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***Ntozake Shange's for colored girls: Performing Female Bonding as an Answer to Patriarchy***

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**Abstract:** Shange's work stands amongst the first feminist pieces written by an Afro-American female taken to stage. This essay analyzes the verses that conform Shange's play as a critique of a patriarchal social structure that is damaging the individuals. She questions the social values, explores human devastation, solitude and marginalization. Besides, she criticizes fiercely the problems of the black community, which the ideology of the 60s tried to hide, such as abortion, rape and domestic violence, while portraying at the same time her passion towards Black culture. Moreover, this paper shows how the author demythologizes both the Black Arts image of the black community and the American patriarchal society in a piece of literary production that calls for women's unity against patriarchy which still applies today.

**Keywords:** Afro-American, feminist, patriarchy, black community, female bonding.

**Marta SORIANO FLÓREZ**

***Ntozake Shange's for colored girls: Performing Female Bonding as an Answer to Patriarchy***

I see a greater and greater commitment among black women to understand self, multiplied in terms of the community, the community multiplied in terms of nation, and the nation multiplied in terms of the word.

(Alexis de Veau)

I create poems about Black women  
which help us grow strong.  
I create stories about Black women  
Which make our day dreams as real as  
life.  
(Ntozake Shange)

Ntozake Shange (New Jersey, 1948) is the African name adopted by the dramaturge, poet, actress and dancer Paulette Williams. This middle class Afro-American writer –daughter of a doctor and a social worker– suffered from racial discriminations that sprung up during the 50s in the North American society. However, her family well-being allowed her to complete her studies at the University of Southern California (1973). In spite of her social privileges, her life was far from being happy, as she tried to immolate herself by imitating Sylvia Plath suicidal technique –inhaling gas– due to the sufferings derived from an unfortunate marriage during her college years. After being under psychological treatment, Paulette Williams radically changed her passive attitude; she did so by adopting an African name, “Ntozake Shange” –which means “she who comes with her own things” and “she who walks with lions”; these two words undeniably represent her need for autonomy, self identity and strength. Moreover, she recovered her interest in pro-women works and thus, Shange begun her literary creation at the same time that she was an active member of the Afro-American movements of the 70s. Therefore, at the same time that Shange participated in various dance groups, such as Third World Collective and Raymond Sawyer’s Afro American Dance Company, amongst others; she started to write a series of poems, which showed the sufferings and strengths of colored women in the United States, and those lines will ultimately become the choreopoem *for colored girls that have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1975). Thanks to this beautiful piece of contemporary drama, not only did she win prestigious literary and theater awards, but she also gave voice and united many women against the crude and violent realities that many of them used to undergo in silence. Ntozake Shange’s play, *for colored girls* portrays the cries, wonders and complaints of seven different black women who share their anxieties towards the patriarchal society in which they are living in. This choreopoem, which is a mixture of poetry, dance and drama, depicts the various realities of the black community of the time. Thus, through these women the author is also stressing universal female problems, such as: violence, rape, family conflicts in the various social classes, etc. Therefore, my aim in this paper is to study how Shange clearly condemns the patriarchal society in which different people, but especially women, suffer; and in addition how she sees that collectively these injustices can be better faced.

*for colored girls* is a criticism towards some ideologies from the sixties such as Black Arts, which stressed the necessity of Afro-Americans to rediscover their blackness in a way in which they “idealized relationships between black men and women, and even considered men superior to women” (Christian 170). Therefore, the play grasps the internal, self-inflicted problems of the black community alone, without forgetting the universality of the abuse on women. Shange, as an ardent feminist, counters this idealization, giving a voice to these oppressed black women and underlining their suffering in this patriarchal and capitalist society, mainly centered around the urban life that they share along with other women from different races. As Barbara Christian acknowledges, “the ideology of the sixties had stressed the necessity for Afro-Americans to rediscover their blackness, their unity in their blackness” (175). Nonetheless, these groups empowered themselves, and as a result, they tended to “idealize the relationship between black men and women, to blame sexism in the black community solely in racism or to justify a position that black men were superior to women” (Christian 175). As a consequence of these beliefs, the Afro-American community itself became a threat to the black women. In *for colored girls*, Shange stresses the necessity to deny those idealizations, and to show the reality that surrounds these women. Thus, she portrays the failures of the black community itself through the complaints of these seven different women, who reveal and revise their attitudes of their own black community towards

them. Once more, it is important to recall that Shange does not forget that those failures and attacks to women are, in part, derived from the ill mentality of the society in which they are living. Within the text, it can be noticed that the very first poem voiced by the lady in brown, remarks women's alienation and isolation, as well as it describes what being a black women has entailed so far: "she's been death so long/ closed in silence so long/ she doesn't know the sound/ of her own voice/ of her infinite beauty ... sing her sights/ sing the song of her possibilities/ let her be born ..." (Shange 18). In these lines black womanhood is addressed. The woman in brown cries for the different women to share their experiences and thus, show their complaints and critiques towards their own community in which they have been silent. In these first lines, a pattern that will be repeated throughout the entire play can be seen: a transition between a monologue by one of the women-in this case the lady in brown, to a choir of women. This choir "observes and comments the action, reminding us of the Greek theatrical choirs" (Cuenca Aguilar 180). Hence, after the lines of the lady in brown, the rest of the women name a city in America: "i am outside chicago/ I am outside detroit/ i am outside houston/ i am outside baltimore/ i am outside san francisco ..." (Shange 19), reinforcing the idea that these longings are spread throughout America, and that these voiceless oppressions which affect the entire black community across the country need to be heard and thus, revised. Besides, these longings are a call that addresses all the colored women suffering under the patriarchal society to join them in this critique.

Shange believed that theater was the best way to bring out from the darkness the injustices that surrounded women's lives and also to make the public aware of how society was deeply rooted in wrong patriarchal values, which clearly left women in an inferior position. The author creates in her choreopoem an atmosphere with a *mélange* of voices, stories, dance movements, colored dresses and lights. Thus, when putting all those ingredients on a stage, Shange uses theater as a mean by which the "private' sphere [of these women] comes into the light" (Hernando-Real and Ozieblo 28); Therefore, this production, set on an empty and black scenario, unites the women in a plurality of colors and voices that have an effect on the viewer, who abandons the theater touched by these various stories. As Hernando-Real and Ozieblo precisely underline, "There is a [clear] need to confront the audience with women suffering elsewhere" (28). Without any doubt, the confessions and cries of the colored girls shown on stage stimulate action and reaction from the audience. Besides, this play has been ascribed by many critics to the Consciousness-Raising Movement of the period<sup>1</sup>. The latter, "had a highly political and social aim" (Hernando- Real and Ozieblo 29). This movement supports the realization that all women united can face their problems and help each other; moreover, they can feel the strength to reach their goals without being subjected to society or males, and thus, feel freer. Furthermore, derived from this conscious awareness, "the post-performance discussions, stressed the need to bond and to request help, to admit, to anger, and to reject the status of helpless victim. The term survivor appeared to replace that of victim" (Hernando-Real and Ozieblo 29) This anger that rose in the public, after seeing such touchy reality on stage, was seen by many critics as a tool to awake the blind society and thus, to cause a response by them; since as Fischer-Litche acknowledges "the most important players are sited on the auditorium" (qtd. in Hernando- Real and Ozieblo 35) and the audience/ readers need to be transported to reality and accept their responsibility towards the society in which they are living in.

Potentially divisive topics such as those that vindicate sexuality as something that women enjoy appear in this brave piece of literature. For instance, "In the graduation night" a set of poems that deal with the end of virginity and the beginning of maturity, it is the lady in yellow who has the leading voice. In her personal story, this lady portrays with joy and passion her sexual awakening and curiosity. Along these lines Shange portrays somehow

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<sup>1</sup> A political awareness movement born in the USA around 1960, in which feminist activist believed that a change of consciousness was a fundamental component of social change. Therefore, they defended that there were intricate relationships between the individual aspects of their own experience and public; that is, the personal becomes political (Fernández Morales et al 21).

how society needs to appreciate sexual encounters as something natural to humankind, instead of seeing the sexual act as something obscene, provocative, men-centered and even dangerous for society. Hence, the poet intends to broaden this closed patriarchal mentality, which is oppressing women; and also to finish with the ongoing spread of fake socially-constructed myths, which claimed that not being a virgin until a certain age (for a woman) was an act of impurity. Besides, both events of graduating from college along with the imminent end of their virginity, are presented as key steps towards the ladies' acquisition of maturity, as can be seen in these cries of joy of the lady in yellow: "moving toward snappin beer cans &/ GET IT GET IT THAT 'S THE WAY TO DO IT MAMA/ all of us moving from mama to what ever waz out there" (Shange 21). Furthermore, as Cuenca Aguilar acknowledges, it is interesting to stress that explicit portrayal on the stage of these sexual encounters was not very common at the time (70s) therefore, the treatment of sexuality as something pleasant and natural to women did challenge the moralist who did not tolerate the sexual expression shown so vividly on stage - even less when a woman expressed them- (181). Thus, the explicit joyful expressions, such as: "martin slipped his leg round my thigh/ the dells bumped 'stay'/ up & down the new carver homes/ WE WAZ GROWN/ WE WAZ FINALLY GROWN/ ... / i just couldnt stop grinning " (Shange 23-24) were also against some mentalities from the seventies which rejected the passionate experience of sex by any colored woman. Moreover, Lebin and Flowers affirm that:

This sister's initiation into womanhood breaks the negative associations linked to becoming a woman. Instead of losing her virginity, she 'g(i)ve(s) it away' and 'it was won-der-ful'. The giggles and sighs of solidarity that greet this admission go even further in breaking the negative stereotypes: the accent is placed on shared experiences, on wholeness. (qtd. in Cuenca Aguilar 181)

After the lady in yellow finishes her story, the rest of the girls joined her words singing happily; all but the lady in blue, who does voice the painful side of sex: when sex is forced, with a total lack of passion or willingness. Further, she recognizes that: "she never did like to grin" (Shange 25). Therefore, Shange is analyzing in this part of the choreopoem not only the positive side of sexual encounters and the necessity to be more open-minded regarding sexual relationships, and virginity; but she also reminds the viewers that sex has been used in today's society as a powerful weapon to control and damage women's integrity. Thus, she condemns those abuses on stage throughout the play.

As suggested earlier, Shange denies the mythologies from the sixties which idealized the harmony within the black community. She does that via revealing cases of violence against woman, for instance: verbal and physical abuse within the household, severe humiliation after a woman's decision to have an abortion, rape cases, etc; worded by the seven colored ladies. Underneath these tragic problems -in this play pictured in the black community alone, the constant critique of the patriarchal society can be identified. Regarding this issue, Charlotte Brunch clearly remarked that:

Acts of abuse against women cannot be considered private acts integrated within a given culture, but 'structural relationship of power, domination and privilege between men and women in society' is still necessary. As she insists violence against women is central to maintaining those political relations, at home at work in all public spheres. (qtd. in Fernández et al 18)

In the following extracts, I would like to analyze through Shange's characters, how these several abuses, which have affected women through centuries, are revised and criticized in particular examples that set these individual oppressions as a universal one, as any women can feel identified with the anguish that these women underwent; since this play touches on social issues that still need to be addressed and revised.

In "no assistance" the lady in red denounces the psychological and emotional abused that she underwent in her relationship. She criticizes the treatment that her partner gave to her, and she also portrays the relief that she felt when she decided to abandon the relationship. At the beginning, she shouts her denounces in just a solo voice that speaks up against the abuses derived from the patriarchal society, which has been many times carried out by their own male partners; although, while listening to her, the colored ladies will join

the lady in red words and show that they are more aware of their own suffering, but also of their particular strength. As Cuenca Aguilar underlines, the lady in red attacks her partner's lack of sensibility through her interior monologue:

you call at 3:00 in the morning on weekends/ so i cd drive 27 ½ miles cross bay before i go to work/ ...but you are of no assistance ... /this was an experiment/ to see how selfish i cd be... if i was capable of debasing my self for the love of another/ if I cd stand not being wanted when i was wanted to be wanted/ & I cannot/ so/ with no further assistance & no guidance form you/ i am ending this affair. (183)

The lady in red shows how she was completely absorbed by her partner, as she obeyed him until she was conscious that she was giving away too much of herself for nothing. She takes into account that making those sacrifices has somehow helped her to discover her own inner power, as she is now conscious of what she wants in her life. Hence, she does not need a partner to guide her life, since she is the one who is in control of her own decisions. Moreover, the lady in red's initial oppression is derived from the way in which society is built. This social construction forces women (unconsciously) to want what they know is not good for them, since the patriarchal structure encourages them to meet those unwritten social conventions –being the perfect, obedient, and submissive girlfriend, wife, mother, housewife, etc. However, being given the possibility to express her feeling out loud gives strength to the lady in red, who will feel the support of the rest of the women on stage. Briefly, it is interesting to add that in this play it can be clearly grasped how there are several paths that have been explored by these women to lessen their pain, worries and anger. Amongst the latter, we find that having sex, like the lady in yellow portrays in the fragment described above and also dancing and singing are ways of sharing and harmonizing the pain of the stories lived by these seven colored ladies, "we gotta dance to keep from cryin / ... / we gotta dance to keep from dyin" (Shange 30). Moreover, as the lady in orange indicates: "when/ i can dance like that/ there is nothing cd hurt me" (Shange 33). Although these three bodily expressions have helped them to survive in the hostile patriarchal structure and have also helped them to face the attitudes derived from it and which surround them; the colored girls believe that it is time to speak up and to leave those passive attitudes. They are ready to raise their voice and to tell their stories, since "they are ready to feel free, to speak the world aloud. Therefore, through their denunciations, "in the mist and fog of life [they are finding their] own way to the rainbow by the sound of their own voice" (Shange 16).

Regarding the cases of rape, the women agree that they have been violated within their own social circles, described as "these men friends of ours/ who smell nice" (Shange 34), and moreover, they point out the fact that women are generally submissive towards these men; as the lady in red says that "women relinquish all personal rights/ in presence of a man/ who apparently could be considered a rapist" (Shange 34). On top of that, the lady in blue acknowledges that "presenting charges will be as hard/ as keeping yr legs closed/ while five fools try to run a train into you" (Shange 32). Once more the lady in blue insists that the profile of the rapist is not a stranger, but they have "bein betrayed by men who know us" (Shange 33). These submissive attitudes that these women are clearly denouncing brings into question again the patriarchal society in which they are living in. The way in which the society is structured leaves women in an inferior position. As a result, they are afraid to even trust the law that would defend them if they were to denounce those sexual abuses. The fact that Shange personalizes these violations in the Afro-American community does not let aside other colored women and white women, who also feel diminished in the men-centered society in which they live. As Marta Fernández Morales et al. acknowledge: "Rape [is] the quintessential sexist aggression in the mentality of the times –should not be considered a sexual attack against an individual, but an act of violence against women in general, based on issues of power and control over the female body" (20).

Also the poem that is found in the "abortion cycle #1" shows how the patriarchal ideas of society narrow the minds of its citizens; and as a consequence, the individuals –in this case the women– suffer. In *for colored girls*, the lady in blue expresses first her anguish

and the physical and mental pain that having an abortion entails; and later on, she portrays the societal shame of being pregnant and willing to have an abortion; hence she stresses these reactions, as well as the loneliness that she underwent before and after the process:

tubes tables white washed windows/ grime form age wiped over once/ legs spread/ anxious/eyes crawling up on me/eyes rolling in my thighs/ metal horses gnawin my womb/ dead mice fall from my mouth/ i really didnt mean to/ i really didn't think i cd/ ... / get offa me alla this blood/ bones shattered like soft ice-cream cones/ ... / i cdnt have people/ looking at me/ pregnant/ I cldnt have my friends see this/ dyin dangling tween my legs/ & i didnt say a thing/ not a sigh/ to get/ those eyes offa me/ get them steel rods outta me/ this hurts/ this hurts me/ & nobody came/ coz nobody knew/ once i waz pregnant and shamed of myself. (Shange 36)

The lady in blue suffers out of her condition; firstly, she sings nightmare images of vomit, blood and baby bones; she also portrays in her words vivid images of the abortion process in which she is just able to see the doctors' eyes, by which she feels observed and judged. These eyes represent somehow the eyes of society, a society that makes her pregnancy and her decision to abort in silence, as no one would have supported her will to finish her pregnancy, or even understood her risky condition. Finally, she underlines in this emotive monologue how she felt alone and hurt, since she is aware that the eyes of society look, judge and condemn. Furthermore, regarding these powerful words, Lester indicates that:

[The]... indictment is not a man who abandons a pregnant woman (the father is not even informed of the pregnancy). Instead, it is an indictment of society, of men and women that ostracizes women who celebrate their sexuality freely, a society that makes a woman's biology her destiny of shame. (321)

Hence, it seems that women are unable to decide whether they want to have a family without the reprimand of their partner or society. However, it is true to say that the lady in blue embodies the spirit of those women who fought (and still do) against unjust social impositions. Therefore, the lady in blue is leading the path of women's independence, courage, strength and power to be self-determine. Reading this poem, any women could be identified with her monologue. Once again, Shange uses an individual problem that can be broadened to a different society, or that can be applied to a different woman. The universality of this extract and her validity in today's society makes it a really powerful one.

In the series of poems of "a nite with beau willie brown" a case of verbal and physical domestic violence<sup>2</sup> within a family is shown. Willie, who finished his relation with Crystal, tries desperately to fit in society after being fighting in the Vietnam War, and it is the secure structure of marriage that offers him a chance to be back in the rigid social structure. Without any doubt, the important of having a "family actually takes place in the greatest American mythological tradition of the American Dream" (Hernando-Real 39), consequently, having a family should be key to fully succeeding in society. That is why Willie sees his marriage with Crystal as the only solution to escape from his social alienation. Nonetheless, the American art, and concretely this theatrical performance in particular, brings into light the problems of this microcosm, which are "based on experiences of women where family is the very genesis of violence; and home a battle ground" (Hernando-Real 40). The lady in red starts her monologue by sharing with the other colored ladies Crystal's anguishing story in her family microcosm, in which "Beau Willie is violent, abusive, deceptive and irresponsible. He seems to lack ambition and to offer nothing but destruction to Crystal's life" (Lester 319). The lady in red portrays these images, firstly, by using the third person: "crystal had gone &/ got a court order sayin beau willie brown had no access/ to this children/ if he showed his face he was subject to arrest ..." (Shange 80). As the lady in red continues revealing the

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<sup>2</sup> Term that appeared in the nineties when a new feminist wave dealt with the issue of aggression (Hernando-Real and Ozieblo 31).

story, she gets more passionate and she starts reporting Crystal's words somehow letting the reader, the audience and the colored girls guess that she is the one who underwent the former domestic violence case: "& i'm not gonna have a thing to do wit it/ o no i wdnt marry yr pitifull black ass for nothing ..." (Shange 81). This man portrayed at the end of the play, Willie, came 'crazy' from the Vietnam War. As pointed out earlier, he feels misplaced and powerless, so, he seeks to reinforce his role in society by accusing Crystal of being unfaithful; he doubts whether the children are his; he insults her constantly; the lady in red even gets a restraining order against him, and he is obsessed with the idea of marrying Crystal:

& he just wanted to marry her/ that is what/ he wanted to marry her/& have a family/ but the bitch waz crazy/ beau willie was sitting in this hotel in his drawers drinkin coffee, smoking crack ... / laughing/ bout how he waz gonna get crystal to take him back/& let him be a man in the house/... (Shange 82)

In these lines, a man is threatening and insulting a woman. That cannot be denied, nor excused. However, there is as well an underlying critique of the patriarchal and capitalist society that makes a man act out of his mind. Staple adds that "there is a curious rage festering inside black men because, like it or not, they have not been allowed to fulfill the roles (i. e breadwinner, protector) that the society ascribes to them" (qtd. in Lester 319). Willie comes back from the Vietnam War, and he tries to get a place in society:

he came crazy as hell/ he tried to get veteran benefits/ for being in Basra and go on to school & they kept right on putting him in remedial classes/ he cdnt read wortha damn/ (...) a gypsie cab to drive/ but his cab kept brakin down/ & the cops waz always messin with him/ plus not getting much bread. (Shange 80)

The racism that black people suffered during the late 60s and the early 70s (as Shange herself when she was a child) is visible in these paragraphs. However, Shange is more interested to stress is the difficulty that Beau Willie had in supporting himself once he was back from the war. Besides, his inability to read and write makes him even get further down in the social scale. These situations disqualify him from finding a proper job, and also his inferior position makes the police, which somehow represent the guardians of law and of the rigidity of social structures, laugh at him. In addition, as Lester adds "[Willie's rage derives] in part by the capitalist system into which he is born" (320). Shange depicts how society is male-oriented, and therefore, men (and in this case Willie) feel frustrated when they do not achieve those expectations - those roles that society has created for them. In addition, Willie feels displaced from society and he sees in marriage a way to reinforce his status in the patriarchal society, and thus, he sees in it a solution to be part of it again. "Consequently, he falls short of the ... patriarchy's fundamental definition of manhood. [Therefore], his only sources of salvation are Crystal and their two children" (Lester 320). However, as Crystal refuses to marry him, denying him this status, he destroys the only things she has: her children. In part, by destroying them he finishes with himself: i ant gonna marry ya / ... / for nothing/ you gonna be in jail/ ... / now gimme my kids/... / he kicked the screen outta the window/.../ you gonna marry me/ yeh/ he looked from where the kids were hangin from the fifth story/... / & he dropped em (Shange 84). This is the last stanza of Crystal's domestic violence description, in which a murder is the ultimate consequence of Willie maladjustment. The pressure of the social hierarchy makes that "men and women, [and children] get suffocated by circumstances not exclusively of their own making" (Lester 320). This revelation puts a question mark in the idealization of the concept American family, here presented as a social requisite to maintain a certain status within a particular culture. Once more, it is important to bear in mind that the social realities embodied in Beau Willie do not justify how he treats Crystal and his children.

Concerning the verses that compose "a nite with beau willie brown" some critics classify Shange's play as one which only aims to attack black men. On the contrary, Shange defended that her intention was not to criticize black men, but patriarchy in general. The

author of this choreopoem confronts images of the black community that are "painful, embarrassing or potentially divisive" (Flowers 54). The imagery, however, is not always portrayed by (male) Afro-American writers. As Flowers suggests, the reason for that silence may be that "blacks have been so preoccupied with political and economic survival that they no longer know, if they ever did, how to confront their own responsibility for what happens between black men and women" (54). However, Shange as a black woman, is aware of the silence that was carried out through many years, and therefore, she is not afraid to speak up through her characters and denounce what she has been seeing in the black community, and also in the bigger picture of the patriarchal society. These poems are very politically bound, however, they have been sometimes been seen by critics as a direct attack against black men (and men in general); although Shange herself admits that her target in *for colored girls* "is not Black men per se, but the patriarchy in general, which she views as universal in its oppression to women" (Lester 322). Additionally, in her review of the play, Andrea Benton suggests that Shange portrays "black men as the root of black women's pain" (547); nonetheless, I would argue that Shange portrays black men as victims of the patriarchal society as well as women are. Furthermore, Shin underlines that Shange herself acknowledges that her aim in *for colored girls* is not putting all the blame on men, but on the oppressive patriarchal society that represses individuals and do not foment communication among them (qtd. in Lester 322). True is to say that some reaction towards this choreopoem did surprise its author who admits that "nothing prepared [her] for the hateful response from Afro-American-English speaking males" (Shange 10). Moreover, Shange believes that some men felt that placing the story in their own patriarchal delusions was a direct attack against them. However, as the play-writer has mentioned several times, her intention in her writing is to make an "important, and yet unspoken, social comment" (Shange 14). She constantly insists that the aim of *for colored girls* is to address situations that "bridged the women unspoken longings" (Shange 10); hence, she wants to celebrate female self-determination and union; therefore, she does not intend to attack directly male behavior. As has been seen through different extracts of the theatrical piece Shange condemns patriarchy and its devastating impact especially on women.

In one of the last series of poems the urban setting is introduced and presented as a bare land, a space empty of opportunities that reproduces the patriarchal structure. Thus, the city in which these women live is not shown as a place of freedom and equality. Besides, it is even portrayed as a prison for the individuals, since they live under the rules and power of a patriarchal structure, as can be seen in the lady in blue words: "Harlem, the Black city within New York City, which figures in the Afro-American literature [described as] Mecca, the city of Refuge" (Mitchell 265) is not what it is expected to be: "I usedta live in the world/ now I live in HARLEM & my universe is now six blocks/ a tunnel with a train/ I can ride anywhere / remain a stranger" (Shange 50). The city embodies the patriarchal structure in which women are nothing but strangers. The promising ideas of the city (and particularly of Harlem) often portrayed by the Black Art movement of the sixties as a place of freedom, is demythologized by Shange. In the city, women and men suffer and they identify their lives with a rail that does not reach any destination. It is the lady in blue, once more, who portrays ghostly images about the city: "women hangin outta windows ...six blocks of cruelty/ piled up on itself/ a tunnel/ closin" (Shange 50). In her words it can be grasped how in these cities women have had little or no opportunities to escape from the train that takes them to a ghetto characterized by its dark imprisonment: "in the dark/ in my universe of six blocks/ straight up brick walls"(50). Furthermore, the lady in blue brings back the idea of the fear that women can have in some men, who can abuse them without pity: "wdnt be good/ not good at all/ to meet a tall short black brown young man fulla his power" (50). This hostile atmosphere in the cities, along with the family dilemmas, questions not only the destructive values that the society is embracing, but also it presents a chaotic bare land in which need they need to get together to combat this poisonous attitude. The lines of this excerpt from the play are sung by one lady while the other colored ladies get into the stage and seem to wait for a bus. This symbolic image conveys the clear idea that these women seek for a different journey; since they want to change the route of their destiny and escape



from Harlem, a claustrophobic bare land in which there are little expectations for women. Finally, it would be important to mention that they are not alone in "the cruel demeaning world of social ignorance, illiteracy, promiscuity and unemployment" (Mitchell 269), as they are firm to take that bus to discover new horizons together.

The idea of female bonding, represented in the play by the seven anonymous colored girls' supporting one another, is clearly portrayed as the best way to go against the main stream patriarchal current of thought. Moreover, as Cuenca Aguilar affirms "[these] women's anonymity makes their experiences seem less of those seven individual women and more the collective experience of every women" (178). Therefore, *for colored girls* calls for unity to achieve a change, and it calls for action. Shange uses the voices and moves of her seven characters to offer the public a different, more insightful, approach to the violence that the women are undergoing. Hence, as Maria Dolores Narbona-Carrión defends:

female bonding is one of those options promoted by some American women playwrights that not only enrich the theatrical scene ... , but also, given the didactic potential of this art, they highlight the fact that possibilities of improving our society with respect to the violence perpetrated against women exist. (64)

Undeniably, female bonding is a key element in this performance. This idea helps the women to realize that all "can escape their fates as victims of violence and oppression, and that a means to reach this goal can be strength derived from their female bonding" (Narbona-Carrión 68). In the last part of the choreopoem "layin on of hands", womanhood is represented as a tree that gathers women together, so they can find and define themselves. The lady in red, after reporting the pitiful story of Crystal, realizes that after sharing that anguish she has felt understood, accompanied by the other colored ladies. She sees in the other women a support, a reason to believe there could be a change in the attitude towards women in society if they are united and denounce these abuses: "screamin/ cryin/ the ghost of another women/ who waz missin'... i fell into a numbness/ til the only tree I cd see / took me up in her branches/ held me in the breeze /made me dawn dew ... I found god in myself/ and I loved her/ i loved her fiercely (Shange 87). This fragment shows how women do not need the patriarchal society to define them, they have to gather together in order to criticize and expose the failures and the pain that this social structure entails; and they are defining and empowering themselves. They go through an inner growth, always helped by their sisters' support. Women form a tree all together, a tree that helps them to grow straight and not to fall; these women represent the nature that still exists in the bare city. They are the nurturers of new possibilities, as they have found the needed hope in themselves. Women solidarity is clearly emphasized in this play as a "powerful instrument to fight against gender violence" (Narbona-Carrión 61) and thus, due to this female bonding "the female characters manage to get rid of male impositions ... [and this] give them strength to rebel against the discrimination they suffer" (Narbona Carrión 76). These women chase a change in society through the strength that they find in each other and the womanhood that unite them fiercely.

Shange's play is amongst the first feminist pieces written by an Afro-American female taken to the stage. *For colored girls* started to be acted in little cafes in the cities of San Francisco; then it moved to little theaters in New York, until it reached Broadway in 1976, where it was run for two years and a half. After its success, its representation was taken to several countries, such as Canada, Australia, the Caribbean and Europe (London). Regarding the various representations that this play has undergone, it would be important to underline that the various women that have taken the role of the seven colored girls, have not always been black women, since Asian, Hispanic and white women, were also part of the *colored* women cast at some point. For Shange, these women have also their own color, and so they deserved to be part of the rainbow of *for colored girls*. The image of the rainbow brings the idea of the union of colored women, and non colored, in a path that leads to the end of their claims, the end of men-centered society. Each of the women is important to maintain the harmony in the rainbow, as together they are one. Indeed Shange recalls in a

prologue that her “parents have always been involved in all kinds of Third World Culture [...], so I knew I wasn’t on this planet by myself”(15). Therefore, Shange is acknowledging how her scope of colors is not just reduced to black woman, as there is no doubt that this play explores the several agonies that politically and physically different women are suffering in today’s society regardless of their skin color.

*for colored girls* remains today as a play that continues on stage and that still illuminates as well as dissects the various gloomy aspects of the patriarchal social structure. Moreover, the morals and committed attitudes that the colored girls embody can be applied in our contemporary society, as the so-sought equality of opportunities are not yet a reality in many countries. In fact, in *revisiting for colored girls*, Shange announces that she has not been afraid to make a few changes and additions in order to update her theatrical piece:

Beau Willie is now returning from Iraq. And with the devastation of HIV/AIDS, a clear present danger particular to women ..., I felt it would be irresponsible not to address the pandemic ... and speak [the new-generation] of women aloud. (Shange 16)

Wars imply for Shange not only human devastation, but also they also represent solitude and marginalization. Male soldiers (and nowadays women too) feel displaced, since they do not fit into any role of the squared social structure. The Iraq War substitutes somehow the Vietnam one. The individuals are different but the consequences of social suffering are strictly the same. Furthermore, Shange adds to her play more on the issue of sexual transmitted illnesses, something that she touched in the original version, but that she makes more evident and raise more awareness about in her new adaptation. Hence she acknowledges the use of contraceptives and new modern methods of sexual protection. Regarding the choreopoem interpretations and its validity today, the play has been shown this year in different areas of North America, such as in Philadelphia’s Theater Hall, and some months earlier in Newark University Hall. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the play was recently adapted to a film version: *For colored girls* (2010), directed by Tyler Perry in which Shange was the script writer. The movie is quite faithful to the play, however, important critics such as Roger Ebert believes that the movie is not as strong as the play is; although the great work done by the Afro-American actresses in the play is appraised. New times bring new hope to women, but also new challenges. Shange sees a change in society, which is opening its doors to women; however, she thinks that there are still matters which remain unsolved and personal stories that have to be denounced. That is why she changes and readapts her play to the new generations and also this is also the reason why the play shows universality and is still performed today.

To conclude, this paper has discussed how in *for colored girls*, Shange demythologizes the Black Arts image of the black community, as she does likewise with the patriarchal society that men and women share in America. Besides, she criticizes fiercely the problems of the black community, which the ideology of the 60s tried to hide, such as abortion, rape, domestic violence, etc; while at the same time she also portrays the passion that she has for the Black culture. This is seen in the dialect, the songs, and the musicality of the verses that form this play. On top of that, Shange innovates and creates the choreopoem thanks to mixing verses with songs, music and dance. The richness of these series of poems lies in the critique of a patriarchal social structure that is damaging the individuals. Shange equals black and white people, since they are both involved in this male oriented society. She does not focus on revising history, but she addresses present day problems within the black community. Moreover, this piece calls for a unity of women, who at the end are the ones who suffer most under this male centered society. Shange’s aim is not to exclude men, but to revise the values of a society that is forcing men and women to suffer. Ultimately, she believes that women have to support each other and gather together, as a way of challenging the pain and suffering they face. Shange uses the stage as a means to give voice and to spread the complaints of these anonymous colored women, with whom anyone can feel identify with. As Shange herself points out: “the personal story of a woman became every woman, the solo voice becoming many. Every poem felt into its place, rainbow of

colors, shapes and timbres of voice, my solo instrument blossoming in a solo chamber ensemble" (10). Her courageous play poses questions around the values of our current society. Thus, the playwright gives the 70's and today's audience- the citizens- a different angle to see the reality. Hence, this way of looking at social issues may help people to open their eyes and thus, to see more clearly what is going on every day in the streets and in their own houses. This work is meant to make people reflect about the way society is recklessly conducted and invites us to awaken and change the direction that it has been taking during many years.

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