Shange's *spell # 7*: The Woman Warrior "Re-Visioned"

Cecilia H. C. Liu
English Department
Fu Jen University

Ntozake Shange (pronounced En-toe-ZAK-kay SHONG-gay), playwright, poet, and novelist, has captivated audiences with her fiery speech since the 1976 Broadway debut of *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf.* Shange's "**choreopoem**" is her most significant contribution to the stage. The choreopoem is a theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance, and music--those elements that, according to Shange, outline a distinctly African American heritage--to arouse an emotional response in an audience. Thus, her choreopoem is a uniquely African American formal strategy that deconstructs the binarizations between the material and the spiritual, objective and subjective reality, psychological realism and Brechtian alienation. As Sandra L. Richards points out, the choreopoem resists the rationality and empiricism of the well-made play, the colonizer's aesthetic (73-78). Shange's choreopoem uses the spirituality of the African tradition to counteract and disrupt the colonizer's system of Enlightenment thought. Within the African tradition, language, music, and dance are *mojos*, spiritual force-fields of energy. Shange's emphasis on *mojos* challenges a western, Eurocentric system of aesthetics privileging the spoken world.

Like many other radical women of color, Shange portrays herself as writer and her speakers/ characters both as warriors, angry and rebellious figures who fight against racism, sexism, capitalist imperialism; and as mothers, nurturers who must birth strong selves and communities, care for the world's children, and resist the violent state. For Shange, drama is fueled by "**combat breath**," a term she borrows from **Franz Fanon**'s studies of colonialism and defines as "the living response/ the drive to reconcile the irreconcilable / the black n white of what we live and where." Her choreopoem disrupts the conventional theatrical form and language. One of the theoretical tasks of this article is to explain the white male experience of minstrelsy as a discourse of desire. The purpose of this paper is to examine how 'colored' women survive the white patriarchy's historical oppression and emerge triumphant after their sufferings.

spell # 7, the first play in Shange's *Three Pieces* volume, focuses partly on sexist oppression but mainly on issues of color, class and race. The grotesque minstrel-show parody that begins the play jolts the audience with that familiar, insidious brand of racism once labeled comedy; and the magician's opening speech reveals the impact of internalized oppression on Black children who wanted

desperately to be made white. A "huge black face mask hanging from the ceiling of the theater"[1] literally and figuratively dominates the scene of *spell # 7*. This minstrel mask, a sign of white domination in the field of entertainment[2] compels the audience to *face* the mask and unmask the *face* underneath the mask. The face underneath the mask of blackface is always already white, in the sense that minstrelsy is a white male tradition, a white disgrace, a white issue. Minstrel shows reveal nothing whatsoever about African Americans; they do, however, reveal something about that dark continent of the white male phobias and desires, and "the horror, the horror" of the white male's experience of gender and racial difference.

Minstrel shows are written in an imitation of black dialect, and while the set-up is obviously a joke upon African American men, the dialogue consists of jokes about women, jokes that play upon gender difference among whites. As Hortense Spillers points out that during the time of minstrelsy's popularity, the late nineteenth century, African-American women, unlike white women, were not "gendered" (i.e., culturally produced as female subjects); rather, they occupied subaltern status for white men as property, chattel.[3] Shange's play addresses this absence of a subject position for African American women by reclaiming and rewriting the legacy of minstrelsy, writing herself back into a history in which she was excluded by virtue of her sex and implicated by virtue of her race.

The characters of *spell # 7* are Black American men as well as women, unemployed actors and actresses and musicians who locate themselves in the trenches, where they examine the impact of racist, sexist and economic oppression on their lives. They must live under the spell of a theater industry that excludes them, a theater industry that reflects their status as "missing subjects" in history. They are not actually engaged in physical battle but instead fight verbally, plotting their revenge against prevailing system, at times assaulting their audience or one another.

In her foreword to the play, "unrecovered losses / black theatre traditions," Shange reveals that she has been influenced by Frantz Fanon's theory of "combat breath," the lived struggle of the colonized subject contending with foreign surveillance:

> as a poet in american theatre / i find most activity that takes place on our stages overwhelmingly shallow / stilted & imitative. that is probably one of the reasons i insist on calling myself a poet or writer / rather than a playwright / i am interested solely in the poetry of a moment / the emotional & aesthetic impact of a character or a line… in everything i have ever written… i have made use of what Frantz Fanon called "combat breath." although Fanon waz referring to francophone colonies, the schema he draws is sadly familiar… "combat breathing" is the living response / the drive to reconcile the irreconcilable / the

> black & white of what we live n where… my characters [respond] to the involuntary constrictions n amputations of their humanity / in the context of combat breathing. (ix, xii-xiii)

The American stage is an agent of colonialism, not in the sense that it is owned and controlled by foreign, European agents, but in the sense that it perpetuates traditions and stereotypes that cause one of its best writers to consider the stage as a territory occupied by foreigners. Shange's manifesto clearly categorizes her as a rebel, a warrior in opposition to write within the parameters of traditional Eurocentric rules and theories of dramatic literature.

Like other feminist writers, one word Shange insists upon using as a weapon is *power*--not power over others, domination, the hallmark of patriarchy; but the power of breaking silence, saving lives of those in occupied territory. Shange explains that women "see the world in a way that allows us to care more about people than about military power. The power we see is the power to feed, the power to nourish and to educate. But these kinds of powers are not respected, and so it's part of our responsibility as writers to make these things important" (Tate 157). As Adrienne Rich has said, even common words must be reconsidered, laid aside, recast with new meanings ("Power" 247). At the head of this list of re-visioned words, for Shange as for Rich, is power.

This view of the warrior's word-power can be further seen in Shange's self-identification as a linguistic *writer* / *righter* of wrongs (Deshazer 95). When *spell # 7* was first produced in 1979, one New York reviewer accused her of destroying the English language. "[T]he man who thought i wrote with intentions of outdoing the white man in the acrobatic distortions of english waz absolutely correct," Shange retorted. "i can't count the number of times i have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language that i was taught to hate myself in" (xii). *spell # 7* was excruciating to write, she explained, because "it demanded that she confront her murderous impulses over the constrictions of racism" (Deshazer 95). Her primary spokesperson in the choreopoem, the magician/narrator, asserts belligerently the goal at hand: "crackers are born with the right to be alive / i'm making ours up right here in yr face" (52). The magician, whom Shange describes as "powerful in his deformities," defiantly names his subversive goal; his claim echoes Shange's own as she concludes her response to the white reviewer: "i haveta fix my tool to my needs / i haveta take it apart to the bone / so that the malignancies / fall away / leaving us space to literally create our own image" (xii).

Shange exorcises the spell of minstrelsy's powerful legacy in *spell # 7* by calling for a unique African American discourse as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes, a reading that illuminates the specific codes, tropes and signifying practices of

African-American rhetorical devices such as the signifying monkey, irony and satire.[4] In *spell # 7*, Shange reveals the many ontological, political, and historical connotations of blackface. In so doing, she demystifies minstrelsy's unconscious appeal, by demonstrating how this white man's joke still haunts the lived, conscious experiences of black performers.

Whites are the Other in *spell # 7*. Shange foregrounds "whiteness" as an ethnic category, decentering the construction of whites as natural, inevitable subjects.[5] When whites put on black face for a minstrel show, they conceal the fact that they are dramatizing their own anxieties by displacing the construction of their own identities onto the degraded representation of African Americans. In *spell # 7*, Shange reclaims the notion of magic, transforming the negative significance of "black magic." Lou appropriates the roles of the magician and the minstrel, so that his black magic transforms the black-cork of the minstrel from the sign of a mere mask into the sign of African American being and lived experience. Lou asserts: "this is blk magic / you lookin at / & i'm fixin you up good / fixin you up good & colored / & you gonna be colored all yr life / & you gonna love it" (8).

However, Shange's black minstrels do not effect stereotypical comic relief through their portrayals; rather, they recall the pain of black people's history of subservience to whites. They also contradict negative stereotyping by showing blacks' contributions artistically and creatively, highlighting particularly blacks' enduring contributions in dance and music--two vital elements of the choreopoem form: "with a rhythm set on a washboard…, [the minstrels] begin a series of steps that identify every period of afro-american entertainment: … acrobats, comedians, tap-dancers, calindy dancers, cotton club choruses, [and] apollo theater du-wop groups" (9). Through these references, Shange validates blacks' creative contributions to an American history and culture that deem these experiences insignificant.

Having the audience witness the blackfaced minstrels' transformation into the unmasked actors reiterates contextually the inseparability of art and life, of past from present regarding racism and racist perceptions. And Shange targets this inseparability also through the actors' parallel dance movements in the minstrel show and as they move into the Manhattan bar: "members of the company enter the bar in their street clothes, & doing steps reminiscent of their solos during the minstrel sequence. as each enters, the audience is made aware that these ordinary people are the minstrels" (12). While the historical elements of slavery and minstrels have passed, the resultant stereotypes have been sustained and perpetuated over generations. In this gesture of shedding masks, Shange offers *Spell # 7* as a kind of self-help book particularly for an audience of color.

The subtitle of *spell # 7*, "geechee jibara quik magic trance manual for technologically stressed third world people" (1), connects black people with an historical association with African conjuring and voodoo or "black magic." It recaptures an African association between dream and reality, spirituality and communal empowerment, and blurs these lines in the African psyche. While Geechee speech is a dialect of Gullah Creole,[6] colloquially, the term "geechee" is also used by African American as a kind of insult associated with unsophitication and condescension within black communities. The "quickness" of this magic involves the ready accessibility of an individual's psychological control over and rethinking about oppressive and potentiality limiting aspects of an individual's environment or self-perceptions. The frustrations of these characters derive largely from the failure of society to rid itself of racial and gender biases. Cultural illiteracy and its resulting bigotry create a kind of stereotypical, unsophisticated "third world" for these black professionals in the minds of a dominant white culture. The title also clarifies the play's purpose(s) and structure--movements from cultural misrepresentations to cultural self-definition and clarity. As Richard Eder recognized in a production of *spell # 7*, the performers bring their own particular experiences via song, dance, and poetry (dramatic and narrative) to another segregated group, and their individual and personal experiences ultimately emerge as one collective voice (C13). In the play black women do not bemoan being black and female; rather, they are empowered by Shange, by each other, and are self-empowered to vent their anger and to work through their disappointments and disillusionments collectively and individually.

As Shange introduces Lou as the Interlocutor who narrates the action, summons the actors to perform, and provides transitions between scenes. In the stage direction, "[Lou] reminds us that it is thru him that we are able to know these people without the 'masks' / the lies/" (27). As a professional black magician personally affected by issues of race, Lou makes no effort to remain objective during the conversations between the performers. He takes part, observes, and challenges. Karen Cronacher posits that Shange's revison of the Interlocutor's role is the play's most blatant move away from the traditional minstrel presentation:

> Shange's interlocutor, Lou, … is not a straight man, but a trickster figure who fools whites in the audience with the trope of the minstrel show…. Lou intervenes between the audience's complicit acceptance of the minstrel show by confronting them with the implications of racism and citing African-American history. (185)

It is through Lou's own past, his own personal feelings of powerlessness that he has found his magical gift of self-empowerment. This same self-empowerment or magical gift has been transferred at least two generations and is being offered and

transferred to this racially familial theater audience. And while Lou's magician father chose early retirement "cuz this friend a mine / from the 3rd grade / asked to be made white / on the spot" (7), it nevertheless reminds Lou of the complexities associated with the formation of positive black identity in a racist society. Lou is determined to re-cast a spell that invokes new ways of honest thinking and elevates and celebrates blackness over whiteness racially.

The character Eli in *spell # 7* exposes his own interpellation within a white symbolic order as a form of mimicry. As a mimic-subject he exposes the dominant culture's ideal of homogeneity. Eli imagines himself as the protector of imaginary boundaries which demarcate this pure, whole, sanitary space. He disrupts the authority of the colonizer's discourse by revealing it to be founded upon the repetitive warding off of what Julia Kristeva calls "the abject," that which calls into question the established binary oppositions necessary to sustain the illusion of a system's totality. "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous…." (4). Eli exposes the white nationalist's solution to immigrants who pose the threat of abjection: "aliens / forwiners / are granted resident status / we give them a little green card / as they prove themselves non-injurious / to the joy of my nation" (13). Eli also plays out the denial of abjection through the compulsive reinstatement of the structural opposition between dirt and cleanliness. Eli, as a colonized subject, must remind the audience that he is not a foreigner, that he speaks perfect English, that he is capable of mimicking whites: "our toilets are disinfected … leave nothing out of place / push no dirt under my rugs / … no fingerprints / clean up after yourself in the bathroom" (13). Homi Bhaba notes that mimicry is a mode of colonial discourse "construed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (87). Eli's defensive posture becomes an excessive performance of the denial of his own difference; he epitomizes the subject split within an alien symbolic order. Eli exposes fear as the basis for white obsessions with maintaining distinctions between inside and outside, between self and other: "MY kingdom / there shall be no trespassers… the burgler alarm / armed guards vault from the east side … i sustain no intrusions" (12).

Having established rules governing the inhabitants of this segregated kingdom, Shange allows her characters, particularly her female characters, to dream of possibilities of overcoming social and internalized psychological limitations. Such is the freedom allowed Lily, who fantasized about being the black counterpart to Rapunzel, the fictitious heroine who, trapped in a tower, effects a reunion with her lover by allowing him to climb up her exceedingly long hair. Lily's private fantasy

at once stereotypes a white girl whose single characteristic physical attribute, aside from her ivory skin color, is her long, straight, blond hair. This image of a passive white female that Lily wishes to become directly contrast Shange's idealized image of a black female's life of activity, whether by choice or circumstances. In changing her "social & professional life dramatically," Lily, as a white woman, is passionless and obsessive.

For Shange, the white woman symbolizes the relations between white women and women of color. Throughout the fantasy, Lily is aware that she is neither Rapunzel nor Lady Godiva, and that before she can spend hours brushing her hair she must first "get my full heada hair" (26). The fantasy sequence takes on dimensions of the grotesque in the image of a white female whose life is her hair, foreshadowing the Farrah Fawcett-as-typical-white-girl image in Act II. And because black hair care involves considerable effort generally black males and females alike, Shange celebrates the cultural richness surrounding this ritual of a black person's life.[7] The differences between characteristically white and black hair and even hair care further accentuate this conscious celebration of difference, defined outside black culture as negative. In this segregated kingdom "where magic is / [and] // … where magic is involved in // undoin our masks/" (27), physical traits of blackness are revered, not sources of shame.

The image of a black Rapunzel extends to another fantasy exercise about white females. In "being a white girl for a day," Natalie furthers Lily's ideas to white females who lead empty and ineffectual lives. Natalie pretends to put on "white-face," the mask of naivete that prevents white women from confronting their complicity in racism and colonialism. "i cd push the navaho women outta my way in the supermarket… i cd smile at all the black and puerto rican people / & hope they cant tell i want them to go back where they came from" (47). Natalie also implicates white women as ideologically complicit in a fascist eugenics: "those poor creatures [women of color] shd be sterilized" (49).

In Natalie's satiric mockery of the white woman, she performs the history of the unequal distribution of labor between white women and African American women. Too preoccupied with her perceived physical beauty, the "typical" white female is "a sophisticated & protestant suburbanite" (47) who takes valium to get through the day, spends her time absorbed in soap operas, and internalized the racist myth that she is the desire of all men, the envy of women of color. Aloof and pretentious, a white girl, according to this improvisation, is actually threatened by the sensuality and spirituality of a woman of color.

In a play that centers on racial consciousness, Shange does establish a community between black and white females. However vicious and comical the

attack upon them, white women are not without Shange's compassion since she finds their ineffectuality "the fault of white man's sexism" (48). Natalie's monologue then, in its attacks on white females inherently attacks the patriarchy's calculated luring of white females into lives of social and cultural sterility. The attack on white men specifically is heightened by Natalie's celebration of black male virility, which, according to myth, is attractive to white women and threatening to white men.[8] Natalie adds: "oh how i loathe tight-assed thin-lipped pink white men / even the football players lack a/ certain relaxed virility" (48). In Shange's celebration of black virility and negroid physical features, she again transforms negative racist stereotypes into positive ones. Whiteness or being white then becomes passionless, empty, and inconsequential--at least in the context of this reconfigured psychological landscape.

The stereotyped description of a white girl's behavior ends with Natalie's recognition that as a black woman she can think of herself, experience emotional ranges that define and validate her humanness, and refuse absolutely to play prescribed roles for social survival:

> oh/ i'm still not being fair / all the white women in the world dont wake up being glad they aint niggahs / only some of them/ the ones who dont/ wake up thinking how i can survive another day of this culturally condoned incompetence …
>
> i'm still in my house / … i'm so glad i'm colored. boy i cd wake up in the morning & think abt anything. i can remember emmett till & not haveta smile at anybody. (48-49)

Natalie celebrates being a black woman with freedoms and choices that white women forfeit to their white men. Natalie's response to the mythic black Superwoman is a simple declaration: "the colored woman of the world … [is not] a strange sort of neutered workhorse" (49). Her conclusion is also Shange's message in *spell # 7*: take pride in being black for being black means "laughin', … lovin' … [and] … livin" (Hughes 123)--honest and instinctive emotional responses to being alive.

While Shange offers creative fantasy to combat racial stereotypes, she warns against unproductive fantasy or the fantasy of controlling the world around us in the sequence about Sue-Jean, narrated by Alec and dramatized by Natalie. With neither satisfying social nor personal identity, nor social attachments, Sue-Jean desires an identity she defines as power over hr environment. Her longing for control in her life is imaged specifically in her intense desire to bear a son: "she had always wanted a baby / never a family / never a man …" (28). Sue-Jean seeks identity and self-affirmation through motherhood and aggressively manipulates and abuses a friendship toward her own selfish end. Sue-Jean's use of motherhood to fashion an

identity for herself as well as her deliberate misuse of a friend is anything but "ordinary," as she describes herself. Masturbation is an appropriate metaphor for Sue-Jean's narcissistic love since all of her actions of manipulation are toward her own end. Her "grinnin" and "laughin" take on dimensions of the grotesque, and Ray is never the wiser regarding his role in Sue-Jean's fantasy and ultimate self-destruction.

Once pregnant, Sue-Jean changes dramatically her attitudes toward life and herself: "now with the boy achin & dancin in her belly / sue-jean waz a gay & gracious woman / … she waz someone she had never known/ she waz herself with child/ & she waz a wonderful bulbous thing" (30). Her behavior resembles a rebirth since she is now spiritually exploding with her prospects as a mother. As a "traditional" mother, Sue-Jean wants to protect her newborn from the social abuse and criticism she has experienced. She vows "myself waz gonna be safe from all that his mama/ waz prey to" (29). More interestingly, the male "myself" would have a power afforded by his gender that his mother lacks.

Despite her seeming rebirth through motherhood, when the baby physically separates from her body and develops his own sense of self, she realizes that she cannot control another independent creature. Hence, her last act of power is to destroy the child she has desperately wanted. Not only does Sue-Jean lose power over her environment, but she loses control of her own rational faculties. Madness becomes an ultimate tragedy for Sue-Jean, whose portrait serves to distinguish creative fantasy from unproductive dreaming. For Shange, the ultimate power for any oppressed individual comes in controlling one's own mind, not through futile efforts to control others--their actions, attitudes, or values.

Maxine's final monologue celebrating black racial identity brings the climactic moment in Act II. It is a culmination of a gradual awareness of how to combat stereotypes with an existentialist goal of reconstructing black people's psychological landscapes. Recalling the child motif that opens the choreopoem, Maxine's improvisation continues Natalie's celebration of blackness as freedom to choose, to think independently, and to feel. While the monologue attacks racism in the media--portraying white people as the only victims of polio, muscular dystrophy, mental illness, and multiple sclerosis--it simultaneously and just as importantly examines an adolescent female's confusion about the physical dangers of her own gender. An initiation story, Maxine's recognizes that demeaning behaviors is not the sole province of any single race:

> the pain i succumbed to each time a colored person did something, that I believed only white people did waz staggering, my entire life seems to be worthless / if my own folks arent better than white folks / then surely the sagas of

slavery & the jim crow hadnt convinced anyone that we were better than them. (51)

To counter racist stereotypes of blacks by whites, Shange again drives home the fact that white people behave in ways that are just as immoral, unjust and shameful as those whites attribute to blacks. Her point is made more forceful when she is reminded of the documented atrocities of slavery and the irrationality of Jim Crow. Maxine challenges black people collectively to feel racial pride from surviving the white patriarchy's historical oppression. She then explains her way of atoning for blacks who fail to realize their worth from a past and present of unyielding racial strife:

i commenced to buying pieces of gold/ 14 carat/ 24 carat/ 18 carat gold/ every time some black person did something that waz beneath him as a black person & more like a white person. i bought gold cuz it came from the earth/ & more than likely it came from south africa/ where the black people are humiliated & oppressed like in slavery. i wear all these things at once/ to remind the black people that it cost a lot for us to be here/ our value/ can be known instinctively/ but since so many black people are having a hard time not being like white folks/ i wear these gold pieces to protest their ignorance/ their disconnect from history. (51)

Shange recognizes a collective identity of black people rooted in Africa, a fact in which Shange personally takes great pride. Paulette Williams' decision to rename herself Ntozake ("she who comes with her own things") Shange ("she who walks like a lion") suggests a feminist reclamation of the African identity (Cronacher 185) and admonishes that "surviving the impossible is sposed to accentuate the possive aspects of a people" (51). Emphasizing the word "sposed" in this statement recalls the note of expectation in Lou's final lines of the choreopoem. His monologue, repeated exactly as in the opening moments of the play, gives *spell # 7* a circular structure, provides a final assertion at the play's end, a collective statement for these black actors and black audience members:

crackers are born with the right to be
alive / i'm making ours up right here
in yr face/ & we gonna be
colored & love it. (52)

Having demonstrated black legitimacy on the stage through fantasy and dream or "black magic," Lou affords blackness a source of pride rather than shame.

Redefining aspects of black experience, Shange attacks racist stereotypes that blacks have internalized. With characters who are actors, dancers and poets--all performance artists--Shange addresses the external, socially imposed barriers that

black people confront daily. Shange, as a feminist, reminds us that sexism exists even within the group of oppressed black professionals. Doubly displaced by institutionalized racism as well as sexism, women of color have traditionally been marginalized on the borderlands of the boundaries. There they have too often had to fight not only white patriarchs but black men and white women as well as to proclaim their centrality in any struggle for liberation, indeed to assert their very presence. There they have been warriors raging against their own invisibility.

To fight for subjectivity, Adrienne Rich has claimed, requires of women to "cast lot with those/ who age after age, perversely / with no extraordinary power / reconstitute the world" ("Natural" 67). Shange's strategy is informed by both a feminist/womanist strategy of reclamation and by a postmodern refusal to provide an essentialized, unified, transcendental subject position for African Americans. The characters are continually engaged in the process of representation, revealing how representation influences and is influenced by experience and history. Creative combatants and woman warriors must continue to do battle and thus keep stereotypical ideology and oppression at bay. Shange does not merely create positive images for African Americans; her strategy is to further recognize the mediating power of the symbolic order, the effect of representational system upon the subject as it is inscribed within history. At the close of s*pell # 7* the actor's song of "colored & love it / love it bein colored" becomes a communal experience among the actors and is sung "as [the] audience exits" (52), recalling the women's song of finding god in themselves in *for colored girls*.

Notes

[1] Ntozake Shange, *Spell # 7*, in *Three Pieces*, 7. Subsequent references to the play are to this edition and will be indicated in the text.

[2] The minstrel mask is also a sign for whites' appropriation of black cultural traditions. Margaret B. Wilkerson notes that the minstrel mask in *Spell # 7* "evokes a potent symbol of the exploitation of black music … initially the 'music' of the minstrels, played by whites in black face, was an imitation of jigs and songs created by southern slaves." Margaret B. Wilkerson, "Music as Metaphor: New Plays of Black Women," in *Making a Spectacle*, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan P, 1989), 64.

[3] "First of all, their [African people's] New World diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body*--a willful and violent… severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire… this body… focuses a private and particular space, at which point a convergence of biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join." Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17:2 (Summer 1987): 67. Spillers

maintains that the original theft of the African-American body during the slave trade, and the subsequent coding of the African-American body as a profitable piece of property during slavery, is still compulsively repeated in the current symbolic order (the language, kinship system, cultural traditions, representational systems, and legal order).

[4] See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1984); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: U of Chicago p, 1985); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

[5] In his discussion of the Wooster Group's use of blackface in *Route 1 & 9*, Savran points out that the Wooster Group critiques and deconstructs the liberal humanist perspective on blackface: "… the very desire of humanism to penetrate the black face is revealed to be an indignity, because it assumes that the humanity beneath is white." See David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 33.

[6] In *Talkin and Testyin: The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mufflin, 1977), Geneva Smitherman notes that "Geechee…is spoken by rural and urban blacks who live in the areas along the Atlantic coastal region of South Carolina and Georgia…. Even the names Gullah and Geechee are African in origin--they refer to languages and tribes in Liberia" (14). Clarence Major in *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang* (New York: Penguin, 1994), adds the following definitions of "geechee": "1. A language derived from a mix of Mandingo, Bantu, Fante, Wolof, Ewe, Twi, Yoruba, Ibo, and other West African languages; a language of the coast of Guinea; also a Kissi County, Liberia. It has its own well-focused grammar and syntax. This term has also been used by whites in a derogatory way to refer to any 'very black' Southern Negro; 2. Any black (and sometimes non-black) person from the coastal area of Georgia or North Carolina; 3. A derogatory term for a southern person whose speech is not easily understood; unable to speak clearly; to speak with a heavy accent" (194). Shange inverts the image of the inarticulate "geechee" of the above to be the articulate, well-spoken, and frustrated black person. Their communications, verbal and nonverbal, may seem like gibberish to an outside world but is clearly presented within this safe bar.

[7] bell hooks examines the ritual of hair straightening among African American women in her article, "Straightening Our Hair," *Z Magazine* (September 1988), in *Reading Culture: Contexts for Critical Reading and Writing*, eds. Diana George and John Trimbur (New York: HarperCollins, 1992): 290-98. See also Alice Walker's short story, "Olive Oil" [*Black Erotica*, eds. Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Reginald Martin, and Roseann P. Bell (New York: Doubleday, 1992)], which connects eroticism with a black man's scalp-oiling by a black woman.

[8] Consult James Baldwin's play, *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), wherein Baldwin explores and explodes stereotypes that connect race, gender, and sexuality. See also Lawrence R. Tenzer's theories concerning the origins of the black-white penis size myths in *A Completely New Look at Interracial Sexuality: Public Opinion and Social Commentaries* (Manahawkin, New Jersey: Scholars' Publishing House, 1990),

especially chapter six, "Is There Really a Sexual Difference?" (90-105).

Works Cited

Bhaba, Homi K. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. 85-92.

Cronacher, Karen. "Unmasking the Minstrel Mask's Black Magic in Ntozake Shange's *spell # 7*." *Theatre Journal* 44 (May 1992): 177-93.

Deshazer, Mary K. "Rejecting Necrophilia: Ntozake Shange and the Warrior Re-Visioned." *Making a Spectacle*. Ed. Lynda Hart. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan P, 1989. 86-100.

Dyer, Richard. "White." *Screen* 29: 4 (Autumn 1988): 45-58.

Eder, Richard. "Dramatic Poetry." *New York Times* 4 June 1979, natl. ed.: C13.

Hart, Lynda, ed. *Making a Spectacle*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan P, 1989.

hooks, bell. "Straightening Our Hair." *Reading Culture: Contexts for Critical Reading and Writing*. Eds. Diana George and John Trimbur New York: HarperCollins, 1992. 290-98.

Hughes, Langston. "Still Here." *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959. 123.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. Trans. and ed. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.

Lester, Neal A. *Ntozake Shange: A Critical Study of the Plays*. New York & London: Garland, 1995.

Major, Clarence, ed. *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

Rich, Adrienne. "Natural Resources." *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems. 1974-77*. New York: Norton, 1978. 67-75.

---. "Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-78*. New York: Norton, 1979. 246-58.

Richards, Sandra L. "Conflicting Impulses in the Plays of Ntozake Shange." *Black American Literature Forum* 17.2 (Summer 1983): 73-78.

Shange, Ntozake. "foreword: unrecovered losses/ black theater traditions." *Three Pieces* (*spell # 7, a photograph: lovers in motion, boogie woogie landscapes*). New York: St. Martin's P, 1981. ix-xvi.

---. *Three Pieces* (*spell # 7, a photograph: lovers in motion, boogie woogie landscapes*). New York: St. Martin's P, 1981.

Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin and Testyin: The Language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mufflin, 1977.

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book."

Diacritics 17:2 (Summer 1987): 64-79.

Tate, Claudia. *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum, 1983.

Tenzer, Lawrence R. *A Completely New Look at Interracial Sexuality: Public Opinion and Social Commentaries*. Manahawkin, New Jersey: Scholars' Publishing House, 1990.

Walker, Alice. "Olive Oil." *Black Erotica.* Eds. Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Reginald Martin, and Roseann P. Bell. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Wilkerson, Margaret B. "Music as Metaphor: New Plays of Black Women." *Making a Spectacle*. Ed. Lynda Hart. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan P, 1989. 61-75.