

“I WILL PAY THAT PRICE AS A POET TO SPEAK MY TRUTH”:
FEMINISM, ACTIVISM, AND THE HISTORICAL MOMENT OF
NTOZAKE SHANGE’S *FOR COLORED GIRLS*

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ABSTRACT

In this analysis of Ntozake Shange’s 1975 work *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, I examine two specific elements of the production—the critical responses to the work (primarily from male critics), and the performances of the play in American prisons, for both male and female audiences. I believe an analysis of Shange’s work through those lenses permits an accurate discussion of the historical moment in which *for colored girls* emerged, and how closely linked sexuality, performance, and protest were in Black Power-era America.

KEYWORDS

American literature; feminism; theater; activism; politics; race; gender; Black Arts Movement; African American studies; Ntozake Shange; *for colored girls*

The Black Arts Movement, a cultural extension of the Black Power Movement, appears at times to have been a movement driven by black masculinity, an attempt by black Americans to simultaneously define what it means to be black and be a man. While both the Black Power and Black Arts movements were by and large male-dominated, it is unfair to ignore the influence of women on both. African American women were especially influential during the Black Arts Movement, as these women—writers, musicians, and other artists—attempted to *create* a new black cultural identity in tandem with the new political identity defined by Black Power. In this vein, Ntozake Shange’s 1975 work *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* is an ideal example of Black Arts literature. Through a hybrid of poetry and drama, Shange’s play depicts black women in America as being active agents in their own identity, while at the same time being forced to confront the masculine gaze of Black Power, and that male-perpetuated definition of what black women should be.

Contrary to most narrative works of theatrical literature, *for colored girls* is an episodic examination of the fears and desires of black women in America. Instead of character names, the performers are categorized by color (i.e., the Lady in Purple, the Lady in Blue, etc.). Instead of scenes, the play is broken up by monologues that address such diverse topics as rape, abortion, childhood, and domestic abuse, among others. A groundbreaking work in its own time, today it is discussed prominently by scholars in fields such as literature, women’s studies, history, and African American studies.

What a historical analysis of the play offers us is an opportunity to explore many of the diverse themes that emerged during the Black Arts Movement. Within each section of her beautiful and sprawling “choreopoem,” Shange depicts post-Civil Rights era black Americans as attempting to define themselves not through the eyes of White America, but through their own eyes and identities; this is a play written by a black playwright, first and foremost for black artists and audiences. Specifically, Shange is most concerned with black women; *for colored girls* is relatively devoid of any male characters or voices, and the few depictions of male figures have been labeled by many (male) critics as negative. It is Shange’s expression of gender roles and the relationship between black women and black men that beg the question: Was *for colored girls* a Black Arts text, or a feminist text? As we will see, the two are not mutually exclusive, and Shange herself would argue that her work was representative of both the Black Arts and feminist moments of the 1970s.

Shange’s play in its finished form was first performed in 1975 and premiered on Broadway in 1976, and Shange herself is still writing today. As a result, a discussion of *for colored girls* permits a unique exploration of primary material. The participants in *for colored girls*—the creative minds as well as the critics—are still active agents in their own political and social activism, including Shange herself. In this analysis, my primary research aim will be to identify how Shange reconciles two intersecting social/political movements, and how *for colored girls*, through its participants and audiences, represents these movements. More importantly, I hope to identify the historical moment in which Ntozake Shange created *for colored girls*, and examine how that moment has influenced its cultural and social legacy.

Much of the primary source material related to *for colored girls* comes from Shange herself, who has provided critics and audiences with her own intentions for her work in the form of interviews and essays. In the introduction to the first published text of the play, written in 1976 (republished in the 1997 Scribner Poetry edition), Shange recalled that *for colored girls* “was first presented at the Bacchanal, a woman’s bar just outside Berkeley, California. . . . This was December of 1974. We were a little raw, self-conscious, & eager. Whatever we were discovering in ourselves that nite [*sic*] had been in process among us for almost two years.” After the initial early performance at Berkeley, Shange and a group of women poets, dancers, and actresses began rehearsals in San Francisco, where the “force of these readings on all our lives waz [*sic*] to become evident as we directed our energies toward clarifying our lives—& the lives of our mothers, daughter, & grandmothers—as women.” More importantly, these women “were promoting the poetry & presence of women in a legendary male-poet’s environment. This is the energy & part of the style that nurtured *for colored girls* . . .”¹

1. Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1997), ix–x.

After the initial performances and rehearsals in California, Shange and her team (including the eventual director Oz Scott) migrated East to New York, where they performed and rehearsed in a variety of spaces, including the back rooms of local bars. They eventually found a home at a bar called DeMonte's, "after eleven weeks of no-pay hard-work three sets a night—maybe a shot of cognac on the house." Her time at DeMonte's was, according to Shange, "prophetic. . . . As opposed to viewing the pieces as poems, I came to understand these twenty-odd poems as a single statement, a choreopoem."² In addition to the creative advances Shange and the group made, audiences began to respond as well. After performances at the New York Shakespeare Festival, "[l]ines of folk & talk all over the Black & Latin community propelled us to the Public Theater in June [of 1976]. Then to the Booth Theater on Broadway in September of 1976," where

the rest of the cast is enveloping almost 6,000 people a week in the words of a young black girl's growing up, her triumphs & errors, our struggle to become all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender, all that we have forgotten. . . . Poems come on their own time: i am offering these to you as what i've received from this world so far.³

The immediate response to Shange's work from male audiences was fierce. "The uproar about how i portrayed black men was insidious and venal," she wrote in July of 2010. "i was said to hate men, especially black men." The play "hit several nerves. There were fisticuffs in Chicago, male students trying to shout me down at Howard University," and her lawyer contemplated hiring bodyguards. "It felt dangerous," Shange wrote, adding that the play "was literally *for colored girls*, which to me meant women-centered. Still nothing prepared me for the hateful response from African-American English-speaking males." According to Shange, the response "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."⁴

By framing the Black Power Movement around her own work, Shange forged a connection between the role of feminism within Black Power and Black Arts. Other scholars and critics have commented similarly on *for colored girls*. As Cheryl Clarke has claimed, Shange contributed her work and her involvement in the Black Arts Movement to Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and others, but she also spoke of being a "witness of the ways women's literary culture changed women's lives in the 1970s," and "[s]he sees herself as both a beneficiary and an arbiter of those changes. . . . Shange had lived through the

2. Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide*, xiv.

3. Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide*, xv–xvi.

4. Ntozake Shange, "Beginnings, Middles, and New Beginnings—A Mandala for Colored Girls: Musings and Meditations on the Occasion of the Second Publication," in *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 2010), 10–11.

integrationist Civil Rights and the nationalist Black Power movements and carried their lessons to the nascent feminist projects in which she became involved.”⁵ Further, Kellie Jones has argued that “the language, writing, and even Shange’s name demonstrated roots in the Black Arts Movement. As Shange herself would later comment, ‘I am a daughter of the black arts movement (even though they didn’t know they were going to have a girl!).’”⁶

Lisa Gail Collins has argued that by “[d]rawing insight and energy from the previously parallel cultural movements, this dynamic work reveled in the movements’ shared tendencies and unique histories.”⁷ Moreover, Collins argues that with the emergence of the play, Shange “joined advocates for the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movements as well as activists for Black Power and Women’s Liberation in daring to imagine a world where they would . . . feel connected, authentic, and whole, and in devoting themselves to creating that world by all possible means.”⁸ Finally, Kimberly Springer believes that while Shange “celebrated black women’s survival in the face of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of black men,” the “uplifting” elements, “the very celebration of survival and labeling of sexism—put black men on guard, particularly given the negative reflections of black men in the play.”⁹

While contemporary scholars and intellectuals have offered their opinions of the legacy of *for colored girls*, reviews of the original production were full of praise, with many critics appreciating Shange’s attempt at representing black womanhood, while still acknowledging the play’s potential for controversy. The white theater critic Clive Barnes, reviewing the Off-Broadway production for the *New York Times*, wrote that the play was about “[b]lack sisterhood . . . because it is about black women—not just blacks and not just women—it is a very humbling but inspiring thing for a white man to experience.” Further, Barnes wrote that to “be black and to be a woman is a kind of double infirmity that must be faced with courage,” claiming that Shange’s play “is a lyric and tragic exploration into black woman’s awareness. Not that Miss Shange is sorry for herself or any of her sisters, she is angry and contemptuous.” While Barnes continually reiterated that the play was about black women, he also argued for its universal appeal. “Miss Shange writes with such exquisite care and beauty that anyone can relate to her message. Fundamentally,” he added, “if we have any sensitivity or sensibility at all—we all feel the same things.

5. Cheryl Clarke, *“After Mecca”: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 95.

6. Kellie Jones, “Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles,” in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 65.

7. Lisa Gail Collins, “The Art of Transformation: Parallels in the Black Arts and Feminist Arts Movements,” in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 292.

8. Collins, “The Art of Transformation,” 293.

9. Kimberly Springer, “Black Feminists Respond to Black Power Masculinism,” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 114.

We just need poets and other strangers to point them out to us.” In concluding his review, Barnes stated rather poignantly that the production “could very easily have made me feel guilty at being white and male. It didn’t. It made me feel proud at being a member of the human race, and with the joyous discovery that a white man could have black sisters.”¹⁰

The Broadway production received similarly glowing reviews from both the *New York Times* and the Associated Press, as well as the *Los Angeles Times* (reviewing the LA production), each critic identifying the subject of the play as black women but also admitting to its universality of theme. The *New York Times* review of its September 1976 premiere at the Booth Theater stated: “The search for self, the struggle for singularity, the anguished urging to be loved are at the root of Ntozake Shange’s remarkable evening of theater.” Further, “we are allowed to share an . . . intensely personal experience. The words are Miss Shange’s . . . [it is] her story that she is confiding to us. . . . Uptown or downtown, in a bar or at the Booth, ‘Colored Girls’ is a play that should be seen, savored, and treasured.”¹¹ Similarly, the Associated Press called the production “a rare and beautiful treat for everybody. . . . Partly private autobiography and partly mordant expose of the female heart, the choreo-drama successfully amuses, beguiles, and stuns.”¹²

The 1977 Los Angeles production was met with comparable praise. The *Los Angeles Times* review called Shange’s work “a luminous SOS: All that bottled up pain of growing up black and female, lonely and sensitive in America, uncorked on the stage. This is a woman,” the reviewer continued, speaking of Shange, “who has used her nerve ends to put complicated feelings down on paper. . . . Words rushing and tumbling over themselves, often elliptically, to reflect a vast tangle of unsorted emotions.” The play “may leave some of you craving more, not because it was short, but because it was good, because it was about being human first, then female and black.”¹³

While feminism and womanhood were recurring themes of the initial reviews, the participants in the production itself believed the play to be as important to African American men as it was to African American women. Trazana Beverley, an award-winning member of the original cast, spoke to the *New York Times* after the play’s Broadway premiere. In the piece, Beverley addressed the play’s role in the burgeoning feminist movement, as well as how male members of the audience reacted to the performance. Beverley, who “describ[ed] herself as a private, nonorganizational feminist,” did not believe the text to be a purely feminist document. “The images have a clearness and

10. Clive Barnes, “Stage: Black Sisterhood; Ntozake Shange’s ‘For Colored Girls’ Opens at Papp’s Anspacher Theater,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1976: 42.

11. Mel Gussow, “Stage: ‘Colored Girls’ Evolves; Play Moves to Broadway,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1976: 53.

12. William Glover, “‘Colored Girls. . .’ Beguiles, Stuns,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 1976: IV:14.

13. Sylvie Drake, “‘Colored’: Choreopoem of Passage,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 1977: IV:1.

simplicity that require you to leave yourself open to the play and let it flow through you," she told the *New York Times*, "I'm not an object and I don't care to be treated as one. 'For Colored Girls' has strengthened my ego and given me the courage to stand up to certain situations." Beverley continued by discussing the influence of the play on men: "But though some men argue with me about the play, other men cry. I remember one man coming to see it and bringing his wife back to see the play another time, while he waited outside with the baby."¹⁴

The relationship between black masculinity and black feminism intersected once again when the cast of *for colored girls* began performing Shange's play for prisoners at correctional facilities in the New York area, the first being the Women's House of Detention at Rikers Island. These prison performances took place after the play moved from Off-Broadway to Broadway, which was indicative of the potential that popular consumption and critical praise could have for political causes. "The seven young women in the cast . . . arrived in a Correction Department bus," the *New York Times* reported of the Rikers Island performance in January of 1977. "In the institution's chapel-auditorium, there was a sort of instant-rapport between them and their audience of 100 or so convicted women—uniformed in their own semi-rainbow of yellow, green, violet, or white prison wraparounds," as well as "200 civilian-clad 'detainees' awaiting trial." According to the *New York Times*, "Shange's play about what she considers black imprisonment in society," was a highly emotional experience for the inmates. Various segments of the performance "brought some noticeable tears and sniffles, as well as laughter and affirmative shouts." One prisoner commented that, "it was like they played a part of everybody's past—what everybody's been through, one way or another." A twenty-nine-year-old inmate, sentenced on charges of armed robbery and assault, said: "There was nothing too bourgeois but also nothing in the gutter. And when it got to a part where a person might feel like crying, they switched quick and it was laughs."¹⁵

The environment was very different at the maximum-security Essex County Jail in Newark, New Jersey, when the production was performed in front of an audience of 485 men and 30 women, "who are being held on charges ranging from murder to drug possession," and "[f]or many it was the first Broadway show they had ever seen." The men of Essex County had strong reactions to the performance, which were very similar to those of the women at Rikers. These reactions prove that Shange's work, while perhaps feminist in nature, was directed at black men as well as women, thus allowing her to define both black womanhood and black manhood. "It was beautiful, just beautiful," said a prisoner named Leroy Harnette. "It shows that we're

14. Anonymous, "An Actress Full of Passion, Pain and Energy, Miss Beverley of 'Colored Girls' Won't Let Up," *New York Times*, September 15, 1976: 50.

15. Laurie Johnston, "Colored Girls' Goes to Rikers Island and Hits Home," *New York Times*, January 14, 1977: 26.

men, black men and that we should be proud. It shows that we should show more kindness, consideration and love for our women.”¹⁶ According to Albert Collier, the warden of the prison, “the inmates,” many of whom were dressed in their best suits, “were very excited.” An inmate named Henry Elan, who the *New York Times* reported was serving a seven-to-ten-year prison term, headed a committee to ensure that the prisoners were on their best behavior before, during, and after the performance. “The majority of the men here have never seen a Broadway show,” Elan said, “and we try to get them to conduct themselves as men so that other shows may come.” Women in the cast also had very strong reactions to the experience. Laurie Carlos, who had performed in the show since it first opened Off-Broadway in 1975, argued that performing the play in prisons only further solidified Shange’s message. “We all have our own prisons. Being outside just makes it easier to deal with some of the bars. The play is very real—very visceral. There’s freedom in it once one finds God in himself,”¹⁷ she claimed, echoing one of the last lines in *for colored girls*—“i found god in myself & i loved her / i loved her fiercely.”¹⁸

As discussed earlier, upon its initial production, *for colored girls* received severe condemnation from black male critics of the period. In “*After Mecca*”, Clarke argues that “in the aftermath of the hostile criticism *for colored girls* received from the black press and individual black male critics and intellectuals, Shange became anxious about her authenticity/acceptance as a black artist.” Clarke cites sociologist Robert Staples’ article featured in *The Black Scholar* entitled “The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists,” in which he wrote, “[w]atching a performance [of *for colored girls*] one sees a collective appetite for black male blood.” Further, Clarke offers a critique of the African American poet Sherley A. Williams, whose reading of the play she calls misread. According to Clarke, Williams “declaims *for colored girls* ‘is not an anthem of female liberation but [a] dirge of defeat’ because Shange is guilty of the same expression of gender chauvinism of which she accuses black men.”¹⁹

While these criticisms may have stung Shange upon their surfacing, she has addressed the tension between masculinity and femininity—specifically the one related to African Americans—in the decades since her original production. “I think unless black women are writing the pieces, we’re left out the same way we used to be left out of literature. We don’t appear in things unless we write them ourselves,” Shange said in a 1987 interview with *The Massachusetts Review*: “In the white male literary establishment women attain what looks like positions of power or influence or economic stability,

16. Alfonso A. Narvaez, “Broadway Show Is a Hit as It Goes Behind Walls of Jail,” *New York Times*, April 8, 1977: 43.

17. Narvaez, “Broadway Show Is a Hit as It Goes Behind Walls of Jail,” 43.

18. Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 2010), 87.

19. Clarke, “*After Mecca*”, 97.

but they're structured in such a way that they become unthreatening." In the same interview, when asked a question about the definition of radical feminism, Shange stated:

Feminists don't start up at twenty-one and know the correct way. It's something that all of us can reach toward, and it's something that's available to any little girl or little boy. It's some thing [*sic*] you have to come to, and you have to come from someplace to get it.²⁰

In a 1990 interview with the *Black American Literature Forum*, Shange offered a much more conclusive discussion of feminism, American manhood, and the shifting notions of gender norms:

I think men are confused and frightened. As women change and we change what our desires and options are, as we become more self-sufficient, a lot of men lose the idea of taking care of one's family. They can find something else that they can take pride in. The other idea deals with men's being sensitive sexually and intellectually. That can be confusing for a man if a woman also wants to be self-reliant, not to be taken care of. How do you manifest care in a situation like that? I don't know. Everybody I know hasn't always been successful at these complicated relationships. I don't think we all know what we're doing.

...
I was raised in a segregated society where black men were the world. So that is all the world I knew. That didn't apparently get through to people, that we [blacks] could be the universal symbol of humanity.²¹

In a retrospective essay written in 2010, Shange argued "there aren't that many negative images of black men in *for colored girls*." Some segments in particular, she argued, "present rather healthy images of black males. Certainly the follies and foibles of modern relationships and one-night stands as represented in the love poems [within the play] are pretty gender free." Even the most controversial segment of the play, entitled "beau willie," in which a (black) soldier returns home from Vietnam, abuses his wife, and drops his children out of the windows of his high-rise apartment to the sidewalk below, served a purpose larger than male vs. female, according to Shange. "Beau Willie is a strangely empathetic character. I wrote the work to make an important, and yet unspoken, social comment," she claimed. "The poem articulated post-traumatic stress syndrome long before it was a national issue, and it was one of the first works of modern literature to give spousal abuse and its potentially dire consequences a harrowing voice and vision." Writing in 2010, Shange draws attention to more vivid representation of gender roles in American popular culture:

Per square inch, there are more negative images of black men in your average rap song or television cop show than in my choreopoem. It is disheartening to see how entrenched and celebrated the culture of misogyny has become. I dared to challenge and expose it three decades ago. The need to do so may be even greater today. While it was painful to be so maligned, I will pay that price as a poet to speak my truth. Some men . . . will never

20. Brenda Lyons, "Interview with Ntozake Shange," *Massachusetts Review* 28, no. 4 (1987): 688, 690.

21. Neal A. Lester, "At the Heart of Shange's Feminism: An Interview," *Black American Literature Forum* 24, no. 4 (1990): 720, 724.

like my work. Others now come to it with gentler eyes and less sensitive ears. They have grown. We all have. The preeminent poet Haki Madhubuti said it best. When I received the Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Prize for Lifetime Achievement, Haki said to me simply, "We didn't know."²²

If Black Power and, by extension, the Black Arts Movement, were representative of the search to define black masculinity in a post-Civil Rights era, then *for colored girls* seems, on the surface, to have been a contradictory work. How was a play, written and performed by black women, about black women, with very little masculine representation, symbolic of what both movements were hoping to achieve? That question was undoubtedly one Shange herself attempted to answer, and she did so successfully. As is evident from the scholarly articles and primary source material, Ntozake Shange was attempting in her work to remove black womanhood from the male gaze and give black women active agency in a political movement that appeared to have no place for them. As the Lady in Blue cries near the end of the play: "i will raise my voice. . . & i won't be sorry for none of it."²³

The primary research question I hoped to answer in my analysis of *for colored girls* was whether Shange's work was a *part* of the Black Arts Movement or inspired by it. Another question I hoped to answer was whether *for colored girls* is a Black Power text or a feminist text. I believe the answer to both of these questions is, to be succinct, *all of the above*. Shange's play was first performed in the waning days of the Black Arts Movement, and was inspired by the constant promotion of masculine blackness; that is, the incessant endorsement of heteronormativity, the illegitimization of African American homosexuality, and the ignorance of African American feminism. Moreover, her work emerged as the feminist movement—especially among African American women—gained more traction through high-profile figures such as Nikki Giovanni and Angela Davis, among others.

Finally, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* defined the Black Power Movement through the eyes of black women: their concerns, their cares, their obstacles, and their visions for themselves. "I guess I've been in every black nationalist movement in the country," Shange said in a 1976 interview with *The New Yorker*, "and I found that the flaw in the nationalists' dream was that they didn't treat women right."²⁴ Shange's play was a unique exploration of the themes of Black Power and Black Arts, primarily because it defined black manhood through the lens of black womanhood, as the male inmates of Essex County Jail appreciated in their post-performance comments. Most significantly, however, the performances, critical responses, and legacy of the play indicate that *for colored girls* attempted to—and succeeded in—defining what it meant to be African American, male or female, in the 1970s and beyond.

22. Shange, "Beginnings, Middles, and New Beginnings," 12.

23. Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide*, 2nd ed., 69.

24. Philip Hamburger, "The Talk of the Town: Ntozake Shange," *New Yorker*, August 2, 1976: 18.

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