "mammies, sapphires, and jezebels, matriarchs…, mistresses," and antagonists (Cheers 1). This precedent is thriving still, but black dramatists have found ways to either reject or re-present these characters. By implementing a form of black irony that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls Signifyin(g), Shange challenges her audience's habit of filing characters away under tropes. This choreopoem—with its dual medium, layered meanings, and diverse voices—removes the danger of "automatic perception;" it curbs most shortcuts its audience could take in interpreting the work (Shlovsky 2). Hesitation is encouraged: a pause outside the fabric of stories we live in. Shange Signifies on performance as it connotes a personhood that is inescapably public. While poetry often records the interior self, theatre tends to privilege outward presentation. Shange blends the two mediums to *re*-present black womanhood. Presentations of the matriarch, mistress, and angry black woman create a language of stereotypes denoting blackness and womanhood; to re-present this identity in media, *for colored girls* opens the stage, expanding its performance beyond what has been projected by a white canon.

Why is *for colored girls* both a poem and play? Who is its target audience? What message was this audience supposed to receive? Shange is intentional with medium, title, and syntax. Her choreopoem reveals layers of meaning when read within Afrocentric tradition: its medium is manipulated to explore concepts like double consciousness and performance; its characters, through dialogue and choreography, create layers of meaning lodged in the text; and its title encompasses the plot. Its driving force originates with African and Afro-American story-telling. Gates, Jr. explores the act of Signification as a tradition that imitates and subverts master narratives. Signifyin(g) filters through the hegemonic spectrum; it relies on the use of subtexts that are illegible to an oppressive audience but clear to the oppressed. Words play tricks: they repeat, rename, redefine one another, and break down their own definitions. Messages layer; what is revealed depends on the reading. The eurocentric verb 'signifying' is re-presented as 'Signifyin(g)' by black vernacular. As Gates, Jr. states in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, "the relationship [between the two terms] is, paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity" (Gates, Jr. 45). Any form of pun or rhetorical equivocality demonstrates the "repetition and difference" so prevalent to styles within black American literature (Gates, Jr. 45). These subversions break down the exclusionary practice of linguistic conventions from within.

Beginning with the title, Shange has already begun to repeat and recontextualize language. *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* announces both its audience and its conflict in the first section, then follows up with its solution "the rainbow" which reflects the "colored girls" who were addressed at the beginning. A variety of readings exist in this title. *for colored girls who have considered suicide* alludes to the one act of violence that is not overt in Shange's choreopoem: suicide. Those who look for it, however, will see the theme: it waits like a ghost around the

corner for that moment when societal pressures overflow into psychological or physical violence, when the self-image loses ground and violence finds its way inside. Shange's ladies narrate some brutal spaces they have inhabited; their speech synthesizes violent or restrictive pasts with their position as story-tellers, repudiating suicide as not exactly the ultimate oppression but a symptom of that oppression. *when the rainbow is enuf* arrives after the backslash, countering this danger to life and selfhood. These characters, all women of color, own their identities and histories through story-telling; a community is built on the diversity of language. How each woman speaks, what she means, and how she presents herself moves beyond the binary of difference and sameness. Both designations rely upon an audience's opinion. Their primary audience becomes one another as the play progresses.

American society's preexisting 'significations' limit visible black womanhood to a number of roles, among them the Matriarch, the Angry Black Woman, the Jezebel, and the Happy Darkie. The Matriarch often plays a supporting role (unlike the Sapphire: her nagging, negative inverse). The Jezebel is an object of desire. The Happy Darkie signals a proscription of negative feelings and the Angry Black Woman its transgression. As Jessyka Finley observes in "Black Women's Satire as (Black) Postmodern Performance," these stereotypes—"tropes so deeply embedded" in narrative spaces—manifest to an extent that they "often prevent black women from speaking and being heard" (Finley 237).

Depictions like these are not limited to popular media. The Matriarch, for example appears in political discourse. Assistant secretary of labor Daniel Moynihan wrote a report in the late sixties titled "The Negro Family: the Case for National Action" (Moynihan 4). In it, the white family unit is said to have "achieved a high degree of stability," while Moynihan expresses concern that "as a direct result of… high rate[s] of divorce, separation, and desertion, a very large percent of Negro families are headed by females" (Moynihan

18). Actual statistics and Victor Shlovsky's "automatized perception" became nearly interchangeable. The Matriarch can signal the absence of male leadership, play into narratives of resilience, or support the protagonist who crosses her path. In *Invisible Man*, Mary Rambo houses the narrator, feeds him, and affirms his goals; she serves as one example of black women as mothers and caretakers (Ellison 495).

The Happy Darkie figure has been well-established as an expectation of white audiences. Comedy and entertainment, the absence of discontent or any threat: these traits would be desirable to an audience participating in a racial hierarchy's preservation. The Angry Black Woman performs her opposition before the same audience, but as a distinctly unsympathetic character. One is celebrated and the other vilified. This trope relates to other stereotypes; a sexually promiscuous character, or Jezebel, can fall under the same category (Brown 525).

The Jezebel was imagined within the context of slavery but survived to infiltrate hip hop music and visual media. Its variation include women who "exchange sex for material and economic reward," further careers through sexual favors, and "use [their] sexuality to increase… social status" (Brown 526). Danice Brown's "Breaking the chains: examining the endorsement of modern Jezebel images and racial-ethnic esteem among African American women" quantifies this stereotype's impact on senses of race and self among black women. The study found a connection. Subjects who did not endorse the Jezebel figure in modern media were more likely relate positively with their demographic and place in it (Brown 525).

Viktor Shlovsky's theory about the habitualization of language can help us understand how these stereotypes develop and disseminate. Shlovsky insists that, rather than clarity, descriptions of a minority result in invisibility as they become routine, then automatic (Shlovsky 1). Ralph Ellison describes this phenomenon in *Invisible Man*. His unnamed protagonist narrates the

way in which he is perceived—a non-entity to others:

> I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me. (Ellison 45)

His race is the identifier that people witness and assign significance to based on whatever frame of reference has been ingrained in them already. Dr. Bledsoe, another figure from *Invisible Man*, manipulates this culture of the master narrative. His mythological legacy on the college campus becomes a stereotype capable of obscuring his personal motives and affording him social power. Bledsoe explains that invisibility is the best route to success; he flips the social script, saying: "We show [these white folks] what we want them to see" (Ellison 225). He takes control of the role imposed on him by a white majority, cultivating his image from within their master narrative (master narrative being the ideological structure enforced by hegemony in literature and society). Bledsoe Signifies on his invisibility; he reflects what his white board members want to see and, in doing so, garners more authority over his public image. With Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the individual is hidden, because his character, intent, and speech become pre-defined by the majority—reflections of white imagination.

The Jezebel figure is one such reflection, acted out by the lady in red. "She waz sullen / & the rhinestones etchin the corners of her mouth / suggested tears… She waz hot / a deliberate coquette," (Shange 46). Her characterization is beauty; her desirability has become a metric for worth. She sleeps with strangers; during the act and afterwards, however, she re-presents male desire as vulnerability and her resulting power as an identity. "'you'll have to go now/ i've a lot of work to do," she says, dismissing partner after partner from her bed; "'you got what you came for/ didn't

you'" (Shange 48). Having been made visible and vulnerable before she ever agreed to sex, she returns the favor. Each man leaves discomfited by the recitation, or dismissal, of his desire. While objectification is a form of "automatized perception" that dehumanizes and depersonalizes, this lady found a way to manipulate it. Ultimately:

& now she stood
a reglar colored girl
fulla the same malice
livid indifference as a sistah…
she wd gather her tinsel &
jewels from the tub
& laugh gayly or vengeful…
& when she finished writin
The account of the exploit in a diary…
she… cried herself to sleep (Shange 49)

Hers is a fraught relationship with others' eyes. The poem builds on depictions of the promiscuous Jezebel figure, the overall fetishization of black women, and eurocentric beauty standards. The lady in red is so visible as a sexual being that the rest of her goes unseen. She plays Jezebel, Signifyin(g) on desires that efface the "reglar colored girl" and reframing her sexual partners' act of acquisition as an act of submission. She gains little social or economic currency from the exchange; the Jezebel myth is challenged. The lady in red embodies a stereotype. She, like Bledsoe from *Invisible Man*, moves within its blind spots.

This invisibility illuminates racism within the master narrative, an ideological structure enforced by hegemony in literature and society. Shange reveals the oppressive effects language has on an individual; in her choreopoem, that language is undermined and repurposed through Signifyin(g). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes "thinking about the black

concept of Signifyin(g) "[as] a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors" (Gates, Jr. 44). Often, Signification draws rhetorical devices from Afro-American tradition into the 'master language' as way to turn convention against itself. The word Signifyin(g) is an example.

> The bracketed or aurally erased g, like the discourse of black English and dialect poetry generally, stands as the trace of black difference in a remarkably sophisticated and fascinating (re)naming ritual… in evidence here… the absent g is a figure for the Signifyin(g) black difference (Gates, Jr. 46)

Most of the omission, repetition, or redefinition in Shange's *for colored girls* will follow in the tradition of black storytelling that layers new meanings over those that have been preset by eurocentric language.

One method is linguistic defamiliarization, an aspect Shlovsky manages to capture. "The technique," as he argues, "is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception" (Shlovsky 1). Although Shlovsky is referring to commonplace descriptions in creative writing, like those of a chair or apple, his theory can be put towards the stereotypes or projections placed on people of color, specifically black women. Already—with her title, Ntozake Shange has taken a familiar phrase and doubled it. f*or colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. This *rainbow* that is *enuf* reframes the colored girls who have considered suicide. The ladies of color connect and create a spectrum of identity.

How does this rainbow interact with significations from Anglocentric media? What Signifyin(g) takes place in the title as a result? Shange casts into doubt the habitualization of language surrounding the term "colored girls" which functions similarly to the automatic characterization of stereotyping. Color—as defined outside racial contexts—applies to everything: blue sky, green grass, and so on. When it comes to humanity, color applies to non-

white people; whiteness becomes the default, assumed state. Minorities require differentiation. In this process, however, whiteness becomes a lack of color. Shange Signifies on this in her title; she doubles "colored girls" with "rainbow," a repetition which recontextualizes her subject. "Colored girls" could connote uniformity among women outside of whiteness, while a rainbow implies diversity. A second Signification takes place with the word "enuf." Shange alters its traditional spelling. As a result, her choreopoem's solution to suicidal ideation exists outside Anglocentric conventions for language; it relates instead to the Signifyin(g) act, to subtexts and re-presentations from the oppressed.

Alain Locke's "The New Negro" envisions a generation in its progression beyond the "stock figure:" a racial concept that viewed the black individual as "more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about… to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden" (Locke 1). It is not only the development of shared identity, but also outspoken individuality that precipitates Locke's term "the New Negro" (Locke 3-4). His commentary on people of diverse backgrounds "finding one another," sharing stories, and fostering self-expression is reminiscent of Shange's *for colored girls*. Her choreopoem and Locke's essay explore the roots of this "truer self-expression," which is accessed when one's message is no longer framed for the general audience but instead prioritizes a community of story-tellers.

After characters take their places and the choreopoem begins, the lady in brown is first to speak. Stage notes describe her standing among women frozen "in postures of distress;" she "looks around at the other ladies" who all remain frozen and "calls to" the lady in red who "makes no response" (Shange 17). Then, her soliloquy starts. The lady in brown switches points of view throughout, moving from "I can't hear anythin / but maddening screams / & the soft strains of death" to:

> she's been dead so long
> closed in silence so long
> she doesn't know the sound
> of her own voice (Shange 18).

This would imply that she has disassociated, her own voice proven unrecognizable. Here is the echo of suicide and of Ellison's invisibility. The lady in brown gives no name. All the audience could describe her as is "the lady in brown." She is unknown to herself and others. Physical distress thrives in its isolated performance as depicted by her monologue and the stage directions. Whether this death the lady in brown describes is the literal end of a body or figurative disappearance of selfhood has been left up for interpretation. She references "half-notes scattered / without rhythm/ no tune," "interrupted solos," and "unseen performances" (Shange 17, 19). Connect this musical metaphor with "the soft strains of death" (Shange 18). Physical violence (loss) reflects metaphysical violence (the loss of selfhood). *for colored girls who have considered suicide* introduces both possibilities in its title. Etymologically, suicide means self-death; Shange Signifies on physical destruction by exploring the loss of selfhood as another side to the coin.

The lady in brown speaks to invisibility by evoking her sung self. In the act, she integrates performance and audience with racial identity. Shange, as the lady in brown, speaks to her own reality, but at the same time avoids slipping into a wholly outward-facing existence. W. E. B. Du Bois explains this tension as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt" (Du Bois 54).

"The eyes of others" prove prone to stereotyping and generalization—the habitualization of language. A non-Black audience might read or watch a single work from the African American canon and, because this canon has

been disenfranchised for so long, apply one narrative far too broadly. More overt forms of stereotyping manifest in a mainstream media tailored to white audiences. The Happy Darkie is one instance, the Angry Black Woman another; such inventions would seemingly attempt to bar black individuals from the full spectrum of emotion. To perceive others this way is to limit expression, expect either conformity or a performance, and do violence to the individual's self-image.

In response to oppressive eyes, Shange breaks down the act of representation to a re-presentation. This concept has been discussed with an emphasis on gender and theatre by others; Rosemary Curb analyzes for colored girls and several other plays written by women of color. Her article approaches double consciousness from a feminist angle:

> Mary Ann Caws speaks of 'the private eye': 'I see the visual object not as an exterior element, but rather inside the subject in what I think of as an inner seen.' Such theatre of 'the private eye' necessarily represents many layers of women's experiences which have been hidden, silenced ridiculed, trivialized, and erased… by intent or default, [American theatre] upholds the masculine status quo. Communicating the hidden layers of women's perceptions in both dramatic text and theatrical performance demands the creation of a new and more complex women's language… (Curb 303)

Curb's analysis of the text highlights the prefix "re-" in re-cognition, re-presentation, and re-creation, arguing that as these words themselves have been redefined, Shange overturns the master narrative by appropriating and altering its language. Rosemary Curb calls this "the [necessary] creation of a new and more complex" form of expression—or "what Linda Jenkins" described as "the 'mother tongue'" (Curb 303). It is the Signifyin(g) so prevalent in African American literature that achieves both a semi-ironic distance from society and a profound, personal transparency. Shange has set the stage for a resurrection.

This resurrection, or re-creation, of self can be traced in her stage

notes; the poem progresses, and Shange's women of color re-enact their opening scene.

> *The ladies in red, green, and brown enter quietly; in the background all of the ladies except the lady in yellow are frozen; the lady in yellow looks at them, walks by them, touches them; they do not move… [the lady in yellow speaks:]*
> my love is too delicate to have thrown back on my face… *(Shange 60)*

The lady in yellow's words are echoed—with slight variations—by the others, who begin to move. The women in yellow and brown repeat phrases like "we gotta dance to keep from cryin" then "we gotta dance to keep from dyin" (Shange 29). Dance creates an extra-linguistic space and bridges the gap between body and mind; the act can also, however, reinforce an audience/performer binary. Which wins out: the performer's expression or her audience's interpretation? Is dance a performance of agency or an encore for the Happy Darkie trope? As the lady in brown explains at for colored girls' beginning, rhythm, song, and tune are all associated with life and its performance. Suicide Signifies death, the loss of self; she has been dead because "she doesn't know the sound / of her own voice" (Shange 18). "it's funny/ it's hysterical / the melody-less-ness:" here, the lady connects her own dissociative dance with comic traditions of minstrelsy. The Happy Darkie dances and sings for a white audience; no depth or scope of feeling humanizes this figure on a stage, because the audience's eyes and imagination give life to the stereotype (Hughes 28). Shange's ladies reveal that the potential for repression still exists in the act of dance. Emotion is expressed by the moving body; emotion may be suppressed by the moving body. Dance Signifies on selfhood with its potential for invisibility behind a performed character or, rather—and through the same act, new re-presentations, re-cognitions, re-creations. Jenkins' "mother tongue" and Gates, Jr.'s Signifyin(g) meet in black womanhood. *for colored girls* implements this layered language, creating a kind of triple consciousness.

Shange's cast members perform their complex relationship with the world for one another. From the lady in purple:

> i am really colored & really sad sometimes & you hurt me
> more than i ever danced outta/ into oblivion isnt far enuf
> to get outta this/ i am ready to die… (Shange 58)

She frames music as a coping mechanism and form of dissociation; she also alludes to suicidal ideation, but in its articulation her tone shifts. The woman concludes that she "is finally bein / real/ no longer symmetrical and impervious to pain" (Shange 58). Ladies in yellow and orange address the same theme; one turns up the music, saying "there is no me but dance… [because] i cdnt stand it / i cdnt stand bein sorry & colored at the same time / it's so redundant in the modern world" (Shange 57). Each has articulated in her own way the taboos of emotion imposed upon women of color by their society and how the self must be reconciled with invectives like "bitch or… nag" when emotion is expressed (Shange 56). Again and again, personal grief and social violence form a kind of binary. Womanhood becomes a performance. This leads to the disconnect described by Du Bois—a double consciousness or "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 54).

Caught between stereotypical extremes, women of color grapple with society's oppressive gaze. On one side, the Happy Darkie or minstrel performer cannot demonstrate any intellectual or emotional depth; on another—the Angry Black Woman trope casts strong feelings in a negative light, while the concept of a Strong Black Woman commends resilience and silence. bell hooks' treatise "The Oppositional Gaze" describes reactions to the Sapphire, modern televisions adaptation of the Angry Black Woman: "[B]lack women… resented the way these screen images could assault black womanhood, could name [them] bitches, nags" (hooks 120). These depictions of black women were not for them. Sapphire's caustic character

"soften[ed] the images of black men, to make them seem vulnerable, easygoing, funny, and unthreatening to a white audience" (hooks 120). The mammy figure often functioned as a plot device or supporting role. "Most of the women [hooks] talked with felt that they consciously resisted identification with films: … 'I could always get pleasure from movies as long as I did not look too deep'" (hooks 121). To enjoy "culturally dominant images," hooks posits, black women dissociate from the bodies on the screen or stage, because then they cannot fall prey to white or male definitions, or the object/audience hegemony (hooks 22). They might "[choose] not to identify with [a performance's] imaginary subject because such identification was disenabling" (hooks 122). Black female viewers also developed an oppositional gaze where they had once been discouraged from looking: a "critical space [in which] the binary opposition… 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' was continually deconstructed" (hooks 122).

Imani M. Cheers observes in *The Evolution of Black Women in Television: Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses* that "[a]s representation of Black women continues to shift and evolve, so do the labels associated with them… these shifts are directly related to the increase in media ownership and creative control obtained by Black women" (Cheers 1). Shange both demonstrates and celebrates her role in these shifts. Her characters never overtly mention suicide, but it is present in their descriptions of disassociation and invisibility. They are referred to by their colors rather than names, which opens another space for Shange to Signify on invisibility as well as the distance from self that performance or objectification can foster. Shange offers an example of a black female writer layering messages or defamiliarizing language. She recuperates the dissociative state of the stereotyped. Her choreopoem is a refuge where "Colored Girls" can look deeply as her intended audience, wield hooks' oppositional gaze, dismantle master narratives, and reconnect with the black female body, emotions, and performance.

Revisit the frozen women on page sixty of *for colored girls*. Return to their chorus. It is building. The ladies in brown, purple, blue, orange, red, and green repeat some variation of the lady in yellow's words: "my love is too delicate to be thrown back on my face" (Shange 60). They build on one another's voices. *"The lady in green then breaks into a dance, the other ladies follow her lead and soon they are all dancing and chanting together"* (Shange 61). Both song and dance are so often viewed first in terms of performance; however, there is the formal aspect as well. Most dances require pattern-learning; many songs require the memorization of notes or lyrics. These mediums also rely on an innate sense of rhythm; they bridge the mind, body, and voice. Similarly to the way in which Signifyin(g) language emancipates itself from the conventions of Anglocentric speech, an individual can circumvent musical rules. Dance can lead to disassociation—a coma of the self described by the lady in purple, or become a route toward healing; song is externalized emotion, either performed or genuine. Shange's poem has a musicality to it that is "real/ no longer symmetrical and impervious to pain" (Shange 58). This signals a departure from performance in the face of stereotyping; rather, the characters care less and less about presenting acceptable emotions and symmetrical bodies. "We deal wit emotion too much/ so why dont we go ahead & be white then," the sardonic lady in blue posits, "& make everythin dry & abstract with no rhythm & no / reeling for pure sensual pleasure" (Shange 58). She refers to white-coded performance as inadequate or restrictive. After this, they all begin to dance together and sing in rounds; white forms of expression cannot resolve the tension these women experience reconciling witnessed black womanhood and personal black womanhood. The performer/audience binary breaks down. Again the conflation of dance and language appears in *for colored girls*. "Enough" is not "Enuf." The triple consciousness of being black, female, and American requires the Black irony of Signifyin(g), hooks' oppositional gaze, and

Jenkins' "Mother Tongue." By incorporating these devices, Shange creates both a performance and script for black female participants. Her syntax, symbols, and imagery do not privilege a white or male audience. Beyond inviting black women to look, Shange encourages them to recite the poem and thereby exist as both a member of the audience and a performer (Shange 16). As the woman in brown urges in her first soliloquy: "sing a black girl's song / to know herself / to know you… sing her song of life" (Shange 18). Ladies take turns leading the musical round. They sing:

everyone (but started by the lady in yellow)
delicate
delicate
delicate

everyone (but started by the lady in brown)
and beautiful
and beautiful
and beautiful

everyone (but started by the lady in purple)
oh sanctified
oh sanctified
oh sanctified

…everyone (but started by the lady in red)
and complicated
and complicated
and complicated
and complicated
and complicated
and complicated
and complicated
and complicated (Shange 62)

These adjectives answer the racist depictions that have been Signified on throughout the play. "Delicate" dismantles the burden of strength imposed by the stereotype of the Strong Black Woman. Chanting "Beautiful" rejects

not only Eurocentric standards of beauty, but also the defining, acquisitive gaze of male eyes. "Sanctified" connotes holiness and purity; its use in the chorus calls back to the Jezebel figure and combats its discourse of shame. "Complicated" breaks and combats its discourse of shame. "Complicated" breaks down the habitual language surrounding black womanhood; "complicated" stands diametrically opposed to any form of stereotype or generalization.

Shange concludes this phase of their chorus, and her stage notes say that the ladies collapse, exhausted by music and dancing, but "full of life and togetherness" (Shange 63). Repetition reaches a more than obvious level. As a medium, the round forms a body from multiple people; everybody introduces one repetition; the ladies of color push the performer/audience binary beyond its functional limits: each voice chants alone, then the rest join in. The lady in yellow is the performer, the others her audience, then the paying audience their audience. No—the other women repeat her and become part of her act. Now, the lady in brown is the performer with her first line "and beautiful;" again, the other women echo "and beautiful." Designations adjust and rearrange to keep up with the cycle of their musical round, complicated more by the presence of an actual audience watching off-stage. Not only does this moment Signify on the triple-consciousness of presenting as black, American, and female in society with song and dance for money, but it also redefines the individuals as they participate in their own re-action to being socially othered.

Another form of repetition takes place with regard to names. Certain characters are tripled throughout for colored girls. The lady in brown describes her childhood love for Toussaint L'Ouverture, the liberator of Haiti; he becomes her imaginary friend and "secret lover" (Shange 41). His presence is a comfort as the little girl copes with her racial integration in school. "1955," she explains, "waz not a good year for lil blk girls" (Shange

41). She walks down the street planning an escape to Haiti, when a little boy named Toussaint Jones interrupts her. At this point, she makes an exchange:

> I felt TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE sorta leave me
> & I waz sad
> til I realized
> TOUSSAINT JONES waznt too different
> from TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE (Shange 44)

First, she turns a historical figure into her imaginary friend. Then, she exchanges the idealized figure for a Toussaint from her own generation. Shange has created a scenario in which the burden of legacy or the desire for heroic figures warrants the acceptance of who is real and present. The lady in brown found reassurance in a hero of the past as a child, but she transitions to his namesake: real company, real connection. The imagined Toussaint cedes to a little boy. Characters simplified by the imagination prove not only temporary, but also without substance; they are merely reflections of the imaginer. Shange again exposes the insufficiency of ideals or stereotypes. Tripling characters allows her audience to study this relationship between historical figures, stereotypes, and real people. Toussaint Jones defamiliarizes a name the little girl in brown had used to invent her savior.

In one scene, the tripling of characters and line repetition come together as an illustration of Shange's Signifyin(g) rainbow in action. The lady in orange is pursued by a man; he propositions the woman with five dollars and calls her a "bitch" for not stopping when he chases her. The lady in orange attributes this kind of harassment to her mental retreat from the world: "I usedta live in the world / really be in the world" (Shange 52). She laments sweetness and niceties as things that she can no longer afford. She describes her ecology as "six blocks of cruelty" (Shange). However, the role of the predatorial man is taken over by the lady in blue, who imitates his threatening volume—which is implied by Shange's use of all capitols—and

puts a familiar, safe figure in place of a dangerous unknown. Perhaps it is her substitution in the story that allows the woman in orange to revisit a moment full of violent potential. This is an example of how performance not only re-presents the self, but also re-enacts trauma in safety. "Never mind sister… go go go go go go sister / do yr thing / never mind" (Shange 52). Although she might have been alone during the original incident and although she is speaking to herself, the chorus is with her now as evidenced by the six go's. By narrating the story and quoting her stalker, the lady in orange Signifies. By taking the place of the man (or the aggressor) in another sister's narrative, the lady in blue performs an identity that is not her own; she quotes the predator and so determines how he will be perceived by the audience.

Shange writes about the violence perpetuated by men in for colored girls, and her depictions have garnered a wide variety of reactions. It would seem that describing the pain threatened or inflicted by black men, or men in general, troubled these audiences to the point of violence. Because men were so troubled by the idea that they could be violent, they threatened her with violence for telling these stories. Her lawyer suggested they hire protection. She explicates this ironic response:

> The reaction from black men to *For Colored Girls* was in a way very much like the white reaction to black power. The body traditionally used to power and authority interpreting, through their own fear, my work celebrating the self-determination and centrality of women as a hostile act. For men to walk out feeling that the work was about them spoke to their own patriarchal delusions more than to the actuality of the work itself. It was as if merely placing the story outside themselves was an attack. For Colored Girls was and is for colored girls. (Shange 11)

Shange points out, in fact, that there are many positive depictions of men, and these include all three of her Toussaint's—the historical, fictional, and contemporary figures. Somehow, this real reaction to this work's author does

emphasize the importance of female story-telling; if depictions of violent acts written and experienced by women are seen as a threat, then what of violence itself? The hegemonic structure privileges the image of the white and the male over the black and the female. Jenkins' "mother tongue" for use in encoding female experience is relevant once again; female stories, or their existence, can pose a threat to the masculine master narrative. Shange's chosen audience is a Signification simply because stories that address objects of stereotype pose a threat to those with narrative power.

The work's construction constitutes a rebuttal. What Shange's choreopoem demonstrates in its multidimensional form is not the absence of characterization or coherence, but of an every(black)woman that audiences can establish as the universal rule. *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* employs black female "representational strategies" in its tripling of characters, its chorus-driven antinarrative, and the parody of stereotypes through reenactment.

> [B]lack women have taken up a brand of satire that privileges emotion and experience, and is infused with postmodern aesthetics—particularly techniques of antinarrative, parody, citation, and intertextual bricolage permeated with disgust. These representational strategies have the potential to undercut stereotypical tropes that circulate about black women as unruly, incompetent, irresponsible, and interchangeable… (Finley 237)

Oppressive scripts have provoked subversions like the ones listed by Finley in "Black Women's Satire as (Black) Postmodern Performance." By applying a theoretical framework that underscores authorly intent, we spotlight such subversions. Audiences wielding bell hooks' oppositional gaze find their compliment in the performance of oppositional language. Sapphire, Jezebel, matriarch, mammy: American media distorted the black woman's image and sidelined her character to further a cultural plot in which she got little range. Shange catalogues the consequences. She inverts the viewing hierarchy. She writes for black women; she privileges their

understanding. She draws on Afro-American traditions of Signifyin(g), exposing marginalization perpetuated on a historic scale. Her characters not only transcend stereotype, but they also perform its damage on mind and body. Gates, Jr.'s Signifyin(g) voice speaks with Jenkins' "Mother Tongue" in a style that is unique to black women. Beyond the double consciousness of the American black man proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois, the American black woman must integrate at least three senses of place, performance, and language. This concept could forestall confusion in literary criticism; black female authorship must be analyzed in all of its layers without resorting to stock images, or tropes, for an answer. A second point to draw from Shange's depictions: scholarship must factor for the racial, historical, and gendered pressures of this milieu. for colored girl's impact extends beyond form and cultural context, however. In the same text, diction and devices also complicated black womanhood for broader audiences. Both repressive and expressive aspects of performance appear as the ladies of color re-present themselves.

Shange's chorus takes internalized violence and generates an artistic—spoken, lyrical, social—force from the complex binary of individual versus culture, so that 'individual' and 'culture' become bookends and what fills the space between them is this Signifyin(g) force that the chorus created. The women of color Signify not only on their experiences but also the act of re-telling, or performance. Ntozake Shange herself says, "As you read, feel free to speak the words aloud. In the mists and fog of life find your way to the rainbow by the sound of your own voice" (Shange 16). She encourages an audience (potentially but not exclusively black or female) to recite her lines; this repetition is a Signification that concretizes the central theme in for colored girls. Her characters repeat themselves, speak themselves (18). By repetition (emphasis on re- as both a force and prefix), concepts become habitualized. Rote depictions of black women in literature have functioned

similarly. Shange Signifies on this process by repeating lines, stories, and concepts: first, to challenge the American canon and, second, to create Jenkins' "mother tongue" (Curb 303). Her language is reflective: it exposes society through the re-action (both reenactment of an experience and response to it) of black women and, second and most importantly, mirrors itself thematically. The title sets this pattern for the rest of the choreopoem.

The identity from the first title finds an additional layer from the second; *when the rainbow is enuf* overlaps with *the colored girls* in the poem *who have considered suicide*. The barrier of a monitoring audience and the burden of identity performance comes between the self and certain emotions that have been rendered invisible by repression. Du Bois' "color line" is refracted into a rainbow. Shange reclaims performing for her own enjoyment, provides a frame of reference for the way music, language, and dancing in for colored girls creates an intimate space to be translated and understood more completely by women of color. The poem ends in the laying on of hands; as Shange has demonstrated throughout for colored girls, this act can be violent or spiritual—a conduit for connection or violence. A rainbow of women forms a circle (Shange 88). The lady in brown speaks the final lines: "& this is for colored girl who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows" (Shange 88). Ntozake has written agency into her characters and her plot, but the conclusion alludes to the fact that the performance will continue and so will healing; her ladies of color "are movin" in a space that they own.

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