

“As though by dressing and walking in a certain way I had enlisted in a fraternity in which I was recognized at a glance—not by features, but by clothes, by uniform, by gait.”

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*.

“I’m not a feminist. I’m a revolutionary!”

Angela Davis, KPU Conference on March 7, 2012

Defining Through Defiance: Visuals in Ntozake Shange’s “*for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*” Filtered through Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*

Visuals play an important role in the theatrical tradition. A play’s aesthetic is affected by the society or time it is representing. Appearances can matter if they are construed to deliver a sociological message. Visuals in the African-American theatrical tradition are especially important. In 1970s America, oftentimes political rhetoric and theater were linked in motivation. Playwright Amiri Baraka’s, *Dutchman*, for example, is inextricably linked to Black Nationalism. *Dutchman*’s plot, a white woman stabbing a well-dressed black man on a subway was unlike anything off-Broadway theaters had seen before (Allen x). Black female playwrights also broke new ground in the 1970s. Black feminism began at the same time as the Civil Rights movement. It vocalized the plight of black women who wanted representation in politics and the arts. Playwright Ntozake Shange created an aesthetic in her play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* that uplifted black women from despair. Many black female playwrights were influenced by the emerging womanism, a movement coined by Alice Walker in her essays, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*. The visual elements in Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls*’s original off-Broadway 1976 production reflected a changing

dynamic in black feminism. The bright colors—crimson, hot pink, vermillion— in Shange’s original production bring out the “turmoil in politics” of the piece (254). Shange also found a creation of self through dance. Understanding and loving her body made Shange want other black women to feel empowered. Visual choices in Shange’s *for colored girls* created a new order of black female beauty, as Alice Walker strove to accomplish through her writing.

Visuals in African-American theater can either support or subvert stereotypes. Stereotypes themselves are rooted more in short-term visual assessments. More in-depth conversations with minorities where typecasts can be broken. The arts have disparaged African-Americans for centuries. In the 19th century, white slave owners created minstrel shows to ridicule slave idiosyncrasies like the cake walk dance. Minstrelsy included white men in blackface (burnt cork and huge red lips), singing, dancing and intentionally acting buffoonish. (Stark 34) Black women were portrayed either as overweight idiots (the “Mammy” archetype) or promiscuous Jezebels (the “Sapphire” archetype). These pejorative skits didn’t leave the American psyche until the 1960s (45). For years, African-American performers couldn’t escape the stereotypes that minstrelsy displayed to all of America. Despite the odds, African-Americans have tried to break the stereotypical mold.

Clothing has always been a form of visual rebellion in the African-American community. The zoot suit riots stemmed from African-American and Mexican-American youths snubbing World War 2 clothing rations and tailoring lengthy suits (White 251). The afro was a rebellion against “perfectly straight European hair”. For decades, black women put dangerous chemicals in their hair. The afro was appreciating black beauty in the Black Power movement of the 1960s (Kelley). Clothes can create a deliberate divergence from stereotypes. Black women were

defining themselves in the 1970s, an ability that had been stifled for centuries. The rebellion, as writer Alice Walker explains, created an autonomous African-American beauty. This newfound revolt was also reflected in black feminist drama of the period. The new aesthetic matched Walker's goal of illuminating the common black woman's struggle.

Black female writers in the 1970s wrote not only about their own experiences, but their ancestor's. Alice Walker wanted to hear various black women's stories, so she delved into her mother's life. One story is when a white woman verbally abused Alice Walker's mother, Minnie, in the 1930s. Mrs. Walker went into town wearing a fancy new dress her sister sent her. Minnie went to the Red Cross to get a voucher for flour. The white woman at the Red Cross refused to give her a voucher. The Red Cross woman told her co-worker, "The *gall* of niggers coming in here dressed better than me!" (Walker 16). Humiliated, Minnie went home that night with no flour for her eight children. Decades later, Minnie saw this same white woman extremely old and decrepit. Once spry and cruel, the Red Cross woman now needed two canes to walk. Minnie couldn't help but relish in her version of divine schadenfreude—she told her daughter that God may be slow, but he always delivered his punishment (17). It's a lesson, Walker notes, a lot of black women learn from society. Skin color gets attention, as well as dress. In pre-integrated America, these weren't vapid assumptions but institutionalized truths.

Various black women's stories inspired Alice Walker, and she found it her duty to shed light on these women. Walker recognized that the world viewed the black woman as a "mule". The black woman carried the burdens everyone—white, black, male, etc—refused to carry. She felt that black women's creative spirits were stifled for centuries because no one took them seriously as artists. At the time Walker wrote her essays, men like William Faulkner and even the

African-American Richard Wright were celebrated writers. However, Zora Neale Hurston, she argued, died in obscurity and wasn't even in her college English curriculum. Walker makes a plea for the black female artist to go "in search of our mother's gardens", or rather the impression mothers leave as a legacy. Walker talks about the artistry and joy her mother brings to her personal garden, brimming with beautiful flowers. Alice Walker puts her message succinctly—"guided by my heritage of a life of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (243). In order to come to cope with the lost treasures of black creativity, Walker finds the solution by telling everyday black female stories and illuminating the artistry in the community. Acting concurrently were playwrights like Ntozake Shange, who sought to create a theatrical event of empowerment.

Ntozake Shange wrote *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* in order to give a voice to the voiceless. The voiceless in this scenario were African-American women who believed their neighborhood block to be their own prison cell (Shange 36). Shange created a new genre with the choreopoem. She wanted the choreopoem to be a mixture of poetry and dance. She wanted to go completely against the European play structure of an exposition, rising action, climax and denouement (Allen 252). Therefore, *For colored girls* is a collection of twenty free-verse poems between seven women. The women have no names, just referred to as "the lady in blue", "the lady in red", and other colors of the rainbow. The poems fluctuate between first love and brutal rape. The women deal with the serious issues in a matter-of-fact fashion. At the same time they are searching for a solution to their tragedies. They finally find the solution through self-love. Shange's goal was "unearthing the mislaid, forgotten and or misunderstood women writers, painters, mothers, cowgirls and union leaders of our past" (Shange xiv-xv).

The process of creating *for colored girls* was an interesting collaboration, and sheds light on how important visuals were to the original off-Broadway production. The poems originated in San Francisco bars, until it was picked up by producer Harold Prince and directed off-Broadway by Oz Scott in 1976. The very look of the show altered the text. The initial production had Shange working closely with costume designer, Judy Dearing as well as set designer and real-life sister, Ifa Bayeza. These three black women were dancers and all three stressed their visual concept to director Oz Scott. He initially wanted a cluttered set with a realistic kitchen, bathroom and living room. Bayeza explained to him that for the choreography to flourish there had to be space, not clutter. Dearing originally wanted the women wanting tie-dye. Ifa and Shange insisted on a monochromatic look. With only a \$100 budget and adhering to Shange's wish, Dearing bought crepe-back silk dresses in the saturated hues of the rainbow. The design process worked organically with the play. It was actually this discussion that led the unnamed women to be named after their dresses (Bayeza). The process of creating the piece was very fluid. Shange understood that in order to create a piece about the black female community, the piece itself had to involve a synthesis of different black women's ideas.

When writing *for colored girls*, Shange made it clear that each of these seven women could represent any woman. The seven women in the show were barefoot and wore simple dresses. The color of each dress represented different moods. The rainbow is used as a literary device to signify self-worth. The barefoot and colorful nature of the 1976 costumes suggested the women discover their inner beauty through nature. Designer Judy Dearing observed her own aesthetic, a naturalistic look (Bayeza). Women in bright colors have the more youthful and passionate poems while the darker colors are tales of "frustration and despair" (El Shayal 365). The lady in yellow happily talks about losing her virginity in an old Buick, proud that her lover

started looking at her like she was a real woman. Breaking this reverie is the darkly-dressed lady in blue, quipping, “you gave it up in a buick?” (Shange 10). The Lady in Blue’s poem is darker. She declares “I usedta live in the world/then I moved to HARLEM/& my universe is now six blocks.” She equates these six blocks to a prison, one that fills her with paranoia. In her poem she doesn’t want a young man “fulla his power” to take advantage of her in the dark (Shange 36). The Lady in Red arguably has the most passionate and violent poem. It’s a rhythmic narrative of her abusive ex-boyfriend, Beau Willie, returning home. He asks for her hand in marriage, but she refuses. He holds their two children over the window sill, threatening to throw them out of the five-story apartment. The lady in red only whispers for him to stop, “& he dropped em” (60). It’s the most cataclysmic tale amidst the other stories of rape, abortion and self-loathing. It’s no wonder it’s reserved for the lady in red, a color synonymous with passion. She’s the one who makes the realization at the end of the play. This realization is that despite hardships, one can find happiness through self-love and the support from a community. After sitting alone crying, the lady in red realizes, “I found god in myself/& I loved her/ I loved her fiercely” (63). The rainbow is in full force within this narrative. But Shange even deviates from the simple idea of six colors.

The lady in brown diverges from the colors of the rainbow, but only to strengthen to story. Shange created the lady in brown to be an observer of the action (El-Shayal 365). She laments the universal themes Shange and Walker draw on. The lady in brown begins and ends the play. It is the lady in brown who introduces the dilemma of the underrepresented black woman. The struggle stems from how “she’s been dead so long/closed in silence so long/she doesn’t know the sound/of her own voice/her infinite beauty” (Shange 4). The lady in brown introduces the main themes of marginalization and despair. Immediately after her first poem the six other women say

they're from all over the country—San Francisco, Houston, Chicago, etc. Shange sets up the connectedness of her piece from the very beginning. Similarly, after the lady in red learns to love herself, the lady in brown concludes the piece. She ends the show announcing that these women are “movin to the ends of their own rainbows” (64). Since they have learned to love themselves in their cultural and racial identity, they are reborn.

The bright color scheme contrasts with the grim subject matter of the play. The bright, simple dresses and bare feet are acts of defiance; by not submitting to the feelings of despair and suicide, the colorful clothing palette is a creative assertion that their existence matters. The disenfranchised women of *for colored girls* pick up their everyday clothes and “rearrange” them into a bold manner (Allen 253). It links the clothes with the dance narrative as well. Clothing is innately linked to the body, a vessel African-Americans once didn't own. Shange also explored visual storytelling through dance. She claimed ownership of her own body through dance, so the communal dance in *for colored girls* helps the seven women discover their own bodies (Waxman 99). The clothes allow the women to dance alongside their sisters who perform their poems. In her teens, dance taught Shange to embrace “the ethnicity of my thighs and backside,” allowing her “[t]he freedom to move in space, to demand of my own sweat a perfection that could continually be approached, though never known, waz poem to me” (Shange xv).

Dance and costume buoyed the performance, because both connected the seven women into a singular rainbow. Alice Walker similarly has a connection to dance in one of her *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* essays. In “Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self”, Walker describes by losing her right eye to a BB gun pellet. Being partially blind since the age of eight, she felt ugly and invisible for several years. Gaining literary success made her self-conscious

about her new public image, especially with her cloudy glass eye. However, one day her daughter truly makes her embrace her otherness. Her three-year-old daughter exclaims, “Mommy, there is a world in your eye! Mommy, where did you *get* that world in your eye!” Walker is absolutely touched by her daughter’s words. Like Shange, it took other people’s stories and kindness to make her love herself. Walker ends the essay with her dream of dancing to Stevie Wonder’s song “Always”. Walker says that this dance dream is one of the happiest moments of her life. Another dancer joins her, a lovely and uninhibited girl. Walker says she *is* this girl as well (Walker 393). Walker uses dance to enlighten her from the stagnancy and self-loathing of her life (Waxman 103). Throughout *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Walker stresses how important it is for black women to get to know *themselves*, not to accept monolithic stereotypes that only hurt them. Finally in the 1970s this black female identity was successful reaching the consciousness of the entire nation.

For colored girls met with commercial success. It debuted Off-Broadway in 1976 and was a massive success. The show transferred to Broadway in 1976 at the Booth Theater, and the original Lady in Red, Trazana Beverley, won a Tony in 1977 (Brantley). *For colored girls* also sparked conversations between all walks of life, white or black. Reviewers raved about Shange’s vibrant 1976 production. New York Times reviewer Clive Barnes adored the show, noting how it simultaneously stuck to an African-American tradition but transcended into human empathy. He writes in his review that as a white man, he didn’t feel guilty about being white or male, but ecstatic that he was a human that had “black sisters”. The choreopoem is true American folklore to him, as he pinpoints *for colored’ girl’s* mix of horror, humor and compassion. The show is specifically about African-American female life, he notes, but he feels that anyone with sensitivity to Shange’s succinct writing will empathize with these fundamentally human

feelings. Barnes takes away from the evening that Shange isn't going for maudlin, but an honest, heightened, "canary-colored" experience (Barnes)

Other reviewers match Barne's zeal over the production. Larry Kart of the Chicago Tribune called it a golden piece of theater. However, he feels that the penultimate lady in red poem—Beau Willie dropping the children out the window—teeters on melodrama. Yet Kart loves the "rite" he experienced, the testimonies that empower seven different and complex women. (Kart). Richard L. Coe of The Washington Post savored all the rainbow colors against the dark set to be an "exceptionally satisfying, constantly shifting kaleidoscope." The play, Coe said, began with the women detached from one another and lamenting their black and female dilemma. Yet the spirited ending left Coe resilient, deeming the overall tone of *for colored girls* a "buoyant assertion of womanhood" (Coe). The play's success and positive reviews marked a shift in black female artists. They could present their autonomous powerful selves and still gain mainstream attention.

The visuals in *for colored girls* still have an impact on the play's revivals. A recent 1995 Broadway revival changed the colors of the women's outfits. Just as the initial 1976 production had designers and the director influencing the text, as did the 1995 production. Instead of women in red, blue and brown, they became lady in rose, mint and aqua (Brantley) Shange, directing this revival, made these changes. She said she saw the subtler changes in the black landscape after twenty years. She changed parts of the poems, even mentioning AIDS in one of them. She felt that it would be ludicrous to talk about female sexuality in the 1990s and not mention safe sex. Still, the women are defying the horrifying statistics of AIDS, rape and poverty that still affect black women in 1995. On a review of the revival, Ben Brantley of the New York Times

welcomed the changes, but felt the famous ending of the play (“I found God in myself/& loved her fiercely”) took away the poems’ gravitas and was a relic of 1970’s cheesiness (Brantley). Shange’s goal, however, was to remain relevant, because to her *for colored girls* is not *Hair*—she doesn’t want it to be a period piece. Color and costume cannot be taken away from this piece. Like the dancing, they are inextricably linked. Shange saw that her iconoclastic piece was malleable, and wanted to change with the times.

Black women have struggled to be properly represented in the theater. For centuries, black women were disregarded as only promiscuous Jezebels or pathetic Mammies in minstrel shows (Allen xi). Black women fought to reclaim their identity, starting with image. They no longer wanted to conform to a white beauty ideal of prim clothes and straight hair. They also didn’t want to enforce stereotypes in dressing destitute and slovenly. For playwright Ntozake Shange, why not make an honest portrayal of black women’s lives and have *for colored girls*’ seven women in gorgeous colors of crimson, saffron and violet? As Alice Walker explains, what’s kept black women persevering is the personal investment in creating their own version of beauty (Walker 241). In the eponymous essay of *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Walker explains the title’s roots in her mother’s flowers. Her mother grew flowers wherever they lived, and created epic gardens with over fifty different kinds of flowers. The gardens were vibrant with every hue imaginable, “so vibrant in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity.” In Walker’s essays, she discovers self-love from internal forces and her own community of strong black women. Walker is like Shange in her reordering of societal values to attune her own freedom of expression. In *for colored girls*, the woman in orange says, ““I cldnt stand bein sorry and colored at the same time/it’s so redundant in the modern world” (Shange 43). Over one hundred years after slavery’s demise, black women area fight to reclaim their bodies. The lady in

orange learns that she can continue to explore her identities of blackness and womanhood with her communal sisters. The lady in orange reclaims her body and image through dance and the defiance to look beautiful in orange. It is her *own* version of beauty. The struggle is a group effort. Ntozake Shange and Alice Walker's creation of new black female aesthetic showed black women that they are never alone.

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