

From Seeking One's Voice to Uttering the Scream: The Pioneering Journey of African American Women Playwrights through the 1960s and 1970s

No Black woman even like nowadays tells you things you're familiar with, like Black women have problems. In a family situation, I'm talking about a classic, if you understand what I'm saying, a classic Black woman figure. Showing her not just surviving, yet surviving, not just being but being, but also not just being a slave but you know still being a slave, not just being a whole but just the Black woman in all her majesty. The Black woman in all her non-majesty as well. The Black woman surviving yet not surviving but being. If that makes any kind of sense. (Sanchez 163)

The 1960s and 1970s were undoubtedly two of the most important and productive decades in African American history and the arts. During this period, black artists in general, and black women in particular, expressed their needs in new aesthetic and linguistic venues that gave expression to their real feelings. Black theater became the literary vehicle of choice for many African male and female artists. The Black Theater Movement of the 1960s¹ in the United States emerged as the African American artists' venue for re-visioning and re-constructing their community's history, culture, and art—for developing a black aesthetics apart from Western parameters. Following the aesthetic concerns and artistic manifestations of the Black Theater Movement in the 1960s, African American women began a search to find their own voices within their communities, adding a gender perspective that widened and completed the delineation established by male theater artists. These two decades were pivotal in erecting the foundations for the development of the subsequent theater created by African American women.

This study focuses on four African American women playwrights as representatives and pioneers of black women's searching journey into the theater and into their selves: Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, Aishah Rahman, and Alexis De Veaux. These playwrights' exploratory journey began with the recognition and examination of the anguish enmeshed in their silent voices, which can be observed in Sarah's split personality between the black and white worlds in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964). Once pain had been confronted, black women felt the need to utter it in unison with their sisters, as one can see in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (first presented in Berkeley in 1974), where dance conveys a celebration of unity and hope. And it is Aishah Rahman, in *Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land, While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage* (1977), who actually represents African American women's *scream* by focusing on the pain suffered by young unwed women—unfinished women—in juxtapo-

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sition with Charlie Parker's music, whose saxophone acts as a baby's cry, uttering these women's tribulations. Finally, Alexis De Veaux in *The Tapestry* (1975) presents the path followed by the new African American woman, already aware of her daily striving to survive, by examining the individual woman as a social, political, and sexual being while trying to find new dimensions to her relationships with family, tradition, friends, and lover. As a group, these writers reveal the African American woman's progression from the detection and recognition of pain to its verbalization and, subsequently, to self-affirmation through a wide range of dramatic means, thereby contributing to the re-mapping of theater conceptions. As a result, these playwrights have become the forerunners of contemporary African American theater written, directed, and performed by women.

Introduction

The need to achieve a position of power, the need for the writers to express themselves in their own voices, and the need to gain self-esteem by presenting a complex perspective that reconstructs black women's history against oppression and stereotyping—these are the issues presented by Sonia Sanchez in the epigraph to this essay. Although there have been many African American women writers throughout North American literary history, only after the 1950s did their voices begin to be heard beyond their community's boundaries (Wilkerson, *Nine* 19). Alice Childress's *Trouble in Mind* won an Obie Award for the best off-Broadway production in 1956, and in 1959 Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* became the first play written by a black woman to be produced on Broadway and to obtain the New York Drama Critics Award. During the 1960s, Adrienne Kennedy built upon

Hansberry's theatrical success. Kennedy's plays, however, offered a new dimension not expressed until then in theatrical terms: the naked internal anguish and pain of being a black woman living in the United States. According to African American poet and essayist June Jordan, women releasing their rage and anger instead of keeping it bottled up inside represents a fundamental step in the process of women's achieving self-determination:

If somebody is trying to hurt you, to oppress you, you *should* be angry, and you should put that anger where it belongs—outside yourself. . . . I tried to show as clearly as I could that the difference between South Africa and rape and my mother trying to change my face and my father wanting me to be a boy was not an important difference to me. *It all violates self-determination.* (qtd. in De Veaux 139; emphasis added)

Author Audre Lorde, referring to the anger caused by racism, equally asserts that it is crucial that any discussion of this issue among women should be creative and direct, and include the recognition as well as the use of anger, with the main purpose being change (see Case 99). The Black Arts Movement promoted ethnic awareness and self-reflection in order to expose the contradictions existing within the North American socio-political system, as well as the contradictions within African American communities themselves. However, the Black Arts and Black Theater Movements were mainly concerned with the effort to define a black aesthetics that could, in turn, help define African American artistic production and, in that way, help achieve self-determination and a restoration of the community's history.² But gender issues were not often included within this agenda.

According to African American theater critic Margaret Wilkerson, the African American woman has played an important role in changing her social milieu, since she was the mid-wife who helped give birth to the Black

and Women's Liberation Movements (*Nine* xiii).³ On the other hand, the Black Arts and Black Liberation Movements of the 1960s also familiarized African American women with the language of protest, feminist concepts, political organization, and ethnic consciousness, thereby helping to usher in the Black Women's Movement in the United States (Case 100). Aware of the parameters formulated by the Black Arts, Black Liberation, and Women's Movements, African American women applied them to their gendered and racially inflected socio-political situation as they searched to find their own space.

Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* asserts that "it is in the emergence of interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective cultural values are negotiated. How are subjects formed 'in between,' or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.?)" (2). African American female playwrights, as *displaced* and invisible beings, made an attempt to *redescribe* their cultural presence and *reinscribe* their human experiences in their artistic quest⁴ to find a place they could call their own (see Bhabha 7). In the process of reconstructing their identities, these playwrights created female characters that, according to Claudia Tate, go through an inner search before they find important links with other people. African American heroines are aware that, before they can establish solid relationships with others, they must go through profound self-introspection to understand their life conditions (xxi-xxii). Moreover, subjectivity and identity formation are closely connected to the concepts of *place* and *displacement*, which show the complex interaction of history, environment, and language that one encounters in examining the lives and experiences of colonized people (Ashcroft, *Reader* 177). And it is self-introspection and consciousness—about being black women—that helped

African American playwrights explore new social and theatrical spaces/places in the process of re-constructing their identities—as black women and as artists.

The absence of an appropriate location that black women could call their own throughout North American history has deprived them of the necessary freedom to develop their true selves and their theatrical artistry—i.e., dramatic language and visual images which highlight the importance of the *politics of location* when examining plays written by African American women. Carole Boyce Davies outlines the multiple layers conveyed in the meaning of *location*:

The politics of location brings forward a whole host of identifications and associations around concepts of place, placement, displacement; location, dislocation; memberment, dis-memberment; citizenships, alienness; boundaries, barriers, transportations; peripheries, cores and centers. It is about positionality in geographic, historical, social, economic, educational terms. It is about *positionality in society* based on class, gender, sexuality, age, income. It is also about relationality and the ways in which one is able to access, mediate or *reposition oneself*, or pass into other spaces given certain other circumstances. (153; emphasis added)

In their exploratory journey to *reposition* themselves as black women and as playwrights, Kennedy, Shange, Rahman, and De Veaux create a new dramatic language that abandons the traditional realistic style utilized by the majority of North American playwrights until then. Kennedy is actually the pioneer in experimenting with an avant-garde theater which opened the door to new venues in creating theatrical conceptions later developed by Shange, Rahman, and De Veaux—as well as by contemporary African American female playwrights who have added dance and music as essential elements of their plays.

As expressed by Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skins, White Masks*, African American playwrights ana-

lyzed in this study are "not merely here-and-now into nothingness." They are in the world in which they travel, endlessly shaping themselves and, consequently, initiating a *cycle of freedom* (Fanon 218, 229, 231). It is, then, in the 1960s and 1970s that African American female playwrights initiated a search, a cycle of artistic freedom whose foundation is still acknowledged in the experimental theater that contemporary African American artists continue to write, direct, and/or perform today. Kennedy, Shange, Rahman, and De Veaux were equally pioneers in breaking the silence African American

women had been forced to maintain until then, unveiling hidden/private truths which are expressed in the stories told in their plays, and making of *storytelling* an "act of resistance to oppression" (Mahone xviii) and a healing balm to their hidden wounds.

Adrienne Kennedy

When studying the writing of African American women playwrights, besides being aware of their immense strength and courage in facing a hostile and racist socio-political environment and attempting to overcome it through their writing, it is critical to consider that theater (playwriting, directing, and/or acting) is the most public of all literary genres; consequently, the theatrical genre complicated the efforts of women playwrights seeking to negotiate this hostile environment in voicing their needs and demands.⁵ I would dare say that, during the 1960s, it was Adrienne Kennedy who best manifested her

As a group, these writers reveal the African American woman's progression from the detection and recognition of pain to its verbalization and, subsequently, to self-affirmation through a wide range of dramatic means.

courage by using the public genre of theater to initiate an extraordinarily intimate exploration of the African American woman's inner self, with *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964)⁶ marking her quest most clearly. Kennedy internalizes the outside world that causes her pain and strips herself naked,

exposing her contradictions—the bone of her private and agonic self—in front of an audience (an outside world that frightened her). Plot (but not story) is totally absent in this play, suppressed by an expressionistic and surrealistic style⁷ replete with visual images that point directly to the senses. Blood and

death⁸ are two constant images in her plays. A parallelism exists between this non-linear and plotless dramatic piece and the agonic confusion and desperate search of Sarah, the main character, as she seeks to find a place to which she can belong. "The rooms," she says,

are my rooms; a Hapsburg chamber, a chamber in a Victorian castle, the hotel where I killed my father, the jungle. There are the places myself exist in. I know no places. That is, I cannot believe in places. To believe in places is to know hope and to know emotion of hope is to know beauty. I find there are no places only my funnyhouse. . . . I try to create a space for myself in cities . . . but it becomes a lie. (7)

Sarah's multiple selves (the Negro-Sarah, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria, the Mother),⁹ always fluctuating and torn between two races (black and white/two *places*), show her daily and painful striving to find her true self.

With regard to *place* and *identity*, Bill Ashcroft observes that, in postcolonial literatures, there is a special concern about finding a relevant relationship between self and place, because the process of subjectivity can only be

conducted in its interconnectedness with place (*Key* 392). Sarah cannot find an appropriate place for her self and has no hope to find one; besides, she does not believe in places. However, faced with the impossibility of finding a place, she creates alter egos within her funnyhouse, which may represent the space of her dreaming—an extension of her own self (*Ashcroft, Reader* 179). But rather than dreaming in this particular case, and due to the clashing of her multiple selves, her own creation becomes a nightmare to her. The unavailability to reconcile her alter egos and inability to find an appropriate place that grants her freedom to be herself make of Sarah a tragic character.

In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, and referring to black women writers, Boyce Davies asserts that categories such as black woman, or woman of color, exist “as multiple performances of gender and race and sexuality based on the particular cultural, historical, geopolitical, class communities in which Black women exist” (8; emphasis added). Boyce Davies’s thesis about the migration of subjects in women’s writing and their defying any specific location finds a parallel in Sarah’s endless quest. In addition, as she proposes, black women’s writing should be read not as fixed ethnic, national, or geographic category but rather as a “series of boundary crossings” which actually annihilates marginality and exclusion (4). Moreover, Sarah in *Funnyhouse*, who represents the hybridity/*mestissage* of two cultures (Anglo and African American), shows what Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as a new *mestiza* consciousness, which implies a constant transition and multiple personality (77-91). In *Funnyhouse*, though, Sarah seems unable to cope with the collision originated by the two cultures, even if her final suicide were understood as the author’s metaphor for the first step a black woman must take—the killing of pain, self-hatred, insecurity—in order to be able to give

birth to a new woman celebrating herself—e.g., the one(s) that can be seen in *Shange’s for colored girls*.

An avant-garde play,¹⁰ *Funnyhouse of a Negro* was devised in 1961 during Kennedy’s trip to West Africa, while carrying her second son. The title “derives from an amusement park in Cleveland which featured a ‘funny-house’ with two huge white figures perched on either side, bobbing back and forth and laughing hysterically at the confused patrons within” (*Wilkerson, “Diverse”* 72). The plot is set in a nightmarish frame that presents Sarah as a young black woman who is tormented and split by her multiple selves, and who fears the return of her black father. Two other important characters in the play are Patrice Lumumba¹¹/father/husband, who surrounds himself with white friends (like Sarah) in order to forget the call to save his people; and Jesus Christ, portrayed as unable to escape his blackness. Finally, there are a white Landlady and Sarah’s Jewish boyfriend, Raymond, “who parallel the laughing figures of the Cleveland house” (*Wilkerson, “Diverse”* 72). Sarah, unable to reconcile the ambiguities and pain of being black, kills herself at the end of the play.

Funnyhouse is a clear testimony of violence against oneself. As Kennedy herself has confirmed, “My writing has a lot of violence in it” (qtd. in *Betsko and Koenig* 245). A great resemblance can be found between Kennedy’s play and the paintings of Mexican surrealist Frida Kahlo.¹² Alluding to surrealism and to Kahlo’s art, Withney Chadwick proclaims:

Now it is violence directed against the self, not projected onto another, violence inseparable from the physiological reality of woman’s sexuality and the social construction of her feminine role. . . . For Kahlo, as for other women artists associated with surrealists, painting became a means of sustaining a dialogue with inner reality. (296)

If Kahlo used the canvas to express a dialogue with inner reality, Kennedy

uses the stage. Both artists adopt enclosed spaces to show their agonic selves, and both artists use their own bodies to show self-hatred and self-inflicted pain.

A special concern with her body (hair, skin color, look) is always present in the character of Sarah, who is very worried about the loss of her/her mother's/Queen Victoria's/the Duchess's hair. "When I awakened this morning," says the Duchess, my hair "had fallen out, not all of it, but a mass from the crown of my head that lay on the center of my pillow" (10). Regarding the issue of the body in Third World literature, Michael Dash recalls Frantz Fanon, who attempted "to rewrite the body of colonised man, creating a new subject from *the dismemberment and castration* inflicted by the coloniser's destructive gaze" (333; emphasis added). The same attempt to "rewrite the body" can be observed in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse*, which shows self-hatred as a result of colonization/racial oppression, and the consequent annihilation of a person's identity. Jesus and Sarah keep repeating that they are trying "to escape being black" (19), and they voice absorbed stereotypes about the black community: "... as we of royal blood know," remarks Negro-Sarah, "*black is evil* and has been from the beginning. Even before my mother's hair started to fall out. Before she was raped by a wild black beast. *Black is evil*" (5; emphasis added). Sarah's words recall Fanon's observations about being black: "As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are *two ways* out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it" ("Fact" 325; emphasis added).

Kennedy's plays prove that, as she herself has declared, they emerged out of her dreams (Betsko and Koenig 254) and were meant to be *states of mind* (Baym 2168). Sarah's internalization of self-hatred leads her to a world of

nightmares, then madness, and, finally, suicide. In regard to madness, Lillian Feder refers to Lain's concept of madness as a struggle to liberate oneself from false values and attitudes, constituting a possibility of giving birth to one's *true self* (28). Thus, Kennedy seems to release her own painful inner confusion through Sarah's madness and subsequent death. Following this line of thought, Tate maintains that, although many African American women writers celebrate racial victory, they equally acknowledge defeat so that its consequences may be avoided in the future by recognizing what vulnerability means (xxv). In this sense, what can be considered Sarah's defeat at the end of the play may actually represent the playwright's self-awareness/recognition—the dying phase of her confusion about identity as well as her growth in power and strength.

Sarah's suicide retains, therefore, an enclosed doubleness. On the one hand, it represents the character's defeat in not being able to resolve the tragic racial confrontation established between two different cultures—Anglo and African American—which annihilates her true self. As Negro-Sarah says, "My friends will be white. I need them as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro. For, like all educated Negroes—out of life and death essential—I find it necessary to maintain a stark fortress against recognition of myself" (6). On the other hand, Sarah's suicide is a victory: the death of a girl's confused self, which will give birth to a new woman (the playwright herself) who has finally discovered strength in being black. Kennedy actually refers to her trip to West Africa, where *Funnyhouse* grew inside her and where she acquired a new sense of power in blackness: "I would say almost every image in *Funnyhouse* took form while I was in West Africa where I became aware of masks. . . . Ghana had just won its freedom. It was wonderful to see that liberation. . . . It gave me a sense of power and strength. . . . I

think the main thing was that I discovered strength in being a black person and a connection to Africa" (Betso and Koenig 248-49). Race as well as womanhood¹³ form part of Kennedy's exploration in her plays. And *Funnyhouse*, from the personal, inner struggle of a black woman, makes a call to African Americans to accept their blackness. Moreover, the musicality of the play's poetic language, the choir chant quality of speech throughout, and the rich, vivid imagery that emerges from Kennedy's work disrupt simplistic portrayals of female characters. Her style and technique, her use of multiple split selves, and the play's simultaneous staging imply the many possible readings and perspectives existing in the journey to find one's self and one's historical and cultural truth.¹⁴

Ntozake Shange

At the beginning of the 1970s, another major African American woman playwright, Ntozake Shange, emerged with a very powerful play that has had tremendous national and international repercussions: *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1974). The title of the play is quite revealing and contrasts with the suicide committed by Sarah in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse*. Shange, inspired by Kennedy's work, focuses not on death but on restoring black women's lives and selves, as she presents seven women who overcome pain and the idea of having considered suicide by gaining self-esteem and celebrating the fact of being black. *colored girls* not only presents black women's experience in a poetic style and exquisite intimacy, but it also introduces a new theatrical form: the choreopoem. Shange adds a new and pivotal element not found in Kennedy's plays—dance and body movement.

Shange's choreopoem reminds one of dancer Isadora Duncan's quest for a new type of dance and dancer that could convey the actual beauty of women's body rhythms and movements:

The dancer of the future will be one whose body and soul have grown so harmoniously together that the natural language of that soul will have become the movement of the body. . . . She will dance not in the form of nymph, nor fairy, nor coquette, but in the form of woman in her greatest and purest expression. She will realize the mission of woman's body and the holiness of all its parts. *She will dance the changing of life of nature. . . . She will dance the freedom of woman.* Oh, she is coming, the dancer of the future: the free spirit, who will inhabit *the body of the new woman*; more beautiful than . . . all women of past centuries—the highest intelligence in the freest body. (108-09; emphasis added)

It is in dance where female characters find freedom and full expression of life in Shange's play, as these words from the *Lady in Orange* make clear:

i wanna sing make you dance
like the bata dance scream
twitch hips wit me cuz
i done forgot all abt words
aint got no definitions
i wanna whirl
with you. (14-15)

And as the characters affirm, dance keeps them from "crying" and from "dying" (15). In contrast to Kennedy's play, the black woman's body in Shange's *colored girls* achieves power, beauty, and life. Representation of the black woman, then, goes from inner and individual acknowledgment of pain in Kennedy's play to exorcising pain and a subsequent celebration of one's self in Shange's choreopoem.

Moreover, dance within a play can serve a double function. On the one hand, it can function within the dramatic text as a *distancing device* in the Brechtian sense,¹⁵ for dance disrupts the narrative sequence. On the other hand, dance helps the women characters to exorcise their pain, to feel alive and to recuperate subjectivity (Gilbert

341-42), as we notice when the seven female characters in Shange's play recuperate and celebrate their own selves through storytelling (monologues) and dance.

Shange's vision of a colored woman's developing self-esteem establishes the need for black women's togetherness. The play states that the liberation struggle of black women cannot be achieved by each woman individually, though each woman needs to become aware of and develop her own power and strength. The play itself was written in a collaborative effort, an effort that has been continued by most feminist theater groups. The play also shows that, in order to achieve a social liberation, black women must first acquire consciousness of their own lives and selves in order to find the essence of their true identities. This growth from inner awareness and introspection to outer recognition and celebration of the black female self contrasts markedly with Kennedy's play, which moves from Sarah's painful struggle to find of her true self, to her tragic inability to reconcile her multiple selves, and, finally, to her suicide—or, to a black woman's victory in overcoming her fears and accepting her blackness, but in a tragic manner.

In *colored girls*, most of the black women characters have considered suicide at least once in their lives—as the title suggests, or have nearly been killed by pain at some past moment. If in Kennedy's play we observe how anger is set against oneself, in Shange's work we see how silence is broken and anger is placed outside, as the Lady in Brown beautifully explains:

dark phrases of womanhood
of never havin seen a girl
half-notes scattered . . .
i can't hear anything
but maddenin screams
& the soft strains of death . . .
sing a black girl's song
bring her out
to know herself
. . . sing her rhythms
. . . sing her song of life
she's been dead so long
she doesn't know the sound

of her own voice
her infinite beauty . . .
let her be born
let her be born
& handled warmly. (2-3)

As if continuing from the point Kennedy left Sarah (dead and ready to be reborn), the Lady in Brown wants to make herself visible, hear her own voice, a new woman sheltered by and becoming one (whole) with nature. Likewise, the Lady in Red recalls,

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 new . . .
the sun wrapped me up swingin rose
light everywhere
the sky laid over me like a million men
i waz cold / i was 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. (66-67)

Through Shange's play, seven black women display their individual and intimate experiences and ask that their voices be heard, telling men how they feel, and how they are being and/or have been treated by them. Each has suffered a type of male aggression and abuse, an extreme example being the Lady in Red, who is forced by her lover to witness him drop her two children from a fifth-floor window (63). With regard to the violence women suffer at home, Valerie Smith notes that writers as diverse as Toni Morrison, Michelle Wallace, bell hooks, Pearl Cleage, and Shange have all continued to address what Shange calls the "conspiracy of silence"; these authors have worked to break the "sound of family secrecy" that helps maintain abuse against black women at home (205). Thus, *colored girls* contributes, in Smith's words, to the "disruption and dissent" of women's silence (205-06).

It is important to highlight the fact that there are seven different colored women on stage in *colored girls*, which allows the playwright to dismantle past stereotypes and the concept of

dealing with black women as a monolith by presenting a plurality of colored female voices and their personal experiences. Boyce Davies's theory of "migratory subjectivity" can be applied to Shange's display of seven women on stage, for she considers that her book *Migrations of the Subject*

promotes a way of assuming the subject's agency. . . . The subject is not just constituted, but in being constituted has multiple identities that do not always make for harmony. . . . Migrations of the subject refers to the many locations of Black women's writing, but also to the Black female subject refusing to be subjugated Black female subjectivity asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so-reclaims as it re-asserts. (36-37)

Shange's choreopoem as performed by her seven female characters (each dressed in a different color) and the brave statements in their poetic monologues, along with the use of music and freedom of movement in their dance, clearly exemplify these women's journeys toward subjectivity and self-affirmation.

Shange's poetry and imagery play a role as important as those of Kennedy. Shange affirms, however, that her plays are actually in space and not in place. She attempts to produce metaphors "using space a lot to create an area where [one] could believe those things happening, said, allowed" (Ceynowa). And, apart from experimenting with new ways of using space, the playwright insists on the need to create a new language in music and body movement/dance, which evokes French playwright Antonin Artaud's conception of theater finding new venues of dramatic language other than words.¹⁶ Shange, of course, borrows this notion from her African American tradition, wherein most black people have "some music and movement in [their] lives. [They] do sing and dance, this is a cultural reality. This is why [she finds] the most inspiring theater among [them] to be in the realms of music and dance" (*Three Pieces* xii). Thus, in plays like Shange's

Spell #7 (1979) music functions as another character—something that typifies Rahman's and De Veaux's work.

colored girls, however, is a choreopoem that symbolizes black women's urge and need to find self-affirmation in crossing the boundary from silence to speech while "naming their exploitation at the hands of black and white men and staking out a new country beyond [that] war, defined by nurturant female community" (DeShazer 92). And, in addition to expressing the exploitations they are subject to, these women want to recuperate their own voices. As the Lady in Green remarks, "i want my stuff back / my rhythms and my voice" (*colored girls* 50). And even more affirmatively, the Lady in Blue determines that "i will not call / i'm not going to be nice / i will raise my voice / scream holler" (57).

The play ends with the seven women characters celebrating their love for themselves in a final communal song. *colored girls* is the statement of the new-born black woman, the woman who has ended victimization and has begun to celebrate and love herself in communion with music and dance. If Kennedy had shown the internal and hidden wound borne by black women, Shange contributes to the healing of that wound with the final image of the seven colored female characters celebrating themselves.¹⁷

Aishah Rahman

Although music plays an important role in *colored girls* through the rhythms of the poetic monologues and through the songs heard during the performance, dance is undoubtedly one of the main characters. In Aishah Rahman's polydrama (as it is called by the playwright herself) *Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land, While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage* (1977), on the other hand, Charlie Parker's (*Bird's*) live music is the protagonist. Music is

used to express sharp emotions by juxtaposing on the stage a live saxophone with a baby's cry, as presented in these stage directions: "(A thin wailing mournful cry like a baby's is played on the sax)" (207) and "(Suddenly the wailing cry of the sax)" (216). The saxophone is actually taken to utter the unwed young black women's lament of pain, as well as to help the playwright utter the African American woman's scream, breaking her silence, as enunciated through one of the characters' personal experiences. "The man spread high above me," recalls Wilma,

worked over me, his sweat dripping down in my eyes and my voice screaming higher and higher along with Parker's sax . . . both sounds pouring over me, pulling me, pushing me to a point of passion, a point of pain and then . . . silence . . . then the smell of the rain falling outside as he breaks into my womb and bursts inside of me, overflowing on the sheets and bed and everything and I knew that the cycle of passion and pain, blood and birth, and aloneness had once again started inside of me and I lay there wondering how many moons before I could become a virgin again! (221; emphasis added)

Wilma, like the other young unwed women, hopes that some day she will overcome her fears and pain and will not be afraid to have dreams and make them come true (232).

As critics such as Linda Hart have pointed out, music becomes a powerful metaphor for the African American woman's experience, in the process of redefining and recreating herself. Hart believes that music brings out an emotional quality that underlines subjectivity in opposition to a more *objective mood* used by men writers—as African American playwright Sonia Sanchez has observed (Hart 62). In Hart's opinion, it is in the hands of African American women playwrights that the theater presents a new and different dimension, since these women know music is as political, sensual, and emotional as their lives (74). In his article "Jazz and the West Indian Novel," Edward K. Brathwaite studies the

transference of music into literature in an attempt to demonstrate the "relationship between jazz improvisation and the folk (oral) tradition" (327). As other writers have demonstrated in the past, Brathwaite asserts that "improvisatory effects can . . . be achieved through repetition of a 'theme' . . . a collective response which marks the end of one improvisation and the beginning of the next" (329). Repetition is present in Kennedy's and Shange's plays, as well as in Rahman's *Unfinished Women*. But Rahman has established a theory of a *jazz aesthetic*, as it applies to drama¹⁸:

Referring to her plays and a *jazz aesthetic*, Rahman asserts that they have been written in the tradition of what [she] calls the "jazz aesthetic," which acknowledges the characters' various levels of reality, they have a triple consciousness: *of the unborn, the living and the dead*. The jazz aesthetic in drama expresses multiple ideas and experiences through language, movement, visual art and spirituality simultaneously. The jazz aesthetic is found in art, poetry, drama and fiction and is not contingent upon jazz music to be. (Mahone 283; emphasis added)

Using Rahman's conception of a *jazz aesthetic*, and following the journey of African American women playwrights from Kennedy, through Shange, to Rahman, we see in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse* the presence of death as its final image, while a dance to life ends Shange's *colored girls*. Rahman, on the other hand, in *Unfinished Women* juxtaposes both birth and death at the end of the play—the birth of a new child (being delivered by Wilma) and Bird's death, completing the cycle of life:

(A woman screams an unearthly sound, half song, half animal pain all mixed up in one long note at the exact instant a note is blown on the saxophone, and both sounds fade away as PARKER dies. Darkness).

CHARLIE CHAN'S VOICE¹⁹
While Unfinished Women Cry in
No Man's Land
The Bird dies in a Gilded Cage
Could a Baby's cry
Be Bird's musical notes
That hang in the air . . . forever? (237)

Following Rahman's theory of a *jazz aesthetic*, her play embraces "the unborn, the living and the dead" — "multiple ideas and experiences." Kennedy, Shange, and Rahman offer multiple layers of interpretation, either through expressionistic/surrealistic images and staging, through a choreopoem performed on a bare stage, or through a polydrama in which four young unwed black girls voice their fears and thoughts on whether or not to give their babies up for adoption, while showing the last days in Bird's life. In Kennedy's *Funnyhouse*, vivid images and poetic language form the connecting line of the play; in Shange's *colored girls*, dance and movement highlight the action of the stories told by seven women; and, in Rahman's *Unfinished Women*, the saxophone's cry and music accentuate the cycle of life (the unborn ready to be born) and death (Bird's death but the perpetuation/living of his music).

Unfinished Women focuses on the solitary moment when unwed girls must decide whether to keep their babies or to give them up for adoption. At the same time, spectators see Bird slowly dying in what Margaret Wilkerson calls "a narcotic fog and the lost dreams of his exploited talent" (*Nine* 197). Rahman's play presents two simultaneous actions that she calls "streams of consciousness," introduced by Parker's music to "superimpose on certain *fundamental* notes which [create] polytones. Rhythmically, [this music] would create an opposition of on- and offbeat accentuations and obtain the effect of two streams of rhythms called polyrhythms" (*Unfinished* 202). Rahman is also very precise about the need for a particular staging of her play, as she explains in an "Author's Note": "The two settings, Hide-A-Wee Home for Unwed Mothers and Pasha's [Parker's lover's] boudoir, should be interplayed and interplayed with the dramatic image of Bird and Bird's music being the fundamental notes with which both parts bounce off on creating tensions

between them while at the same time weaving the seemingly disconnecting parts into one 'polydrama.'" Rahman's intention is that the public should capture the metaphor of "birth and art" (202), which must be sustained by playing a note from the saxophone to portray one of the character's — Consuelo's — baby's cry, as mentioned in a stage direction: "A thin wailing mournful cry like a baby's played on the sax" (207). Music highlights and expresses the emotions (fear, joy, and so on) of the characters, something that parallels what Bird explains to Pasha about his music: "I'm trying to communicate feelings, baby, not knowledge" (219). The same effect is obtained in *Funnyhouse* and *colored girls* through their authors' poetry and vivid imagery — and, in the latter case, dance.

Apart from the metaphor of "birth and art," Rahman also uses the birth of a child to show that giving birth is always painful — be it an artistic, metaphorical, or actual human birth — and the characters in *Unfinished Women* are quite scared at the fact of delivering a baby. Mattie, for example, remarks that "I don't know nothing except this baby is in my belly and gonna come out my pussy with blood and piss and shit. I'm scared" (216). Other readings of simultaneous layers can be found in the stories told by these young unwed women about how they became pregnant: the innocent girl who felt that music was making love to her, the girl who was abandoned by her lover after learning about her pregnancy, or the one who was raped. "My social worker said the State would get me [an abortion] if I could prove I was raped like I said," Mattie says. "Shit! How can I prove that?" (223). The women's stories — about delivering a baby and rape — convey clear images of the pain they have suffered and their desire to escape it. "We've been used, hurt, abandoned by our men," Wilma complains. "Is it so wrong to look for an alternative to pain even if it's only in our subconscious?" (232). These young unwed women are also trying to find a

place for themselves before they make room for a new baby: "I can't keep my baby . . . until I make a place for me," says Wilma (231).

Unfinished Women represents the step taken in between Sarah's tragic end to her pain in *Funnyhouse* and the celebration of a new self by the seven women characters in *colored girls*; that is, the young unwed women's delivery of their babies becomes a beautiful metaphor to express the painful gestation and final birth of the black woman's consciousness and true self. It is worth transcribing the whole stage direction explaining the preparation for the birth of Wilma's baby simultaneously with the image of Bird's dying:

HIDE-A-WEE and PASHA's boudoir. All characters are on-stage. The structure of this scene is nearest to a spontaneous jazz piece. Free-form saxophone music dominates and is played steadily throughout, sometimes underneath, sometimes up front, but always there. The entire drama bursts into music and voices. The characters repeat the following dialogue over and over, weaving in and out of, on top and below each other, accelerating in pace, volume and intensity. CHAN [Bird's alter ego] opens the scene by fixing the clock. As the scene grows, CHAN jerks and twists in agony, his frantic movements almost in time to the music as if he has internalized everybody's pain. (235)

In Wilkerson's words, the play moves to its climax, "forcing an untimely but necessary resolution to the guilt, uncertainty, fear and pain of these women" (*Nine* 197). It is Wilma who, while delivering her baby/new self, utters the scream—"an unearthly sound, half song, half animal pain all mixed up in one long note at the exact instant a note is blown on the saxophone" (237)—as Bird dies, completing, as previously noted, the cycle of life.

Alexis De Veaux

Alexis De Veaux's *The Tapestry* (1976) continues along the line drawn by Kennedy, Shange, and

Rahman: Music is a fundamental part of the play and disrupts a realistic flow by the inclusion of a Choir of spirits which represents the main character's (Jet's) past/traditions. Sydné Mahone's description of African American playwrights' styles may perfectly apply to and tie up the dramatic lines employed by the four dramatists analyzed in this essay:

In the same way that jazz musicians ritualized improvisation, these writers take the liberty to extend the solo or "take as many eights" as they need to reach the peak of understanding. I compare it to Ella Fitzgerald in scat-mode; full knowledge of the chord changes gives her the freedom to flirt with her favorite phrase or break out into a whole new song in the middle of the song. . . . Or consider the rap artist's freedom found through sampling. Similarly, the circular use of time allows for rapid transit from one reality to another, for the past to become present, for exaggerated stillness or for several timeframes to come alive in a single moment. (xxxiii)

The Tapestry breathes with the rhythms of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and the powerful and warm voices of South African Miriam Makeba and African American Nina Simone, as if they are helping to delineate the path that Jet must pursue. De Veaux, however, adds a new aspect to her play. Now it is not the various states of a woman's (Sarah's) mind or a collective of women telling each other and the audience their stories of pain, but an individual black female character, Jet. De Veaux explains the reason for her choice: "In all of the work I've done, there is a certain deliberate care I've taken with laying out the image of the black woman as I have seen and experienced her, which indicates that there is a clear and conscious desire to address myself to her" (qtd. in Ramsey 95). In contrast to the plays previously examined, *The Tapestry* presents a specific moment in the life of a specific young woman who is preparing for her bar exam and who might represent the baby/new woman delivered by Wilma in *Unfinished Women*.

Jet lives in an apartment by herself and is shown at a critical point of her life when she is preparing for the bar. At the same time, Jet must cope with the demands of her lover (Axis) and his betrayal as well as with the relationship with her friend Lavender and Lavender's weakness. Simultaneously, Jet's apartment/space is invaded/inhabited by a Choir of Members, dressed in church garments, who represent various phases of and people from her past (churchgoers, her parents, tradition). Jet's apartment becomes the grounds for her "creativity and re-memory; exploration, challenge, instability," by which she has to deal with various issues and find a resolution (Boyce Davies 154). Jet's life is presented against this tapestry of emotions, and she alone must strive to reach her final aim—her social commitment to the world:

i want to leave my mark on the world
 make it all worth something
 something more than working my own
 into old age and a social security check
 i see things to be done
 so many things
 thats why i want to be a lawyer
 (*Tapestry* 170)

Jet's social commitment—like that of De Veaux—might symbolize a new woman born at the time of the Women's Post-Liberation Movement, already aware of the Movement's goals and demands and continuing her struggle beyond and after the Movement's achievements. Jet demonstrates that the world needs continuing re-mapping as geographical locations evolve throughout history. Whereas maps show a series of "erasures and overwriting which have transformed the world" (Rabasa 358), Jet symbolizes the new black woman *in transition* and still journeying, realizing that she is in continuous flux while trying to find her own place—like Sarah in *Funnyhouse*, the seven women characters in *colored girls*, and the unwed mothers in *Unfinished Women*.

Like Shange in *colored girls*, De Veaux examines space in *The Tapestry*.

She focuses, though, on the "inner space of relationships" as a microcosm of international and national relations. She is mainly interested in showing the African American woman in relation to her sexuality, and seeks to comprehend its meaning in relation to her emotional and socio-political self (Wilkerson, *Nine* 136). De Veaux proclaims: "I stumble forward and with caution in search of *new worlds / a new path / new contexts* for living and working together. Equally. Whole. Black women and black men. Not as homosexuals and heterosexuals but as sexual beings. *Free from the domination of race, sex and class*. . . . These are my feminist priorities" (qtd. in Ramsey 93; emphasis added). In the same way, Jet is desperately trying to find some space in her life, away from categories, which suggests what Boyce Davies calls her "resistance to fixity" (154): "i want to be defined in my own terms," says Jet, "not somebody elses" (*Tapestry* 170).

Furthermore, Jet considers that each generation has to keep asking "new questions" (171), trying to find new ways, new paths to improve social relations.

In regard to sexuality and tradition, De Veaux keeps revising both issues through Jet's personal quest and questioning. A clear example of this is a scene in which the Choir Members/spirits enact a picnic during which ". . . a woman—sports a moustache, another [actor]—a man—wears a bra over his clothes" and they end up eating one another—"they eat each others hands and faces in a very sensual manner, everybody eating on everybody: including man to man and woman to woman"—and finish by humming "a gospel" (177). This striking and powerful scene recalls the theater of the absurd and reminds one of Artaud's work, for there is an attempt to provoke a response from the audience by breaking sexual taboos that are embedded in tradition—in this specific case, within the African American tradition. This image also shows that there are values in this tradition that can and must be kept—e.g.,

gospel—but this is no obstacle to changing other things that deprive individuals of the personal freedom to be and enjoy themselves—e.g., their sexuality preferences. Consequently, the disruption of sexual taboos is interwoven with a gospel song. The various layers of De Veaux's play show her artistic commitment to participate in what bell hooks in her article "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Racial Openness" calls "the formation of counter-hegemonic practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision"—traditional values, history, gender, sexuality (qtd. in Boyce Davies 154-55; emphasis added).

Jet dives into social rules, traditions, relationships, and social responsibilities and, at times, feels totally defeated for not finding room for her self:

leave me alone
 leave me
 jesus somebody please
 everything is so mixed up . . .
 please stop the tearing in my head . . .
 my head
 somebody inside
 growing
 pulling out . . .
 im not sacrificial chicken
 spirits i have to be ready
 give me what i need. (*Tapestry* 194-95)

However, Jet's striving continues, as the end of the play makes clear when she leaves her apartment to take her bar exam. *The Tapestry* shows how an ordinary woman must fight against her powerlessness within her personal relationships and an educational system that threatens to overpower her. The play does not assure Jet's victory, but shows her final determination to become a lawyer, an act of will and courage, when placed against the tapestry of her emotions.

In contrast to Sarah's inability to find the appropriate place for her lost self/selves, Jet strives continuously to find a space where she can fit in and that will help her contribute to change, improve, and open possibilities for new spaces/places in her world/society. Ashcroft insists that *place* in colonial

studies is "much more than land" and claims:

The theory of places does not propose a simple separation between the "place" named and described in language, and some "real" place inaccessible to it, but rather *indicates* that in some sense *place is language*, something in constant flux, a discourse in process. These [postcolonial] writers become compelled to try to construct a new language that might fit the place they experience. (Reader 182; emphasis added)

The playwrights studied in this essay are always seeking to uncover new modes of expression, be they theatrical, musical, and/or spoken/written.

The language in *The Tapestry* and *colored girls* is re-visioned, re-built, and re-appropriated by the playwrights to make it their own language, which helps them define themselves "in [their] own terms," as Jet demands (170). The playwrights' experimental use of English (including the absence of capital letters, apostrophes, punctuation, etc.) is one way in which they resist oppression.²⁰ Their storytelling and non-realistic theatrical styles also produce statements of their continuous journey in search of their personal/individual space within society.

The experimental use of language and especially music in *Unfinished Women* and *The Tapestry* becomes an essential dramatic component in these playwrights' struggle to shape African American women playwrights' aesthetics and to produce self-affirmation both as African Americans and as women. Indeed, this important element has symbolized resistance throughout African American history: "Black people," writes Angela Davis, "were able to create with their music an aesthetic community of resistance, which in turn encouraged and nurtured a political community of active struggle for freedom" (201). Jet's questioning and struggle as well as her emotions and states of mind are equally highlighted by the music which displays the complexity that she herself conveys.

Conclusion

Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, Aishah Rahman, and Alexis De Veaux can be considered pioneers in breaking the silence, in opening new possibilities of expression in multiple theatrical ways which have established a foundation for contemporary African American male and female theater artists who, far from being fixed, continue to develop the modalities initiated by their predeces-

sors. I would like to end this essay with words from Sydné Mohane which beautifully express the meaning of plays written by African American women as well as their artistic achievement within the field of theater:

Magnetic and relentless, the playwright's words are coursing through the inner terrain of the psyche like blood and mother's milk, making waves, turning the tides, constantly shifting the coastlines of consciousness; and here, reshaping dramatic form and narrative. . . . In tune with the cycles of the moon—swelling, maturing, releasing, rebirthing, filling up with self. (xiii)

1. For further information on the Black Theater Movement, see Williams; Barrios, "Black Theater."
2. Larry Neal, one of the leaders of the Black Arts Movement, defined the Movement's goals in the following terms: "The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black arts is the aesthetic and the spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black Americans. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology" (Neal 1960; emphasis added).
3. African American feminist critic bell hooks in *ain't i a woman* has pointed out that the Women's Liberation Movement was mainly populated by white middle-class and upper-class women. This Movement was regarded by black women in the United States as a "racist and classist" one, since it did not consider race as an important element that made a great difference between black and white women (hooks 157). Audre Lorde and Barbara Christian, like hooks, have contributed to widening and completing the concept of feminism. Along the same line, regarding women of color in theater, Sue-Ellen Case states that "women of color have also pointed out that most consciousness-raising groups have been composed primarily of white women and that they have rarely dealt with issues of racism and class bias" (89). On the other hand, postcolonial critic Carole Boyce Davies finds omissions as well when black feminist criticism began to be defined in the United States, affirming that "the exclusionary nature of US constructions of Black feminism has to be identified or it forces Black women from other parts of the world to locate their identities within the context of US hegemony" (31).
4. As some critics have pointed out, the close connection between art and society "is central to black feminist criticism" (Richards 233).
5. Besides, as Case states, there is a great absence of published theatrical works (105). Although Case's statement appeared in 1988, there is still a large void in black feminist drama criticism at the beginning of the twenty-first century.
6. *Funnyhouse* won an Obie Award for Michael Kahn's production in 1964.
7. One must bear in mind that expressionism and surrealism—both opposing realism—developed almost simultaneously at the turn of the twentieth century and share a number of common points. Both movements attempted to dramatize a subjective perception of reality. From an expressionistic point of view, reality is distorted; "characters change identities, combining and fragmenting"; and people and objects become symbols. Moreover, there is no attempt at psychological characterization, and in most cases dialogue is either mechanical or repetitious (Vaughn 77). Surrealism shares with expressionism a symbolic quality and a penchant for distorting reality; moreover, surrealism is concerned with the subconscious mind as the main source for the artist's most significant perception, mingling the strange and the familiar, and at times producing grotesque results. Furthermore, as Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay state, "In drama, familiar human situations occur in unusual surroundings or two seemingly unrelated scenes are juxtaposed. Such alogicality and discontinuity break the bonds of ordinary reality and create a 'surreality' where[in] associational patterns can lead the mind to novel significant perceptions" (300). Expressionistic and surrealist elements overlap

Notes

and are clearly present in most of Kennedy's work, which makes hers an extremely innovative approach, unprecedented in African American theater.

8. The images of *blood* and *death* are also present in the plays of Shange, Rahman, and De Veaux. Used as a symbol of the characters' ongoing pain, *death* and *blood* also become symbols of their being invisible and unrecognized within North American society in general and within the black community in particular.

9. In Kennedy's *The Owl Answers* (1965), Clara—the main character—also presents multiple selves: She Who Is Clara Passmore Who is the Virgin Mary Who is the Bastard Who is the Owl.

10. Kennedy explains her choice of an avant-garde theatrical style in *People Who Led to My Plays*. Seeing Spanish playwright García Lorca's *Blood Wedding* led to her changing her idea of "what a play was. Ibsen, Chekhov, O'Neill and even Williams fell away. Never again would [she] try to set a play in a 'living room,' never again would [she] be afraid to have [her] characters talk in a non-realistic way, and [she] would abandon the realistic set for a greater dream setting. It was a turning point" (108). In the same manner, African masks also exerted a tremendous influence on her work: "Not until I bought a great African mask from a vendor on the streets of Accra, of a woman with a bird flying through her forehead did I totally break from realistic looking characters" (Kennedy, *People* 121). In addition, bell hooks affirms that Kennedy's plays remind her of Catalan Salvador Dalí's surrealist paintings, since Kennedy's writing is experimental and abandons realistic settings ("Critical" 180-81).

11. Patrice Lumumba was the founder and leader of the National Congolese Movement and fought for the independence of the Congo (Zaire). He became Prime Minister of his country in 1960 but was assassinated in 1961, coinciding with Kennedy's stay in Accra at that time.

12. Kennedy herself has found great likenesses between her plays and Kahlo's paintings (Barrios interview).

13. In *Lesson in a Dead Language* (1966), menstrual blood becomes the protagonist as the symbol of a girl's initiation into womanhood. In De Veaux's *The Tapestry*, the main character—Jet—also refers to her menstrual blood in association with the pain conveyed by the simple fact of being a woman: "i cant stand cramps / cant stand the pain / and the blood / is a river every month / theres a flood . . . / i think theres a connection between / bleeding and vulnerability" (173). Earlier in the play, through Jet's speech, De Veaux connects the meaning of blood/vulnerability/being a woman to race and the black community: "we are some vulnerable folks / according to these books / we dont own nothing . . . / thats why we aint got no say" (150).

14. At the end of *Funnyhouse*, after Sarah's suicide, Raymond and the Landlady assert that the story Sarah narrates is false, for "she is a liar" (54). This final statement could stand for Western *official* history about African Americans, whose own voices, and, consequently, their actual history, had never been acknowledged.

15. It is important to highlight Shange's admiration for German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht's work, which, among other things, led her to write an adaptation of his play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, for which Shange was awarded an Obie in 1981. Brecht's theory about *epic theater* refers to the need of including a *distancing device* that abandoned Aristotle's and Stanislavski's idea of establishing a feeling of passive empathy between characters and audience. On the contrary, Brecht intended to give the audience a more active role in the theater by disrupting the narrative sequence of a play, thereby leading audience members to question the story and the characters' situation and, in so doing, bringing change into their own lives. As Brecht himself asserts, referring to epic theater and to his play *The Mother*, "This makes nothing like such a free use as does the aristotelian of the passive empathy of the spectator; it also relates differently to certain psychological effects, such as catharsis. Just as it refrains from handing its hero over to the world as if it were his inescapable fate. . . . Anxious to teach the spectator a quite definite practical attitude, *directed towards changing the world*, it must *begin by making him adopt in the theater a quite different attitude from what he used to*. . . . Briefly, the aristotelian play is essentially static; its task is to show the world as it is. The learning-play [epic theater] is essentially dynamic; its task is *to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed)*" (Willett 79; emphasis added). Brecht's statement perfectly connects with Shange's healing theatrical images that invite/urge women to change their lives.

16. The French playwright and director was actually inspired by the performance of Balinese dances. And Shange herself has publicly recognized, at the National Black Theater Festival in Winston-Salem, NC (Aug. 2002), the influence that Artaud and Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski exerted on her plays.

17. Shange considers it essential that playwrights include healing images in their plays (Betsko and Koenig 372). See also n15.

18. It must be observed that most of Rahman's plays include music or are musical dramas, such as *Lady Day: A Musical Tragedy*, *Transcendental Blues*, *The Tale of Madame Zora* (a musical biog-

raphy of Zora Neale Hurston), the libretto *Opera Marie Laveau*, and *The Mojo and the Sayso*, for which she won the Doris Abramson Award.

19. Charlie Chan is a black man in a black face who acts as Master of Ceremonies, "commenting between the scenes, always remaining outside the drama. He is a magic mimetic man" (Rahman 205). This character reminds one of Garcia Lorca's and Brecht's plays, where at times there is an actor either introducing the whole play or each scene, and/or commenting on them, which creates a Brechtian distancing effect. Chan is also Parker's alter ego and "he should be dressed like [Parker]" (Rahman 205).

20. Referring to some of the reviews her work had received regarding her use of the English language, Shange states: "one new york critic had accused me of being too self-conscious of being a writer / the other from the midwest had asserted that i waz so involved with the destruction of the english language / that my writing approached verbal gymnastics like unto a reverse minstrel show. in reality / there is an element of truth in both ideas / but the lady who thought i was self-conscious of being a writer / apparently waz never a blk child . . . who spoke an english that had evolved naturally / *only to hear a white man's version of blk speech that waz entirely made up & based on no linguistic system besides the language of racism.* 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 / the language that perpetuates the notions that cause pain to every black child* as he/she learns to speak of the world & the 'self.' yes / being an afro-american writer is something to be self-conscious abt / & yes / in order to think n communicate the thoughts n feelings i want to think n communicate / *i haveta fix my tool to my needs / i have to take it apart to the bone / so that the malignancies / fall away / leaving us space to literally create our own language*" (*Three Pieces* xi-xii; emphasis added).

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