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A Thematic Exploration of "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf," by Ntozake Shange

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**A THEMATIC EXPLORATION OF "FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE
CONSIDERED SUICIDE/ WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF,"
BY NTOZAKE SHANGE**

By

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B.A. University of Maine, 1999

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in Theatre)

The Graduate School

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December, 2001

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BY NTOZAKE SHANGE

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Thesis Advisor: Jane Snider

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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White customs and values have traditionally monopolized commercial theatre. It is not until recently that theatre has taken on multicultural influences in order to incorporate minorities into the audience. There are many artists who have pushed beyond the barrier of modern traditional theatre and influenced their generation. One of these artists has challenged not only traditional theatre, but also addressed gender and race issues as well, with controversial results. This artist is named Ntozake Shange and the play that received so much attention is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf. This piece is intended to speak to women of color and to offer guidance for Black girls.

The thesis covers a brief history of Shange's life and experiences into the piece. The paper also addresses Shange's intentions for the piece as it evolved from writing to production and then onto the Broadway stage. Shange termed her work a choreopoem that, by definition, incorporated music, dance, and poetry. Each of these three elements flow together creating a performance that is organic in nature. African storytelling, religion, dance, and music inspired the choreopoem.

In order to demonstrate Shange's intentions for the piece, the thesis then describes each element of a choreopoem and analyzes Shange's use of it within for colored girls. Next, the paper discusses the play by analyzing the content of related poems in the piece. By doing this, the paper pulls out certain pieces of subject matter in order to prove Shange's intentions. As well as discussing the performance, the thesis briefly touches upon some critical reactions to the piece and influences it has had on the audience. By acknowledging the awards and impact the piece has had, this analyzes whether or not Shange's intentions were successful.

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INTRODUCTION

On first reading Shange's play, the reader is stunned by her fearless and honest writing about women pushed aside by society. Both the content and writing are bold, taking from many established art forms in order to create a piece that creates a specific culture. The characters speak honestly about their experience, which are both emotional and believable. Shange's work is provocative, often creating very personal emotional responses in the reader. It is not surprising that the piece provokes strong emotions. Shange used her own life experiences in the work, along with the experiences of women she has met along the way.

Born into an affluent family, Shange was forced into an integrated school, where she suffered much discrimination. Later on, Shange married and divorced at an early age and was forced to start her life over from scratch. During this time, she started a long stream of suicide attempts. Shange characterized these attempts as a way of taking control over her life. She did not know her place in society; no longer a wife or daughter, she was forced to deal with herself as an independent woman.

Shange grew up with a great understanding of many art forms as her parents exposed her to different artists throughout her childhood. For colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf, was influenced by many Black artists that came before her. Some of these artists include Chico Hamilton, Dizzy Gillespie, and Chuck Hamilton to name a few. Later on in life, Shange studied many art forms such as African storytelling, religion, and dance. Each influenced her and found its way into the performance.

Shange's work is considered a compilation of many artists that came before her.

For colored girls... began in 1974 as a poem and later a set of poems that were read in women's bars. Soon several poems were developed and placed into a performance piece that included both dance and music. These encompassed all of Shange's studies and included poetry, music, and dance. This style of performance was termed the choreopoem, denoting a performance where dance is performed to poetry. The poems enjoyed a successful run on Broadway and provided an alternative to traditional American theatre.

For colored girls... is a study in cultural and gender identity. The play is a survival manual for the American Black girl as she matures and a reference for people seeking a better understanding of the culture and life experiences of Black women. For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf, is a significant theatre piece, and of value in cultural studies and women's studies.

Shange was inspired by women gathering together and sharing experiences.

[Shange] intended only to celebrate and share with other women – especially Black women – her personal experience as a Black female, and to participate in a community of female poets and artists, nourished by each other's creative renderings of their particular and common experiences (Lester 21).

The author used Judy Grahn's The Common Women as a "structural and thematic model" (Lester 21). With the help of several women and dance companies that Shange was performing with at the time, she transformed her poetry into a piece that encompassed not only story telling, but dance as well.

This thesis explores the themes, structure, language, and cultural references that characterize this as a work of cultural and gender identity. The paper will begin by discussing Shange's life experiences that led to writing for colored girls... It will

continue with examining the process of writing and putting together for colored girls... from the bars in California to the Broadway stage. The paper will incorporate the personal experiences of Shange and the progress of the piece under her own direction. The thesis will then analyze selections of poetry from the piece, exploring themes as well as structure and language. By analyzing the pieces separately the thesis will attempt to pull out references to cultural and gender identity. In the conclusion, the summary of Shange's process and the analysis will establish that this performance piece is an asset to cultural and women's studies, as well as a guide in life for all girls of color.

CHAPTER 1

FROM SHANGE TO BROADWAY

The exact point in Shange's life when there was a need to speak out is unclear. Despite a happy childhood full of culture and art, Shange grew up affected by racism and sexism. Her childhood was complicated by much of the civil rights movement and she was forced to attend an integrated school after the Brown versus the Board of Education decision. In the segregated school, she was allowed to learn with the support of the other Black children, but the integrated school provided only alienation. These experiences and the expectations of a hostile society grew until Shange could not tolerate them anymore.

Perhaps, Shange felt that she needed to follow in her parent's footsteps or that she needed to settle down, but directly after high school, Shange married. This marriage quickly failed. After divorcing her husband, Shange had to pull herself together and go out on her own. She baptized herself Ntozake (she who comes with her own things) Shange (who walk with lions) in 1971. She states, "I had a violent, violent

resentment of carrying a slave name; poems and music come from the pit of myself and the pit of myself was not a slave” (Brown 115).

Shange’s life struggles would provide much inspiration for her work. There is no doubt the content of for colored girls... came from the writer’s experiences. Shange explained that no writer can separate himself or herself emotionally from the work. Shange clarified that she is, “committed to the idea that one of the few things human beings have to offer is the richness of unconscious and conscious emotional responses to being alive” (Tate 151). Therefore, many of the characters are mixtures of Shange’s emotions and people she has met throughout her life. Critics state that many of her characters are not real. Shange takes this as a personal attack because all the characters come from her. It would imply that her experiences and emotions were inauthentic. (Tate 158)

As a child, Shange attempted to develop herself as a writer. Often times her writing was stunted by racist backlash that discouraged her from continuing. Growing up, Shange’s writing was labeled as “too Black,” but despite her disappointment she continued her academics by studying and writing about American culture and history. She managed to graduate with honors from Barnard. In the early nineteen seventies, Shange found courage, and the cloud of past failures began to dissolve as she started living with people who encouraged her art. It was during this time that Shange began to develop herself as an artist, and changed her name to Ntozake Shange.

A variety of influences would encourage her art and personal development. In 1973 Shange moved to San Francisco, and her poems and writings were praised and acknowledged by putting them in published books. An example of this is seen in one piece

of work, which was placed in a collection called, "Time to Greez. Incantations from the Third World." Acceptance encouraged and intensified Shange's dreams to express herself through writing. Along with writing, Shange was reciting her poetry with a group known as the Third World Collective in various women's bars. Soon, dance was incorporated as Shange began studying choreography linked to the Caribbean and West Africa. Shange explored her spirituality by studying religions such as Vudon, better known as Voodoo, from Haiti, and Santeria as practiced in Cuba.

Shange studied dance, religion, art, writing, culture, and music. During this time she began, in earnest, to explore her life, identity, and experiences and incorporate them into her art. An article chronicling great African American writers states, "By discovering in movement some of the intricacies and strengths of her identity as a Black woman, Shange found that she was also discovering her voice as a poet" (Baechler 381). Shange also worked with different dance troupes, one of which, was Halifu Osumare's "The Spirit of Dance." During this time Shange picked up experience in the theatre working and producing performances. This experience was followed by her leaving the dance company in 1974 to collaborate with "The Sound Clinic," Paula Moss and Jean Desarme and his Reggae Blues Band. The accomplishments of this group eventually turned into for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf.

Shange intended her work to be distributed on a grass roots level by continuing to stage the performance in small venues. After 1974, the poems took shape and she began reading them in women's bars throughout California. This experience evolved into a performance with a cast of four women and a lean budget. Technically, the piece was very simple, but emotionally it flowed with electricity. Shange realized that there was

much pain in the exploration of one's self and she presented the piece as an emotional demand on the audience. This demand made the audience think beyond their own lives and connect with the actors on stage. The actors themselves were asked to use all their senses to become the words, and move with the poetry. The play gives African American women a portrait of themselves, but soon Shange's message spread beyond her culture and performance intentions. From the start, for colored girls... had an impact on the readers and viewers despite small audiences and venues.

I began reading my poetry in women's bars. Not lesbian bars, necessarily, but women's bars, where they can go without being hassled or having someone try to pick them up. Anyhow those were the places that would hire me and when I was there, I realized I was where I belonged (Brown 116).

Shange not only wanted to perform, but to share consciousness. In the heart of the piece were not only her experiences, but also the experiences of African American women. The audience soon picked up the performance as a "must see" and the demand created a need for a change of venue. Shange brought the show, as it had no name at this point, to New York and the performance has changed and developed. Oz Scott was brought in to help with the production to provide advice and support. There had never been a need for the work to be structured and consistent until then. Next, the performance opened Off-Broadway then Broadway, in the Booth Theatre, and was commissioned by Joseph Papp who was the artistic director at the time. Shortly after this, Shange released the performance completely into Scott's vision and left New York City for Paris.

I said, "Hell let's go for it." I can always write something else. When somebody asked Duke Ellington if he was angry at Paul Whiteman for stealing all his songs, Ellington said, "I don't have time to be angry at Paul Whiteman, I just write another song." So that was my idea, I said, "They can take this and do whatever they want with it. I'll just write something else" (Savran 198).

Up until then, the performance would change every night and the group performing it was not being paid. The piece had not maintained a structure and had changed in script and choreography. Oz Scott, who had been with the performance since its arrival in New York, began shaping the piece into what is known as today for colored girls.... Soon, the production used professional actors and a crew for a full scale Broadway production.

The performance was a success and was the first “spotlight” for the African American woman on the commercial stage (Savran 190). This was a ground breaking event in American theatre, receiving commercial success and both widespread criticism and praise. For Shange, the experience was a challenge. She wanted to maintain an intimacy with her art, but this format alienated her from the performance. As well as stunting the creative process, the new venue took the piece away from its intended audience. Before, the piece was played Off-Broadway which kept the audience small and “racially segregated.” The success on Broadway took the play away from the Black woman. “Lost was the intended intimacy metaphorically with young Black girls that Shange sought as she unraveled some of the mysteries of her own experience as an adolescent.” (Lester 23).

Despite the cutting edge presentation, many critics thought the piece was too avant-garde with its lack of story line and character development. Many people thought the piece was not theatre because it did not meet the often-selective needs of traditional American theatre. Critics viewed the piece as poetry and nothing more. As an African American woman, she could not relate to the traditionally White form of expression.

But when we dealt with American White people who, except for Lorraine Hansberry, were the only people on Broadway, I didn't have any feeling for them, I didn't feel sorry for them, their lives were not universal to me. So it wasn't necessarily boring, but it was emotionally dead. I believe theatre should be living (Savran 200).

The differences Shange was having with theatre critics did not compare to the criticism received within her own culture. Societies that are oppressed put a large emphasis on staying together in order to stand against the oppressors. Shange chose not to ignore the oppression occurring within the Black Community. Her writing assumed the struggles of women within the Black culture. Often the play pointed to Black men as one of the leading oppressors in Black women's lives. Poems such as "latent rapists" and "a nite with beau willie brown," showed Black men not only as lovers and husbands, but as rapists and abusers as well. Many individuals within Shange's culture openly denounced the performance.

Many critics and audience members were discouraged by Shange's play saying that the performance did not look at why these men's actions were so abusive. In defense, a group of inmates from the Maryland House of Correction for Men called the "Writers Club," wrote a statement against insensitivity towards men in Shange's play. The counter attack was entitled, "For Colored Guys Who Have Gone Beyond Suicide and Found No Rainbow," and consisted of an "imitation" of Shange's work. The piece was filled with misogyny and included the reasons why Black men abuse Black women. The piece turned against women in order to draw sympathy for the men in the play. Ironically, this obvious misogyny supported Shange's writings on men (Lester 79).

Another form of criticism toward Shange's work made a much deeper impact on her career. Other critics pointed out that there was no motivation behind the characters in the play. In essence, Shange wrote stories that expressed emotion, but critics felt that was not enough. In the Black Scholar, an article, "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists," Robert Staples attacked Shange's work:

Ms. Shange does not care to tell us the story of why so many Black men feel their manhood, more accurately their feeling of self-respect, is threatened by Black women. We are never told that many of these men are acting out because, of all groups in this society, they have no basis for any sense of self-actualization, or somebodiness (Lester 78).

Unfortunately, this was a typical response to Shange's work. She did not focus on reasoning behind her abusive male characters nor did she need to offer an excuse for their behavior. Instead, she chose to focus completely on those for whom the play is intended, Black girls and women.

Despite the backlash, Shange never intended to conform or to maintain calm within her own culture, but rather to raise a new voice and heighten awareness. First and foremost, the play told the truth about the experiences in a Black girl's life touching upon all groups that oppressed her. Also, Shange wanted this presented in a manner she felt followed the African American tradition. She did this through dance and storytelling, abandoning traditional theatre and creating an organic and living experience. By doing this, Shange not only challenged her culture and its environment, but also the traditions in theatre and performance. Despite much artistic alienation, Shange succeeded.

The production of for colored girls... was like nothing America had previously experienced. Jettisoning the national preference for linearly structured, realistic plays, the text manipulated poetry and dance so as to create a swirl of imagery, emotions, colors, and movement proclaiming a woman's experience a fit subject

for dramatic representation. For many women and men, the performance became akin to a consciousness-raising event (Baechler 382).

CHAPTER 2

THE POETRY BEHIND THE PERFORMANCE

For colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf has been analyzed in many different ways. Part of the performance's success is its diversity of language. Much of the diversity is seen in the wording, rhythm, and language of the play. In its very diversity, the piece is intended to speak to all women or girls within the Black culture. Shange accomplished this by incorporating her experiences and most importantly, by incorporating herself in her work.

An example of the careful poetic language used in the writing is seen best in the title. For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf is a deliberate selection of words and language. The words represent the intentions of the author and identify for whom the author is writing. Like all poetry, the meaning of the phrases is up for interpretation. The piece becomes vulnerable each time an audience tries to interpret the author's intentions. While this is true of Shange's work, there are many words used deliberately chosen to convey a specific meaning.

The first half of the title, "for colored girls," represents Shange's intended audience. She uses "girls" not women because Shange hopes to use this as a manual of identity and self-exploration for girls. Also, the author uses the word "colored" because as she put it herself:

I used the words "colored girls" in the title because my grandmother would understand. It wouldn't put her off or turn her away. I wanted to get back to the

brass tacks of myself as a child; I was a regular colored girl, with a family that was good to me (Lester 24).

As well as relating words to Shange's past, the work "colored" also aims to remind the older audience of the Jim Crow era and the "Whites only" sign that Shange grew up observing. There are both hope and alienation in the word "colored." Finally, the word makes a distinction between White and Black. Like a gift, the script is labeled for colored girls... from Ntozake Shange.

The play also denotes an experience. "For colored girls, who have considered suicide," are words that demand attention and call to women and young girls who are losing themselves. The word suicide implies not only physical death, but also a death of the soul. Shange wants the girls to take whatever losses they have experienced and find respite in the poems. The term "considered suicide" recalls Shange's life when she literally considered suicide and tried to end her life. Shange's job is to make sure that there is somebody telling girls what they ought to have known. Sometimes this is the knowledge that Black mothers have not come to understand.

"For colored girls, who have considered suicide," is for women who learned to conform to society's expectations and subsequently lost a sense of their own beauty. The second half of the title, "when the rainbow is enuf," is a suggestion for these girls to learn to love themselves.

And, though colored girls have considered suicide because White society and Black men have abused them, this need no longer be the case. "The rainbow" is now understood as an image of their own beauty and it "is enuf" (Lester 27).

The terms "colored" and "rainbow" are perhaps the most important words in the title.

Shange goes on to explain the significance in her own words:

The rainbow is a fabulous symbol for me. If you see them all, it is. A colored girl, by my definition, is a girl of many colors. But she can see her overall beauty if she can see all the colors of herself. To do that, she has to look deep inside herself. And when she looks inside herself, she will find... love and beauty (Lester 26).

The meaning is expanded to the imagery of the performance. The actors are “colored” by costumes that represent each color of the rainbow. The actors do not have character names, but rather identify themselves by the color of the rainbow. The play represents a “collective” women’s experience (Lester 31). By taking away names and using colors instead, the meaning of the phrase “rainbow is enuf” is strengthened and the performance reaches out to different women with different experiences.

The title is only an example of the detail used throughout the play. Shange succeeded by creating a piece that is an event of total consciousness, building all the senses. The piece concentrates not only on the words, but the phrasing as well. Each verse and poem are written in rhythm. This rhythm is not reminiscent of standard poetry, but rather music. Song and rhythm are used in the poetry as well as the performance.

Throughout the play, Shange uses traditional songs and rhythm of Black culture as a “safe place” for women to be. Also, she uses music that is exclusive to the “colored” community. This, again, reinforces the exclusiveness of the piece. The music within the play also touches on the transition between youth and adulthood. “Momma’s little baby like shortnin’ shortnin,’” plays upon the innocence of a child while the seductive sax music used for the poem “graduation nite,” represents the transition from childhood to womanhood (Lester 37). Finally, in the piece, “now I have somebody more than,” the subject is womanhood and losing inhibitions through music. Shange also uses music as a

collective voice among Black women. This is seen in a group of girls singing to the music of “little sally walker” or with a woman swaying seductively to the rhythm of Ray Cohen.

As well as music within the performance, there is music within the poetry.

This rhythm incorporates not only music but also beats heard from a typewriter or in footsteps. Of course, all poets create rhythm within verse, but Shange concentrates on this rhythm to further the theme of music and dance. Shange explains this phenomenon further:

Sometimes I’ll hear very particular rhythms underneath whatever I’m typing, and this rhythm affects the structure of the piece. For instance, if I’m hearing the rumba, you’ll get a poem that looks like a rumba on the page. So the structure is connected to the music that I hear beneath the words (Lester 35).

Another example of Shange’s ethnic style of writing is denoted in the language. Shange writes in a Black dialect. Words such as, “yrself” and “enuf,” which appear in the title, are examples of Shange not only writing to a specific audience, but also shunning White American dialect. Shange explains, “I don’t write because words come out of my brain. I write this way because I hear the words” (Lester 30). However, this is not the only reason the words appear as they do. Shange states, “It bothers me, on occasion, to look at poems where all the letters are capitalized. It is very boring to me” (Lester 31). In other words, Shange is not only using the language of a specific culture; she is also creating something dynamic and representative of the culture.

Another reason for the language and appearance of the words are for “visual stimulation.” Shange not only counted on an audience in the theatre, but also on the readers and actors.

Also, I like the idea that letters dance, not just the words dance; of course, the words also dance. I need some visual stimulation so that reading becomes not just a passive and more intellectual activity, but demands rigorous participation (Lester 30).

Shange's particular language, wording, and usage of song are a manipulation expressing intention. More importantly, she uses every experience and medium to conjure up emotion in the audience and the reader.

The play is written with a unity of meaning and language so that the intended audience can understand. Each poem comes from Shange's own experiences, but she placed enough fiction within the text for the piece to communicate to many individuals. Shange is cognizant of the importance of an individual living in a culture. She is not only writing about individuals, but she is also making a statement about the Black culture or the people who fall into the category of "colored."

The poems are for colored girls despite their backgrounds, class, or upbringing. Therefore, Shange has divided the piece and arranged the performance with actors representing several different characters. Each poem unraveled from the piece tells the narrative of a woman or girl and her struggles with life. Many of these poems are humorous and others represent a dramatic truth about life on the outside of society.

For colored girls... does not have a clear beginning or end to the performance. Each poem reaches its own climax. The play is cyclical in nature, beginning and ending in a collective voice. In between these two poems, Shange tells stories that build onto each other. Finally, even though the play has no traditional beginning or ending, there is an intended conclusion to be made, that is, to be reborn or find God in yourself and "love her fiercely" (Shange 63).

Between these first and last poems, the middle poems recreate and universalize a Black woman's experiences both spiritually and physically. These poems are about individuals, but represent the common experience of a Black woman whether it is pain or joy. The women come together in the first and last poems creating a unity to the entire piece. The first poem can be associated with a gathering of midwives as the poem calls to, "let her be born/ let her be born/ & handled warmly" (Shange 5). The last poem asks for women to embrace salvation rather than death. Therefore, the piece is cyclical, beginning and ending with rebirth.

The performance starts with a poem entitled, "Dark Phrases" and it is done in a collective voice. Each actor, dressed in one of the colors of the rainbow is present without depicting a specific character or event. They represent the state of the Black woman as a whole. This first poem starts in the shadows or dark places of their lives. While this seems to express a need for pity, it is not Shange's intention. She expects the audience to relate to the strength of the characters and in return find strength within themselves. "Dark Phrases" is not about what is lost, but rather it is about the strength earned from being outside of society's expectations.

"Dark Phrases" also speaks of the definitions put on Black women by their environment. This is seen in the language of the play. The women in the performance state that they are from, "Outside Detroit, Outside Houston," and many other locations that make up American society (Shange 5). The meaning behind this is not to state location, but to express a state of mind. Although, it is clear that this culture has been pushed into ghettos or projects on the outskirts of cities. This isolates a person not only physically, but also mentally, as their culture is not represented within the mainstream.

This piece is the introduction to the entire performance. The story develops experiences contributing to both alienation and acceptance.

The middle poems deal with control or the loss of control in two major categories of a woman's life. First, these poems deal with challenges women have with their bodies and sexuality. This includes rape or coming to terms with one's self as sexual during adolescence. This could also include loving one's self for what you have in your body not for what you are told you should have. Secondly, the poems also examine women on a developmental level that. This includes the ability to nurture one's self and others.

In general, not all the poems in the piece have a message of sorrow and pain. In fact, many poems deal candidly with the pathos of growing up or coming of age. The "graduation nite" poem, for example, is story of a Black girl losing her virginity. The poem ends with the lines, "in the backseat of that ol buick/ WOW/ by daybreak/ I just cdnt stop grinnin'" (Shange 8). "Graduation nite" explores the transition between youth and adulthood. The main character is discovering womanhood and physical maturity. During this night of transition, the poem describes several girls going through teenage rituals of fussing and primping. In contrast, the narrator of the poem chooses to liberate her body. She gets what she wants through dance: "so I hadda make like my hips waz inta some business" (9). The lead character is not threatened by her community and so she was able to express herself without hesitation.

Shange writes "graduation nite," as finding a piece of one's self through dance. Because the girl is so young, there is a sense of freedom within herself and within her body. She has not yet sustained the blows of society; she is still proud and sexual. Most importantly, Shange does not emphasize the boy in the poem. She points out the girl

wanting something and taking it. This choice is not commonly seen among women where, in this society, the man is in control. In “graduation nite,” the choice is hers and is not coerced. This poem shows a young woman in control of her sexuality.

There are many similarities between this poem and the poem later in the piece entitled, “no assistance,” but the poem is not as hopeful or candid. Shange deals with the phenomenon of women loving others more than themselves. The similarity between this and “graduation nite” is in the choices the woman has made. In “no assistance,” the character explains, “this waz an experiment/ to see how selfish I cd be/ if I wd really carry on to snare a possible lover/ if I was capable of debasing my self for the love of another...” (14). The character emphasizes that while she is hurt, the power or control has not been taken away from her. This is a choice she has made just as it is a choice that the first girl lost her virginity on graduation night. The irony of the piece is that the woman still loves this man. However, for survival, she must end the relationship. She might diminish if she continues in a relationship with someone who does not value her. By ending the relationship, she maintains her pride.

Both poems describe choices that empower a Black woman. Shange emphasized these choices and intended this to represent positive role models for colored girls. Throughout this play, it is important to come back to the intended audience. “Graduation nite” and “no assistance” represent lessons that girls might not learn through their lives until it is too late. They have the power and control to make their own decisions.

Despite this message he also insists on telling the truth about women’s lives. No matter how in control a woman is of her life, there are times when the control is taken away. In the poem, “latent rapists,” she deals with the true nature of rape. The poem

doesn't deal with myths, but rather the truth that rape often happens in the presence of friends. As the poem explains, "cuz it turns out the nature of rape has changed/ we can now meet them in circles we frequent for companionship" (20). Shange boldly talks about a woman's inability to press charges: "pressin charges will be as hard/ as keeping yr legs closed/ while five fools try to run a train on you" (18).

Following this piece is a poem on abortion and the shame sometimes associated with pregnancy. Shange touches upon the burden a woman has to bear during an unwanted pregnancy. The poem states, "I cdnt have people looking at me/ pregnant/ I cdnt have my friends see this" (22). Without the support of child's father and friends, the invasion of a pregnancy is overwhelming. Shange writes a poem that describes the invasiveness of the abortion procedure on a woman's body. The character cries, "eyes crawling up on me/ eyes rollin in my thighs/ metal horses gnawin my womb" (22).

From this, the piece segues into another character who also survives the experience of her body and self being debased. "Sechita" is a poem about a woman dancing for White people in a dirt filled poor carnival. Shange contrasts the beauty of Sechita's dances with the squalor surrounding the show. She describes this as, "god seemed to be wipin his feet in her face" and "Sechita's legs slashed furiously thru the cracker nite." Despite the degrading experience of men hollering and, "gold pieces hittin the makeshift stage/ her thighs/ they were aimin coins tween her thighs," Sechita danced on as though a goddess.

The poem may be about survival and the beauty that can come from that survival, but moreover the poem is about losing one's self in dance. Sechita uses her dance to let out anger and she dances as a goddess, without delusion, as she refuses to be degraded.

Despite the filth of this show, Sechita maintains her self-respect. Sechita calls herself an “Egyptian Goddess” and Shange ended the poem powerfully as Sechita, “kicked viciously thru the nite/ catchin stars tween her toes” (25).

“Sechita” offers a story of woman that is mythical in style and character. The poem “Toussaint” is a reflection of Shange’s life. In this poem, she tells the story of a girl who is in a library reading contest and is dissatisfied by the books she cannot relate to in the children’s section. She starts reading from the adult section and finds stories of a Haitian revolutionary named, Toussaint L’Ouverture. She describes her immediate passion for the character, “TOUSSAINT L’OUVERTURE/ waz the beginning of reality for me/ in the summer contest for/ who colored child could read/ 15 books in three weeks/ I won & raved abt TOUSSAINT L’OUVERTURE/ at the afternoon ceremony” (Shange 26). The girl won the reading contest only to have the award taken away because the contest did not include books from the adult section. So, in response, the girl decides to off to Haiti, Toussaint’s homeland, but instead finds a willful boy by the same name to befriend.

The girl within the poem takes control of her own situation. The children’s section does not have books that she can relate to so she explores the library further to find ones to which she can relate. However, when the award is taken away from her, she is stripped of her freedom to explore. It is as if the people taking the award away are conveying a message that she cannot have her Black hero and she must stick with books to which she cannot relate.

This story is close to the experiences Shange had within the integrated schools she was forced to attend as a child. In the poem the young girl says, “the night I decide to run away from my/ integrated home/ integrated street/ integrated school/ 1955 waz not a good

year for lil black girls” (Shange 27). Just as Shange’s writing was coined, “too Black” as a young child, the character in the novel loses hope over the options she has in life.

An interesting piece of the poem concerns the young girl meeting the boy on her way to Haiti. The boy insists that he is as good as any hero and that the girl should stick with him. Shange’s character willingly decides that the book is a fantasy and that the boy in front of her is real, and she befriends the boy immediately. This leads to another aspect of the poem not often discussed, the nature of the sexuality of the young girl. The character finds a lover in her Black hero. As she is banned from the adult reading section in the library, the girl is also banned from the feeling she has toward the character in the book. In the end, it is her own decision to quit the fantasy and to choose a friendship rather than a lover. Shange’s end describes the beginning transition of a young girl’s feeling toward men and boys. As seen in the following quote it is an observant combination of childhood games and the first feelings of intimacy.

TOUSSAINT L’OUVERTURE

became my secret lover at the age of 8
 I entertained him in my bedroom
 widda flashlight under my covers
 way into the night/ we discussed strategies
 how to remove white girls from my hopscotch games
 & etc.

TOUSSAINT (Shange 27)

The emotional agony of losing one’s self or the pain inflicted by rape, abortion, or a debasing situation, is expressed clearly through Shange’s writing. Above all, Shange makes a clear distinction between the control a woman has of herself and the rules put in front of her to take that control away. This handbook for girls shows the experiences of women as marginalized members of society. Shange boldly introduced many issues that

had been considered unworthy of discussion because they dealt with women's feelings and emotions. Demystifying women's issues continues throughout the play. Not only does she deal with a woman's sexuality and body images, but she also deals with a Black woman's need to defy the outside world through nurturing and supporting herself.

A few poems stand out as having themes of mutual nurturing and support. In the poem "pyramid," friends who love and support each other are pulled apart by a man. Each friend gives the other space in order to pursue the love of this man. The poem states, "he found one" and others "spurned his advances" in order to let their friend have this man (40). "He found one," indicates that the man did not choose the individual, but rather any woman. Clearly the man's devotion to these women is rather loose as he tries to spark romance between the other two friends.

In the end, the friendships are renewed, as these women do not need this man, but rather each other. This celebrates the Black woman's ability to support each other in the light of personal tragedy. "The woman's shared betrayals by the same man move them toward renewed sisterhood and renewed personal strength..." (Lester 57). There is an understanding of mutual suffering among the friends, and these friends are the constant throughout these women's lives. This indicates that they are not just friends, but rather sisters or family and more significant to each other than the men that come and go. The last paragraph of the poem reinforces the importance in finding support from other women.

She held her head on her lap
 The lap of her sisters soaking up tears
 Each understandin how much love stood between them
 How much love between them
 Love between them

Love like sisters (Shange 42)

Another example of the importance of nurturing or in this case of a nurturing society, is seen in "a nite with beau willie brown." The depiction of a Black woman's life would be incomplete without the trials of rearing children under the confines of oppression. Shange takes this a step further by pointing out that the Black man is one of the leading oppressors. This poem discusses the abuse of an estranged husband. Back from Vietnam, Beau Willie Brown attempts to get back together with his girlfriend, Crystal, by breaking her restraining order against him. He enters the apartment and demands to see his children. Crystal lets him see the children, but he holds them out the window, demanding that she marry him or threatening to drop the children.

The poem is not about a mother losing her child. Shange focuses on the relationship between Beau Willie and Crystal. The poem does not state whether or not the two people love each other, but there is definite connection seen during the struggle with the children. In spite of this connection, Crystal and Beau Willie could never sustain a healthy relationship. Both individuals have been stripped of self and betrayed by society. Crystal has been let down because despite the restraining order against Beau Willie, she is still not safe. Beau Willie Brown has served his time in Vietnam and has been dumped back into his life without any help. Critics say that this poem speaks against Black men as a whole, but they are missing the entire picture. Beau Willie is just as much a victim as Crystal. Of course, the ultimate victims in the poem are the children, caught between two very vulnerable people.

Both Crystal and Beau Willie have lost power. The spontaneous act of dropping the children shows how Beau Willie is not in control of his life or emotions. Crystal

cannot properly nurture her children if she has not been nurtured herself. Perhaps she has never had an example of what healthy relationships look like. “She loses control over her environment, her life, and children’s lives. The tragic irony of such a relationship is that Crystal has, throughout their “romance,” remained implicitly content in this abusive relationship” (Lester 64). “Implicitly content,” refers to Crystal never knowing what respect is. Perhaps she watched her mother being beaten by her father or she believes she does not deserve better, either way her tragedy is just as great as Beau Willie’s is. Shange writes of this because she does not want the pain of a woman overlooked; she explains,

And she is just as pitiful and just as in need of love and respect as Beau was since the day he was born. It’s unfortunate and it’s another indication to me that we always shift our attention to the male character no matter what happens... [This] indicates to me that we’re in an awful lot of trouble emotionally as people and that as long as we don’t care about Crystal and other women like her and like me who have known moments of great powerlessness – and for that reason just to go across the street becomes a great attack on the world – we have an awful lot of work to do (Lester 64).

The entire play demands that the audience not overlook the pain of women, but rather face it and relate it to their own lives. Crystal or any other character cannot be ignored. “a nite with beau willie brown” is the climax of the play. This poem contains the most anger and tragedy in the piece. Crystal has lost her pride, her strength, her relationship, and her children. This character has hit bottom with no place left to go, leaving the audience hopeless, but in the end Shange replenishes hope. Following this, the final poem, and like the first, is a gathering of women. Directly after “a nite with beau willie brown,” the poem concludes with a calling of women to bond together. The final poem, “a laying on of hands” is unlike the first because it calls the women to act or be reborn. It calls for women to transcend the pain created by their harsh experiences and to

respect and take pride in themselves. As "Dark Phrases" describes being born outside of society, "a laying of hands" depicts being reborn. It is an epiphany of sorts, but not an ending, for each of these women's tales goes on into greater pain and joy. The final poem calls upon women to take their sexuality, their bodies, and power and have an experience of, "all the gods comin into me/ layin' me open to myself" (Shange 61).

Shange uses the analogy of a "layin on of hands," to suggest healing through the support of other women. It is clear within the poem as Shange writes, "not a man," and "not my mama," that she is asking women to pull themselves up from the ground (62). The power to continue and find one's self must come from inside a Black woman, and not from society. Society does not offer a woman control, but rather a feeling of powerlessness. One of the last phrases written in the play is an affirmation for Black women and it gives them power, "I found god in myself/ & I loved her/ I loved her fiercely." The very last line of the play restates Shange intentions, "& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows" (64). The poem sends the message to love and heal yourself because nobody else can do it for you.

As a whole, the performance is not just poetry or a set of stories put together, it is a total sensory experience for the audience. The actor must not only speak the words, but move to them as well. The dance is not always done to music. Sometimes the actor makes her own beat through phrasing. In many ways, it requires an actor to movement without restraint. The poetry and dance must portray the emotion of the story.

This is the opposite of a traditional theatre that strives for realistic movement. Like modern realism, the actor must take from her own experiences and fuse them with

the experiences of a character within the play. In other words, the actor cannot appear detached from the character she is portraying. This is very difficult for the actor because there are as many as twenty different characters within the play. One of the actors who performed Shange's work during the 1977 Broadway production of for colored girls... is Robbie McCauley. She described some of the challenges she was faced with when dealing with this piece in this way:

The form [choreopoem] demands that the performer have an organic, physical relationship to the words and images of the poems/ narratives ... In order to perform Shange's text, the actor has to personalize her relationship to it. (I mean personalize as an acting process wherein the actor involves herself experientially and imaginatively with the text ... to play it through herself) (Lester 3).

CONCLUSION

For colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf, challenged not only the actors on stage, but the theatrical community as well. The performance was an innovation, in its collaboration of dance, music, poetry and powerful characterization. It drew both from its Broadway predecessors and from traditions, such as African storytelling and dance. Furthermore, For colored girls... was only the second piece to appear on Broadway written by a Black woman.

Despite critical backlash, for colored girls... won many awards. This list includes nominations for a Tony, Grammy, and Emmy awards as well as winning the 1977 Obie Award. Other honors include the Outer Critics Circle Award, Audelco Award, and the Mademoiselle award. With all of this in Shange's possession, however, she never succeeded in creating another performance that attained the amount of attention and praise that for colored girls... received. She has continued to work in the same honest and gritty manner to explore Black women's issues.

The true success of the play, in the estimation of both Shange and this writer, is measured in the impact it made on Black women's lives. The accomplishments that stand out are the overnight Broadway success of the play. In all, Shange's piece played on Broadway for 862 performances, not including those that Shange presented on the its way up to Broadway (Musical Heaven). The performance was aimed for minority women and opened up the audience to all women of color. Many Black playwrights who have been successful on Broadway owe their success to people like Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange, who cleared the path for Black writers, male and female.

If the entire work is examined poem by poem, it is clear to see why the play has generated such controversy. This includes praise for the daring poetry and eclectic style and criticism for such things as the controversial portrayal of Black men. By starting as a small performance and ending up a mainstream Broadway production, the progress of the performance imitates the theme of the work, becoming a celebration of a Black woman's ability to survive. Shange paved the way for other Black women to follow in her footsteps and have their own voices heard.

For colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf is a celebration of both cultural and gender identity. It is intended by Shange as a handbook for Black girls in order to understand their own lives. Shange explains her intentions:

It's the silence of the mothers that is so shattering. The mothers know that it's a dreadful proposition to give up one's life for one's family and one's mate and, therefore, lose one's self in the process of caring and tending for others. To send one's daughter off to that kind of self-sacrifice in silence with no preparation is a mortal sin for me. To do this without telling her that this is a sacrifice is so unnecessary. To break this silence is my responsibility, and I'm absolutely committed to it. When I die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves (Lester 28).

As Shange's explanation and this analysis of the performance indicate for colored girls... with its unique, culture-specific voice and its unflinching look at problems women of color face in the modern world is a work of art that challenged long-held assumptions about the nature of Black women's experience. Its success helped to ensure its lasting impact, making it a work that continues to be studied and produced. It continues to give a powerful voice to gender and ethnic concerns.

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Jocelyn M. Richard was born in Bridgton, Maine on August 17th, 1977. She was raised in Lewiston, Maine and graduated from St. Dominic Regional High School in 1995. She attended the University of Maine and graduated in 1999 with a Bachelor's degree in Theatre. She continued her studies at the University of Maine and entered the Theatre graduate program in the fall of 1999.

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