Finding God in Oneself & *For Colored Girls*: A Revolutionary Performance of Language, Naming, & Spacing

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Finding God in Oneself & *For Colored Girls*: A Revolutionary Performance of Language, Naming, & Spacing

**Abstract**

This project analyzes the powerful implications of Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* in terms of the language of “choreopoetry,” the identity politics present in the experiences of Black women, and the elements of spirituality that move Shange’s work forward. I argue that *For Colored Girls* offers Black women a space to celebrate the fullness and diversity of themselves, regardless of where they fall within the spectrum of characters represented. Shange’s work is groundbreaking in its usage of dance and poetry as joint storytelling language, and with Black women as the titular characters and target audience for this piece. *For Colored Girls* reshapshes how we can continue to enjoy creative processes in theater, writing, poetry, dance, literature, and so much more. This piece has and continues to breathe life and beauty into stories that often go ignored.

**Disciplines**

African American Studies | Theatre and Performance Studies

**Comments**

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Finding God in Oneself & *For Colored Girls*:
A Revolutionary Performance of Language, Naming, & Spacing

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Introduction

“Black women are searching for a specific language, for specific symbols, and, even though they can claim their rightful place in the African American tradition and in the feminist tradition of women writers, it is also clear that, for the purposes of liberation, black women writers will first insist on their own name, their own space.”¹

- Mary Helen Washington, Midnight Birds

_All of the ladies repeat to themselves softly the lines ‘i found god in myself & i loved her.’ It soon becomes a song of joy, started by the lady in blue. The ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience._

[...] 

_lady in brown_

& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows²

- Ntozake Shange, For Colored Girls

The United States in the mid-20th century saw liberation movements across the country, with advocacy and demonstrations executed by and on behalf of Vietnam War veterans, college students, and countless other groups. The Black and Women’s Liberation movements of the late 1960s and 1970s grew out of direct reaction to systems of racial and gender oppression in the United States. The aims of both were to eradicate these systems, and both inspired artistic arms meant to simultaneously complicate audience perception of societal norms, express frustration at stigmatization and systematic oppression, and offer idealized concepts of a large-scale progressive, collective existence in the US. Where these projects failed, however, was in their exclusion and disregard for black women. Both aspects of the black

¹ Mary Helen Washington, Midnight Birds xvi
² Ntozake Shange, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf, 88

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woman’s identity were being celebrated, but neither her racial nor her gender group celebrated the
interlocking identities manifest in her experience. Thus, these movements created a tension characterized
by simultaneous pride and intense conflict. Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered
Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* grew out of an attempt to rectify this conflict.

The Black Power Movement saw men as the preeminent subjects of radical thinking surrounding
racial destratification. Though the movement was predicated on the labor and theorizing of black women,
3 racial issues that intersected with female identity were largely ignored by the central figures of the
movement. According to bell hooks’ *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, black women often
contributed to the larger movement with their ideas and with manual labor, but their efforts were always
seen as supportive of the central character, the man—never inclusive of the woman. Furthermore,
Kimberly Springer notes in her essay “Black Feminists Respond to Black Power,” that black women who
“challenged sexism and abuses of patriarchal power during [this] era [...]” were met with a backlash
chorus labeling them “man haters.” This conflict was, indeed, something that Shange’s work faced.5 It
was therefore very difficult for black women to find voice in this movement, with their experiences often
taking a backseat to what others deemed more important. This stigma of “man hating” was not in the
least helpful, and prevented many black women from aligning themselves with feminism, though they
often felt isolated from the Black Liberation Movement.

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) was an extension of this larger political movement, and was
also hyper-masculine in its exploration of themes regarding racial liberation, self-determination, and
cultural uplift. Poets like Haki Madhubuti often perpetuated this male-centered ideology, and effectively

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3 hooks 70
5 Lester, “Shange’s Men: for colored girls Revisited, and Movement Beyond” 319

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marginalized the efforts and contributions of black female artists by likening their work to that of their physicality. Madhubuti, along with many artists of the time period “had not yet learned to question the narrow framework in which gender is theorized in black culture.” Pieces such as Amiri Baraka’s “Who Will Survive America” reinforce this point, and chronicle the poet’s views on an impending race war and the inevitable doom that will follow. He pays very little attention to the fate and role of the black woman, famously chants: “the black man will survive America/His survival will mean the death of America/Survive Blackman! Survive Blackman! Survive Blackman!/(Black woman too)” The offhand reference to black women’s survival in America is exemplary of the ways in which black women existed at the margins of this movement. This is especially discouraging when one considers the heavy presence of black women throughout the musical performance of this poem. Women comprise the multiple choral voices performed behind Baraka’s lone shout, yet remain nameless and unidentified throughout the song. The barely acknowledged support that these women provide for the lead male character in this song further exemplifies the ways in which black women were confined to the periphery of this movement. This void of representation for black women also extended into the sociopolitical realm of second-wave feminism.

Narrow theorizing of what it meant to be woman in society ranged from 19th century ideology explicating “The Cult of True Womanhood” to 1963’s *The Feminine Mystique*. Both Barbara Welter and Betty Friedan, respectively, took upon themselves to define womanhood generally, though each of them held worldviews that lacked universality. bell hooks notes in her book *Feminist Theory: from margin to center*, that “much feminist theory emerge[d] from privileged women who live at the center, whose

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7 Bolden 25
8 Amiri Baraka, Genius Lyric website, “Who Will Survive America”
9 Amiri Baraka, Youtube “Who Will Survive America”
10 hooks 2-3

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perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women [...] who live at the margin. As a consequence, feminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences.”

hooks’ poignant analysis of the birth and perpetuation of feminist theory necessarily critiques the gaps left notably on intersecting identities involving class and race. This ignorance continued to pervade the dominant female culture, and manifested itself very strongly in the movements’ artistic outgrowths.

The chronic deference of the non-white, non-elite classes of women by more privileged women is evident in the performance art of the late 1960s and 1970s. Stage productions that claimed to celebrate women often limited that celebration to middle- to upper class white women, ignoring the overlapping, unique experiences of women of color. “The Women” by Clare Booth Luce is a prime example of this. A revival of this 1936 play ruled the Broadway spring season of 1973, follows the social lives of Manhattan women as they navigate and confront the mishappenings and anxieties of elite society. The characters of “The Women” do not represent all women in the least, and therefore lack the implicit universal appeal to women that its title suggests. The definite article “the” denotes that these women’s stories “are common in daily life.”

Clare Booth Luce’s play then, befalls the same fate as Welter and Friedan’s theorizing, employing her singular perspective as the general reality for an entire group.

Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* seeks to assuage these disparities. As its title suggests, the piece claims a certain specificity of identity that “The Women” does not, hoping to appeal to black women, though its influence

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1 bell hooks xi
11 International Broadway Database, “The Women”
13 Merriam Webster Online Dictionary “the”

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would extend far beyond this community. First conceived and performed outside of Berkeley, CA in local Bay Area bars, the piece sees a group of seven black women conveying their life experiences through their bodies and words. The choreopoem—a term Shange invented to encapsulate the piece’s tendency to use poetry and dance jointly as one language—debuted on Broadway in 1976. Her intentions in creating the piece stemmed from an affinity for “women in general,” and “women of color in particular, [feeling the] pride and dignity and joy and fullness that [all women are] capable of.” For Colored Girls, then, becomes a tribute piece to women of color, offering them the opportunity to be celebrated as central figures in narrative with fullness and richness of character.

After such quaint beginnings, it is difficult not to recognize For Colored Girls as revolutionary simply due to its rise in prominence. Traversing the nation and pausing on such a grand stage is undoubtedly a great feat, but For Colored Girls is more profound due to the decisions Shange makes concerning its framework and presentation. Black women are foregrounded as subjects through Shange’s positioning them as the only characters in the piece, named according to the colors they wear, and the target audience members. Though Shange is not the first to pursue this end, with contemporaries like Gwendolyn Brooks and Sonia Sanchez who wrote for black women as well, Shange is the first to employ this messaging through “choreopoetry.” In electing the choreopoem as a framework and primary form of expression, Shange actively rejects traditional forms of dramatic structure and poetic convention, offering a unique, more liberating language as communicative prose for black women. This language of contested body and tongue offers “colored girls” the necessary, irregular contouring through which they can

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14 Lynn F. Miller, “For Colored Girls” Review, “For Colored Girls has a wider appeal than its title suggests; it is not for black women only, although the experiences culled and given life on the Booth stage are directly related to the lives of many black women.”
15 Collins “Activists Who Yearn for Art That Transforms: Parallels in the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movements in the United States
16 2009 CNN Interview with Ntozake Shange
reclaim their temples, words, and life experiences from the other, and wield them as motivators to “[reach] the ends of their own rainbows.”¹⁷ Moreover, this redefining of language and renaming of genre through choreopoetry effectively shatters presupposed ideas delineating dance, poetry, and stage performance. In becoming the “specific language” for which Mary Helen Washington implores, choreopoetry assumes the role of the black woman’s native tongue. Washington does not see black women’s experiences and art as conducive to the exclusive language that traditionally white and male traditions have developed over time.

Criticism on Shange’s *For Colored Girls* has largely focused on the gender and racial implications of the choreopoem. In large part, the critical conversation on Shange’s work has altogether excluded analysis of the most dynamic aspect of the piece--its language--and the many influences that contributed to its existence. This is very clear in Andrea Benton Rushing’s “For Colored Girls, Suicide or Struggle,” and Lynn F. Miller’s review of *For Colored Girls*. Both writers discuss and engage the content of the piece, the role of trauma in shaping the characters’ experiences, and how the experiences of each woman correspond to their identities as black women, but neither examines the effect that choreopoetry has on their language production and performance.¹⁸ Neither writer analyzes the ideas or people who influenced Shange’s work, nor do they discuss her contemporaries or partners in the production of *For Colored Girls*. Furthermore, very little attention is given to the work of Shange’s predecessors, who did not invent choreopoetry in the least, but provided the building blocks for its creation during their primes.

A term I call *Corpoetic Articulation*, or expression through body and spoken word, seeks to reconcile these gaps. This concept causes manifold shifts of our understanding of appropriate forms and/or subjects of storytelling. It situates choreopoetry under a singular umbrella that also acknowledges

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¹⁷ Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*, 88

¹⁸ Rushing, “For Colored Girls, Suicide or Struggle;” Miller, “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf by Ntozake Shange”

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protest dancers like Pearl Primus as early developers of poetry-dance fusion. Work of previous dancers in combining these two art forms does not necessarily claim choreopoetry as its language, but are definitely in conversation with Shange’s work. Together, I am arguing in this paper that Shange’s *For Colored Girls* revolutionizes narrative form within white and male dominated writing traditions. In creating a space for black women’s stories to be told and celebrated, Shange succeeds in opening up a place of safety and spiritual healing. Thus, her choreopoem offers black women the “language,” “name,” and “space” for which Washington pleads. In so doing, Shange creates new opportunity for black women in fostering a sense of self-identity and -imagining in society, as players with more open trajectories.
I. Choreopoetry: Loosing the Wild Tongue & Dancing Revelations

As a piece fused with influences from many different styles and genres--from BAM-influenced poetry, to traditional plays in theater--*For Colored Girls* uses movement as the singular force forging bonds of different elements. As Farah Jasmine Griffin notes in the introduction to her *Harlem Nocturne*, “movement” carries a multiplicity of meanings:

> Literally, it means a change in position or place, [...but] is also an important concept in the arts, one that applies to diverse art forms. In dance it may simply mean a change of position or posture, a step or a figure [...]. In literature “movement” signals the progression or development of a plot or storyline. Finally, there is the “political movement,” defined as a series of actions on the part of a group of people working toward a common goal [...]. Artists sought to imbue their work with this sense of mobility as well.¹⁹

Movement, then, according to Griffin, is apparent in all aspects of our daily lives--through our words, bodies, and locales. It is also apparent in the art we consume and create. Though Griffin references art of the 1940s as influenced by the political movements of the time here, Shange is undoubtedly an artist responding to the political climate of her own era, seeking “to imbue [her] work with [the movements’] sense of mobility.” Choreopoetry encapsulates the aesthetic of movement through its combination of dance and poetry as mechanisms for storytelling in *For Colored Girls*. As both are employed separately and jointly throughout the piece, Shange effectively propels the storyline forward while simultaneously depicting the sociopolitical climate of the 1970s.

The style of poetry employed throughout *For Colored Girls* is exemplary of Shange’s alignment with her contemporaries, and of her subversive agenda in placing black women at stage center. Characteristic of the writing of other black arts poets, like Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks and Sonia Sanchez, was an employment of “the black aesthetic” as a primary means of poetic communication. This

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¹⁹ Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists & Progressive Politics During World War II*, 16-17

concept embraced the language of the street, of the urban environments from which many blacks had come, and rejected the confines and oppressive nature of Standard American English (SAE). This was the language of mainstream America, devoid of the delicacies that subject-verb disagreements provided, and too distant from the slave past that created the beloved “Ebonics.” The language of “the black aesthetic” blended Ebony-Phonics, or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), with the geographically unique twang of city life. This fusion of language was selected as the defiant tongue of counternarrative that black poets employed to further perpetuate an idea of self-love and appreciation amongst black people.

At the very beginning of Shange’s *For Colored Girls*, the lady in brown awakes from a distress-stricken pose and discovers that she is the only one of the characters who has done so. The other six characters remain “still [as she] walks over to the lady in red and calls to her. The lady in red makes no response.” Upon the realization that she is the only woman who can speak, and presumably has the responsibility to do so, the lady in brown immediately breaks the fourth wall, and offers an introduction to the piece that employs this poetic language of protest:

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dark phrases of womanhood
of never havin been a girl
half-notes scattered
without rhythm/no tune
distraught laughter fallin
over a black girl’s shoulder
it’s funny/it’s hysterical
the melody-less-ness of her dance
don’t tell nobody don’t tell a soul
she’s dancin on beer cans & shingles
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20 Bolden 23
21 Bolden 18
22 Shange 17
23 Shange 17

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The first ten lines of this poem/monologue very clearly align themselves with AAVE, rather than SAE. Through the lady in brown, Shange uses phrases like “don’t tell nobody,” which deliberately disobey SAE’s grammatical rules concerning double negatives. The lady in brown also uses words like “havin,” “fallin,” & “dancin” purposely without the “g” that would follow in SAE. Additionally, she does not add the apostrophe common to deviations to standard speech or dialect. The spoken and written forms of For Colored Girls, in employing this black aesthetic, are clearly meant to appeal to black women “outside Detroit […] and] New York,”24 to black women who are local, urban, far away and closeby. Shange intends to make her characters more universal in appeal, and inclusive of black women across the country.25 It is not meant to subscribe to linguistic or grammatical rules concerning standard speech, the “higher level of speech common to Literature” or any of the traditional stylistic forms of poetry.26

Terry Eagleton explains in his Literary Theory: An Introduction, that Formalists and literary critics alike forge “literariness” as the essence of canonical literature and poetry. In order for a work to be “high brow” or worth the title of Literature, it must use non-colloquial language that is of a “higher essence.” Shange’s poetry, evidenced here, and that of Black Arts Movement poets, are purposely in direct conflict with this ideology, and disregard the tendency of mainstream critics to regard “poetry by African Americans […] lacking in literary merit or an inadequate imitation of white models.”27 As these perspectives did not escape Shange or her contemporaries, each artistic decision made with one’s art was intentional, and not solely meant as an act of defiance, but also as an effort to forge a unique identity independent of white traditions. As language and identity are inextricably tied, for Shange, to switch codes, or use the language of her white oppressor, would be somehow illegitimizing her own

24 Shange 19
25 Shange CNN Interview 2009
26 Terry Eagleton Literary Theory: An Introduction, 2-5
27 Fahashima Patricia Brown, Performing the Word: African American Poetry as Vernacular Culture, 2

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language and identity.28 Gloria Anzaldúa argues in her essay “How to Tame A Wild Tongue,” that the processes of colonization and oppression take place through the marginalization of entire languages and/or dialects. Shange’s unwillingness to give into “standard,” “literary,” or oppressive language is a push-back against mainstream culture and an assertion of self-celebration and identity.

In addition to the style of writing common to Black Arts Movement poets, Shange’s poetry ascribes to its unique form of free verse as well. Because the poetry is written and performed in free verse, it is “freer, looser, and less constrained than poems written in closed or fixed forms, which adhere more closely to prescribed requirements concerning line length, rhyme, and stanzaic structure.”29 The line length and rhyme scheme deviations are apparent in the first stanza of the lady in brown’s monologue. Line length differs from phrase to phrase, with each individual line retaining its own measure of units, often in dissonance with that of the line before or after it. This is especially apparent in the middle four lines of this opening stanza: “distraught laughter fallin/over a black girl’s shoulder/it’s funny/it’s hysterical/the melody-less-ness of her dance.” In order, each line has three, five, four, and five words; and, six, seven, eight, and nine syllables. These variations effectively create a sense of freedom—as neither word nor syllable count in any of these lines is confined to a specific formula. The liberating effect that the poetry has is evidenced in the lack of care the young “black girl” has for her audience’s disdain for her personhood—she is content and free in her existence.

Evidence of Shange’s open structure is further seen in the poem’s lack of rhyme scheme. Notably in this first stanza, there are no words that rhyme—neither at the end of a line nor internally. Moreover, free verse is exhibited through the lady in brown’s monologue and stanzaic succession. The first stanza

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29 DiYanni 57, Reading Poetry

has nine lines, the second has five, the third three, the fourth two, the fifth twenty, the sixth eighteen, and the seventh eight. Evidently, the structure Shange is employing is the mere deviation from traditional, predetermined poetic structures. She effectively uses the structure itself as a sociopolitical message, by subverting the audience’s expectations for poetry, without regard for the racist judgments that would abound in doing so.

Narratively, the lady in brown’s monologue functions as a prologue of sorts, which sets the stage for the remainder of the choreopoem, and the themes that will be explored throughout. The lady in brown addresses the difficulty of black woman- and girlhood. She clues the audience into the fact that black women are regularly othered from girlhood and womanhood. This perspective is effectively demonstrated in the first two lines: “dark phrases of womanhood/of never havin been a girl.” Through the lady in brown’s modification of “womanhood” to “dark phrases of womanhood,” (emphasis mine) black and white audience members are made aware of the black woman’s status, not as woman, but as black woman. Black women are excluded from the narratives, conversations and resources that “lighter phrases of womanhood,” can more easily access. The initial lines purport the lady in brown’s beliefs concerning the black woman herself—that black women lack the opportunity to be girls first—to experience the period of innocence that all humans should. For black women, this innocence is stripped away. The lady in brown notes “the melody-less-ness of [the black girl’s] dance,” and the laughable nature that it has for onlookers. Dancing without melody is obviously an alternative way of dancing, as dancing very often takes place alongside music—with the body taking cues from a series of notes in a song that comprise its melody. The black girl’s dance, however, isn’t simply devoid of melody, but the music it is set to has “half-notes scattered/without rhythm/no tune.” Isolation and an off-beat nature are evident in these descriptors, but they are employed in such a way that the audience is meant to find these quirks.
endearing. These phrases connote the strength and beauty of black womanhood, with the lady in brown compounding this notion with what she views as its uniqueness.

Furthermore, as a functional piece of the entire choreopoem, the lady in brown’s monologue successfully moves the non-black and/or non-female audience members from outsiders to participant observers. The initial lines of this poem begin with the lady in brown’s speaking from personal experience, and gradually move toward an acknowledgment of the observer: “dark phrases of womanhood/of never havin been a girl/half-notes scattered/without rhythm/no tune/it’s funny/it’s hysterical[...] don’t tell nobody don’t tell a soul.” In reexamining these few lines, it is apparent that the audience’s move from outsider to participant observer corresponds with the lady in brown’s speech transition from introspective to more interactive. She begins talking about the trauma of “never havin been a girl,” and proceeds to implicate those who find her “dark phrases of womanhood” “funny” or “hysterical.” Finally, she issues a command that the audience is meant to obey: “don’t tell nobody don’t tell a soul.” This line is the key point at which the tension of the choreopoem lies. The audience members are being gifted with private information, and thus must thus keep it to themselves. What is also obvious here, however, is that though the audience members who do not identify with black women are being invited into this intimate space, they are not of this space--meaning that because this is not their lived experience, their role is not necessarily one of someone who can identify with these experiences, but of an outsider who has been invited in for a time. Catherine Wiley’s review of a 1991 performance of Shange’s “spell #7” speaks directly to the effect of the lady in brown’s monologue: “If you did not realize before, you realize that this play is not about you. You can learn from it, enjoy it, but it does not address you.”

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Later in the monologue, the lady in brown moves more toward the interactive, giving further instructions and asking more of the audience members:

- somebody/anybody
- sing a black girl’s song
- bring her out
- to know herself
- to know you
- but sing her rhythms
- carin/ struggle/ hard times
- sing her song of life […]
- sing her sighs
- sing the song of her possibilities
- sing a righteous gospel
- let her be born
- let her be born
- & handled warmly.\textsuperscript{31}

She implores the audience members to appreciate the black woman—to love her in a way that society, has thus far refused to love her. Because the audience members make up this society, they are again implicated in the lady in brown’s exhortation. Her admonishment calls for a singing of a “song of […] possibilities,” a “righteous gospel.” It is a call for a space where black women can be loved for their intricacies and nuance of being. The lady in brown wants someone to present an ode to black women that would celebrate them instead of demonizing them. In proclaiming that a “righteous gospel” be sang, the lady in brown is also attributing a more spiritual meaning to the identity of the black woman. She wants someone to create a language that will both uplift the black woman’s spirit and uplift her from the trenches of society. The process of this uplift would hopefully lead black women to “[find] god in [themselves… and love] her fiercely.”

Shange connects this song and its meaning with movement and dance. In her essay “movement/melody/muscle/meaning/mcintyre” she evokes a theory of choreopoetry, expressed to Shange by her dance instructor, Dianne McIntyre:

\textsuperscript{31} Shange 18-19

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Chants that must be sung. Music that must be heard, to pacify spirits, consecrate our souls, we sometimes call magic. Dianne McIntyre calls it dance. Her company, Sounds in Motion, is such a force that we must repent, rethink, reinvent, and remember all our lives cause it’s urgent. And we’re strong. No matter how the 20th century has denigrated the human body, the black people, the land, McIntyre’s choreography insists that living is arduous and remarkable.  

Chants, as anaphoric expressive sayings, are put to “music that must be heard.” This music, made up of melody and poetry, is truly a type of dance that forces its observers and participants into a religious experience--one that will “pacify spirits,” “consecrate [...] souls,” and “[make us] repent.” This dance, then, asserts itself as an interaction with the godly--one so impactful that it stirs both the spirits of its participants and its observers. The lady in brown’s monologue evokes this ideology, with language that is meant to stir the audience to action and tug at their souls.

That which the lady in brown wants her audience to understand has been clearly spelled out, and is further underscored by her clear indication that “[this piece/tribute/song] is for colored girls who have considered suicide/but moved to the ends of their own rainbows” (emphasis mine). Movement to the end of one’s rainbow is clearly outlined as the defining characteristic of colored girls to whom this piece is written. This movement, a traversing of a spectrum of experiences and ideas, underscores the difficulty inherent in black womanhood. The lady in brown has outlined for the audience very generally what these experiences look like, but in her final two lines before the interlude lets her audience know that black womanhood is not just about difference, but also about the danger in which they live and the traumas that plague their lives. However, a movement away from this mindset--of self-hate and -loathing, is what brings a black woman to “the end of her rainbow,” and what simultaneously provides the backdrop for the entirety of For Colored Girls.

32 Shange, “movement/ melody/ muscle/ meaning/ mcintyre” lost in language and sound: or how i found my way to the arts, 59
33 Shange, for colored girls, 20

This movement across rainbows is not limited solely to a traversing of experience, but also to the movement of each character’s body throughout the piece. The choreography of the piece plays a crucial role in engaging the spatial configurations of the black woman’s existence, and destigmatizing the black female body in its deliberate display of contested bodily landscapes. In attempting to understand these danced movements themselves, it is important first, to examine these movements and analyze them in language that befits them. The first choreographed dance piece takes place as a transition between the monologues of the lady and brown and the lady in yellow.

The stage directions in the Scribner Edition of “For Colored Girls” note a music cue and describe the dances of the characters: “Immediately ‘Dancing in the Street’ by Martha and the Vandellas is heard. All of the ladies start to dance. The lady in green, the lady in blue, and the lady in yellow do the pony, the big boss line, the swim, and the nose dive.” All of the dances performed require the active motion of the lower body. “The Swim,” however, very much engages the hips, the area that hinges the lower body to the upper. The dance, popularized by Bobby Freeman’s “C’mon and Swim” is characterized by a steady sway from side to side, swimming motion in the torso, and a side-to-side shaking of the hips. As evidenced in one of Freeman’s video performances of the song, there are two modes of representation, or ways in which choreographed aspects of the dance refer to the outside world – one for the upper body, and one for the lower. The upper body imitates typical forward stroke swimming motions, with one arm pushing forward after the other, falling downward and slightly to the side as each arm descends. This imitation “leaves little doubt about the referent of the movement,” meaning that without explanation or elaboration, this aspect of the choreography is easily identifiable. The lower body, however, has a

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34 Susan Leigh Foster, Reading Dancing, 58
35 Shange 21
36 Youtube “C’Mon and Swim” Bobby Freeman, 1964
37 Foster 65
38 Foster 66

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different mode of representation than the upper. The wiggling, side-to-side motion of the legs and hips seems to signify the movement of water. In mimicking the spontaneous nature of water’s movement, in effect, the lower body “[focuses] on a certain quality or attribute” of water, resembling it. This upper body imitation, and lower body resemblance, as mentioned prior, are hinged together through the steady movement of the hips.

The hips, along with the buttocks, are a highly contested, sexualized and racialized geographic location within the black female bodily landscape. Brenda Dixon Gottschild theorizes about the latter, arguing that the buttocks act as a sexual trigger for all humans. She further purports that upon the initial European-African encounter, Europeans read the typically-larger/more emphasized African buttocks as hypersexuality. More plainly, the Europeans read their own hyper-awareness of the buttocks as an intentional accentuation or emphasis of the buttocks on the part of African and African-descended women. As an already sexualized geographic space on the body, the heightened attention on the black female buttocks resulted in a fabricated, hypersexualized image of the black female. Dixon Gottschild notes: “The female butt is part of a gendered discourse, with sexually charged energy surrounding the female fanny in general and the black bottom in particular, not only in dance but also in daily life.” This statement speaks to the preoccupation with both the female buttocks and the black buttocks. The intersection of both black and female identity brings forth an even stronger awareness of this sexualized part of the body. The hips, in connection to the buttocks, have the ability to move and shake them—to draw attention to them through dance, or even as Dixon Gottschild suggests, simply in everyday life. The hips, then, in moving rambunctiously in “The Swim” move and attract attention to the buttocks.

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39 Foster 71
40 Brenda Dixon Gottschild, The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool, 146-7
41 Dixon Gottschild 147

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Shange’s inclusion of “The Swim” could be read as an intentional embracing of stereotypes concerning black female sexuality. However, this inclusion is in fact intended to do the opposite. According to Shange’s essay “a history: for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf,” “with dance [she] discovered [her] body more intimately than [she] had imagined possible. With the acceptance of the ethnicity of [her] thighs and backside came a clearer understanding of [her] voice as a woman and as a poet.” Her inclusion of this dance then, and subsequently all dances like it that may accentuate the more sexualized locations of black female bodily landscapes (the buttocks, hips, thighs, breasts, etc.), is meant more to be celebratory of the black woman’s body than to ascribe to racial and gender expectations for these women. Instead of demonizing the black woman’s body for causing an uncanny response from onlookers, Shange’s dancers embrace their bodies as vessels for expressing their emotive state – happy and celebratory.

In combining social dance and poetry as language meant to convey the unique experiences of seven black female characters, Shange succeeds in bringing great power to the pieces that are in *For Colored Girls*, validating the bodies, voices, and experiences of each woman. This method of storytelling – choreopoetry – does great work to expand collective understanding of what storytelling looks like and who deserves to be a part of and within said stories. This alternate form of communication resounds in creating a narrative of black female empowerment through a forged alliance between body and speech.

When Shange’s profound theory of dance and poetry as gospel is coupled the very real power of its live

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42 Shange, *Lost in Language & Sound: Or How I Found My Way to the Arts*, 8
43 The “uncanny” is a term explored by Sigmund Freud in his essay *Das Unheimliche*, which translated, is “The Uncanny.” One of his central arguments is that an “uncanny” response is a simultaneous revulsion and attraction to a visual stimulus that reminds humans of our suppressed desires, namely sexual. Brenda Dixon Gottschild aptly notes in her book *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, that black bodies often reside at the nexus of “attraction/repulsion, love/hate” from white onlookers. (7) Here, I am arguing that Shange’s intentions in including “The Swim” dance, is to free black women of this gaze and reclaim their bodies for themselves.

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performance, the audience members are bound to feel the dynamism of every black woman who utters a single word, or stirs her body in the slightest of manners.
II: The ‘Colored Girl’ & The Body Electric: Shange, Primus, & The Lineage of Corpoetic Articulation

Shange’s “Colored Girls”—the ladies in brown, red, blue, purple, yellow, green and orange—are named simply by the colors they wear. These women use their bodies to inscribe their stories onto the stage, alongside a fluid and match-worthy poetry. These bodies are charged with the contested legacies of their foremothers, and move beyond their own individual iterations of identity to draw from a lineage of black women who used their bodies to speak. Within this lineage, the legacy of Corpoetic Articulation thrives. While choreopoetry is specific to Shange’s work, blending dance and poetry in one performer, Corpoetic Articulation is different in its broader scope of inclusion. I assert it as an umbrella for all joint bodily and poetic expression wherein both art forms are used, though not necessarily by the same performer. This definition includes but extends beyond Shange’s characters and the choreopoet herself, as far back as the 1940s and the World War II era. During this time period, black women had more flexibility than ever before to flourish as creatives and intellectuals. Pearl Primus was one such woman: a dancer and anthropologist whose work often lent itself to critical commentary on a racist and sexist society to the backdrop of poetry.

Both Shange and Primus, I argue, are situated within a lineage of “Colored Girls” who express their sociopolitical viewpoints and commentary through Corpoetic Articulation. This shared lineage and identity is not coincidental; in fact, both of these women’s ideologies and development as artists have roots in West African and Afro-Caribbean cultural traditions. As Dr. Andreë Grau notes in her essay “Dance, Identity, & Identification Processes in the Postcolonial World,” “The self can only be achieved through others [...] identity is first and foremost dialogic, given that it is constructed through dialogue

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44 Black men, as most men in the country, had been conscripted in service of the country to fight the war abroad, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists & Progressive Politics During the World War II Era, 5
with the other, and is constantly in construction, given that it is bound to the dynamics of interaction.” If we think of “the other” as a community of fellow self-identifying Colored Girls, neither of these women exist as creatives independently of one another, nor of the women who came before and after them. Women like Katherine Dunham and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar do similar work, with dances that inspire or were inspired by poetry, and at times include poetry in their pieces. The work of all these women exists within a continuum of dialogism that allows for their simultaneous individuality and commonality amongst themselves and other black women. My goal, however, is to outline their connection and relationship to one another, and analyze how that relationship further speaks to the experiences of “Colored Girls” both within and without *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf.*

Pearl Primus’ work constitutes a direct precursor to Shange’s *For Colored Girls.* As a dancer who often worked closely with poets, Primus came to prominence during the World War II era. This period was especially advantageous for her and other Colored Girls, whose artistry was allowed to flourish in the absence of men whose work oversaturated downtown and uptown clubs in New York City. Born in Trinidad & Tobago, Pearl Primus and her family moved to New York City in the late 1920s. Soon after facing difficulties due to the racial climate of the medical field, Primus decided to pursue a career in dance. She was soon granted the opportunity to perform with the New Dance Group, which “had been established in 1932 by artists dedicated to social change through dance.” She undoubtedly learned extraordinary technique here, having worked with the Modern Dance greats Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Charles Weidman, but she also latched onto the ideology of the troupe itself, making social justice an integral part of her dances.

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45 Andrée Grau “Dance, Identity, and Identification Processes in the Postcolonial World,” 191
46 Griffin 38

Primus’ career took off with great speed shortly after joining the New Dance Group. When reflecting on her legacy years later, Primus had this to say:

Dance has been my vehicle, my language, my strength. In the dance I have confided my most secret thoughts. I have danced across deserts and mountains, ancient rivers and oceans and slipped through the boundaries of time and space. Dance is my freedom, my medicine. Dance is the fist with which I fight the sickening ignorance of prejudice. Dance has been my teacher, ever-presently revealing to me the dignity, beauty and strength in the cultural heritage of my people as a vital part of the heritage of all mankind. I dance not to entertain, but to help people better understand each other.\footnote{\textit{International Encyclopedia of Dance, “Pearl Primus,” 9, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture May 2015 Final Paper, 2014-2015 Andrew W. Mellon Undergraduate Fellowship, Penn Humanities Forum Abrina Hyatt, CAS ’15, University of Pennsylvania}}

For Primus, dance is evoked as motive force through the “my vehicle” metaphor. As a vehicle, dance has the ability to transport sentiments and ideas from the body of the dancer to onlookers. She also calls dance “language” in this sense, speaking to its ability to communicate. In Primus’ theory of dance, then, where dance is “not [meant] to entertain, but to help people better understand each other,” we find her fundamental praxis for dance. She desires for dance to do extra-spatial work outside of its performed realm in educating the ignorant or biased observer. In this sense, for her, dance takes on locomotive and linguistic properties, with the ability to communicate to and with an audience at particular junctions of time and space. She wholeheartedly believed that dance could speak in a way that could “fight the sickening ignorance of prejudice.” Primus, in moving her body, allows it to articulate the realities of the Negro people of the time. Here, dance is a form of inscription, allowing Primus to write with her body and use it as language, allowing the audience to read and interpret it in a way that is very clear and akin to reading a printed text.

The most poignant example of this is Primus’ \textit{A Man Has Just Been Lynched}, set to the poem “Strange Fruit.” Popularized by Billie Holiday in late 1939 and the early 1940s at the Café Society in New York City, this song was actually first created as a poem by Lewis Allen. Pearl Primus performed to
this poem in 1943, and presented it to New York City spectators. The dance, radically presented without
music or song, but solely to the spoken word of the poem, is not archived with Primus herself as the
performer. For the sake of this discussion, however, footage of former Philadanco dancer, Dawn Marie
Watson, performing Primus’ choreography to the poem, will suffice.\textsuperscript{48} The character most often
presented throughout the dance, as stated by Primus, was said to represent an idea rather than a person.\textsuperscript{49}
Primus conceptualized the character she danced not necessarily as a person, but as a genderless
participant in the “mob behavior” she describes as similar to groupthink—behavior that would not
necessarily happen on an individual level, but the likeliness of which is enhanced when in larger groups.
The participant takes part in the lynching then alone laments the role they played in killing a black man.\textsuperscript{50}
Throughout the piece, the movements that the dancer performs correspond to the words of the poem
spoken, allowing both verbal and bodily communication to take precedence in performing language for
the audience. Corpoetic Articulation becomes the primary medium through which this piece is
communicated.

The poem itself describes a lynching, and provides the context for Primus’ choreography:

\begin{quote}
Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{48} YouTube, “1943 Strange Fruit Pearl Primus From Podiumstudie on Vimeo”
\textsuperscript{49} Susan Manning, \textit{Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion}, 165
\textsuperscript{50} Manning 164-165

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As the piece begins, the dancer reaches out in agony and then falls to the ground. She repeats this movement again twice as though her entire body is heaving, before the first line of the poem is spoken: “Southern trees bear a strange fruit” The dancer wiggles her hand upward and allows her entire body to follow after it, rising from the ground upward to stand completely upright just as the line ends. The movement upward allows the dancer to transform, or grow, from a wounded and regretful participant/observer, to a “southern tree.” After standing, she runs further right of her initial starting point, with arms perpendicular to one another—the upward reaching one indicating the branches, while the outward reaching one resembles\(^{51}\) the branch from which black men hung.

It is clear in these initial opening phrases, that both body and poetry are working together to create an explicit, horrifying picture of the conditions under which southern blacks lived. Audience members having this information communicated to them would likely react with shock. It is apparent that the work that Primus was doing here sparked a great deal of thought, and provoked a desire for action and more fuel for the NAACP “Double-V” campaign. This marketing campaign paralleled the ongoing war abroad to the domestic plight of blacks in the United States. Its ideology demanded that the US do justice by its own citizens if the country ever expected to be successful in fighting for the rights of those abroad. Many artists and activists latched onto this ideology, and included its inherent protest message into their work, and Pearl Primus was no exception.\(^{52}\) According to Susan Manning’s *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, “Primus danced on the fault lines between Negro dance, modern dance and leftist dance...[The solos she would often perform] through the 1940s [were...] dances of social protest.”\(^{53}\) Pearl Primus’ *A Man Has Just Been Lynched* exemplifies this fact.

\(^{51}\) Reading Dancing, Susan Leigh Foster 71
\(^{52}\) Manning 125
\(^{53}\) Manning 159-160

Following the first line and phrases of movement, Primus’ choreography pushes her to the ground once more, with feet and back flat on the ground, but with elevated buttocks -- which creates somewhat of a plane in appearance. The lines “Blood on the leaves and blood at the root/Black body swinging in the Southern Breeze” both have this stance repeated, along with the anaphoric movement that soon follows it--Primus thrusting her left leg and right arm upward, lowering them back into the position, then lifting the right leg and left arm upward, then down again, and finally the left leg and right arm upward again. Between the repetition of this phrase is Primus’ imitation of what she interprets as the appearance of black bodies swinging in the southern breeze. In resembling this, she turns away from embodying the figure who is lamenting the lynching, and actually becomes the black body itself. Moreover, these changes in character can be read as Primus’ transition from a participant-observer in a crime, to the the agent’s perceived focal point--the black body, the tree, and the wind--all of which move together somewhat lifelessly and further enhance the onlooker’s pain.

Primus’ choreography, in allowing fluid transition from one character, idea, or item to another, is in many ways indicative of her sensitivity to her racially mixed audiences and the complexity of society more generally. She goes from being an “idea,” a mentality that spurs a lynching, to a lynched being, then to many of the tools that helped create the scene of the crime--including a tree, branches, and wind. Primus is sensitive to the needs of both black and white audiences: the former is in need of healing, and the latter of education. Dance critic John Martin noted the fluidity of her movements in his reviews of her work, and paid particular attention to the ways that he believed her dancing impacted her audience. In a 1943 review, he cited her unique ability to heal people through dance with her “tremendous inward power,” “fine dramatic sense,” and “superb technique.”

54 Griffin 40: Martin “The Dance Laurel Award No. 2,” *New York Times*, August 1, 1943

dance, and moreover, her execution, imbued with her spirit and energy, transcends choreography and moves audience members in ways that provide catharsis and healing from trauma.

In Primus’ attempt to both educate and offer healing for her racially mixed audiences, her style of dance took on racially mixed aesthetics as well. She is distinctly known for having blended traditional African dance styles with the modern dance techniques she learned early in her career. In combining the aesthetics of both—the former, Africanist\(^{55}\), the latter, Europeanist\(^{56}\)—Primus effectively revolutionized dance by creating a completely new style. This distinct style shone through in social protest dances she did in defense of black life—from *A Man Has Just Been Lynched* to a piece called *Jim Crow Train*, and beyond. Farah Jasmine Griffin notes in the second chapter of *Harlem Nocturne*, that “[the desire to transform the observer’s consciousness] was a central component of the aesthetic informed by [Primus’] practice—a component she inherited from a tradition of vernacular dance born of Africa, and one that was also central to modern dance itself.”\(^ {57}\) Griffin further purports that combining these two styles of dance, along with the black social dance aesthetics of the time, Primus was able to transfer an aesthetic and emotional concept from her own consciousness to all who observed her dance.\(^ {58}\)

Because Primus’ dances were often pieces of social protest, much of her work was aimed toward facilitating a cathartic experience for her audience members, but also to educate the ignorant. Farah Jasmine Griffin notes that Primus “[used] the language of dance to represent the dignity and strength of black people and to express their longing for freedom. [She] saw dance as a means of contributing to the ongoing struggle for social justice. The politically conscious young dancer had learned that the dancer’s movement has the power to transform the observer’s consciousness.” With this ideology in mind, it is

\(^{55}\) This term comes from Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography From Coon to Cool*, and has to do with “concepts, practices, attitudes, or forms that have roots/origins in Africa and the African diaspora” xiii

\(^{56}\) Gottschild, European concepts, practices, attitudes, and/or forms

\(^{57}\) 25

\(^{58}\) 25

difficult not to regard *A Man Has Just Been Lynched* as educational and activist in intention. Not only does Primus lend her own talents to the stage, and subsequently, to the audience, but she does so with the intention to uplift black people.

Primus’ very nuanced theory and style dance is the framework through which Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls* is conceived and produced, with Shange acknowledging that her own dance education was heavily influenced by Primus’ work.\(^59\) Having experienced her own trauma and hardship in observing and being subject to racial and gender oppression over the years, Shange sought solace in dance and poetry.\(^60\) Throughout the piece, she suggests movement to the end of one’s rainbow as a completion of catharsis for Colored Girls who have considered suicide. The dances she includes in the piece, as discussed in section one, allow the Colored Girls of *For Colored Girls* to experience their own healing process through the reclamation of their bodies and words. One piece in particular, however, sees the Africanist aesthetic very smoothly blended with modern dance techniques and Black vernacular dance. “sechita” tells the story of a performer in the deep south, a story deeply reminiscent of a distant African past in a more modern European world, and dance that blends these themes as well.\(^61\)

*Soft deep music is heard, voices calling “Sechita” come from the wings and volms. The lady in purple enters from up right.*

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\(^{59}\) Shange, *lost in language and sound*, 54  
\(^{60}\) Shange 53  
\(^{61}\) Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*, 39

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As detailed in the transcription of a portion poem above, “sechita” is actually the lady in green. The stage directions, acting as a form of choreography themselves, indicate that the poetry and the dance will be performed simultaneously. The lady in purple’s poetry immediately contextualizes the space as somewhere in the deep south, while the lady in green prepares to dance in a way that corresponds to the poetry. For the purposes of this discussion, the analysis on the lady in green’s dance will reference a performance of *For Colored Girls* during the Black Theater Festival in Washington, D.C.62

The poem informs Sechita’s choreography, as she enters and begins dancing at the same time that the lady in purple begins her monologue. Immediately, Sechita’s danced movements correspond to the poetry, as she squats deeply and stretches to her right, pointing downward as the lady in purple talks of “gamblin down the mississippi.” Sechita very clearly puts a strong emphasis on “down,” and then quickly shifts her body in the opposite direction, indicating a move “to memphis.” As the lady in purple continues to describe the nature of Sechita’s surroundings, the lady in green continues to mimic these descriptors with her body, crouching down into a slump closer to the ground to embody “the poor white trash,” who live near the bottom of society’s hierarchy. She moves fluidly upward and somewhat without form when

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62 YouTube “Sechita”

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the lady in purple describes the “liquid tones/ thru the swamps.” Here, Sechita is mimicking water as she moves from side to side slowly. The paced, creeping nature of this movement resembles the leisurely manner in which water moves through a swamp. In allowing a smooth pulse that begins with her hips to roll outward and ripple through her extremities, Sechita effectively resembles water, but also exemplifies the Africanist influence within the choreography. Brenda Dixon Gottschild notes that the “Africanist, articulated torso and bent-kneed, get down postures draw attention to the pelvis, abdominals, breasts and buttocks.” Sechita’s choreography embodies all of these things immediately within the first stanza of the lady in purple’s poem. Her body seems to imbue all that Dixon Gottschild denotes as distinctly African in aesthetic through her deep squats and the pulse she exudes from her pelvic area, causing all other parts of her body to move.

Here, then, Primus and Shange are clearly linked in their roots in African diasporic dance. Along with the bodily movements that is exhibited in both sets of choreography, the Africanist presence in both their works is evident in the barefooted presentation of the dance. Brenda Dixon Gottschild recognizes this as distinctly Africanist, as barefoot dancing “[reifies] contact with the earth, touching it, rolling or lying on it, giving in to it [...] Those traits live in African and African American dance forms.” She further purports that this aesthetic emphasizes a oneness and closeness with nature and the earth, both of which are exemplified in her prior comments on the “bent-kneed, get down postures.” Both Primus and Shange’s choreography pulls directly from this cultural context. Both women were students of West African dance, and were thus very familiar with the styles and meanings they incorporated into their choreography.

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63 Dixon Gottschild 25
64 Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, 49

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What is especially unique about their work is how both manage to “[wear] many hats and [invert-subvert] codes” in conforming to an extent to mainstream culture’s expectations, while retaining their own culture through their particular, respective styles.65 Both women’s work appealed to a wide range of audiences, though most of their choreography was rooted in an African tradition. As Farah Jasmine Griffin notes in Harlem Nocturne, “[Primus created] a dialogue between [African and Modern Dance, and] helped to introduce a new context for the marriage of black aesthetics and politics. For Primus, traditional African dance and contemporary black vernacular dance were more than mere inspirations for modernist choreography; they were equal participants in helping to create a modern dance vocabulary.”66 This point is critical to Shange’s dance vocabulary as well, indirectly through her citing Primus as an influence on her in early life, and directly through her own interactions with African dance. Though her personal experience with African dance did not happen until much later when she was living in New York City and began taking classes, as a native of St. Louis, Missouri, raised in a household where black art and expression were openly embraced, Shange understood the relationship that existed amongst languages like poetry, music, and dance very early on.67 It was not until this point that she decided to dance for the sake of “[inspiring] consciousness in [her] people at all levels.”68 Shange, similarly to Primus, saw dance as a way of transforming minds, and decided to pursue it only after discovering the energy it conveyed through bodily articulation.

In addition to what is physically captured in both “sechita” and A Man Has Just Been Lynched, Shange and Primus both demonstrate their ability to encapsulate the emotional meaning and essence of the word, and transcribe that meaning onto the stage and into space through their bodies. Because

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65 Dixon Gottschild 57
66 Griffin 25
67 Shange, “preface,” Lost in Language and Sound, xiii-xvi
68 Shange 56

“sechita” is the only piece in For Colored Girls wherein a character dances alongside the poetry, explicitly to the words, it is the most similar to A Man Has Just Been Lynched. Both of these Colored Girls use their cultural affinity for African styles of movement to enhance their respective sociopolitical stances on black issues. This messaging very clearly aligns itself with Corpoetic Articulation as it relies heavily and equally on both body and word to convey their views. Because of their many similarities, it is evident why both of their works have such staying power, and have made such remarkable contributions to the African American artistic canon.
III: Geographies of Movement & Space as Embodied Spirituality

_For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf_ is a piece of performance art where space and movement through space both play a critical role in crafting narrative. With the style of movement Shange’s Colored Girls use figuring into a larger narrative of African diasporic dance, this movement is also situated within a history of cultural exchange through bodily communication in spaces particularly ripe in creativity and innovation. The legacy of learned body movement traverses private spaces like family rooms to public community spaces like dance festivals or city squares. These spaces not only act as crucial points in artistic and cultural exchanges, but also as critical sites in ongoing processes of identity formation. These spaces, as hubs of Africanist movement and cultural regeneration, also seem to embody the spirituality and sacred aspects of the movement and culture themselves. In the space that Shange creates through _For Colored Girls_, movement and space encourage a spiritual uplift that allows the Colored Girls within and without the piece to heal and become one with themselves.

As Farah Jasmine Griffin acutely points out, for blacks, social movements and physical movements often correlated. Thus, as many blacks moved to northern cities in the first and second waves of the Great Migration, cityscapes become places where different geographic cultural bodily languages are fused to form new dances that are uniquely urban. Marya Annette McQuirter argues in her article “Awkward Moves: Dance Lessons from the 1940s” that “African Americans from a range of geographical spaces attempted to create new urban identities. Social dance figured as one of the central arenas in which the process of identity formation became manifest.” McQuirter is contextualizing her

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69 Dancing Many Drums, 95
70 Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance, “African American Dance: A Complex History” Thomas DeFrantz, 27
71 Griffin 16-7
72 Marya Annette McQuirter, “Awkward Moves: Dance Lessons from the 1940s,” Dancing Many Drums, 81
claim within a larger narrative of black mobility, where urbanity becomes a new and exciting concept ready to be molded for identity’s sake. As Shange’s Colored Girls are identified not only by the colors they wear, but also by their geographic proximity to major US cities, space and identity within the cityscape is especially important in For Colored Girls. With black people from many different places bringing their moves to the cityscape, they collectively forge new ways of moving through the sharing and receiving of their favorite moves. Brenda Dixon Gottschild notes in her book The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool, that cultural exchange through dance was common in cityscapes like New York City, and often happened across racial lines. Though interracial cultural exchange through movement was common, intraracial exchange in critical spaces like dance ballrooms in Harlem allowed blacks to learn from one another and to “understand that black is beautiful.” In this way, shared cultural identity is formed through movement. Marya Annette McQuirter’s argument further suggests implicitly that dance, in its ability to be both constantly reinvented and to create identity, that identity itself constantly in flux or in motion. Black identity, in this case, in being formed through new forms of dance, is always a mobile entity.

The identity of the black woman becomes especially capricious when this concept is applied to them. Colored Girls are regularly relegated out of spaces and confined to certain spaces deemed appropriate for them. Farah Jasmine Griffin notes that in the 1940s, “the Jim Crow car was the impetus behind [black women’s] challenge to race-based definitions of the term “lady.” On some segregated cars, black women were forced from the “Ladies Car” to the “Smoker’s Car” or the “Colored Car.”

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73 Shange, for colored girls, 19: the lady in brown is “outside Chicago,” the lady in yellow “outside Detroit,” the lady in purple “outside Houston,” the lady in red “outside Baltimore,” the lady in green “outside San Francisco,” the lady in blue “outside Manhattan,” and the lady in orange “outside st. louis.”
74 Dixon Gottschild, The Black Dancing Body, 23-24
75 Dixon Gottschild 24
women were excluded from the category “lady,” and thus from the protections afforded by that term.” The “protections” about which Griffin speaks are not explicated, and leave room for interpretation as to what black women exactly needed protection from--what would being in the “Ladies Car” keep them from? This likely meant keeping them from experiencing things that would potentially jeopardize their standing or reputation as a lady, like sexual harassment or other forms of abuse. Black women, however, as Griffin notes, were not afforded this protection, and were instead relegated to spaces where they were not necessarily the safest for them, for the sake of accommodating white supremacy. Very literally here, is the policing of the black woman’s body through the regulation of space. A black woman during this time period was not allowed to be a woman in the same way that womanhood was understood for white women--a reality that affects their identity formation, as a person who is not fully a woman, but not fully black either.

With this very real discrimination trickling over into feminist and black art spaces alike, For Colored Girls’ necessity transcends its performance element, and becomes a very real space of sanctity and safety, where black women can achieve catharsis as the piece takes on the responsibility of providing recuperation and group therapy. Moving through their own sacred space in following the narrative of For Colored Girls, black women are allowed to feel, remember, and move through their hurts in identifying themselves within a group of similarly wounded black women, and finally finding spiritual wholeness within themselves. This attainment of self-actualization, or what the lady in red calls “finding god in [her]self,” is a spiritual awakening that behaves as the culminating act within the choreopoem’s grand effort in offering a healing space for black women. It is through the movement of the black female body through sacred space that spiritual fulfillment and self-love is realized.

76 Griffin 27
In analyzing this space as a performative element, Shange’s work, though intended for Colored Girls, still manages to simultaneously communicate to different people. Mae G. Henderson theorizes on this phenomena in black women’s writing in her book *Speaking in Tongues & Dancing Diaspora*:

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women’s writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the “other(s),” but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of the self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity.\(^7^7\)

Henderson is basically arguing that black women’s writing has the inherent ability to communicate effectively to many different people at once—from those who do not identify as black women, to black women themselves. The multiplicity implied in “the matrix of black female subjectivity” reveals that *For Colored Girls*’ aim is not to be monolithic, nor to offer a single counternarrative to the black woman’s experience, but to be a pluralistic narrative in this sense. In providing a space for black women to exist holistically, she is communicating Henderson’s “internal dialogue with the plural aspects of the self.” This complexity in dialogue is allowed because of the space, which had been deemed sacred and private as early as the beginning of the choreopoem with the lady in brown’s initial invitation and implication of the audience.

With movement conceived as both a social and physical phenomenon, dance becomes the perfect form through which both cultural and spiritual identity can be expressed in the space that has been created for black women. This is most evidently seen in the way that Africanist movements have been transformed over generations. P. Sterling Stuckey notes in his essay “Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance” that “just as [Africans] crossed actual boundaries in being brought to America, enough were able to make an imaginative retreat to the ancestral home to discover, in the Ring Shout, the ground of cultural oneness. This dance was known to most slaves, whose people had mainly come from

\(^{77}\) Henderson 60

sections of Africa in which, as the Circle Dance, it was associated with ancestral ceremonies…” His essay further purports this idea, analyzing in close detail the ways in which dances carried from Africa to the American slave south bore the essence of African spirituality and identity. The Circle Dance, as noted here, was culturally associated with paying homage to ancestors, a concept that was retained through the middle passage and infused into the essence of the Ring Shout. Both dances were meant to honor the spiritual--to recognize the self as only one part of a whole, and to honor the spirits of God and one another. Along these same lines, Stuckey comments that “circular dance was to suggest a certain wholeness that encouraged the spirit of community.”

This concept is seen very clearly in the choreopoem, as the Colored Girls support one another on stage shortly after the final monologue:

All of the ladies repeat to themselves softly the lines ‘i found god in myself & i loved her.’ It soon becomes a song of joy, started by the lady in blue. The ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks, the ladies enter into a closed tight circle.

In creating a circle and continuing to speak, this part of the poem is reminiscent of the slave Ring Shouts and the Circle Dance. With the Africanist principle of circular formation within dance, Shange’s piece is situated within a spiritual and dance tradition that is culturally and historically African. Within this model, the sacred and the secular meet through bodily movement coordinated in groups. The Circle Dance, then the Ring Shout, then the sacred space of Shange’s Colored Girls all perform the same function in their shared acknowledgement of the cultural and the spiritual as sites of forged community and shared identity.

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78 P. Sterling Stuckey, “Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance,” Dancing Many Drums, 44
79 Shange 88

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Moreover, this scene in the choreopoem forces the audience to see the body and the spirit as joint entities, rather than separate. As Brenda Dixon Gottschild notes, certain types of dance force us to “[interrogate] … spirit as [part] of the body, or [an] embodied [attribute].” Stuckey argues a similar point in his article, arguing that dance “is capable of inscribing in space the language of the human spirit.” He further states that:

Slaveholders never understood that a form of spirituality almost indistinguishable from art was central to the cultures from which blacks came. Distinguishing between the two for the African was like distinguishing between the sacred and the secular, and that distinction was not often made [...] This quality of culture helps explain why, for the descendants of Africa in America, the sacred so easily satisfied the deepest “secular” needs, and the two long remained the same when that which was sacred was labeled secular by outsiders.

In this sense, it is clear that African spirituality encompassed understanding of the self as both an inner and an outer being--as spirit and body. This understanding of self, then, for Stuckey explains the indistinguishable nature of the sacred and the secular amongst African-descended people in America, and why “the sacred so easily satisfie[s] the deepest “secular” needs.” These needs would undoubtedly include healing from trauma specific to raced and gendered oppression, healing that Shange’s Colored Girls so desperately need. These secular needs also extend to sexual violence and relational dysfunction. Whatever type they be, however, it is clear in the language used throughout *For Colored Girls*, that an Africanist ideal of spirituality is being summoned for healing purposes--an ideal seen in the choreography’s incorporation of distinctly Africanist concepts, but also in the poetry.

Shange uses religious/sacred language throughout *For Colored Girls*, implicitly signalling to Stuckey’s theorizing about African-descended spirituality as equal parts sacred and secular. This

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80 Dixon Gottschild 9
81 Stuckey 41
82 Stuckey 41

language is evident in the very first poem, performed by the lady in brown, during which she implores someone to “sing [to the black girl] the song of her possibilities/[to] sing a righteous gospel.” This opening poem, in foregrounding the context of the choreopoem itself, also explicitly identifies the needs of the Colored Girl based on the psychological and physical ailments she has endured—having been denigrated, downtrodden, and abused by both societal and individual forces, the black girl needs spiritual fulfillment within herself, delivered through “a righteous gospel.” This gospel, this truth, would have the ability to correct the skewed perception that the Colored Girl has of herself, and would also heal the wounds of past hurts. This sacred language is not solely meant to be poetic in sound, but is included due to its very real necessity in the lives of black women. The spiritual and the secular, as interconnected entities, are both vital to the healing process. This language is weaved throughout the choreopoem, and is especially apparent in the final poem, “a layin on of hands.”

“a layin on of hands,” as its title suggests, is reminiscent of language used within the Christian religious tradition before prayer. People “lay hands” on someone in need of something—whether that be healing, sustenance, deliverance from spiritual bondage, or a plethora of other things. Laying hands on someone is meant to emulate and activate the power of God represented through Jesus Christ, and is usually accompanied by a beseeching for His intervention in the lives of His servants. In this poem, though Christ is not entreated for assistance, the essence of necessity for spiritual healing and/or need is evident via the “layin on of hands.” As an ensemble piece, each character presents several lines of the poem, though some have more than others. The lady in red begins, clueing the audience into a spiritual void she has been experiencing, with the line “i waz missin somethin.”83 The other women chime in intermittently, noting collectively that the physical act of laying hands on another’s forehead has the

83 Shange 84

power to spiritually rejuvenate and revive these broken women. The lady in purple notes that healing could not even be found in “[her] mama/ holdin [her] tight/ sayin/[she’s] always gonna be her girl,” “not a layin on of bosom and womb,” but in “a layin on of hands/the holiness of [her]self released” This comparison offers a critical point in the commentary of the entire choreopoem. The lady in purple’s mother, a person from whom she has likely sought comfort and healing, is contrasted with the power of “a layin on of hands.”

The figure of the mother, often cross-culturally associated with emotional security and safety, nascence and love, having nurtured and cared for her child for most, if not all of their lives. the lady in purple acknowledges the healing power of the mother, in conveying for the audience the image of a child nestled on their mother’s chest and belly, being soothed by her encouraging words. We, as an audience, are meant to understand this as a healing process, likely having experienced it ourselves. However, this is not the prescribed resolution for the pain of these Colored Girls. The lady in purple yet implores for a “layin on of hands,” so that she can have “the holiness of [her]self released.” This statement speaks of the lady in red’s desire to be complete within herself. To release her own “holiness” would mean to have the spirit within her become one with the life that surrounds it. It would mean recognizing the perfection and completion that exists within her.

Though the maternal body is acknowledged as a site of spiritual and emotional nourishment--even development--it is the self that must ultimately do the healing for itself. In needing to have “the holiness of [themselves] released,” the Colored Girls must reconcile their hurt with their own individual power.

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84 Shange 85-86
85 Shange 88

understanding that they alone possess the ability to make themselves whole and complete. This is further understood vis a vis the lady in red’s closing monologue:

i sat up one nite walkin a boardin house
screamin/ cryin/ the ghost of another woman
who waz missin what i waz missin
i wanted to jump up outta my bones
& be done wit myself
leave me alone
& go on in the wind
it waz too much
i fell into a numbness
til the only tree i cd see
took me up in her branches
held me in the breeze
made me dawn dew
that chill at daybreak
the sun wrapped me up swingin rose light everywhere
the sky laid over me like a million men
i waz cold/ i waz burnin up/ a child
& endlessly weavin garments for the moon
wit my tears

i found god in myself
& i loved her/ i loved her fiercely

Here, we see the lady in red’s monologue begin tragically, with this spiritually bereft woman contemplating suicide. She, like the Colored Girls who have spoken before her, was “missin somethin,” something so crucial that it left her devoid of the desire to live. This emptiness led her to want “to jump up outta [her] bones/ & be done wit [her]self.” In a twist in the narrative arc of the poem, the lady in red “falls,” not off of a ledge as is initially implied, but into an emotional state that acts as a sort of refractory period after the poem’s initial depressive and suicidal episode. In this recuperative state, the lady in red is metaphorically cared for by Mother Nature, evident in the tree that “[takes her] up in [its] branches/ held [her] in the breeze” and “made [her] dawn dew.” This encounter with her natural surroundings allows the lady in red to “[find] god in [her]self” or attain spiritual self-realization.

86 Shange 87

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The maternal figure of nature, similarly to the physical mother mentioned by the lady in purple, catalyzes the lady in red’s healing process. However, the former is not necessarily an external factor in the self-actualization journey for the lady in red. Her experience with nature allows her to love herself, which points to the lady in red’s perceived oneness with nature. This woman, having within her the ability to give life as a maternal being herself, finds this same power exemplified in her surroundings—in trees, in the breezes, in sunlight—and begins to understand all of these elements as mutually inclusive of her own being as woman, especially as black woman. Shange notes in her autobiography that “[she] knew/’Negro’ women were beautiful/ could dance/ and manage headdresses” at a young age, revealing her capacity to see black women as having many abilities and playing many different roles in their own lives and in the lives of others. In realizing the oneness of herself, the lady in red recognizes that she does not have to be any “one” of these things, but can recognize herself as doer and inhabitor of all.

The process of self-actualization is also realized in the telling of her story, or the “testifying” that the lady in red does. Mae G. Henderson theorizes about the black woman and spirituality in her book *Speaking in Tongues & Dancing Diaspora: Black Women Writing and Performing*. She contextualizes much of the spiritual language she uses within the Pentecostal Holiness denomination of Christianity. For one, she argues that glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, “is a strategy by which [she] attempts to use a rite and figure of spiritual discourse to create a theoretical trope for black women’s praxis and literary discourse.” She means to say then, that she is using the language associated with the spiritual gift of speaking in other tongues, bestowed by the Holy Spirit, as an analytical lens through which black women’s voices can be understood and appreciated. She notes that “an emphasis on orality and literacy, speaking in tongues, spirituality, textual authority, personal testimony, and female participation are all

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87 Shange, *lost in language and sound*, 52
88 Henderson 7

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characteristically associated with the values and rituals of worship in the Sanctified Holiness Church,” and continues on to argue that “for black women writers, then, the spoken and written Word occupies a near sacred place [... because similarly to] the practice of tongue-speaking[, black women’s writing] embodies a form of expression and communication that privileges individual, firsthand experience,” or testimony. The lady in red’s monologue takes on an even more powerful tone, when considered through the lens suggested by Henderson. In simply telling her story, the lady in red’s voice is affirmed; because her “individual, firsthand experience” is privileged in the space she occupies, she simply has to speak for her words to be valuable. The same is true for Shange in inscribing these words onto paper--they are self-affirming, in that they become important as they come into being, as they are born before us as we read and/or watch them come forth. This reality reinforces the beauty and safety of the sacred space that Shange creates in affording these women the opportunity to share their stories honestly and uncensored in a way that allows for healing.

In the final scene of the choreopoem, the repeated mantra “i found god in myself & i loved her,” embodies the revolutionary aspect of the entire piece. The women repeat the lines to themselves until “it [...] becomes a song of joy, started by the lady in blue. The ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience.” The repeated line firstly takes on a poetic nature, in its anaphoric repetition. In choosing to recognize herself as a priority, the Colored Girl forsakes the role of background supporter in movements that only acknowledge black men or white women. The black woman takes center stage and loves herself primarily, and others secondarily. This is evident in the choreography’s description of the ladies “[singing] first to each other, then gradually to the audience.” While the choreopoem begins with the lady in brown speaking to the audience directly, it ends with the women acknowledging themselves

89 Henderson 7-8
90 Shange, for colored girls, 88

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and then the audience. The audience members are secondary figures in the Colored Girls’ journey to loving and appreciating themselves and one another.

Movement plays a critical role in the Colored Girl’s journey to this place of self-love—in both a historical context, and within the confines of *For Colored Girls*. In terms of the former, movement can be oppressive, often forcing the black woman to move to or away from places that threaten her. In terms of the former, however, movement acts as a healing process for black women everywhere. With the characters in the choreopoem moving across and on the stage throughout the sacred space that Shange creates in *For Colored Girls*, black women are allowed to both access and remove themselves from their collective and individual pain, ultimately moving on from it, or at least “toward the ends of their own rainbows.”
Conclusion

Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* is a testament to the phenomenal being of the black woman. With the power to transcend its reach of the target audience that the title suggests and touch people farther outside of the sacred space intended for Shange’s Colored Girls, For Colored Girls manages to hold resonance and maintain its acclaim throughout the years. Though this truth is undoubtedly important, what is most amazing about *For Colored Girls*, is the work that it does for black women in providing a language, name, and space through which the black woman’s multiple identities can be fully realized and embraced.

The language of choreopoetry, the lineage of Corpoetic Articulation, and the sacred nature of space and movement are just some of the rich findings within critiques of *For Colored Girls*. Each section offers a new, revitalizing way of viewing Shange’s revolutionary work, in ways not necessarily considered in the Shange criticism as it stands. Those critics who do attempt to engage *For Colored Girls* focus entirely on race, gender, and/or spirituality. While these are critical aspects of the piece, no work has been able to fully engage the many layers of Shange’s *For Colored Girls*. This gap in criticism has persisted the forty-some years that the choreopoem has existed, despite its continued, vibrant life within the African American literary canon.

With Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* resting at a critical nexus of black feminist art, it is a surprising that her work has gone relatively understudied in the aforementioned manners, but also more generally, over the years. Shange’s work has

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91 Lynn F. Miller, Review of *For Colored Girls*
92 Neal A. Lester, “Shange’s Men: for colored girls Revisited, and Movement Beyond;” This article deals with and refutes much of the criticism claiming that Shange’s for colored girls was an attempt to demonize the black man, and to “air out” the communities dirty laundry through said demonization.
93 Dara Tafakari Green, “‘How We Got Ovah:’ Afrocentric Spirituality in Black Arts Movement Women’s Poetry” thesis discusses about spirituality throughout, along with intersections of race and gender.

been narrowly confined to African American literary studies, though the choreopoem has made significant contributions to dance studies and theater studies as well. Moreover, it has made contributions to the larger American literary canon, though it is not recognized or taught within that genre. The benefits of intently and diligently studying Shange’s *For Colored Girls* provides substantial opportunity for academia to reinvigorate its concept of knowledge. As a piece that is fundamentally interdisciplinary, Shange’s work comments on society in a variety of angles—through several mediums, in a way that acts as a precursor to our concept of what “interdisciplinary” means. Shange herself notes that black people embody “an interdisciplinary culture/ [because] we understand more than verbal communication,” and that this truth “lays a weight on afro-american writers that few others are lucky enough to have been born into.” ⁹⁴ Studying Shange would stretch the confines of even this concept, which implies its malleability, but can still often be confining. *For Colored Girls* begs us to continue working with the idea of interdisciplinary art generation and criticism, so that we can develop a better understanding of what true knowledge looks like—holistic and transcendent.

Additionally, the art form the Shange uses throughout—the choreopoem—is in need of more attention as well. As a very fitting style of expression for black women’s stories, the choreopoem seems at its onset in 1976 to be a stylistic savior of the black woman. However, since its inception, little to no artists have emulated the form, or at least that to replicate the genre’s title. There is irony in calling “choreopoem” a genre, when the choreopoem is in fact the antithesis of genre, not confined to one thing but ascribing and acknowledging, many “things” and art forms. It is an anti-genre that has gone underutilized in the forty-odd years it has claimed existence. In large part, the main artist associated with the form is Ntozake Shange herself, who wrote several other choreopoems throughout her career.

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⁹⁴ Shange, *lost in language and sound*, 16

It is possible that the form, having been popularized by *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rianbow is Enuf*, reached its zenith in appeal during the run the show had on broadway. Maybe the choreopoem has not been picked up because Shange did not make it large enough of a “thing” through the works she created after *For Colored Girls*. Her lesser known choreopoems, namely *spell # 7* is said to be “sharper, wittier, and more unforgiving of dominant culture,” though it “never received the critical acclaim of *for colored girls.*” Shange’s following works, though equal in content, did not reach the level of prominence of *For Colored Girls*, and could thus not continue the limelighted legacy that it had presented. The choreopoem’s popularity, then, waned as the years passed and so, too, did its appeal as a form.

Its usefulness, however, cannot be underestimated. As a form that, due to its interdisciplinary nature, is highly intersectional, it would work well for any artist seeking to express their idea of the intersectional politic and/or safe space. One such example would be an activist who identifies with the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The movement, sparked in 2012 after the death of Trayvon Martin, has been used in acknowledging slain, usually unarmed black men at the hands of white vigilantes and police officers. The hashtag, however, is often co-opted for these male figures, though black women created it and remain unacknowledged in its use. This is compounded by the fact that these women, similarly to the Black Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, remain the driving force behind the movement itself. Shange’s *For Colored Girls*, then, is not only still relevant in its message and necessity, but also continues to provide the language, naming, and spacing through which black women can figure themselves into a narrative that befits their courage and beauty.
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