Three Pieces: Quest for the African Continuum

For Colored Girls was followed by a trilogy entitled Three Pieces all of which were produced but were not successful commercially. The three plays, Spell #7 (1979), A Photograph: Lovers in Motion (1977, 79) and Boogie Woogie Landscapes (1979) are a response to Shange's creative encounter with the American theatre, its traditions, and its dramatic and theatrical techniques. Shange's commitment to her art is apparent when she says, "These new pieces may be non-commercial, but that's what I was and still am, as far as I'm concerned -- a noncommercial artist ... I can not allow myself to get trapped into a Broadway 'has been'." ¹

First of all, Shange considers herself a poet in the American theatre for whom the predominant theatrical styles have been "overwhelmingly shallow/stilted & imitative." Her interest is in "the poetry of a moment" and "the emotional & aesthetic impact of a character or a line."² She considers that the so-called perfect play is Eurocentric. It adopts a European framework for a European psychology. In her search for the Afro-American theatre, Shange moves in the direction
of combining the blacks' pain with their art and invoking the musicals which are an integral component of black life to the aid of the theatre. That is, she attempts to move the theatre of her time into the realm of the drama of the lives of the blacks. It is in this respect that she recreates in the theatre an Afro-American language which expresses the self-conscious feelings of the community creating an Afro-American image in its essential truth. Barbara Smith in "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" says that Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker use a "specifically black female language to express their own and their characters' thoughts," but she fails to describe or provide examples of this unique language. We have recently come to acknowledge that "many of our habits of language usage are sex-derived, sex-associated, and/or sex-distinctive," and that "the ways in which men and women internalize and manipulate language" are undeniably sex-related.

In the creation of a distinct Afro-American theatre, Shange points out that she has made use of what Frantz Fanon called "Combat breath." Although Fanon refers here to Francophone colonies, combat breathing is a living response to a cultural crisis. The three pieces in the collection Three Pieces reveal the pain and sensation experienced by Shange's characters who express their creative response to the
constrictions of their humanity in the context of combat breathing. In analyzing Francophone African colonies, the social psychiatrist has argued thus:

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

Implicit in Shange's reference to Fanon is the understanding that struggle for liberation involves the entire community. Liberation for women necessitates a re-definition of the position of men.

For Shange, Fanon's additional characterization of combat breath involves the drive to reconcile the irreconcilable. This shows that Shange, like Fanon, often fuses concrete reality with metaphoric projections which reveal her awareness of the social determinants and her commitment to change. Sandra Richards examines Shange's world from an African world view and points out that one of the most outstanding features of her dramaturgy is "a dialectic between
the felt constrictions of the social order and the perceived limitlessness of the natural order. On the one hand, there is an awareness of social oppression and commitment to struggle; on the other there is a desire to transcend or bypass, through music and dance, the limitations of social and human existence." Shange's plays also reveal that the individual protagonists not only show combat breath but also seek to transcend corporal existence in order to merge with natural cosmic forces. According to Sandra Richards, the new world African religions such as Voudoun, Santeria, and Candomble provide a useful paradigm for the spiritual axis found in Shange's plays. Common to all these religions is the belief that the world is a dynamic interplay of forces like language, music and dance which are potent modes of the manipulation of more profound insights. American theatre has not only been influenced by European models but by non-European ones as well. It has been affected in varying degrees by Japanese Noh and Kubuki plays, Chinese Ching Hsi drama, Indian Sanskrit drama and traditional African drama, all of which contain elements of mime, dancing, stylized gestures, song, and instrumental music. An examination of the plays of Pulitzer Prize winning Wole Soyinka reveals that plays by contemporary African-American women strikingly resemble Africa's methexic drama, containing
songs, drums, dance, rituals, masks, chants, music and the call and response. The epistemology of experience within an African world view is inseparably cognitive and intuitive. Shange’s protagonists are African people raised within a Western perspective. Their Western heritage teaches them to reckon experience as fragmented rather than as holistic. Hence there is the dialectic of combat breath versus the will to divinity in the plays of Shango.

For Benston, European drama, which is basically mimetic— an imitation or representation of an action— amounts to "the spectacle observed," whereas African—American drama grows out of rituals that dissolve "traditional divisions between actor and spectator, between self and other." Alvin Goldfarb and Edwin Wilson note that "while Western theatre and drama have emphasized separation of audience and actor, individual creativity, and a set text from which little variation is permitted, African theatre has emphasized audience participation, group activity, and improvisation. The result is that while the purpose of the European theatre is to entertain and to teach, that of the African is to embody and affect, and to be."  

Spell **7**, the first piece in the volume *Three Pieces* was originally published in 1979 by Joseph Papp's
New York Shakespeare Festival in New York City. Set in a bar, it centres round 9 characters, Lou, Alec, Dehlia, Eli, Bettina, Lily, Natalie, Ross and Maxine. The characters live in a country which tries to deny the blacks the right to exist. Hence they consider it a deceitful country. They discuss how the blacks are oppressed by racism in America. They also examine the plight of the black artist. They express their inability to find satisfactory jobs because the whites demand that blacks live according to their stereotyped view which presents them as inferior to them.

Spell ‡ 7, is about blacks learning to love themselves and each other. The magician casts a spell on a group telling them they are going to love being Coloured. Of this powerful piece, Don Nelson of the New York Daily News wrote thus: "Ntozake Shange's Spell ‡ 7 is... is a celebration of blackness, the joy and pride along with the horror of it. It is a shout, a cry, a bitter laugh, a sneer. It is an extremely fine theater piece."¹⁰

Shange imaginatively develops the mask as a symbol in this theatre piece. A huge black face mask hanging from the ceiling is lowered and raised at several intervals in Spell ‡ 7. This larger than life mask represents the misrepresentations of black life both on and off the American stage.
Shange's characters in *Spell ++ 7*, like the persona in Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask," reveal that they have had to lie and hide the truths about their lives in order to survive in America. With the mask looming, the play opens with a magician who promises to cast a spell on black America. As if to counter all that the mask has done to shape blacks' attitudes about themselves and each other, the magician announces that he is going to make them love being coloured.

When the magician casts his spell, the characters tear off their blackface masks, representing their freedom to reveal secrets, fantasies, nightmares, and hope. They become uninhibited and begin to tell truths about the journey of blacks in America. The magician then commands the hideous, gigantic mask to disappear. Though the mask rises, it is never hidden from the view of the audience. Shange does not want the audience to forget that the mask is symbolic of oppression. She makes this clear by linking the raising of the mask to the preceding lynch mob scene. The menacing shouts, cries, and laughter of the mob cement the cast to the floor while the unmasking frees them.

Dancing is also symbolic in Shange's *Spell ++ 7*. Shange uses dancing and music to suggest linkages. She believes that black playwrights should not be allowed to work.
without dancers and musicians because "black people have some music and movement in their lives" (X). Shange links her characters by having them engage in a series of steps or dance routines that identify every period of African-American entertainment, including acrobats, comedians, tap-dancers, calindy dancers, Cotton Club Choruses, and Apollo Theater do-wop groups. The characters' friendships are tested and strengthened in the play as they re-enact, through dancing, the various stories of their lives and the lives of a host of black heroes, including Muhammad Ali, Ishmael Reed, Marcus Garvey, the Commodores, Bob Marley, Stevie Wonder, and the Miracles. Through dancing, the characters develop a sense of familiarity and family, a shared cultural heritage. Dancing becomes a cultural communion, with the participants deriving sense of impenetrable solidarity. In an interview Shange was asked to tell about the impact of dance on her creative life and writing process. She explained as follows:

"Writing is for most people a cerebral activity. For me it is a very rhythmic and visceral experience. Dance clears my mind of verbal images and allows me to understand the planet the way I imagine atomic particles experience space. I am not bogged down with the implications of language. I am only involved in the implications of movement which later on,
when I do start to write, become manifest
in the rhythms of my poetry."

Like Childress and Hansberry, Shange levels an
indictment against the American stage which mirrors ideas
tainted by racism. Under the watchful eye of the hovering
mask, the characters voice their anger at the stereotypical
roles that are offered to them. They express contempt at being
forced to squabble over such degrading roles as mammy, prostitu­
tute, and buffoon. Bettina, a struggling actress, says "if that
director asks me to play it any blacker/i'm gonna have to do
it in a mammy dress" (14). Trying to comfort Lily, a fellow
actress who complains that the only roles she can find are ones
that call for blacks to sing and dance or shuffle, grin, hum,
and pray Bettina says, "at least yr not playin a whore/if some
other woman comes in here & tells me she's playing a whore/i
think i might kill her" (23). The scarcity of realistic
dramatic roles for blacks has been a serious concern for Shange
and for countless other artists particularly because the stereo­
typing continues both on and off the American stage.

Shange claims that black women are unloved, unwanted
and unattended because of these myths. Lou, one of the black
male characters, says, "nobody loves the black woman like
they love farrah fawcett - majors, the whole world dont turn
out for a dead black woman like they did for Marilyn Monroe" (36). In another scene, a black man recently back from Europe sets in awe of a black woman who reads Nietzsche, speaks several foreign languages, and talks about global issues. The man tells her several times that she is not like any black woman he has ever met. Shange argues that this is one of the lies that racist America has fed to black men. Her message is that there are millions of black women who are intellectuals and that black women for too long have been assigned restricting labels.

If there is any question that Shange views sexism as an outgrowth of racism, one needs only examine the scene that pokes fun at white women who accept and promote these myths about blacks. Shange ridicules white women by depicting them as gullible, frivolous, artificial, and emotionally weak. Natalie, a not too successful performer, announces that she is going to be a white girl for a day. She tells the cast that the first thing a white girl does when she wakes up in the morning is to give thanks that she is not black. Shange depicts white women as paranoid of blacks, thinking that black men plot to beat, rape, murder or marry them. Also coming under attack are whites who write about blacks. The persona says, "after all, Gertrude Stein wanted to know about the black women/Alice Adams wrote thinking about Billie/ Joyce Carol Oates
Shange is clearly resentful in her treatment of the white female liberal. Natalie points out that there are some white women who castigate themselves because they were not born black. Natalie says, "yes i'm sorry they were born niggahs. But then if i cant punish myself to death for being white/i certainly cant in good conscience keep waiting for the cleaning lady" (49). Shange's most severe indictment against white female liberals is her denouncement of them as women who have to take twenty Valium a day to contend with their ignorance of the world, ERA and men.

One of the characters in the play is a magician named Lou. Both Spell and Boogie Woogie Landscapes introduce elements of magic in typical Afro-American fashion. Lou casts a spell on the group when he says, "i'm fixin you up good/fixin you up good and colored/ & you gonna be colored all yr life/... Colored & love it/love it/ bein colored" (8). The implication here is that whites are born free but blacks have to struggle for the right to be alive. There is the portrayal of the persistence, determination of the blacks in Spell. Blacks here demonstrate a refusal to be
annihilated. The play is a celebration of blackness -- the joy and pride as also the horror of it. Spell # 7 perhaps is not a play in the traditional sense of the term. But in touching upon the many facets of black life, Shange vividly recreates a sense of powerful drama inherent in her poetic vocabulary. Her nine characters offer a conglomeration of experiences of other blacks by assuming roles of characters who do not actually appear on the stage. One of the features of Shange's characterization is that her characters appear in flashes. They give the audience a glimpse of their pain, frustration, disillusionment, loneliness and rage. Motivation of character and adequate dramatic development are absent in these plays. The idea that blacks must strive to accept and to love themselves is no doubt positive. Yet the Sue-Jean story told by Alec and Natalie deals with a character who neither warns nor can give love. Sue-Jean's desire for a baby, her pretension that she enjoyed his love-making, her masturbation and laughter at him when he left, her slitting the child's wrist when he began to grow away from her suggest implications which are not developed in the play. The story perhaps suggests that a man is needed for no more than propagation.

In the play, the minstrel performers move through the pain of dance steps and memories associated with Black entertainment. In doing so, they banish the hideous mask along
with their stage personae, thereby creating a safe space in which to expose secret hopes, fears, or dreams. But two confessions come at the end of each act. The first involves a young woman who gives birth to a boy named Myself. Sue-Jean is ordinary, a "colored girl with no claims to anything/ or any one" (28). As a Black person she is defined by her poverty and low status and as a woman by her availability as a sexual object. In choosing pregnancy, Sue-Jean refuses to see herself as inert or inconsequential. She creates instead an active, engaged self. She pursues the traditional female modes of self-expression in planting a garden, canning, baking and knitting: "Sue-Jean waz a gay & gracious woman/ ... she waz someone she had never known/ she waz herself with child/ & she waz a wonderful bulbous thing" (30). And she strives to ensure that her baby will be safe from "all that his mama/ waz prey to" (29).

But when Myself begins to crawl and explore the world, when the male Myself, an embodiment of Sue-Jean's own self, grows into new realms, Sue-Jean kills the child and drinks his blood. She then returns to a state of pregnancy. But then it is an imagined pregnancy in which the anticipation of an impending birth is gradually superceded by the joyous feeling of being pregnant "& she forgot abt the child bein born/ & waz heavy & full all her life/with "myself" (32). Thus,
for Sue-Jean, psychic paralysis or the liminality of being forever on the verge of self-expression is preferable.

In Sue-Jean, Ntozake Shange creates a figure whom the critic, Barbara Christian, identifies as the contrary Black woman. Because she is seen as abnormal, as the "other" essentially apart from whites and Black men, the Black woman has limited alternatives. In fashioning the character of Sue-Jean, Shange embraces the concept of the nurturing female with vehemence. In killing her child Myself, Sue-Jean makes actual the suicide which many women symbolically experience in sublimating their own identities to those of their children. In committing a murder generally thought to be contrary to all laws of "nature", she courageously asserts her independence. But his independece leads nowhere. She remains in a limbo in which the old formulations have been rejected and no new visions seem possible.

Shange, like early black women playwrights Angelina Grimke and Myrtle Smith Livingston, apparently feels that black and brown babies must be protected from those forces that would torture them. Sue-Jean's protectiveness is apparent when she says, "I gotta prayer cloth for the boy/myself waz gonna be safe from all that his mama/waz prey to" (29). Mentally deranged, Sue-Jean prefers to murder her child rather than see him victimized in an oppressive American Society.
Maxine is another Shange character whose actions in the final segment of Spell #7 seem like a contrary, ludicrous response to the socio-metaphysical ills she would cure. As a young girl she lived in a house where "... trees that grew into my room had to be cut back once a year/ this waiz when the birds sometimes flew thru the halls of the house as if the ceilings were sky & i/simply another winged creature" (49-50). Nor did they notice that this intelligent little Black girl celebrated phenomena like polio epidemics as evidence of divine protection because "if god had made colored people susceptible to polio/then we wd be on the pictures & the television with the white children, i knew only white folks cd get that particular disease/" (50).

When she becomes a young woman, however, her grandmother closes up the windows. Together with her mother, they send her out into the world to be among "trouble" but not get into "trouble". Her loss of innocence is not confined to the personal realm of the mysterious "trouble" young men present. Maxine learns that, contrary to her cherished childhood beliefs, Black people are not immune to the diseases and perversions manifested by whites. Her faith shattered, she buys gold, knowing that more than likely it comes from apartheid South Africa.
to remind the black people that it cost a lot for us to be here/our value/can be known instinctively/... i buy gold/ & weep. i weep as i fix the chains round my neck/my wrists/my ankles. i weep cuz all my childhood ceremonies for the ghost-slaves have been in vain. ... no one understands that surviving the impossible is sposed to accentuate the positive aspects of a people, (51)

What gives arresting uniqueness to the familiar themes of the loss of innocence and the repression of natural instincts, inflicted upon young females, is the element of contrariness. Maxine's purchasing of gold is the adult counterpart to the childhood ritual of paying homage to unknown ancestors. The visible evidence of African subjugation, these pieces of jewellery are chains binding Maxine directly to the enslavers. Thus, like Sue-Jean, Maxine chooses a liminal state in which her childhood faith has been almost completely destroyed and no adult strategies have been devised to resolve the crisis effectively.

Despite the public, political implications of contrariness, one may wonder how these pictures of wounded, stagnating women are an indication of Shange's combat breath. For an answer, one must examine the thrust which Shange's
playwriting assumes. Most often she does not write plays in which a crisis is resolved within the structure of the play. Nowhere is this thrust beyond the theatre clearer than in Spell

7. This play attempts to create a liberated stage space for Black self-expression. Because Sue-Jean's and Maxine's confessions threaten to reveal a pain almost beyond cure, the magician/master of ceremonies must halt the action in order to reassure his audience that it takes up the refrain "bein colored & love it." With the magician's defiant reaffirmation of the right of Blacks to exist as they choose to define themselves, the minstrel mask returns, and the audience leaves.

Shange draws upon two distinct traditions in contemporary Western theatre. In her commitment to combat breath, she achieves some of the effects described in Bertolt Brecht's dramatic theories. Chief among the German dramatist's tenets is the view that the theatre must be an analytical forum which exposes bourgeois illusions and stimulates audiences to think objectively about the causes of social and personal ills. By constructing most of her plays as a series of poetic monologues, occasionally interrupted by conventional dialogue, Shange takes advantage of the poetry to encourage her audiences to listen with close, critical attention. However, the episodic structure diminishes the audiences' empathetic tendencies by denying them the opportunity to gain a more rounded sense of
character. But Spell $++$ 7 forces both performers and audiences to acknowledge the terrible distortions of their lives.

Shange seems indebted to the French theorist Antonin Artaud, and the Black nationalist, Amiri Baraka, whose 1964 essay, "The Revolutionary Theatre," is derivative of Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double*. In this tradition, the theatre is a place for emotionally charged, eruptive forces which assault social complacency. It exposes victims who, nevertheless, contain within themselves seeds of their own regression. But while Shange's mode of playwriting shares similarities with Artaud's and Baraka's theoretical writings, Sandra Richards would contend that her style is actually rooted in an even older philosophical tradition, that of the African world view.

Because this perspective posits the universe as animated by the interplay of energy-fields or forces, power resides not only in men and machines, but also in props, costumes, lighting and sets. All have the capacity to assert a presence akin to what we associate with actors/characters. Music and dance are particularly strong in their power to convey layers of sensate information lying beyond or outside linguistic dimensions. They function as mojos. As spirit-forces, they have the power to amplify, contradict, or reaffirm the spoken word. As structures, they act as channels...
for enlightenment. In Shange's drawing upon this Black aesthetic lies the will to divinity, an impulse which her characters experience as an opposition to combat breath, as Sandra Richards says in her article "Conflicting Impulses in the plays of Ntozake Shange."13

Two examples of the will to divinity occur near the ends of her plays. Both follow moments shocking in their level of self-inflicted violence. Both raise issues which extend beyond the plays. The transition from "a nite with beau willie brown" to "a laying on of hands" in For Colored Girls and the shift from Maxine's adult method of atonement to the cast's refrain "bein colored & love it" in Spell ++ 7 are the examples. In the first play, Crystal's story about the death of her children caps a long list of grievances against men. The other women have nothing to match Beau Willie's self-hatred and psychosis. For many women a performance becomes a quasi-religious event in which the hurt of personal and group relations is subsumed by the recognition that their lives are being given public validation for the first time. They experience a communal yet intensely private discovery of their own worth.

Spell ++ 7 is not without elements of hope. Shange challenges blacks to rise above injustices and particularly to avoid hurting each other. Natalie says, "surviving the
impossible is supposed to accentuate the positive aspects of a people" (51). The play ends as it began, with the magician casting a spell to make blacks love themselves. In order not to imply that the struggle is over, Shange has the huge minstrel mask lowered while the cast sings "colored & love it" (52).

The second in the trilogy, Three Pieces, is _A Photograph: Lovers in Motion_. _A Photograph: Still Life With Shadows/ A Photograph: A Study of Cruelty_ was produced at the Public Theatre in December 1977 and revised as _A Photograph: Lovers in Motion_ for Houston's Equinox Theatre in November 1979. In this theatre piece, Shange explores the notion that a person's identity is not defined by things but by a belief in self.

_A Photograph_ has a fascinating theatrical quality about it. Its five "intertwined characters push and shove into each other's lives, making their overtures and rejections and pleas for love with seductive gestures and violent outbursts." Ann Holmes of the Houston Chronicle makes a special mention of the logical progression of action and dialogue in the play and admits that the play reveals detectable growth in at least one character, that is, Sean David who is a struggling novice photographer involved with a complex triad of women. Nevada,
an attorney, wishes to take Sean out of the ghetto and provide him with material comfort. Claire, a model, is a cocaine addict and a nymphomaniac who wants to possess Sean. Michael, whom Sean chooses in the end, is a dancer who wants to help Sean fulfill his dreams. Earl, another character who is also an attorney, is a homosexual who has designs on Sean.

It is not altogether accurate to treat black plays as an imitation of either European or African models. An examination of Childress' *Wedding Band* and *Wine in the Wilderness*, Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Shange's *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion* reveals a unique brand of theatre in which many heritages come together. The dramatic action in these plays is inextricably linked to and is defined by the experiences of African-Americans which are rooted in African rituals. Female characters in these plays journey through several stages of psychological growth. Parallels can be drawn between these stages of growth and the progression through the phases of exposition, exemplification, and resolution. The progression is undeniably linked to African-American struggle for survival and wholeness. The female characters undergo a personal and sometimes political odyssey or search for wholeness as they progress through six stages: Koinonia, logus, metanoia, kerygma, didache and eucharistia.15
These stages of growth, which have their equivalence in Freytag's Pyramid, are terms based on Koine Greek, the marketplace or common n's Greek spoken during the Hellenistic through Roman periods. These words lend themselves to broad interpretations and are placed in the context of African-American initiation and survival rituals. Koinonia means fellowship, a fellowship that helps to define and positively affirm a person's sense of self. The next stage, logus serves to bring on confusion and doubt. This is when a black person realizes that his poverty or illiteracy or exclusion from or failure in a given field is a direct result of racism. The metanoia, the third stage of growth, involves a turning away or turning around, a quest to understand and be saved from confusion and disappointment. It marks a struggle to cope with the oppression accompanied by a series of trials and errors. The Kerygma follows the metanoia. This stage of growth centres round the heroine's compulsion to speak. Kerygma suggests explosion, sometimes verbal but sometimes physical. The message, or didache, serves as a catalyst for those who sit in judgement and catapult the heroine into the final stage of growth. The eucharistia, the final stage, is a combining of inner wholeness with outward community. This wholeness or completeness leads the heroine to cement a family that has been torn apart, whether it is a consanguineous or spiritual one. Often the heroine rejoins
her immediate family, or lover, or significant other, or community to celebrate her renewed faith in the value of solidarity.

Michael does embark on a journey that results in her wholeness. She is a dancer who is in love with the struggling photographer, Sean. She is culturally and spiritually grounded. Michael's first stage of growth, Koinonia or beginnings, is evidenced as she shares with Sean the strength of her ancestors. Michael tells Sean that her people -- grandparents and uncles -- took care of themselves and fought for every breath every day of their lives. Sean attempts to deflate Michael's sense of self by telling her that black people are not as courageous as she imagines because he only knows of "welfare/the white folks/heroin & whores" (80). At this time Michael describes a vulnerable but resilient grandmother who carried a shotgun to protect her offspring from racists and who sat on the porch telling stories about Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Dubois, Jack Johnson, and "the colored horse soldiers" (80).

Michael not only has the strength of her grandparents to rely upon but the stories of black heroes who offer hope to young blacks as they journey through life in America. She reminds Sean that her history is one filled with "alla the blood
& the fields & the satchels dragging in the dust" (81). Shange connects Michael to her immediate and distant forbears who represent tradition, shared experiences, and the community spirit of survival. Michael shares with Sean an incident that traumatized her and shaped the lives of her entire family. She painfully recalls for Sean the details of her grandfather's savage lynching in the Carolinas. She tells him that it was at that point in her grandmother's life that she started carrying a shotgun to ensure that no more of her children would be brutally murdered by a white mob that had no respect for black life. Michael connects her own nigger moment to what she perceives as Sean's. She berates Sean for allowing Nevada to dehumanize him. Sean allows the jealous Nevada to destroy several of his photographs that serve to boost his career. Michael tells Sean that she is disappointed that he thinks that "being a nigger is being nothing" (80). She is repulsed by the fact that he allows Nevada to buy him with her money and tells him that she did not come from people who tolerated being treated like niggers.

The action of the play is advanced as Michael moves into the third stage of growth, the metanoia. At this juncture, Michael informs Sean that she wants to end the relationship involving his sexual association not only with her but with Nevada and Claire. She comes to the realization that she must
This awakening is prompted by a visit from Nevada who offers to help Sean get a show at a museum. Though Sean turns down Nevada's invitation to help him, he does accept a very expensive lens for his camera from her. Michael decides that she no longer can tolerate Sean's manipulation of women and his self-debasement. Recognizing that he is a parasite and a coward, she tells him "I'm leaving ... it'll keep me loving myself" (83-84).

Michael journeys into the fourth stage of growth when she and Sean argue about his lack of self-confidence. She tries to tell him that he is capable of great things as an artist. But that it is his fear of failing that prevents him from putting his photographs on exhibit. Sean's defence mechanism is to shout obscenities at Michael. He accuses her of not knowing anything about him, except that he is perpetually making love to her "never get enuf ass" (84). Michael is hurt by Sean's verbal blows to her self-esteem. His sense of inadequacy is infectious and Michael begins to question her own worth. However, when Sean asserts that Michael is a "stupid bitch" who can be appeased like all females, by sexual pleasure, Michael goes into a fit of rage. She regains her own sense of self-worth as she slays the dragons that plague Sean: insecurity and indecisiveness. She retaliates by saying, "I
Michael shows her love for Sean by refusing to give up on him, in spite of the fact that he abuses her emotionally. She does not stop chipping away at Sean's layers of insecurities until she teaches him he must learn to love his art, regardless of whether the Washington critics or anybody else tells him that his photographs are without quality. Though Sean grabs her and wrestles with her to silence her, she continues to spread the news to him telling him "when you work on yr pictures like you worked on me/i'll believe you/right now I think yr fulla shit & i'm ashamed cuz I believed you at least loved photography" (87). Michael prepares to leave but Sean regresses to his boyhood, during which his father loved a pet monkey more than he did Sean. Shange portrays two people who are missing something that only the other can supply: a love that satiates. Michael's growth is inextricably linked to Sean's.

Michael's reaching out to Sean not only heals the wounds left by his father's abuse but cements her relationship with Sean. Michael stands by Sean. She reaches out to
him and convinces him of his self-worth. He chooses her, discarding Nevada and Claire, because she believes in him and forces him to risk sharing his work with the public. This re-joining of two lovers points to Michael's eucharistia. It is characterized by her celebration dance. As the play closes, Sean tells Michael, for the first time, that he loves her. Her response is to dance which suggests the joy and peace she has found in her relationship with a black man with whom now reciprocity, understanding, and tenderness are possible.

Ntozake Shange's works often focus on the lives of musicians, dancers, visual and performing artists and so on. Her use of poetry, dance, music, and choreographed lighting is her way of bringing to the American theatre the heart and soul of African-American traditions. Blacks have traditionally turned to singing and dancing because those areas were open to blacks in white America. Shange's dramatic structure is innovative, and in A Photograph: Lovers in Motion the poet/playwright merges traditional dramatic structure with identifiable African-American self-expression.

Sean David is one of Shange's most confused characters. We witness his complex social, physical, and psychological responses particularly through his treatment of
three female lovers. At a glance, Sean might seem the stereotypical male whose self-image is determined by his sexual prowess. He boasts of his ability to juggle several female lovers while retaining complete control over each. Yet Shange undercuts his empty confidence by showing that Sean cannot keep his women apart any more than he can separate the suffering depicted in his Vietnam photographs.

Ntozake Shange's poemplay *For Colored Girls* and *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion* are replete with chauvinists. Like Beau Willie Brown, Sean is also a male supremacist. Shange's middle-class chauvinists are no less brutal than the grass-roots black men who violate their women. Sean, in this play, explains to Michael, his favourite lover, "there are a number of women in my life/who i plan to keep in my life/ & i'll never let any of them come between us/between what we have in our world" (61). During an argument, however, over Sean's lack of confidence in himself and his work, Michael tries to tell him that she knows he is capable of great things. Viewing Michael's encouragement as an attempt at emasculation, Sean tells her that she does not know anything about him except that he takes care of her sexual needs. Becoming abusive when she dares to tell him not to confuse her sex with genuine love, Sean raves, "yr really outta yr mind/stupid
Sean is equally disrespectful and vulgar to Claire and Nevada. To him, Claire is solely a mindless sex object. When Claire jokingly intimates that she may share with some other man some of rhinestones and palm leaves and magnolia, Sean's ego is bruised. He retaliates by telling her that if he ever finds out that she has gone to bed with another man, he will take her to the 500 club and "give everybody some of that magnolia" (65). That Sean could threaten to participate in the rape of his paramour illustrates his regard for womanhood.

Nevada, a lawyer, also falls victim to Sean's verbal abuse. Since he is only interested in her money and connections, he has little patience with her when she exhibits jealous behaviour. At one point when she tells him that she loves him, he responds apathetically and non-committally and orders her to get out of his sight. Sean's chauvinism toward women is also expressed by his friend, Earl, who tells Nevada that she deserves someone better than Sean who only knows women and cruelty. The key thread that joins these three women is that Sean seems to feel that each one in her own way is trying to deprive him of his manhood.
As the "stud" whose overwhelming masculinity precludes a monogamous relationship with any female, Sean is emotionally callous in his treatment of his lovers and a bisexual male friend. In an effort to validate his manhood he taunts Michael:

"don't be getting all holy & above possession/a'int a bitch in the world cant get jealous & loud/ they been running me crazy." (69)

Such a comment reveals Sean's contempt for women. Yet in his failed efforts to arouse Michael, he becomes indignant.

Sean seems to take great pleasure in his abuse of the women who do almost anything for him — from posing nude under a shower of Jack Daniels, to parading naked with feathers vaginally inserted, to providing money for his rent and expensive camera equipment. This abuse also manifests itself in a violent temper and brute force. Using Michael as her mouthpiece, Shange works toward redefining manhood in a way that makes both females and males more whole individuals:

Michael: I thot you were a man
Sean: I fuck you fool/you still don't know i'ma man?
Michael: I mean somebody who loves in the world/ loves himself & his work & some people. (87)
To change his attitude toward women, Sean examines his sexual identity. In the painful process of self-discovery, Sean elicits our sympathies.

First, we witness Sean's examination of his literary idol, Alexandre Dumas, who defined success as materialism and manhood as sexual promiscuity. Until Sean can become commercially successful, he considers himself a nobody. His harem of female lovers temporarily satiates this obsession with becoming the world's greatest photographer rather than being a photographer satisfied with his own work. Needing to prove himself to white society and to his own father, Sean like Beau Willie is a man trapped. In the final soliloquy of Act I, he abandons his preconceived notion of manhood as granting immunity to emotional pain:

When you get to be a man/you can go to
the whorehouse
with me/that's what he usedta say
tho he brought the whores home/â€ªd fucked
em â€ª beat em â€ª fought em â€ª laughed all
nite long ...
When you can swim like me/he said/
you'll be a man
â€ª stuck me in the water with my diapers on.
at dinner time daddy waz asleep/head
on the table
â€ª bottle nearby ...

............. ............ ............ ............
my daddy didn't like me/daddy didn't like me
he usedta say/mama neither but it don't
matter cuz i'm not theirs no how/i'm a man
i am a man
& he wd cry & drink his vodka/with the
lady whose name
i cdnt know/cuz i waz running the hallways
looking for a daddy. (88-89)

Sean's hostility toward his lovers is his way of
lashing out at the man who was never a father to him. But
the father's problems are as deeply rooted as Sean's. He
too defined manhood as violence and indiscriminate sexual
activity. Sean's boyhood memories reveal a father who had
little respect for women, a father who "brought... whores
home/ & fucked em/ & beat em & fought em & laughed all nite
long" (88).

Sean's behaviour with Michael, Nevada, and Claire
parallels his father's degradation of women. The same paternal
neglect has crossed at least two generations, distorting the
men's perceptions of manhood. The independence thrust upon
Dumas's son and on Sean does not diminish the son's needing
paternal approval. Thus, each son must prove his legitimacy
to another male. In a white patriarchy, the black male, in
his failure to measure up to the standards of manhood set by,
white men, defines his manhood in terms of his ability to
dominate black women. But even physical and psychological power over women does not satisfy these men's emotional and spiritual voids. In the stories of these men and their unresolved relationships with their fathers, Shange redefines manhood as gentleness, emotional vulnerability, and sensitivity. These are the very qualities stereotypically and negatively attributed to women.

Sean's hostility subsides when he admits his need for real love, not just sex—which is precisely what Shange's colored girls discover and long for. Like Beau Willie, Sean David is not an abusive black man without redeeming qualities. Edith Oliver, in a review of A Photograph, recognizes his dilemma:

Sean, whose camera represents his manhood and his means of attaining fame—a Nobel Prize for photography is what he has in mind—is haunted by a dreadful childhood by Alexandre Dumas, (the father and son) (who were themselves part black), and their literary and sexual achievements in nineteenth century Paris, and by some dead soldiers he photographed on a hillside in Vietnam. For all his savagery to his women he cannot be dismissed as just a male chauvinist; ... he appears to be as much
What moves Sean away from the stereotypical black man is his ability to admit to himself that he is in pain and has been misguided in his move toward knowing who and what he is. Although he eventually admits that he needs to love and be loved, this commitment is rather ambiguous, given the fact that there appears to be no real change in his attitude toward the women characters even after this soul-searching.

His final relationship with Michael even takes on the stereotyped role of man as woman's protector. Perhaps Shange suggests in this ambiguity the difficulty in individual's efforts to rid themselves of socially prescribed gender roles. Yet what is ultimately significant in this play is Shange's willingness to probe beneath the surface to arrive at what causes Sean to behave as he does.

"a photograph is like a fingerprint/ it stays & stays forever/we cd have something forever/just how we want it give me a camera," boasts the aspiring photographer Sean, "& i cd get you anything you wanted/breeze/a wad of money/mad- ness/women on back porches kneading bread/ stars falling/ice cream & drunks & forever/i cd give you forever in a night."
Sean's unspoken assertion here is that the objects of desire and excess, from money to ice cream, from madness to intoxication, from breeze to eternity, are unrealizable on a stage lying outside the realm of the camera, outside the world of the picture. The world of Sean's photographic construction in Shange's play is represented thus: "I've got it all there in that frame, I gotta whole dynamic of centuries/ in a two-dimensional plane" (76). We need to listen to the photographer Sean to appreciate how the modern love affair with the camera can turn unformulated desires into phantasms of creative potency: "I gotta world I'm making in my image/I got something for a change/ lil sean david who never got over on nothing but bitches/ is building a world in his image" (79). The photographic process allows Sean to objectify the world around him and to arrange the world according "to a point of view which endows it with a recognizable meaning." To Sean, most significantly, this imagistic constancy provides the frame for the objectification of his own masculine self. Such an object-building through the genius of mechanical reproduction allows Sean, as Jean-Francois Lyotard puts it, "to arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity as well as the approval he thereby receives from others - since such structures of images and sequences constitute a communication code among.
all of them." As Sean puts it "i'm a genius for unravelling the mysteries of the darker races" (76-77).

Yet Shange does not permit Sean to receive easy approval from his interlocutors. Although his female counterpart, Michael, has little difficulty acknowledging Sean's desire to conceive the world as a picture, she does not let him forget that his self-esteem as a maker of both pictures and women is always mediated on the stage of the world by the presence of a technological character, the camera. "You tell em straight out" She taunts Sean, "that you are/osiris returned à yr camera has been the missing organ in our forsaken land " (93). As Michael dismissively interprets Sean's phallic antidote for the diseased condition of black American culture, hope lies less in the subjective impotency of its voyeuristic user than in the idealized character of the camera.

This ideological formation of camera as phallic voyeur and shaper of the female "look," serving male desire, also surfaces in a photograph when Sean recounts how he has made pictures ever "since we cd hide neath mary susan's window in the projects à watch her undress" (95). In these instances, the fixating camera and the desirous male gaze come together in a performance of masculine entrapment. Feminist critics with a psycho-analytical bias relate the theme of the
male gaze on the female body in poetry & poetic drama to phallic activity and the desire for sadistic mastery of the object.

Shange's play provides us with a striking example of a mixture of dramatic and filmic vision. The play opens with the disjunctive performances of two "struggling artists." Sean struggles to control the female subjects of his photographic art. Michael turns to her inner world of dance and movement as a fluid expression of the psycho-economic struggle: "our lives/our grandparents & their uncles/it's how we came to be/ by taking our lives seriously/we fight for every breath every goddamn day" (80).

Michael's dances of rebellion, both inside and outside, for and against the hegemony characteristic of the age of the world picture, are what establish the conceptual framework of Shange's play. The dance is something Sean "can't have or return to/somethin dim in memory/barely articulated" (77). Always present among these lovers in motion, dance takes on the character of a cinematic memory. And while Sean displays slides of the Muslim woman whose toiletry he secretly films from across the street, Michael describes her dance to Sean, as if reinforcing the memory in its most vulnerable state:

i am space & winds
like a soft rain or a torrent of dust/
i can move
be free in time/a moment is mine always
i am not like a flower at all
tho i can bloom & be a wisp of sunlight
i'm a rustling of dead leaves
collections of ol women by the weddin
the legs of a cotton club queen
& so familiar with tears
alla this is mine/so long as i breathe/
i'm gonna dance
for all of us/everybody dead/everybody
busy everybody too burdened to jump thru
a nite a hot & bluesy jump in the guts
of ourselves a dance is like a dream/i
can always remember make it come again...
i can make it come again (77)

The coalition of photo and dance - the fusion of technology's representations and drama's human forms - produce a screen of artistic struggle in which the crucial activity is less human agency that its representatives, that is to say, its framings, its readings, its interpretations. Responding to Sean's claim that "I thot art waz survival," Michael insists thus: "no, it's love it's fighting to give something/it's giving yrself to someone/ who loves you ... lettin everybody in & giving up what is most treasured" (85). As Shange's visionary of moving dreams, Michael confirms that
her art is framed in pathos, in struggle, in vulnerable openness. The clash of Shange's filmic bodies thus provokes us to acknowledge, to read, the structural anxieties and abstract relations enslaving art in the age of the white against black, even male against female, world picture.

Ntozake Shange taking the lead from Hansberry, seems preoccupied with broadening the American theatre to include African rituals. Shange's theatre pieces generally do not conform to traditional dramatic structure, making it difficult to detect a noticeable progression of action or character. Addressing the issue of dramatic structure in Shange's pieces, Sandra L. Richards asserts, "By constructing most of her plays as a series of poetic monologues occasionally interrupted by conventional dialogue, she takes advantage of the telegraphic, elusive quality of poetry to encourage audiences to listen with close critical attention."¹⁹

Shange's redefinition of what constitutes theatre in America has caused a great deal of controversy, particularly since her verse drama is antithetical to that of such established writers as Maxwell Anderson, Robert Lowell and James Scheville. Wilkerson notes that "Shange is critical of the artistic constraints imposed by the professional theatre on black writers and performers."²⁰ C.W.E. Bigsby points out
that Shange views the originality of her dramatic form as "a necessary gesture of revolt of models of drama which she saw as alien to her own situation." 21

Last in the trilogy is Boogie Woogie Landscapes, which is Shange's most experimental dramatic piece. It blends surrealism and expressionism to form a fantasy world in which Layla and the other nightlife companions sing, dance, and share emotional ramifications of being black and female in America. Produced at the Terrace Theatre of the Kennedy Centre in June 1980, this piece suggests that it is not good to be born a girl when females are infibulated, excised, clitorectomized and are still afraid of molesters and rapists. Speaking of the play, Anne Welsh of The Washington Star writes, "Shange is a major poet, born in and out of theatre." 22

As a result of the popularization of the matriarchy myth, unyielding, religious women who rob their sons of manhood appear in much of the literature written by blacks and whites. Mapp suggests that "the thin line between black mammy and black matriarch may be distinguished largely by whether the old girl is presiding over a white or black household." 23 Regardless of her moral and physical strength, though, she traditionally has been "relegated to her place in the kitchen or pantry." 24 When no other job was open to the
black mother, she could find work in the kitchens of White Americans. Alice Childress, once a maid herself, contends that the black mother's function has been to serve as a maid of the world. In her article "The Negro Woman in American Literature," Childress asserts that "facing the world alone makes a woman strong. The emancipated Negro Woman of America did the only thing she could do. She earned a pittance by washing, ironing, cooking and cleaning, and picking cotton." In response to the myth that the black mother has unmanned black males, Childress says that the black woman has "helped her man, and if she often stood in the front line, it was to shield him from a mob of men organized and dedicated to bring about his total destruction." Many multidimensional images of the black mother appear in literature written by black women. Mary Helen Washington asserts that the black mother is depicted as fiercely provocative of her children, often sacrificing herself to prepare them to live in a violent and racist world. In her essay "Black Women Playwrights: They Speak: Who Listens?" Barbara Molette contends that black women dramatists have traditionally written positive images of black motherhood and tried to promote mores that were humanistic. In keeping with the traditional stereotypes, many of the mothers in plays by Childress, Hansberry and Shange are selfless, determined, and
saintly. They symbolize sincerity, depth, strength and vitality. There are two black mother characters that escape the narrow confines of stereotyping: Lorraine Hansberry's Rissa in *The Drinking Gourd* and the nameless mother in Shange's *Boogie Woogie Landscapes*. Lorraine Hansberry apparently believed that not all slaves were content and chose to portray a black mother whose devotion to her family and whose simple, motherly act of vengeance set her apart from the archetypal black mother figure.

Another atypical mother appears in *Boogie Woogie Landscapes*. While there is not a great deal said about this mother, she deserves to be examined because she is more vulnerable, confused, and disorganized, than any other mother figure to appear in literature by blacks of the period. The mother in Shange's theatre piece is a professional woman who cannot cope with the pressures of a career and a family. She is very intolerant of her children's mischievousness and even less patient with the steady flow of maids who come into her home to keep the family intact. In spite of domestic help, "the house got crazy. mama tryin to feed nine people & make lunches for five/put each one of us at a different bus stop. cuz a integration/no one of us went to the neighbourhood school"/ (131). The mother gives in to her temptation to leave behind the madhouse of a home. She turns over the responsibility
of the family to her physician husband, leaving the family without any assurance that she is ever coming back. By the time the mother does return the children, husband, and maid agree to be supportive of the modern-day, high-powered, and heart-attack-prone career mother.

Like the works of Childress and Hansberry, Ntozake Shange's writing reveals a preoccupation with blacks as an integral part of the African Continuum. Shange's own connectedness to Africa is evident in her name change. Shange insists that her background shaped her view of the interconnectedness of African-Americans and other people of colour:

My parents have always been especially involved in all kinds of Third World culture ... I was always aware that there were different kinds of black people all over the world because my father had friends from virtually all of the colonized French-, Spanish-, and English-speaking countries. So I knew I wasn't on this planet by myself. I had some connection with other people.

The family in Shange's Boogie Woogie Landscapes is one not frequently seen in literature. First it is an augmented middle class black family as opposed to the
grass-roots black family that graces the stage so often. Second, the images of middle-class blacks in this family are positive, including the image of the black father. The husband, a physician, and his wife, a career woman, earn enough money to afford a luxurious two-storey home and to provide for a series of live-in domestics who are perpetually plagued and provoked by the children and then terminated. These maids/nannies may be considered as part of the family because they do have a great deal of influence over the children, including teaching them manners, values and practical skills such as how to manage a home.

Though primarily an augmented one, the family shifts to an augmented, extended, attenuated family because the mother, anxiety- and stress-ridden, abandons the husband and children. The mother, depicted as puritanical, hypersensitive, and color-and class-conscious, does not like her "common" children. The young girl recalls her mother saying "I always pick the most niggerish people in the world to make my friends & then she wd list mavis & freddie & charlenetta & linda susan (who waz really po white trash) so I didnt say nothin" (134). Overwhelmed and unhappy, the mother abandons the family. In the absence of the mother, the father who is gentle, patient, and loving cares for his children with the help of the grandmother and a house keeper.
The persona says of her father, "daddy brushed our braids to a point like a dunce's cap & then patted them down. He gave us way too much money for lunch & tol grandma she waz overworkin her heart so he wd have to get someone to come in til mama figured out whether she waz comin back" (132). Shange chips away at the myth that black fathers do not take responsibility for their children. Billingsley's findings lend credibility to Shange's portrait of this middle-class black father:

Social workers have known for a long time that there is nothing like a good steady job with adequate and dependable income to make a man get married, stay married, remain with his family, and support it, while the absence of such economic viability is highly correlated with the refusal of men to ensure the stability of their families.\(^{30}\)

On another level, Shange connects this middle-class black family to its larger family, one that is not as fortunate and does include the masses of disadvantaged blacks. One of the characters, who serves as a voice of African-Americans, criticizes the New York Times for its shallowness and inefficacuity at treating the concerns of coloured peoples of the world. She speaks of other papers that serve as a forum and
Shange's images of the black family are powerful and diverse.

Much of *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* deals with Layla's difficulties during adolescence. The biographical parallels between Layla and Ntozake Shange are apparent. *Boogie Woogie Landscapes*, with no traditional plot or theme, resembles the stream-of-consciousness style of James Joyce. Bits and pieces of Layla's experiences, memories, and dreams are presented in such fragmented fashion that it is difficult for audiences to find a theme in the piece.
Childress, Hansberry, and Shange cannot be accused of writing only about domestic, narrow issues. Their scope is at once local, national and global. Their writings reveal a preoccupation with Africa, which shapes the content, conflicts, and tone of the bulk of their works. The family is the vehicle that allows these three women to express their feelings about the joys and sorrows facing the progeny of Africa. All three playwrights have written about families that, regardless of the many problems or obstacles, have survived and sometimes succeeded. One of the most important reasons why black families have been able to withstand slavery, reconstruction, urbanization, unemployment, and poverty is because of their adaptability of family roles. Where blood-related members of the black family create voids, the interactional or fictive members of the family provide the spirit, the history, and the courage that blacks need to sustain themselves in American society. There is a strong kinship that exists among blacks, one that links the blood-related family to other African-Americans and to their African ancestors. Jim Haskins, in "Some African Influences on the Afro-American Theater," contends as follows:

As acquaintance with things Africa grows, as the essential and difficult work of tracing Africanism in America continues, we will come to know how really vast and invisible the African influence on all
American theater has been."  31

The black women playwrights of this study have drawn, both consciously and intuitively, upon African traditions to solidify their sense of the African—American family. Childress, Hansberry and Shange speak of the drums that beckon and prompt them to write of the heartbeat and the rhythms of a people whose single most important forte is its sense of family. Their quest for identity reveals a preoccupation with blacks turning to Africa for identity and viewing blacks around the world as a family.
REFERENCES


14. Ntozake Shange, *Three Pieces* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981). Excerpts from reviews of Shange's plays are found on the dust cover of this publication. All references are to this edition of the play.


18. Lyotard, 333.


