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Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls*: Quest for Black Female Identity

Ntozake Shange is known best for her "choreopoem", *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*. It is a moving work full of choral poetry and portraying feminine black experience. Shange draws upon her personal experiences as a black woman to passionately express her concerns with racial, political, and feminist issues. The seven women representing the colours of the rainbow speak of the double oppression of being black and being a woman. Shange's voice is always lyrical, whether she is recounting an episode of bleak exploitation or evoking a mood of resignation and quiet strength. She has a keen ear for black American idioms recreated in the rhythms and nuances of the language of her characters. Her choreopoem consists of chants, poetry, dance, and rituals, and recalls the salient features of African theatre.

Shange describes the choreopoem as a cycle of poems combined with music and dance. In this choreopoem, she explores the sufferings and joys of seven black American women and rejoices in their ability to share and overcome their
sorrows. Critics have found fault with Shange for her unsympathetic treatment of black men who are depicted as obstacles to the social and spiritual freedom of black women. However, the play can be viewed as an affirmation of the people's will to survive.

The choreopoem can be regarded as a literary coming-of-age of black womanhood in the form of a series of testimonies which in Shange's words, "explore the realities of seven different kinds of women." Indeed, the choreopoem is so rich that it lends itself to multiple interpretations which vary according to one's perspective and experiences.

The choreopoem *For Colored Girls* offers a quest for new being stemming from an experience of nothingness. In Shange's poems the experience of nothingness is born of the double burden of being black and being a woman. But the stories she tells bring a shock of recognition to everyone who has given too much of herself to a man. The heart of the experience of nothingness in the choreopoem is a woman's experience of loss and debasement of self on account of the love of a man. But what makes Shange's poems more than just another version of *Lady Sings the Blues* - a theme of sorrow and survival too familiar to Black women.
(and white women) is Shange's refusal to accept the Black woman's sorrow as a simple and ultimate fact of life. She probes for a new image of the Black woman that will make the old images of the coloured girls obsolete. Shange envisions Black women "born again" on the far side of nothingness with a new image of Black womanhood that will enable them to acknowledge their history while moving beyond it to "the ends of their own rainbows."

Shange is a gifted poet/playwright who orchestrates symbols in her choreopoem *For Colored Girls*. These indices to tonal form advance meaning in Shange's choreopoems. One symbol in *For Colored Girls* that legitimizes women's vision is the array of colours worn by the seven women, including brown, yellow, red, green, purple, blue and orange. These colours of the rainbow suggest the diversity of women and limitless possibilities. Shange uses the rainbow myth presuming that a pot of gold can be found at the end of a rainbow to illustrate that these Coloured women are moving toward something good, liberating, and dynamic. Shange also uses the elusiveness and ephemeral nature of the rainbow to demonstrate the mystery of life, particularly of the lives of her women who have been marred by strangers and acquaintances alike. There is a certain amount of illusory hope expressed by these women who do not always understand why they have
been victimized. With names lower-cased, suggesting self-effacement, invisibility, and a lack of self-confidence, these women battle the storm before they can enjoy the quite of the rainbow.

In the stage production six actresses dressed in the colours of the rainbow - yellow, red, green, purple, blue, orange - and one dressed in the brown of earth and warm-toned skin alternately speak the twenty odd-poems, each a story. While one speaks, the others listen attentively or mime the story creating a sense of sisterhood and sharing. When a story is told by one woman it often evokes sympathetic "yeahs" or the telling of a related story or even dancing from the other women. The sense of dialogue in Shange's choreopoem which raises the consciousness of women is an invitation to the women in the audience to tell their stories. A tapestry of experiences emerges interwoven with a sense of plurality and commonality.

The title of the poem provoked questions of why Shange had to use outdated term "colored" which Black people abandoned as oppressive in the sixties. As an answer to these questions Shange explained in a television interview why she used "colored girls" in the title of her poem. She spoke of the importance of Black self-definition and of taking pride in dark skin and American heritage. Her own name "Ntozake" is
an African name which she chose as a way of affirming her African roots. But she said that it was also important to affirm her American ancestry. Recalling her grandmother's last words to her that she was a precious "little colored girl," Shange realized that "Colored" was not only a term used by whites to define Blacks, but also a term of endearment in the Black community. The juxtaposition of "Colored girl" with "rainbow" enables Black women to see the varied tones of their skin as a reflection of the glorious hues of the rainbow, not as a colour to be borne in shame. And, though coloured girls have considered suicide because they have been abused by white society and Black men, this need no longer be the case. "The rainbow" is now understood as an image of their own beauty, and it "is enuf."

The women in Shange's play have journeyed through one emotional minefield after another, bouncing back from the blows which have been levelled at them by males. These women console each other as they speak of how they fought for integrity and self-respect. Though the evolving black women speak of the brutal treatment accorded to them by their men, Shange emphasizes their struggle to rise above this form of bondage and their success at coping with a world where "Being alive, being a woman, and being colored is a metaphysical dilemma." These women have been knocked down,
but they pick themselves up and search for a way to hold on to their sanity and to improve their lifestyles. In her essay, "For Colored Girls - And White Girls Too," Toni Cade Bambara supports this point:

What is curious about the work is that though men appear exclusively as instruments of pain, there is no venom, no resorting to a Queen of Hearts Solution off with his head! No god-like revenge, no god-like forgiving. Hell, some things are unforgivable. The women of the various pieces suck their teeth, storm, sass and get on with the miracle of living.  

Shange's works dignify women's suffering and inform females that they have a responsibility to love themselves and each other enough to resist oppression. Her female characters battle with the incomprehensible dilemma of living in a world where being female and black makes them twice oppressed.

_For Colored Girls_ is unified by a series of similar experience shared by characters whose names are lower-cased to represent the poor, abused self-effacing women of colour. On one hand, the choreopoem speaks of the physical and emotional abuse enacted against black women. On the other, this work is about women's possibilities, their ability to survive in the face of loneliness, rejection, pain, rape and
Invalidation. The substance of the choreopoem is embedded in its title, says Shange, who feels that a rainbow, which comes after a storm connotes the possibility "to start all over again with the power and the beauty of ourselves." According to Shange, this theatre piece is an "exploration of people's lives and provides hope for women who have known the bitterness of the storm." 

For Colored Girls begins with a poem spoken by the lady in brown about the importance of naming and celebrating experience in song and story:

Sing a black girl's song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
but sing her rhythms
carin/struggle/hard times
sing her song of life
she's been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn't know the sound
of her own voice
her infinite beauty. (4)

"Woman must write her self:
must write about women and bring women
to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies .... Woman must put herself into
Helene Cixous speaks about *écriture féminine*. In a bid to find a language like hers, women have not only adopted post-structuralist theories of language but have used sexuality and subjectivity for describing their feminist interests. In *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory* Chris Weedon makes a case for the appropriation of recent French theories of language and culture. These theories enable women to analyse the injustices of patriarchy and women's resistance to them. Women writers and critics have keenly felt that the female experience and the creation of women characters have been falsified or distorted. In the light of these theories espousing women's cause, a plethora of texts have appeared, produced by women writers written with a strong political consciousness and awareness of recreating "real" images of women. It is in this context Shange's work presenting sexual and social pressures acquires a special accent.

Shange, in order to sing a coloured girl's song, must re-create the language of her experiences, a language which in its concrete particularity has almost never been spoken. The voices of the Black women have been negated by the standard English grammar that has forced Black people to fit their experiences into alien language patterns. Black women's
experiences have also been negated by a literary tradition that celebrates the experiences of white men. Shange ignores standard grammar in her effort to capture the nuances of Black women's speech patterns and experience. The lines spoken by the lady in yellow are characteristic of Shange's style:

- it was graduation nite & i waz the only virgin in the crowd
- bobby mills martin jerome & sammy yates
- eddie jones & randi
- all cousins
- all the prettiest niggers in this factory town
- carried me out wit em
- in a deep black buick
- smellin of thunderbird & ladies in heat
- ...
- all mercer county graduated the same nite cosmetology secretarial pre-college autoshop & business
- all us movin from mama to what ever waz out there. (7)

The idiom of this Black girl's life is reflected in her speech patterns, choice of words, details of description, spelling and punctuation. The lack of punctuation and capitalization may reflect Shange's perception of the particularities of Black women's speech and experience.
Virginia Woolf once remarked that the translation of women's speech into writing would require the introduction of a new sentence. She said that women's experience does not fit neatly into the rhythms of dominant and subordinate clauses that were patterned after the ordered and hierarchical world of upperclass (white) men.

In her own writing Woolf explored a stream of consciousness style, which, she felt, expressed women's experience more fully. Like Shange's poetic lines, Woolf's sentences lack precise beginnings and endings and patterns of subordination. In both Woolf's and Shange's writing, experience is perceived as a flow with pauses, but without the clear ordering required by the standard sentence and paragraph. Shange and Woolf would probably argue that their writing styles reflect more directly lived experience and that the order expressed by the standard sentence is an imposition, an attempt to control reality. Shange's poems also reflect her notion that Black speech is close to music, an understanding expressed in the mixed genre choreopoem in which music, dance, and spoken word are woven together.

Shange's determination to make her poems reflect female experience and bodies is evident in all the poems in *For Colored Girls*, especially in those poems that consider abortion, rape and relationships between Black women and Black
men. For Shange, it is important to affirm her Black woman's body and this is reflected in many of the poems. As Shange says, "with dance I discovered my body more intimately than I had imagined possible. With the acceptance of the ethnicity of my thighs & backside, came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman & as a poet" (Xi). Through the particularities of Black woman's story, Shange touches a core of pain and self-negation shared by most women.

The first poems of For Colored Girls create a mood of youthful optimism, playfulness and joy in being alive. The serious note of the opening poem is interrupted by the singing of the childhood song, "mama's little baby," the reciting of a playful rhyme and a game of tag. This lighter note, which carries over into the next two poems, expresses Shange's perception that the Black girl's childhood does not always prepare her for the struggles and hard times of her adult experience. As Shange says, "For Colored Girls .... is a record of me once I left my mother's house. I was raised as if everything was all right, And in fact, once I got of my house, everything was not all right."

The poem "now I love somebody more than," tells the story of the lady in blue's teen-age fascination with the Caribbean rhythms of Puerto Rican musician, Willie Colon. Beginning with the first "Ola" (11) and moving through vivid
descriptions of her dancing," i waz twirlin hippin givin much quik feet" (12), the poem is an invocation to the spirit of music and dance that has brought so much joy to a coloured girl's life.

In white culture the Black woman's sensuality and sexuality have been viewed negatively. Black women have been viewed as sexually loose, as having animal-like passions, and as willing whores. These images of the white man's imagination have been used to justify sexual abuse and rape of Black women by white men. Despite these stereotypes Shange has chosen to begin her choreopoem with a celebration of Black women's sexuality and love for music and dance. In doing so, she affirms the body and its rhythms of sensuality and sexuality and rejects those white male images of humanity that denigrate the body and sexuality.

The women of this theatre piece experience a communal yet intensely private discovery of their unique worth and strength. The first two poems celebrate Black women's life force. The next poem, "no assistance," tells of their abuse. The lady in red speaks of the many ways she tried desperately to encourage a man to love her. Instead of reciprocating, he used her only to satisfy his sexual desires. A characteristic of this Choreopoem is that the lady in red, through her acting and humour, distances herself from pain
and expresses her anger and anguish at having to take responsibility to end the affair:

this waz an experiment
to see how selfish i cd be
if i wd really carry on to snare a possible lover
if i waz capable of debasin my self for the love of another
if i cd stand not being wanted when i wanted to be wanted & i cannot so
with no further assistance & guidance from you
I am endin this affair
this note is attached to a plant
i've been waterin since the day i met you
you may water it
yr damn self. (14)

The anger expressed in her last words to this man is the anger of a woman who has realized that she doesn't need to waste her time on a man who does not value her. Her story calls up feelings of pain and outrage that such an obviously creative and funny woman has not been able to find a man to appreciate and love her.
The next two poems speak of painful violations of women's bodies in rape and hack abortion. All the women speak the rape poem together affirming that this is not an individual story. Using gang rape as a metaphor for pressing charges describes the raped woman's sense of double violation and humiliation - first by the rapist, then by the criminal justice system. A final humiliation is that friends can be rapists: Women are often "betrayed by men who know us" (19) and "we cd even have em over for dinner // & get raped in our own houses" (21). The picture created by Shange's poem is brutal but true. The stark simple lines of the poem and their harsh rhythm contrast effectively with the mood of joy expressed in the first two poems. They deepen the feelings of pain and outrage that were introduced in "no assistance." Shange creates a mood preparing the audience to experience even deeper nothingness in a Black woman's story.

In "abortion cycle ≠ 1" Shange recreates a woman's terror during an illegal abortion. The woman sees dirt and metal instruments. The images become more brutal, the feeling of disgust grows, "metal horses gnawin. my womb || dead mice fall from my mouth/" (22). These images capture the feeling of violation, the pain of an abortion without anaesthesia. It was as though something huge and powerful was inside her womb, like death coming out of all her orifices. The woman
explains that she sought the abortion because she wasn't married and "i cdnt have people// lookin at me// pregnant" (22). Her shame dissolves into pain as she cries inside, "this hurts// this hurts me" (22). At the end of the poem her feelings of isolation and shame return as she concludes, "& nobody came// cuz nobody knew// once i waz pregnant & shamed of myself." (23)

In the poem about abortion the indictment is not of a male who abandons a pregnant woman. Instead, it is an indictment of a society of men and women that "ostracizes women who celebrate their sexuality freely. Shange has sensitively portrayed the trauma of abortion, a trauma which, to some extent, probably exists in every case no matter how strongly a woman might advocate the right to choose abortion. Still, the black movement's rhetoric linking birth control to genocide, cannot be lightly dismissed. These considerations ought to make clear the delicate balance between blackness and womanhood which Shange manages to strike in Colored Girls. Maintaining this balance is no easy task. The black woman writer of some political consciousness is under tremendous pressure not to sacrifice issues of blackness to those of womanhood and vice versa.
In the poem "Sechita," we see Shange's connection to Africa where the dancer is linked to Nefertiti "hence to Africa and the Olduvai Gorge, the cradle of civilization" (23). Sechita dances in the dust of the tent of a tawdry carnival. Though she moves with an elegance that recalls "quadroon balls" (23) or Egyptian Goddesses "performin the rites" (25), her talent and beauty are not appreciated by redneck audiences. Sechita's story tells of the degradation of a Black woman's sexuality and creativity and of her defiance of those who degrade her: "they were aimin coins tween her || thighs| sechita/ egypt/ goddess/ harmony/ kicked viciously// thru the nite/ catchin stars tween her toes" (25). She refuses to let herself be debased by the dirt and vulgarity of the man who comes to see her, envisioning herself as a Goddess and expressing her contempt with vicious kicks of her legs.

The childhood reverie about Toussaint L' Ouverture shows a black female's positive fantasies about a black male who "didnt low no white man to tell him nothin" (26). The little girl, upon meeting one who alleges that he is Toussaint Jones, gives up fantasy for the reality of the boy in "those skidded out cordoroy pants // a striped teashirt wide holes in both elbows" (29). This poem captures an important aspect of a young girl's imagination. A Black man's story is certainly more inspiring to a little coloured girl than one about big city
white boys. Yet even this story teaches her to put her hopes in men as her saviour. Like Doris Lessing's Martha Quest and many other women, this little girl believes that the man standing before her is like the man of her dreams. Even though this story ends on a positive note, it shows how a little girl's fantasies prepare her for disappointments with men.

The story "One" told by lady in red is that of "the passion flower of South-west los angeles" (31), a lady in heat dressed in "orange butterflies & aqua sequins" and out to entice "every man who wasn't lame white or noddin out" (31). Shange describes this woman's craft and beauty - "her stomach out lined with small iridescent feathers" (32). Despite her bravado, the passion flower really wants to be loved and appreciated. Though the lady in red describes with humour the way the mere sight of her as a "reglar colored girl" banished the lover of the night from her bed, no amount of humour can gloss over the pain this woman felt as she "cried herself to sleep" (35).

The painful irony in this poem is that this woman's power to conjure men vanishes with the water in her bathtub. Waters that purify and cleanse, so that "she became herself" (34), return her to being a sorry coloured girl. Men
flee when they see her as she really is. This experience of the inadequacy of her own self and her own body is shared by all women who feel ugly and undesirable without make up and without getting dressed in the latest fashions. Black women experience this sense of inadequacy even more deeply than white women because the ideal of beauty is always white. So while Shange admires the passion flower's sense of style as expressed in her costume and even in her bath salts and respects her ability to give men a dose of their own medicine, she also recognizes that the passion flower's power is illusory until she can also be loved as she is a "regular colored girl."

In the next poem "i useta live in the world," Shange contrasts the universe of free Africa with its "waters ancient from accra/tunis// cleansin me/feedin me" (36), with Harlem where "my ankles are coated, in grey filth// from the puddle neath the hydrant" (36). Black women in Harlem not only live in poverty and filth but also suffer verbal and physical abuse from men. "NO MAN YA CANT GO WIT ME | I DONT EVEN||
KNOW YOU || NO/I DONT WANNA KISS YOU| YOU AINT BUT 12 YRS OLD/" (37), she screams. The ultimate degradation she suffers is on account of the knowledge that she must become violent if she is to survive." i cant be nice to nobody// nice is such a rip-off... is just a set-up" (38-39).
The next poem, "Pyramid," concerns three friends whose closeness is expressed as "one laugh// one music || one flowered Shawl || knotted on each neck" (39). However, they allow themselves to be split up by a man. It is an old story of women considering men more important than their friendships with each other. In this case, the women betray a close affinity with a man who doesn’t even care for any of them. He conquers one, then goes after the other two who resist his advances at first and then succumb. Finally the first one finds "the rose// she left by his pillow//... on her friends desk" (41). When the two women go to confront him, they find him with yet another woman. Shange concludes the poem with the two women confronting each other:

She held her head on her lap
the lap of her sisters soakin up tears
each understandin how much love
stood between them
how much love between them
love between them
love like sisters. (42)

The poem on "between" in these lines brilliantly captures the paradox of these women's friendship. Though they allow love for a man to come between them, a bond created from shared experience and suffering, reasserts itself. Like Adrienne Rich, Shange celebrates the bond of sisterhood between women as
a more reliable source of support than romantic fantasies about men.

In the next series of poems "no more love poems," Shange explores the experience of nothingness created by women's dependence on men. These form the introspective centre of the choreopoem. The lady in orange sings a "requium for myself/cuz i// have died in a real way/" (43). The death she suffered was caused by self-denial and self-deception. In these lines Shange expresses an understanding of why women take abuse from men without complaining.

The lady in blue wonders whether it is worth it to be open and vulnerable if it only leads to a deeper experience or nothingness. To her the ideal of the rational man celebrated in the philosophies of white males doesn't reflect "spiritual evolution cuz its empty & godliness// is plenty is ripe & fertile" (45). Shange rejects their denigration of the body and emotions. Her model for perfection is not the emotional and material world, but the African gods' and goddesses' expression of the life force.

In the final poem of "no more love poems," the poet confesses her inability to make her experience congruent with her philosophy. She may not be able to find a man to love her, but she can at least refuse to be a victim. The
other women join her in her refusal to take abuse, asserting that their love is too "delicate," "beautiful," "sanctified," "magic," "saturday nite," "complicated," to be thrown back in their faces. Their join affirmation has more power than the individual assertion. In celebrating their sisterhood with each other, each woman affirms her value in community.

At last able to affirm themselves as they are -- coloured and sometimes sorry, open and in need of love -- the women face a final challenge as the lady in red tells the story of Crystal and Beau Willie Brown. Beau Willie Brown's, economic, psychological, and social profile reads: drug addict, paranoid, Vietnam Veteran who has returned home not as a hero, but as a pauper and drunk. He lives in a hotel room, further emphasizing his own displacement upon returning "home" after the war. He is not totally without ambition because he does try to get a job and an education. Indeed Beau Willie is not created without Shange's sympathies:

he came home (from Vietnam) crazy as hell/ he tried to get veterans benefits/ to go to school & they kept right on puttin him in// remedial classes/ he cdnt read wortha damn/ so beau // cused the teachers of holdin him back & got
himself a gypsy cab to drive. But his cab kept breakin' down & the cops was always messin' with him. Plus not gettin' much bread. (55-5)

That "there waz no air" (55) in Beau Willie's life is caused in part by the capitalist system into which he was born. Consequently, he falls short of the white patriarchy's fundamental definition of manhood. In Beau Willie's frustrated efforts to save himself, he lashes out at his only potential sources of salvation — Crystal and their own children. And in destroying them, he is suffocated by circumstances not exclusively of his own making. Although Beau Willie actually drops the children, Crystal is also responsible for what happens to her and her children. After all, it is Crystal who first brings the children into the couple's adult dispute. In a moment of bitterness and powerlessness, reacting to the unsubstantiated rumour "that beau waz spendin alla his money// on the bartendin bitch down at the merry-go-round cafe/,", Crystal gets a court order "saying beau Willie brown has no access// to his children" (56).

Ultimately both Beau Willie and Crystal destroy their children because of their own selfishness and inability to communicate with each other. Sandra Flowers defends
Shange's presentation of black men by offering an insight into the complexity of Beau Willie Brown's character:

... Beau Willie Brown is the quintessential black man of his generation. (i.e. the Vietnam era) By this I do not mean, nor does Shange intend to imply that Beau Willie Brown is all there is to black manhood. Conversely, I am not suggesting that the political realities embodied in Beau Willie justify his treatment of or his attitude toward Crystal. Instead, I believe that Shange's compassion for black men surfaces most noticeably in this poem and that her characterization of Beau Willie recognizes some of the external factors which influence relationships between black men and women.\(^\text{10}\)

At no point does Shange minimize Beau Willie's victimization. At the same time, she does not, as Staples seems to do, condone his aggressive and abusive behaviour. Moreover, Shange suggests that women like Crystal are partly responsible for their oppression at the hands of the patriarchy. For whatever reason, Crystal stays in an abusive and destructive relationship.

Crystal allows Beau to hold her child only because she is so starved for love and kindness. But Beau takes
advantage of her wavering and "jumped up a laughin' & a
gigglin'/a hootin' & a hollerin'/awright bitch...you gonna marry
me" (59). When Crystal refuses again, he kicks the screen
cutta the window/6 held the kids// offa the sill" still
screaming "you gonna marry me" (59-60). When Beau Willie
tells her to scream her acceptance to the neighbours, Crystal
"stood by beau in the window/with naomi reachin'/for me/8
kwame screamin' mommy from the fifth//story/but i cd only
whisper/6 he dropped em" (60). Beau Willie Brown's dropping of
his two children from a fifty-story window as a helpless
Crystal looks on is an instance of male brutality. He is
violent, abusive, deceptive and irresponsible. He seems to
offer nothing but destruction to Crystal's life. Indeed, this
example of male brutality and Shange's general presentation
of males throughout the play make For Colored Girls more than
another black feminist's ruthless attack on all black men. These
images and portrayals have led critics and audiences to
assert, with Robert Staples, that in "watching a performance
(of For Colored Girls) one sees a collective appetite for black
male blood." Jaqueline Trescott insists that Shange's men
"are scheming, lying, childish, and brutal baby-killers...
beasts humiliated for the message of sisterly love." The lady in red finally breaks the silence with her
cry, "i waz missing something" (60). Her cry reminds...
everyone of the loss of her children. The other women deepen her cry. The lady in blue finally names what is missing - "a layin on of hands," to which the other ladies respond: "strong," "cool," "movin," "akin me whole," "sense," "pure," "all the gods comin into me/layin me open to myself" (61). Their words describe the sensations felt in a laying on of hands, an ancient healing ritual that is often practised in evangelical sects in poor white and poor Black communities. The ladies explain that a laying on of hands is not sex with a man, or a mother's comforting touch, but a touching in which powers larger than the self are channeled into the one being healed. The laying on of hands ritual affirms the self's position in a community and in the universe. It suggests to the woman that she is not alone. The laying on of hands in a community of women celebrates the power of sisterhood and sharing as one of the keys to a woman's moving through the experience of nothingness.¹³

Like Chopin's Edna at the Sea, Atwood's protagonist in the woods, and Lessing's Martha Walking by the Thames, Shange's lady feels a connection between her rhythms of being and those of nature. The lady in red concludes, "we are the same as the sky, we are here, breathing, living creatures and we have a right to be everything."¹⁴ The final words of the lady in red, which are picked up and sung gospel style by
the other women, are an incredible affirmation of her own power of being: "I found God in myself/ and I loved her/I loved her fiercely" (63). These words express the affirmation of self of being a woman, of being Black, which is at the heart of *For Colored Girls*. The final lines express Shange's conviction that the Black woman's quest for being is grounded in the powers of being. More than just a statement of self-affirmation, this woman's finding God in herself is an acknowledgement of her self's grounding in larger powers.

Shange's affirmation of the God in herself is a revelation of a new way of viewing the world and of being woman. To say "I found god in myself/ and I loved her/I loved her fiercely" is to say in the clearest possible terms that it is all right to be a woman, that the Black woman does not have to imitate whiteness or depend on men for her power of being. This affirmation is a clear vision of new being on the far side of nothingness.

Generally we see the black woman only peripherally as the protagonist's lover, wife, mother, or in some other supporting role. Certainly black women can identify with the predicament of black men. Black women can identify, for example, with the problems articulated in Ellison's *Invisible Man* because they share the same predicaments. But for black
women the predicament of the black male protagonist is compounded by concerns which effect them on yet another level. This then, is what makes Colored Girls an important work which ranks with Ellison's Invisible Man, Wright's Native Son and a handful of other black classics. It is an artistically successful female perspective on a long-standing issue among black people.15

Shange in the choreopoem does not glamorize black females at the expense of stereotyping black men. She recognizes as fact that men abuse women and that "in a crunch, (men) can always rely on their brute force" (Personal interview).16 Clarifying her objective, Shange explains that her "target" in the choreopoem is not Black men per se, but the patriarchy in general which (she) view(s) as universal in its oppression of women."17

While her choreopoems celebrate black female identity, Shange at no point encourages women to eschew all social or intimate contact with men as the solution to male exploitation. She works toward a level of communication in male-female relationship that is built upon mutual respect, trust and individual self-worth.
REFERENCES

1. Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (New York: Macmillan 1977) xii. All further references are to this edition.


8. *For Colored Girls* (Original Broadway Cast recording), a jacket notes, 57.


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