THE SUBLIMINAL TO THE REAL: MUSICAL REGENERATION IN NTOZAKE SHANGE'S *BOOGIE WOOGIE LANDSCAPES*

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The basis for Ntozake Shange's poetic style--her choreopoem--is apparent in her insistence that Black writers revive "the most revealing moments from lives spent in nonverbal activity," since it is through nonverbal activity--music, song, dance/movement, ritual--that "black people have conquered their environments/ or at least their pain."[1] To preserve this ceremonial ideal, Shange creates a liberated stage space in which theatrical styles and themes are explored, overcoming the limitations of dialogue and realism. She relies on indigenous folklore by applying ritual and ceremony--"the way we worship"--to her drama.[2] Separating these components would deny African-Americans a theatrical heritage emphasizing collective participation, celebration, and action-inducing genres. To ignore them, Shange observes, would be to sell "ourselves & our legacy quite cheaply/ since we are trying to make our primary statements with somebody else's life/ & somebody else's idea of a perfect play."[3]

Shange recommends revising stereotypes of Blacks as singers and dancers, rather than discarding them. As Margaret Wilkerson has noted, African music, with "its complex, phonetic reproduction of words and its polyphonic and contrapuntal rhythmic structures," offers creative material for African-American dramatists seeking "new ways of conceptualizing music as

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[1]Ntozake Shange, "Unrecovered Losses/Black Theatre Traditions," The Black Scholar 10 (July-August 1979): 7-9.

[2]Ntozake Shange, Interview, In the Memory and Spirit of Frances, Zora, and Lorraine: Essays and Interviews on Black Women Writing, ed. Juliette Bowles (Howard, Washington D.C.: Institute for the Arts and the Humanities, 1979) 24.

[3]Shange, "Unrecovered Losses," 8.

an element of drama."[4] Shange seems to share this view as well as that of Barbara Ann Teer who believes that, as powerful religious forces, music and dance explicate Black people's spiritual and primal well-being.[5]

The presence of dance, song, music, poetry, and ceremony in Shange's work dramatizes a continuity of culture from Africa to Black America, citing Africa as a distant but "accessible" homeland and identity source. Assessing Shange's technique, Elizabeth Brown-Guillory writes: "not only did she popularize the choreopoem, but she brought to the American theater an art that is undeniably African."[6] Shange's drama is committed "to recuperating marginalized folk traditions of 'New World' Africans and of women in general."[7] Her choreopoem sustains the vibrant theatrical form that she prescribes and initiates a revolutionary phase in the African-American quest for a functional theatre.

In redesigning a non-linear dramatic pattern that distorts an oppressive language and dialogue tradition, Shange obscures the progression of action and character. Her adherence to non-linearity is rooted in her belief that drama can relay diverse, though related, themes through several voices and individual representations. In searching for new theatrical forms, Shange creates a musical quality offering its audience a "reverie" of the type commonly relayed during a musical performance.[8] Shange suggests:

> we demolish the notion of straight theater for a decade or so. refuse to allow playwrights to work without dancers and musicians/ 'coon' shows were somebody else's idea/ we have integrated the notion that drama must be words/ with no music & no dance/ cuz that wd take away the seriousness of the event/ cuz we all remember too well/ the chuckles & scoffs at the notion that all niggers cd sing & dance/ & most of us can sing & dance/. . . this is a cultural reality. this is why i find the most inspiring theater among us to be in the realms of music & dance.[9]

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[4]Margaret Wilkerson, "Music as Metaphor: New Plays of Black Women" in Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989) 62.

[5]Barbara Ann Teer, Interview, Blacklines 2 (Spring 1973): 25.

[6]Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 41.

[7]Sandra Richards, "Under the 'Trickster's' Sign: Towards a Reading of Ntozake Shange and Femi Osofisan" in Critical Theory and Performance, ed. Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992) 68.

[8]Shange, Memory and Spirit, 23.

[9]Shange, "Unrecovered Losses," 8.

Music and dance in Shange's drama function as in traditional African performance. Apart from retaining ties with Africa, dance, like music, serves as a cathartic and freeing agent--a defense mechanism. Recalling her dance training in San Francisco, Shange claims:

> with dance I discovered my body more intimately than I had imagined possible. With the acceptance of the ethnicity of my thighs & backside, came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman & as a poet. The freedom to move in space . . . insisted that everything African, everything halfway colloquial, a grimace, a strut, an arched back over a yawn, waz mine.[10]

To fully explore Black nonverbal resources, Shange endorses a theatre of "more than verbal communication," one that appeals to all the physical senses and celebrates the "interdisciplinary culture" of Black Americans.[11] Reconstructing standard English usage, Shange uses language to bolster her theatrical liberty. She does not use a Black English or idiom comparable to Ebonics.[12] Instead, she applies a colloquial, metaphoric, rhythmic style that complements the musicality of her drama. Shange's English is not "Black," it is a personal construct avouching her own cultural, dramatic, and feminist self. She liberates herself from the language of her oppressor. After the production of *spell #7* in 1979, Shange responded to a New York reviewer who claimed that she had done the English language much damage:

> the man who thought i wrote with intentions of outdoing the white man in the acrobatic distortions of english waz absolutely correct. i cant count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language that i waz taught to hate myself in . . . being an afro-american writer is something to be self-conscious abt/ & yes/ . . . i haveta fix my tool to my needs/ . . . so that the malignancies/ fall away/ leaving us space to literally create our own image.[13]

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[10]Shange, Preface, for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf (New York: Macmillan, 1975) xv-xvi.

[11]Shange, "Unrecovered Losses," 8.

[12]Ebonics is a combination of "ebony" and "phonics" or "Black Sounds." Popularized in the 1970s, Ebonics embraces the verbal, nonverbal, and gestural communicative patterns systematically employed by African-Americans.

[13]Ntozake Shange, Foreword, Three Pieces (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981) xii.

Sandra Richards notes how the women of Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* can "bypass, through music and dance, the limitations of social and human existence."[14] Music, movement and song "convey layers of sensate information lying beyond or outside linguistic, cerebral dimensions of the brain."[15] Playwrights like Shange "find in music a second language that gives expression to profound anguish and joy of their vision and experience . . . finding in the dissonant tones of black music a powerful expressive mode."[16] Not always utilitarian, Shange's music punctuates action with *life*, fashioning a *total* theatre that appeals to all the senses, stimulating audience involvement.

boogie woogie landscapes[17]

Structured on the boogie-woogie--a piano-playing method evolving from jazz and blues, and sometimes described as "up-tempo" blues[18]--Shange's *boogie woogie landscapes* (1979) is an expressionistic and fantasy representation filtered through the random thoughts, reveries, visions, hopes, "combat breath," internal conflicts and memories of the play's single "real" character, layla. The notion of boogie-woogie as speeded-up blues reflects the play's rendition of the central character's thought process in quick succession. Dealing with correlating themes in different parts of *landscapes*, Shange deviates from the traditional beginning, middle, and end arrangement, presenting her subject matter via the spontaneous thought process of the boogie-woogie. Her approach foregrounds random unresolved themes of color, racism, sexism, and ignorance, all of which filter through layla's mental state. Hope is eventually, but subtly, foreseen in the efficacy of music.

An adaptation of the choreopoem, *landscapes* resembles *colored girls* in its use of unreal, symbolic characters;[19] de-emphasis on dialogue; flashbacks; episodic renditions; and portrayal of themes and subthemes in imagistic monologues. As in *colored girls*, major themes center around Blacks, especially Black women and girls. Unlike *colored girls*, however, "characters" here are not only women; there are men who interact with

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[14]Sandra L. Richards, "Conflicting Impulses in the Plays of Ntozake Shange," Black American Literature Forum 17 (Summer 1983): 73.

[15]Richards, "Conflicting Impulses," 76.

[16]Wilkerson, 62.

[17]Capitalization of titles and character names are consistent with those in Shange's published versions of her work.

[18]Ortiz M. Walton, Music: Black, White and Blue (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1972) 31.

[19] Layla is "attended" by six night-life companions (n.l.c.'s)--three women and three men--who represent her dream memories.

women, and there are occasional instances of actual dialogue. So, *landscapes* is not a choreopoem in the original sense displayed in *colored girls*. This slight shift in form shows a gradual, though not strictly chronological, progression from the choreopoem to other forms, creating space to explore varied themes and skills.

While *landscapes* is technically set in layla's bedroom, the real "landscape" lies within her head. This mental process, both conscious and unconscious, grows out of a hostile racist and sexist setting and is relayed in quick, stream-of-consciousness succession, suggesting speed and kinesis. The caustic revelations handed out by layla are surprisingly direct. As Shange notes, the voices of layla's "unconsciousness" are "unspeakable realities/ for no self-respecting afro-american girl wd reveal so much of herself of her own will/ there is too much anger to handle assuredly/ too much pain to keep on truckin/ less ya bury it."[20]

Shange's unique structure shocks her reader/audience into appraising the consequences of racial abuse and the macabre results of violating women. Layla is conditioned by a racist discourse which sees America in terms of two main colors, denying her the opportunity to recognize and pursue numerous colors--the vast resources that comprise human existence. Addressing this problem, night-life companion (n.l.c.) #2 points out that "she never thought people places or ideas were anything/ but black & white."[21] N.l.c. #1 further explains the insecurities, fears, and restraint of this color dilemma in layla's life: "her most serious problem is how/ to stop walking on this road the/ color of pitch/ . . . she is trapped in black & white/ without shadows/ she cannot lean against anything/ the earth has no depth because she cannot hold it" (114). Layla's life is empty and without substance. Although she attempts to go beyond black and white, she remains obsessed with the limitations of color and the dissonance that comes with this obsession. She either "howls/ for anything red" or she "wd have a fierce yellow" (115). A restrictive color-conscious life generates self-hatred in layla who periodically detests the fact that she is Black. Her phobia for her Black self is exhibited in her constant belief that she stains anything she touches "with grime" and "a furrow of slate fingerprints" with which "she made things black" (115). N.l.c. #6 observes: "she didnt want anything as black as the palms of her hands to touch her" (115).

Layla's attempts at escaping her insecurities are relayed through flashback and mime by the n.l.c.s. While her goals are worthwhile, they are subsumed in her passion for colors. In her desire to learn more, she carries out a bizarre ritual in which she eats books, gothic novels, and "the black & white pages" of newspapers, remaining confined to her perceptions of black

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[20]Shange, Three Pieces, xiv.

[21]Ntozake Shange, boogie woogie landscapes (1979) in Three Pieces (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981) 114. All subsequent references are to this edition.

and white (116). While "reading" does not provide escape from layla's color-stifled life, she finds new hope in a spiritual realm when she discovers Jesus. Through Christ she seems to find a huge range of unexplored "dimensions/ & hope, . . . horizons . . . different dawns" (117). For once, layla recognizes and relates to a variety of colors, accepting herself without fear and with excitement: "she studied the legs & arms of herself/ the hair & lips of herself/ before the burst of spirit let her hold herself" (116-7).

But layla's immersion in religion is a bland exercise devoid of profound liturgic healing. For one, she cannot escape her entrapment in color concepts. Such experimentation with "jesus" fails to erase the racist and sexist mutilations on her psyche or the psyches of her degenerate, loveless family. Her gnarled rite-of-passage away from fulfillment evolves into a nightmarish desire to save her family and Black people from the shackles of color which repress her. The n.l.c.s express this dilemma when they recall a violent racist attack on layla's brothers and sisters. At this point, the optimistic color images associated with layla's religious gambit revert to discordant images, expunging any possibility for religious growth. Once again she becomes the black-staining organism devoid of racial confidence. Increasingly captivated by images of blood--"scarlet" and "red"--she desperately attempts to rescue the "little black things" who are "charred" by "scrawny cheap white men" (118). The abuse and subsequent reduction of layla's siblings to a less-than-human state is reiterated in her allusion to them as "little black things." This racist attack merges the discordant images of color with the dehumanizing effects of hate on the individual and the family. As the n.l.c.s reenact the White supremacist chant--"niggahs/ niggahs/ go home/ go home/ niggahs!" (118)--the ultimate feeling of alienation is aroused, even as layla tries in vain to reassure her brothers and sisters. Again, colors evoke the permeating disenchantment. While orange and yellow are metaphors for hope, such optimism is eclipsed by more volatile and bloody images elicited by red and scarlet which comprise "a cacophony of colors" (119).

A deeper appraisal of layla's arduous and degenerate family life occurs in a flashback acted out by n.l.c.s #1, #2, and #3. Within the family, layla is introduced to racism, police harrassment, and the division of the world into colored and white. The task of raising children is left in the hands of a tiring, hostile grandma because mommy and daddy are rarely present; "mommy" finally leaves the madhouse because she cannot cope with her mischevious children and the several maids hired to stabilize her family. Within this labyrinth, layla learns to steal and peek at Regina, a maid, when she has sex with Roscoe. She learns to accept another maid, Carrie, as her role model since her own parents fail to offer her the incentive she desperately needs. She is crushed, therefore, when Carrie goes to jail for cutting someone. Memories of past family life come to this vehement halt, fitting well into the abrasive climate of the drama.

The gruesome impact of a life of racial entrapment, family disintegration, and self-hate induces a chain reaction where the simple ability to appreciate love is lost even while it is coveted. In a brief drama where

n.l.c. #4 expresses love toward layla, using imagery-rich poetry to eulogize her beauty, layla's responses exemplify the loss of human affection. She incessantly reminds n.l.c. #4 that her humanity is sucked dry by race, color, violence, and sexual tensions. Her depraved history is a heavy load that she cannot shed: "i am sometimes naked/ but mostly i wear my past/ the pinafores & white socks that shamed me" (122). Subsumed within this debauched, bloody epoch, layla grows to accept her background as normal: "i sleep more easily now/ my love in that scarlet cup" (122).

While, on one level, layla's rejection of n.l.c. #4's advances implies her self-denial of basic human traits, Shange extols this denial as a vital step toward resisting sexual molestation. Incensed by n.l.c. #4's love overtures, two women, n.l.c. #1 and n.l.c. #3, approach layla with a range of aggressive proposals for deterring rapists, proposals already being executed in "cuba where rape is treason" (123).

More poignant attention is paid to the plight of women--girls in particular--when issues of infibulation, clitorectomy, forced marriage, polygamy and incest are raised. Shange expands her theme to include Black women and women/girls from a variety of backgrounds. Her language is straightforward and coarse:

> societies usedta throw us away/ or sell us/ or play with our vaginas/ cuz that's all girls were good for. at least women cd carry things & cook/ . . . i wish it waz gd to be born a girl everywhere/ then i wd know for sure that no one wd be infibulated/. . . . infibu-lation is sewing our vaginas up with cat-gut or weeds or nylon thread to insure our virginity . . . . we've been excised. had our labia removed with glass or scissors. . . . we've lost our clitoris because our pleasure is profane & the presence of our naturally evolved clitoris wd disrupt the very unnatural dynamic of polygamy. . . . we're sewn-up/ cut-up/ pared down & sore if not dead/ & oozing pus/ . . . & STILL . . . afraid to walk the streets or stay home at night.
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> [135]

Using n.l.c. #3, Shange's sermon on the mental, physical, and social agony informing female sexual desecration voices a ritual of terror and distress in which girls are ultimate losers. Their defilement is compounded by their susceptibility to family estrangement, death, and blame. More disconcerting is the truth that "attackers/ molesters & rapists . . . are proliferating at a rapid rate" and, on too many occasions, they "like raping & molesting their family members better than a girl-child they don't know yet" (136).

Female victimization persists in the ritual climb from girl to woman. In a scene where n.l.c. #3, as layla, is depicted as having undergone the passage from girl to wife, images of death and decay explicate her condition. Her husband, n.l.c. #4, describes their children as "ghost children . . .

swallowed/ like placenta/ . . . when you rear yr young in dark closets" (136). The family is in a wretched state and layla, now bereft of her father, mother, and sisters, bears the majority of its burden, laboring to attend to her husband and children's needs. n.l.c. #4 admits:

> like a stray cat she waited on me . . . she leaned/ over steaming laundry/ the baby the father/ & the graves. . . . she waited/ her hair so heavy/ her head hung down to fondle the baby/ warm the baby.
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> [136-7]

Shange merges racism and sexism as two variations of a single phenomenon. In concentrating on gender matters, she momentarily drops her manipulation of color symbolism, refocusing on the general decay in human values. Events filtering through layla's consciousness and unconsciousness expand beyond African-American society to embrace humanity. The world is portrayed as hypocritical, pretentious, and spiritually-deficient. The daily "elegance" that we witness and appreciate is a shadow of the real depreciation: "elegant hoodlums/ elegant intellectuals/ . . . elegant derelicts/ elegant surgeons/ elegant trash. elegant priests/ elegant dieticians/ elegant nymphomaniacs/ . . . elegance. elegance. elegance" (140).

In her final chant, layla's insightful alliance with the musicians and n.l.c.s provokes her awareness of a pervasive desire for harmony. She discerns the human tendency to engage in "struggle" and "merge in our eccentricity/ this penchant for the right to live" (141). At the end of *landscapes* layla's trust is embedded in the attainment of a spiritual realm represented by music. Dance and music are restorative instruments of hope, strength, and the communication of key moods and tensions. Out of the six n.l.c.s four are required to sing, move and/or dance well. Layla also entertains "a trio of musicians . . . who reflect her consciousness. . .[and who] side with the night-life interlopers, attempting to refine layla's perceptions of herself and her past," rather than just entertaining her (113). The musicians and n.l.c.s suggest the presence of spirits and this fantasy dynamic evolves into concrete reality as they constantly move around and "thru the walls" of layla's bedroom (113). In this ritualized arena, the spiritual and natural worlds merge.

Music pervades the drama as a theatrical and uplifting device; it reclaims a sacred mode, healing and transcending the mundane world. At the beginning of *landscapes*, layla returns from a disco accompanied by her background theme song. She hints at music as a redeeming symbol:

> dontcha wanna be music/ . . . dontcha wanna
> be daybreak & ease into a fog/ a cosmic event like sound/ & rain
>
> . . . .
>
> like when a woman can walk down gold street

feeling like she's moved to atlantis . . .
it's what we call a marin intrusion
interlopin visions & deities findin the way home
cuz we dont recognize what's sacred anymore

[113]

The refrain of "music," "fog," "cosmic event," and "rain" resurfaces throughout the play. Music is repeatedly alluded to as a source for deliverance, the only factor in the play that comes close to regaining a lost spirituality: "music offers solace/ offers some kinda way to reach out/ to ring bells on gold street/ . . . to be free/ in truth/ in silence" (120).

To heighten the role of music as a participatory ceremony for change, the n.l.c.s take part in an orgiastic fanfare during which they completely immerse themselves in music as they dance, sing selected songs, chart the development of musical forms from "neo-afrikan" to "rock n roll," and mark the significance of artists like Sun-Ra and Ike Turner (126-9). The ceremony substantiates the sacred role of music, a role that dogmatic religion does not accomplish: "shall i go to jonestown or the disco?/ if jesus wont fix it/ the deejay will" (138). Shange implies that, perhaps, mind and body will find salvation in the blending of music and the divine. As n.l.c. #1 puts it: "at the disco we shout the praises of the almighty/ i wrap my arms around you till the end" (139). On their own, music and the divine are deficient. At the disco there is the potential to "dance myself to death" while isolated religion becomes little more than a series of downcast, barren screams: "shout hallelujah/ praise the lord/ shout hallelujah/ praise the lord" (140). Rather than completely discredit Christianity, Shange underscores the integral need to reconstruct its structure by applying the recuperative role of music so that the religion addresses and appeals to the sensibilities and sociopolitical needs of Black people.

Music is not only a symbol, it is a pathway to the type of ceremonial drama that Shange endorses. This drama will shun trivialities and advance viable themes, just as Shange calls for the news media to eschew petty information and focus on issues like Zimbabwean independence, the isolation of White South Africans, and the education of African-American children (125-6). Music does not provide total regeneration in *landscapes*, but it remains the cardinal metaphor for ritual growth and freedom, the type of freedom Shange anticipates for all girls:

> right now being born a girl is to be born threatened; i want being born a girl to be a cause for celebration/ cause for protection & nourishment of our birthright/ . . . we pay for being born girls/ but we owe no one anything/ not our labia, not our clitoris, not our lives. we are born girls to live to be women who live our own lives/ to live our lives. to have/ our lives/ to live. [136]

Conclusion

Shange is a gifted dramatic poet whose feminist rhetoric blends with her entrancing musical poetry to mold a fascinating style and powerful vision. She harmonizes music, dance, poetry, and movement to express her views on the effects of racism, sexism, poverty, and spiritual decay on women, Blacks, relationships, art, and life's energies. Shange is pivotal to a growing socioartistic trend in which women of color "assert their very presence . . . become warriors raging against their own invisibility."[22]

Shange makes pronounced contributions to the Black Aesthetic and its efforts to break down conventional walls. Sandra Richards observes that Shange's deviation from conventional realistic styles is influenced, in part, by Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" and Baraka's "Black Revolutionary Theatre." Like both artists, Shange exhibits "a locus for emotionally charged, eruptive forces which assault social complacency to expose victims who, nevertheless, contain within themselves seeds of their own regeneration."[23] The religio-ritualistic role of music is germane to the attainment of this "emotional charge."

Music, dance/movement, and song are used profoundly "as spirit-forces. . . [which] amplify, contradict, or reaffirm the spoken word."[24] Such African-based nonverbal tools ritualize Shange's drama and guide her ritual participants--both players and observers--to new insights. This ritual approach to Black drama, a concept promoted in the 1960s, borrows and reapplies the sacred, spiritual, and communal significance of traditional African performance in a new setting. The process harmonizes with E. T. Kirby's description of indigenous African dramatic ritual as "abstract or symbolic actions arranged in a pattern and progression that approaches closer to that which is fundamentally ritual as it becomes more highly controlled and precise in execution."[25] Shange equally displays a penchant for discarding concepts of time and space as she conveys random and fragmented, yet controlled and coherent thoughts.

Moments of possession are attained as Shange's themes, language, visual and musical effects arrest the senses of her audiences, startling them into consciousness. This overall ritual impact is sustained in the incantatory and telegraphic properties of her intense musical poetry, confirming Jane Splawn's point that poetry contributes to "a more ritualistic effect than is

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[22]Mary K. DeShazer, "Rejecting Necrophilia: Ntozake Shange and the Warrior Re-Visioned" in Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989) 87.

[23]Richards, "Conflicting Impulses," 76.

[24]Richards, "Conflicting Impulses," 76.

[25]E. T. Kirby, "Indigenous African Theatre," The Drama Review 18 (December 1974): 24.

achieved through the use of naturalistic/realistic dialogue."[26] While Shange confronts critical themes, she also mourns the loss of a strong, indigenous, religious culture which her theatre strives to recover.

[26]Jane Splawn, "Rites of Passage in the Writing of Ntozake Shange: The Poetry, Drama, and Novels" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1988) 100.