



For Colored Girls – An Intersectional Means of Speaking and Understanding

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Abstract

For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf has been adapted as a book, a play, and a film. Ntozake Shange's original 1974 play has since metamorphosed into a choreopoem book, and two contemporary films by the early 21st century. In this paper, we argue that these ranging adaptations have shed light on the multi-dimensional nature of oppression, thus broadening public understanding of racism, while mobilizing a full array of one's personal resources, sensibilities and skills. This story, across its many platforms expands emancipatory possibilities emerging from race, class, and gendered spaces. The central theme is that *For Colored Girls* offers tools for analysis of black women's experiences of oppression in different spaces, triggered by their socio-cultural context. In this paper, theories of intersectionality and performance analysis are used to explore how Shange's *For Colored Girls* in all four formats frame female experiences that give voice to women of color. We explore how these works enable readers/viewers to occupy space as well-springs for understanding themselves (culture), and use it to cultivate paths toward liberation, and/or life-long struggles against domination and exploitation.

Keywords: black women's experiences, oppression, Intersectionality theory, black performance theory, and framed female experiences.

There are few times that films and plays adapted from books produce new perspectives for a viewer. One might automatically think of the *Color Purple* having been one of those rarities, but with controversy in all its three forms – book, movie, and play. However, when audience depth of perception is strong across formats, it is due primarily to the author’s creative ability to enhance the work’s major themes. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf has taken the form of book, play, and film, but never in a traditional sense. What Ntozake Shange wrote as a play in 1974 has metamorphosed into a choreopoem book, and two films by the early 21st century.¹ All the while it has never stopped drawing viewers into the dynamic stories about women of color.

For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf toured on and off-Broadway since 1975. It was adapted as a book in 1976 and released in 1982 as a PBS teleplay. What is the purpose of releasing these stories in so many variations? In this paper, we argue that this proliferation of stories sheds light on the multi-dimensional nature of oppression, and it broadens understanding of the spatial context, while mobilizing a full array of one’s resources, sensibilities and skills. Furthermore, it then expands emancipatory possibilities emerging from race, class, and gendered spaces. One way that Shange accomplishes this feat is voicing obstacles that women of color face, specifically black women, in a manner that is usually unrecognized by dominant society. If this is the question, then what answer(s) does *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* offer? The ways that the characters are added in different settings, adds to the capacity to interpret their situation and offers a glimpse of ways the character envision possibilities for change. The answers afforded by Shange are not in a recipe format, rather suggestions of self-actualization and empowerment.

One component of the answer is connected to the central theme that *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* offers tools. This theme is that one finds value, worth, and true essence in their life despite its challenges. Such an analysis of black women's experiences of oppression in different spaces and contexts is seen in each cohort or group of women as we view their experiences in combating racist patriarchal institutions.² For example, the Lady in Blue struggles with physical and emotional anxiety from having terminated a pregnancy. What Shange offers readers is a glimpse of the terrain that shapes the life experiences of the character.

For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf offers perspectives on how black women confront forms of direct, structural, and cultural violence, and the paths that lead to empowerment. Direct violence is often coded as domestic and intimate partner violence (DV/IPV). Feminista Jones explains, "While black women make up only 8% of the United States population, 22% of homicides that result from DV/IPV happen to black women, and 29% of all victimized women, making it one of the leading causes of death for black women ages 15 to 35" (Jones 2014). Structural violence is seen when social and economic institutions lock people into spaces that inhibit their ability to meet basic needs. This violence is especially harmful to women because of the intersection of gender with existing conditions such as poor access to healthcare, and inadequate education (Sinha, et al. 2017, 134). Cultural violence refers to societal or group values that bolster and rationalize inferior treatment. One such example occurs when black women are pressured to resist reporting mistreatment because giving attention to violence within their communities would reinforce stereotypes about people of color, especially black men as inherently violent (O'Bannon 2016).

This paper uses intersectionality and black performance theory to explore how Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, across all four formats, frames female experiences and gives voice to women of color. We argue that Shange's works enable readers/viewers to occupy a multitude of positions so cultivating a well-spring for understanding themselves (culture) and use this new positionality to cultivate paths toward liberation from life-long struggles against domination and exploitation. For the purpose of this paper, intersectionality is defined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1991) as the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of individuals lives (1244). In "Mapping the Margins," Williams Crenshaw reminds readers that intersectionality is a provisional concept that links contemporary politics with postmodern theory where race and gender intersect (ibid). We broaden Williams Crenshaw's interpretation to include Nina Lykke's (2010) definition because it comprises a different structure to the term. Lykke explains: "Depending on the theoretical framework, that can be theorized as dominance/subordination, in/exclusion, recognition/ misrecognition, power/disempowerment, possession/dispossession, privilege/lack of privilege, majoritizing/minoritizing and so on" (50-51). While intersectionality is defined many ways, and its credit as a theory is given to Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality, as a practice, has its roots and history in abolitionist endeavors against transatlantic enslavement.

Intersectionality is useful because it provides a theoretical foundation for situating the experiences of groups ordinarily confined to the margins of societies.³ A common theme is that intersectionality of women's struggles offer windows into how they are constructed and interpreted by mainstream institutions. Additionally, storylines revolve around black women characters who struggled to overcome institutionalized barriers within the household, as well as outside.

Similarly, black performance theory draws from the humanities. This outlook can be traced to the work of nineteenth century writer Williams Wells Brown, who is often identified as the originator of black performance theory. His work, which started as a lecturer of his life as a slave, became the frame through which black theatre was written and interpreted (Hughes-Warrington 2009,108). One way of defining black performance theory is understanding that it is not an essence, but more of an experience of drawing on the multiple influences on black lives (Schueller 1999, 234). Stephanie Batiste (2019) offers a perspective on black performance by noting,

It plays in a layered relationship with the capacity of Blackness to be about itself and about things beyond itself. Blackness too provokes beyond its intentionality—it performs. Black performance carries histories of race onto the stage and performs with, in lieu of, and regardless of its fact....Performances of Blackness “coconstruct” consciousness about race and its meanings as a socio-political device, a system or tool that makes something happen (1-2).

From our perspective, intersectionality and black performance theory compliment each other by recognizing how different manifestations of black lived experiences expand the range of interpretation and performance - over time and place.

The Play

Not all plays make it to Broadway. In fact, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* started at The Bacchanal, a woman’s bar just outside Berkeley, California, and later moved to New York’s Public Theatre. The 1976 Broadway

playbill synopsis for *For Colored Girls* at Booth Theatre, explains that the play focuses on the “stories of seven women of color using poetry, song, and movement” and how each emerges stronger (“For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf” who have Considered Suicide /When the Rainbow is Enuf” Playbill, Inc. 2020). It was during this run that the production won an Obie Award for distinguished production, a Tony Award for Best Featured Actress (Harris-Perry 2011, 30). This descriptor speaks to the wavering cycles of womanhood that are complicated by battles of race, class, and sexuality, just as poignant in the 1970s as they are today. What the reader would not know from this playbill, after 742 performances, is how the production would draw audience attention and provoke moments of reflection. So poignant at explaining life cycles of black women, the play went on to receive the Obie Award, Outer Critics Circle Award, Audience Development Committee (Audelco) Award, Mademoiselle Award, and Tony, Grammy, and Emmy nominations (Jessee 2006, 787).

In a production of the play in St. Paul, Minnesota, the directors diversified the cast by including Black American, Latina American, and Asian American women (Bovard 2018). Color-blind casting has a long tradition in the Minneapolis- St. Paul theatre community, but it also speaks to the durability of Shange’s themes and to the “relevance and ambitions of *Penumbra*” (Preston 2018).⁴ In 1979, the Mixed Blood Theater⁵ in Minneapolis put on the play, followed by the Walker Art Center in 1980 and the *Penumbra* in 2018 (“The 1970s”). These three playhouses were important for expanding the audience and their interaction capability. Viewers of the play would recognize that this production was eye-opening in portraying black women’s experiences. More specifically, it provided soul-searching innovative ways for transporting the audience members from their seats to the stage to see the traumas and resilience of these women. While viewers may have not experienced all of the specific themes in the play, there was a means of

learning and engaging with the dialogue that presented historical injustices of black women.

Melissa Harris-Perry (2001) writes:

The production portrays the hardest and most bitter experience of black women's lives. Her characters suffer sexual and romantic betray, abuse, rape, illegal abortion, heartbreak, and rejection. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* has a lasting significance for so many because it presents black women's experiences with unflinching rawness that is not primarily concerned with translating these experiences for a broader audience. It speaks to and about black women, and it does so by using language, images, and experiences that resonate for black women (30).

This play, in all its forms incites progressive movement by expanding oppressive categories and broadening understanding of oppression and expands emancipatory possibilities. Engaging stories about individuals struggling against domination are common in African traditions of storytelling. For example, Nigerian journalist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) explains in her TED Talks presentation that reading African writers and hearing their stories gave her gratitude for such storytellers who enhanced her ability to appreciate and embrace her blackness (Ngozi Adichie).

The twenty-one poems of seven women in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* connect to symbolic city landscapes to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of inequality: Lady in Brown – Chicago; Lady in Purple – Houston; Lady in Blue – Manhattan; Lady in Green – San Francisco; Lady in Yellow – Detroit; Lady in Orange – St. Louis; and Lady in Red – Baltimore. Specific aspects of black women's struggles are represented by the cities and colors. For example, in Chicago, the works of Gwendolyn Brooks'

A Street in Bronzeville, Mamie Till-Mobley's *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, are instructive and suggestive of how Chicago landscapes gave rise to black women's emancipatory struggles.

In the poems, "latent rapists," and "abortion cycle #1," Shange includes the voices of all the ladies, highlighting the many sexual vulnerabilities and dangers faced by many women. The sequence of the poems lays a foundation of the ladies narratives of sexual awakening.⁶ While the horrors of rape and devastation of abortion are tackled by many women, it can be argued that Shange's choice of placing these poems midway through the play is emblematic of how sexual assault and violence are intensely pervasive issues specifically for black women. These are racial motivated crimes that routinely go unreported, under-addressed, unfairly stereotyped and destructively misrepresented in ways that rationalize crimes against women of color ("Black Women and Sexual Violence" 2018).

Shange emphasizes to viewers that black women should not be the forgotten survivors of sexual violence. By the end of the play, Shange has all the women express how they overcame their obstacles and survived. They chant: "i found god in myself & i love her/ i loved her fiercely." This storytelling moment can be read to mean that the characters grew to find a healthy place which involves self-love. Self-love can be hard for black women when they are often victim-blamed⁷ for their experiences connected to sex, sexual violence, and relationships.

We argue that *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* speaks to contemporary audiences regardless of age, cohorts, classes, gender, sexualities, and race to understand and respond to oppression. Also, the overall play suggests that the ladies are very much survivors who take full responsibility for their own completeness (Brown-Guillory 1987, 238).

The Book

Choreopoem is a term coined by Shange in 1975 that involves blending music, dance, poetry and dramatic expression to tell the stories in the plays *For Colored Girls* and *The Love Space Demand* (Penumbra Theatre Company 2018, 6). Shange's choreographed series of poems can also be read as the singing of lived art. They constitute a critique of seven black women's unpleasant realities: of their marginalized position in several U.S. cities that extend symbolically across the globe.⁸ One can see that Shange as a teenager must have been influenced by the Black Arts Movement (BAM) to create the trailblazing aesthetic practice of choreopoem. Kaluma ya Salaam (2017) argues that because BAM was not able to match the economic and public visibility for the play, it was shifted to mainstream theatres (ya Salaam and Martin). The Black Arts Movement was viewed as the spiritual and aesthetic sister to the Black Power Movement, focusing on self-love and self-protection as the keys to the survival of African Americans in the United States during the late 1960's and 1970's (Parkinson 2017, 17).

Shange used the art of choreopoem -- dance, music, and poetry -- to challenge the position of black women by making agents of her characters. This contrasts with popular examples of black female identity such as actress Gayle Fisher on detective television show "Mannix" from 1968-1975 or Dianne Carroll as a nurse in "Julia" from 1968-1971 (duCille). Though these characters were black women seen on national televised shows each week, their storylines were too superficial to truly resonate with black audiences, lacking depth (Cheers 2020, 3). These women were black, but one dimensional. Instead, the Black Arts movement acknowledged the multi-dimensionality of blackness (e.g. socio-emotional, psychological, spiritual, and sexual). What Shange was doing was influential, regardless of limited publicity,

because the choreopoem spoke to black women's deprived status, spiritual support, and resilience despite the inability to take timeouts.

The Televised Film

Films offer visual understandings of: 1) social groups, the types of discourses that underlie these representations; 2) labor conflicts and social unrest; 3) relations between class and gender, class and generations, class and ethnic minorities. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* was adapted for television in 1982 as part of PBS *American Playhouse* series and directed by Oz Scott (McPhee 2018). Since its 1982 inception, *American Playhouse* has a history of broadcasting noteworthy productions. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* was selected for the first season and “spring-boarded the careers of numerous performers” over 13 seasons (“American Playhouse” 2019).

During his frequent addresses in 1982, President Ronald Reagan contributed to the criminalization of black poverty, in particular black motherhood. It was refreshing to see the television film production of the play that resisted such negative stereotypes. The televised film of Shange's play provided a toolkit to unpack the arsenal of undue layers of systemic oppression and racial negativity espoused by the nation's leader. John O'Connor (1982) found flaws in the televised film version, yet noted, “The strength of Miss Shange's work is in its language, in its ability to capture the sounds and cadences of contemporary black America” (O'Connor C00014). The opening scene to the televised film shows Shange at the typewriter typing poems labeled “Toussaint 1955.” Readers comprehend that these dates not only correspond to the dates that Shange penned the poems, as well as to events in her personal life. The scenes “Toussaint

Poem,” “abortion cycle #1,” “pyramid,” and “a nite with beau willie brown,” stand out for the ways Shange expresses and describes the people and things that black women love, how these women deserve love in return, and are worthy of love and respect:

In the seventh scene, Shange is holding her daughter in her lap and explaining the “Toussaint Poem.” The Lady in Brown (Laurie Carlos) acts out the poem at a picnic with her boyfriend (Gregory Johnson), reflecting on the story of Toussaint Louverture that she read as an eight-year old girl in 1955 for a library reading contest. The childlike tone of this scene expresses Shange’s warm ideas about the black men and women found in the “ADULT READING ROOM” of the library (Shange 2010, 40). Music and literature were solace to Shange: “I came by my passion for literature in a circuitous way, a night journey marked by music, movement, improvisation, and smells of perfume, sweat, and humid star-flickering nights. I pay tribute and homage, first to the wondrous miracle of language on an African’s tongue” (Penumbra Theatre Company 2018, 7). Viewers see enlightenment to the world and its possibilities through music and literature. And at the same time, they see possibilities of fighting against oppression that cloud their dreams of feeling loved, loveable, and worthy of love. What is also clear from these two scenes is that Shange’s study of African storytelling and religion influenced her need to perform such stories as authentically possible.

Self-love and defense of choice are explored in “abortion cycle #1” where Lady in Blue (Lynn Whitfield) is dressed in a high school girl’s outfit of a cashmere pink sweater and short plaid skirt entering a shady apartment room occupied by a white male dressed in a doctor’s white lab coat. With tears, the Lady in Blue is on the doctor’s table undergoing an abortion and narrating the poem. The abortion poem “is an indictment of a society of men and women that ostracizes women who celebrate their sexuality freely, a society that makes a woman’s biology

her destiny of shame” (Lester 1992, 321). But the theme of love and choice sometimes means going through hardships alone, which was the tone of this scene.⁹ Loretta Ross (2018), who has written and advocated extensively on the subjects of abortion and black women finds that the reproductive rights of poor women of color are still denied because of their poverty caused by racism and misogyny (17). Ross, a co-founder of the Foundation for African Women, emphasizes that because of both racism and sexism there has been a historical struggle by which black women have sought to “control their fertility through the use of abortion and birth control” (Ross 1992, 274).

Scene nine “pyramid” involves three ladies (Alfre Woodard, Crystal Lilly, and Carol Maillard) explaining how they all fell in love with the same man. Though this poem is written as a monologue for the Lady in Purple, the televised film version helps viewers see how three women fell in love with the same man after hearing their testimonies. While the women are preparing for their ballet class, they stretch and dialogue with each other in a sense of sister solidarity and end the scene by agreeing to “love like sisters.” The women did not need this man, but instead more fiercely need the sisterhood found between each other.

Scene 10 the Lady in Blue (Laurie Carlos) performs the poem “I useta live in the world” on a Harlem subway platform, speaking to a longing for physical safety while fighting misogyny.¹⁰ The Lady in Pink (Alfre Woodard) is harassed on the subway platform by a 12 year-old boy (Charles Johnson). She reprimands him in a motherly tone noting how he should be ashamed for speaking to her in such a manner. On the same platform, the Lady in Orange (Crystal Lilly) is harassed by two adult black men (Clarence Thomas and Jackie Davis), the Lady in Blue comes to her rescue, arriving to chastise the men. This scene focuses on the misogyny

against black women by black men, and how in the twentieth century many women have attempted to turn the tides of such violations in the songs of protest by black female rap artists.

Scene 17 is the Lady in Orange (Trazana Bradley), acting out the poem “a nite with beau willie brown” where all the women return to a picnic table. Shange identifies the Lady in Orange by giving her the name Crystal.

What makes this scene unique is that it altered the words in the poem from Arabic to Vietnamese when talking about the challenges of Beau Willie Brown and leads the viewers to think he is a returning Vietnam veteran.¹¹ Neal Lester (1992) interjects, “Shange suggests that women like Crystal are partly responsible for their oppression at the hands of the patriarchy. After all, Crystal, for whatever reasons, stays in an abusive and destructive relationship” (Lester 321). In contrast to Lester’s position, one can see how oppression manifests itself in relationships for black women in a myriad of ways. For example, many black women struggle in domestic and intimate partner violence (DV/IPV) households during the COVID 19 pandemic finding it quite difficult to leave abusive partners while being confined by stay-at-home orders. Part of this is due to women of color feeling a sense of isolation, economic instability, unsafe housing options, neighborhood violence, and lack of safe and stable child care and social support (Evans et al. 2020, 2302).

The connection of this scene with the other poems speaks to whom the play is intended – black women, thereby raising a new voice and heighten awareness to their existence due to a lack of power. The issue is not that Beau Willie is simply an abusive man, but is more expansive in speaking to the possible factors that made Beau Willie and Crystal’s overall relationship unhealthy. This is directly related to blackness as each experience powerlessness in a society that distresses and unsteadies them in many ways.

In the final scene, Shange appears with her daughter. She says, “I’m outside San Francisco and this is For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf but moved to the ends of their own rainbows.” This scene leaves television viewers with hope for a better tomorrow because seldom are black women develop a repertoire for carving out spaces of wholeness. But to make that tomorrow better, there must be a coming together, a meeting of minds, for change.

The Theatrical Film

The 2010 film version directed by Tyler Perry featured an ensemble cast (McPhee). Three things are different in the film than any other version of Shange’s piece: nine ladies instead of seven – Lady in White (Whoopi Goldberg) is the mother of the Lady in Orange (Thandie Newton) and the Lady in Purple (Tessa Thompson) and Gilda (Phylicia Rashad) is an added character; the Lady in Red (Janet Jackson) is married; and there is a follow-up to the Beau Willie Brown murdering of Lady in Brown’s (Kimberly Elise) children.

The two additional characters Lady in White and Gilda were given excerpts of the poems to perform. Gilda does not have a color, but plays the landlord of the apartment complex where two of the ladies reside. Perry gives her an excerpt of the “Toussaint Poem.” This character may have been added, like the Lady in White to draw big name actresses into the cast for more box office appeal. Thus, it is understandable why critical reviews of the film were mixed, as reflected in Melissa Harris-Perry’s (2011) analysis. Her comments underscore how slight changes in the production can significantly alter presentation and audience reception.

...In Perry’s film the women are subjected to more dominating, moralist, and constrained notions of mortality. Perry creates a new character, played by Whoopi

Goldberg, who is a religious fanatic. She serves as a tool of shaming surveillance in the film, interjecting her judgmental, mocking, dogmatic Christian ethics over Shange's original poetry. Perry also generates a homophobic story line that does not exist in Shange's play (Harris-Perry 260-261).

The Lady in Red appears as a successful businesswoman in a marriage to a husband on the down-low, one who engages in homosexual behavior.¹² Nowhere else in Shange's piece is there a financially affluent character or one who is married. But in Shange's 2010 book of poems *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, she explains that she wanted to address HIV/AIDS, so including the poem "positive" which addresses this epidemic, but Shange writes "positive" with all of the ladies voices, and Perry uses only the Lady in Red's. Also, in his version, the Lady in Red is a financial support to the other women – at the conclusion of the film in she provides a sizable donation to their community center.

The final addition to the theatrical film shows the aftermath of the murder of the Lady in Brown's children by Beau Willie Brown. Gilda counsels the Lady to hold herself somewhat accountable for Beau Willie's domestic abuse and, more importantly, to use this tragedy to empower other women. This part of the film comes across as rushed. As Shange has said of Perry's adaptation, "I think he did a very fine job, although I'm not sure I would call it a finished film" ("Watch Lynn Whitfield and Alfre Woodard in 'For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf' (Video)" 2011).

While Perry's version has its limits, it cannot be denied that the film amplifies many critical themes from the original while enlisting new viewers to Shange's work. There may be limits due to efforts to make the film marketable to broader audiences, which invariably means compromises with earlier productions of the work. Such sacrifices are common in films that have

budgets over \$20 million. Shange is a contemporary black woman playwright whose vision and perspectives are different from black males or white writers (Brown-Guillory 1987, 239). All seven ladies in the film have endured disappointment from the men in their lives. Their performances become discourses to reflect of their “deferred dreams,” resisting the call to be the “woman-behind-her-man,” making the choice to be an assertive actor in a constructive future (Brown-Guillory 1987, 236). These women have found an inner courage and strength to rebel and claim that no man is ever going to oppress them again (Brown-Guillory 1987, 236). While this may appear melodramatic, these performances galvanize the theme of self-empowerment in future relationships.

Conclusion

The world of performance provides a space in which to theorize and reflect upon “blackness,” representation and identity (Shannon 2005, 605). This paper has noted examples of the suffering and vulnerability of women in seeking love from both others and themselves. This emotional process is not without its tearful moments as well as those for rejoicing. Violence against women remains a major problem within the black community, yet few black organizations – no matter how big or small – consistently speak out against it (Hill Collins 2004, 212). We’ve explored an intersectional approach to Shange’s work, and that considers the three formats impact in the past, present, and future related to violence against women. The examples given, suggest that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, meaning that the value of each individual version of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* is not as equivalent to the value they generate in combination. Each version enables new performers and performances to reach new audiences and develop new levels of meaning. While

each new format develops the story's common themes, the various mediums of presentation both constrain and release interpretations of the work. The key element in each is that it allows performers, readers, viewers, choreographers, and audiences to read *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* into their own lives and experiences.

For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf speaks across place, time, medium, class, gender and race, to provide a catalyst for self-analysis. This has a liberating capacity. This text has inspired women in the second decade of the 21st century as it did during the 1970s. Examples of black female activists inspired by Shange work include political campaign manager and news analyst Donna Brazile¹³ and voter activist and state legislator, Stacy Abrams. Shange's work has become a launch pad for anti-violence struggles, established common ground with women across the race/ethnic spectrum, and it helps men to develop empathy for women, as well as see the toll that exploitation of women takes on their own lives. Our objective in this essay has been, not to provide a comprehensive assessment of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, but to suggest its utility for grasping the comprehensiveness of women's oppression, and for planting the seeds of resistance. Shange has provided a form of expression that combines energizing messages with strong orality and movement of performance. The net result is that in whatever platform *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* takes, it moves performers and audiences into uncomfortable but necessary spaces for envisioning new possibilities.

Notes

¹ An understanding of the Shange name change is explained by Matthew Dessem (2018), “Shange was born Paulette Williams, and later adopted the Xhosa and Zulu name Ntozake Shange. Her first name means ‘She who comes with her own things’ in Xhosa, while her surname means ‘who walks with lions’ in Zulu” (Dessem).

² In the book and play, the women are identified by the color of garb they wear: Lady in Brown – Chicago, Lady in Purple – Houston, Lady in Blue – Manhattan, Lady in Green – San Francisco, Lady in Yellow – Detroit, Lady in Orange – St. Louis, and Lady in Red – Baltimore. But in the televised and theatrical films, their clothing color is not always associated with the women, rather their part in the scripting of the book shows which role they are assigned.

³ Intersectionality theory is appropriate in this study because diverse structures intersect for women of color, since even the class dimension is not independent from race and gender (Crenshaw 1989, 160).

⁴ Penumbra Theatre is the sole professional black theatre in Minnesota and since 1976 it has offered career-building opportunities to theatre practitioners of color, both on and off-stage (Penumbra Theatre Company 2018, 1).

⁵ Mixed Blood Theatre was created by Jack Reuler in 1976 as the first multi-racial theater company in Minnesota (“Mixed Blood Theatre” 2020).

⁶ From a historical analysis of the sexual mistreatment of black women in America’s health history, Prather et al. (2018) concluded that the sexual and reproductive health of black women has been compromised due to multiple experiences of racism, including discriminatory healthcare practices from slavery through the post-Civil Rights era and the historical underpinnings of racism negatively influence the present-day health outcomes of black women (Prather et al. 249).

⁷ Psychotherapist Dr. Bernasha Anderson defines victim blaming as “the insinuation or explicit message that her experience of trauma was her fault and her fault alone. This is the thing that shatters her to pieces inside” (Anderson 2019).

⁸ Melissa Harris-Perry argues that the women of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* suffer with burdens imposed by misrecognition, meaning that burdens are imposed both by the structural constraints of white racism and the intimate and often violent restriction of black sexism (Harris-Perry 2011, 52).

⁹ A performance analysis of this scene with Lady in Blue alone on the table, is read as fighting against the oppression derived from any verticalized power relationship (Tellini 2016, 164).

¹⁰ Misogyny is sexualizing women and the dominance of men over women (Dixon et al. 2209, 357).

¹¹ Shange explains, “In revisiting *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, I have made a few changes and additions. Beau Willie is now returning from Iraq [Gulf War instead of Vietnam War]” (Shange 2010, 15).

¹² WebMD editors define down low as “The term is often used to describe the behavior of men who have sex with other men as well as women and who do not identify as gay or bisexual. These men may refer to themselves as being ‘on the down low,’ ‘on the DL,’ or ‘on the low low.’ The term has most often been associated with African American men. Much of the media attention about men on the down low and HIV/AIDS has focused on the concept of a transmission bridge between bisexual men and heterosexual women” (“‘Down Low’: What is it?” 2019).

¹³ In the Acknowledgement section of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Politics*, the authors express how they were inspired by Shange's writing. Stacy Abrams wrote the Foreword in this text.

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