Ntozake Shange: Portrait of a Literary Feminist

by Edward K. Brown II

Throughout the ages, women have written about the imposition of a male-dominated society, about how this domination constricts their character, and about how women themselves have contributed to the development of a progressive society. Ntozake Shange writes from these perspectives. Her poetry, plays, and novels initiate an awareness of contemporary femininity in society.

Shange has an M.A. from the University of Southern California in American Studies. She teaches Contemporary Black and Latin Literature at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. She has won two Obie Awards, one for ***for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*** another for the adaptation of Brecht's ***Mother Courage***. She has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Chubb Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

She has four collections of published poetry by St. Martin's Press: The ***Love Space Demands: a continuous saga***, 1991 ***Ridin' the Moon in Texas***, 1987; ***A Daughter's Geography***, 1983; and ***nappy edges***, 1978. Her fiction—***Betsey Brown*** (1985) and ***Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo*** (1982)—was published by St. Martin's, as was one of her two plays—***Three Pieces: Spell #7, A Photograph: Lovers in Motion, Boogie Woogie Landscapes*** (1981). Shange's play ***for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*** was published by Bantam in 1977.

The Love Space Demands: a continuous saga was adapted for the stage and premiered in New Brunswick, New Jersey, at the Crossroads Theater in March of 1992 before moving to the Talawa Theater in London and to the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia.

What made you decide to become a writer?

I couldn't find anything that truly reflected what I thought was my reality and the reality of other women my age. Since I couldn't find it, the only responsible recourse was to write some myself. It was at the height of the Black Nationalist Period, the Black Arts Movement: 1969-1970. It was a very male, very patriarchal, warlike environment for black people, black intellectuals, at the time.

Warlike in the sense of...

Yeah, warlike. The Black Power Movement—people got killed. People went to jail. People got tortured. People *died.* There was massive destruction of property. It was in the middle of riots. The [Black] Panthers were being shot at. The Revolutionary Action Movement had cadres of armed people. It was a very serious time to be trying to function as a rational person. It was very difficult.

Do you write about your experience?

I'm not a sociologist. Let's not get confused. This is not Black Fiction as autobiography. That's not what I'm doing.

What are you doing?

I make up a lot of things. It's real fiction. You can't extrapolate me from what's in a book. A lot of intellectual work is edited; it's refined. Obviously it comes out of something I know about. Everything that I have written about did not have to happen to me. It might have never happened to anybody. Some of them [Shange's work] are really fantastical—that just don't happen as far as we know.

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So how does that relate to the experience that you want to share with your readers?

Well, because of the imaginings. Slavery, racism, and sexism denied our hopes and our dreams. Therefore the imaginings of women of color are particularly sacred to me. Those are things we cannot afford to lose when we are being beaten down constantly. Those [imaginings] are the first things to go. *Sassafras...* and *Betsey Brown* are alternative kinds of lifestyles of black people, people of color. I was interested in looking at many different ways we live, and how many different manifestations of us there are, and when those lifestyles come into conflict, and when they don't-how the past influences decisions we make even if we were never explicitly told stories about the past by our family, or how we decided how we got black, what that means when we're children. Those are very young people in those books. So watching them trying to negotiate being black in an English-speaking country is very interesting in their own families as well as in the borders of society.

> "I'm a big girl now with ideas of my own. These crazy folks 'round here just don't leave me alone. 'Turn that mess off, Betsey.' 'Betsey, you know you're tryin' your best to be a niggah.' As if I had anything to do with that. That was God's will is what it was. How can you try to be what you awready are? Sometimes these folks don't make any sense at all. 'Betsey, you could do better than to let the whole world know you a niggah.'
>
> 'These crazy people just won't let me alone and this is my mama I'm talking about, my daddy, my home I've got to find some place to be on my own, where I don't have to explain and where I'm never ashamed that I'm Miss Cora Sue Betsey Anne Calhoun Brown."
>
> --*Betsey Brown,* 1985

i hate being asked about how i do what i do, why i do what i do it makes me crazy insane poetry is a collective experience it's the closest thing to the voice of the people you can get outside of the national anthem there's a lot of subterfuge where poetry is concerned we are forced to read it by ourselves poems shared by a lot of people change the entire ambience of a group, but the audience is still themselves in fact they're *closer* to themselves writing poetry is more satisfying than writing theatre the beauty of words their sound can be heard and then read on the page theatre pieces don't work in books but the poetry works in books and on stage what about spaceman miles davis says there's music in everything in people walking down the street if you can hear it i've never heard poetry in silence i hear music i live in music and i need people around me who can bring that out spaceman and i intuit with sounds and words we can move from intergalatic stuff like sun ra to b.b. king and be fine the words and music allow us to offer a world that is more wholly the way we experience it then we really do have the right to make the words and make it who we want you can't do that with a character in a play a character in a play has his own voice why do you suppose people want to know this stuff

—Ntozake Shange, 1991

During childhood I always came into contact with people who would say, "If you're not down with this, then you're not down at all." [In other words, if you are not willing to do what we are doing, then you are not a pant of us at all.] Was it like that for you?

Well, that and also just trying to figure out where you're fitting in any time you walk into a room "Where am I fitting in here? How am I going to make myself known and maintain my integrity?" Things like that.

Do you see that as a type of compromise, or do you see it as a sense of identity?

I think it is a process. I think if any time we decide to lock ourselves into one definition of who we are, then we [should] call some guys with straitjackets. One's identity is constantly in flux. It is constantly being informed and growing and shifting. I think maybe sometimes you want to be *down,* and other times you might not want to be, but that doesn't mean that in any of those times that you weren't a black person.

So, how do you feel about being upwardly mobile or middle class?

Anybody who was a slave is upwardly mobile. If you come from slavery, you are upwardly mobile. We don't have much choice. I think our contribution to the labor movement, the working people's movement in this country, has been substantial. Our contributions to all kinds of fringe benefits and to improve education for poor and rural children have been substantial. None of this could have happened if we hadn't had young black people and their families willing to sustain them through their years of professional school.

I think that the difference, or the difficulty, we are presented with now is that because our commonalities are not so segregated we don't necessarily know where we will go to serve, Before if we had lawyers or doctors or dentists, they would always come hack and work with us, and therefore these *so-called* role models were there. The community was getting its money back in its own pocket. We were servicing ourselves. We were purely self-sufficient. Today we are not only graduating fewer black professionals proportionately than we did before World War II, we are also not serving our community. I think that's where this idea of upward mobility is somehow jeopardizing our sense of ourselves as a people because we are not in immediate access to one another. I think that is a terrible dilemma. I don't know how we are going to address it. I know we better get on the stick quickly.

You had mentioned something about these "so-called" role models.

Well I think that's bullshit. We're trying to live. We cannot appropriate one's life. We learned that. That's what slavery was: the appropriation of people's lives. You can't do it when you take a hero's life. You can't do it when you take people's bodies like slavery. It's intellectual laziness. I wish they would get off this role model business. It's ridiculous. We should be talking about how to live, not how to model.

So whose identity, or whose image is expressive of a whole?

That's why an artist puts a name at the end of something. The image is what one of us saw and it takes a whole lot of us to get a whole picture. There is no one image of black people. What are we? Cardboard cookies? I really find this exasperating. There are as many images as there are of us.

After the Clarence Thomas hearings I saw a petition from the African Women in Defense of Ourselves in The New York Times to which your name was listed. The New York Times Magazine also ran a piece entitled "Taking Sides Against Ourselves" by Rosemary L. Bray, which was about the dichotomy of

race versus gender. What has been your experience?

I've been in this situation before, and I would say I have a vagina and skin at the same time, so I don't have a dilemma. Any male who presents himself as a patriarch, I don't care who he is or where he comes from, is not a friend of mine. It's just like any racist who presents himself or herself to me is not a friend of mine. I couldn't side with a racist or a sexist. I'm a feminist. I never had any choice between black women and children. I would side with whatever would be best for women and children of color. Some people have elaborate distinctions. I don't have them.

What was the public's response to <u>for colored girls...</u>?

It's a feminist play. I think, critically, the play was received wonderfully, but a lot of black males had a lot of trouble with it. A problem which still is a problem, but that's not really my problem. There was a lot of uproar and kinds of name-calling from black male columnists and black men in the audience.

> beau willie jumped back all humble & apologetic/i'm sorry/i dont wanna hurt em/i just wanna hold em & get on my way. i dont wanna cuz you no more trouble/i wanted to marry you & give ya things what you gonna give a broken jaw/niggah get outta here/he ignored crystal's outburst & sat down motionin for naomi to come to him/she smiled back at her daddy/crystal felt naomi givin in & held her tighter/naomi pushed away & ran to her daddy/cryin/daddy, daddy/come hack/but be nice to mommy cause mommy loves you/ and ya gotta be nice/he sat her on his knee/& played with her ribbons & they counted finger & toes/every so often he looked over to crystal holdin kwame/like a statue/& he'd say/see crystal/i can be a good father/now let me see my son/& she didn't move/& he coaxed her & he coaxed her/tol her she was still a hot lil ol thing & pretty & strong/didn't she get right up after that lil ol fight they had & go back to work/beau willie oozed kindness & crystal who had known so lil/ let beau hold kwame/
>
> as soon as crystal let the baby outta her arms/beau jumped up a laughin & and giglin/a hootin & a hollerin/ awright bitch/awright bitch/you gonna marry me/you gonna marry me...
>
> i aint gonna marry ya/i aint ever gonna marry ya/for nothin/you gonna be in jail/you gonna be under the jail for this/now gimme my kids/ya give me back my kids/
>
> he kicked the screen outta the window/& held the kids offa the sill/you gonna marry me/yeh, i'll marry ya/ anything/but bring the children back in the house/he looked from where the kids were hangin from the fifth story/at alla the people screamin at him/& he started sweatin again/say to all the neighbors/you gonna marry me/
>
> stood by beau in the window/with naomi reachin for me/& kwame screamin mommy mommy from the fifth story/but i cd only whisper/& he dropped em
>
> —*for colored girls. . .* 1977

It's because they're sexist and they don't like being called on it. You're not supposed to say that. You're just supposed to live with it and let them do that. You're not supposed to call a spade a spade.

Some people would say, "If you don't agree with the status quo, then you're not part of the status quo."

I was never a part of the status quo. So how would that affect me?

Well, status quo within mainstream America—or main-stream within...

Mainstream of Black Nationalism? I have never been a good conformist in anything, any group. I've been very constant in terms of what I believe in, but I'm not going to be curtailed or constrained in the passion of my beliefs by anybody.

The whole idea of the American myth, the American dream—how have you seen that change and where do you see that going?

Well, what is the American dream? Whose dream *is* it?

The American dream: if you work hard, you can do whatever you want to do; the American dream that everyone is free and you have certain rights. From your experience what have you seen the American dream to be?

I always thought that had to do with people before my generation. I think that baby boomers are a little more cynical than that. I know my parents believed in that. They believed in the Constitution. They believed in the ultimate justice of the United States of America. I don't have that kind of unquestioning faith in the cultural and political integrity of this place. I don't think I've ever had it. My dream is to have a nation fully of black people who are living up to their greatest potentials and offered the opportunities to aspire to them. That's my dream. I don't have an American dream. It's just not interesting. I don't want a house in the suburbs. I don't want any of these things.

Is that why you teach?

That's why I constantly teach. I don't like to not be teaching. I have no reason to hoard the information I have. All I need to do is make sure I get to as many people as I can. That's why I'm in the National Writers' Tour. That's why I try to go to high schools. I try to adopt a high school on the road. I make sure young people see a poet who isn't dead. It's very important to me.

What then is your response to political correctness?

I think it is a term the right wing has coined: a phrase to make the leftist scholars and artists seem foolish. I really resent it. There is no such thing as politically correct, and there is certainly nobody, certainly [not] people of color and women, running around with sheets on their heads making people cower in their shoes because they don't belong somewhere because they think they don't worship the right god. This is ridiculous and an insidious distortion of language to move us away from examining where real political and emotional manipulation and oppression emanate from, and that's from white male institutions. Being politically correct meant that women, Native Americans, Chicanos, black people should just he quiet. We've been politically correct for two hundred years and how dare they try to insinuate that we behave like they do. Or that we would even want to emulate them in our dealings with one another. This is an absurd and obscene idea. [Political correctness] was crafted by the same people who crafted the Willie Horton ad.

I read during the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) debacle that you didn't even want to think about or consider applying for a grant.

No. I'm not going to talk to those people. No. Talk to them about what? To tell me what I can do? No. I'm very proud of the people who did fight and I certainly support them: those who were denied grants. I've worked with people to change the NEA to its original intent, but that doesn't mean that I'm going to stop working or change how I work so I can get money. No! As a slave, if you saved enough money, you could buy yourself freedom. Many of us did that. Then white people made that against the law. What I'm saying is that when we want something, we will do it. They can constantly make laws to make us feel impotent, but we don't even have to accept that as reality. Because they made it against the law to buy our freedom didn't mean that we stopped running away. So I think of it the same way. I'm not going to not be myself and not work because there is no NEA money. That's ridiculous. It's crazy.

There has been some discussion of postmodernism versus modernism versus Afrocentrism. How do you feel about the' whole idea, and where do you see yourself within that scheme? In terms of postmodernism being decentralized, on the margin?

I've always had to wonder. Allegedly, if I was doing postmodernism, I would be a marginal person. If I am the center of my own universe, then how can I be marginal? So it becomes quixotic for people of color to be postmodern. Quixotic like chasing rainbows. I can't make myself be marginal in my own life. It's absurd. However, in order for me to comprehend others around mc, I might have to perceive myself that way so I can see how they perceive me. I've been leaning more towards the culture of Martinique and the philosophy of Edouard Glissant[1], who proposes a theory on intersecting histories and parallel histories. That I find more manageable.

So how do you deal with that in terms of your writing?

I just keep writing. Part of what I do is naming—naming and documenting. I mean this very seriously. The documentation of the culture that I live in. Is it more exciting to read the plans of the Pyramid of the Moon in Mexico City that the Aztecs built, or is it more exciting to read love poems by the Aztecs translated from their language? Obviously, for intimacy with these people, we want to read their love poems. The plans are wonderful. Yes, I want to see where they walked when they wrote them, but I would really rather hear the voices of the people. In that sense, I hope I can contribute to a body of literature that will survive us and give us a greater sense of depth and preciousness to what we've managed to create as a people. When I was a youngster, the wealth of who we were was unspoken and unrecognized. I spent a great deal of my adult life unearthing this for me as well as for everybody else. So [naming and documenting] is a continuation of that process.

Okra to Greens: A Historical Perspective of Sound/Downtown

thought i might be in slug's
pharoah was singin
though he didnt beat his chest
carnival rolled outta brooklyn thru the snow
& soho/right up 7th avenue south
with out wintry american version of the jump-up
pharaoh did know the sun
& tabo screamed over & over
6 tenor players filled the front row
the battles if the horns to commence
but i know this isn't slug's

1 Edouard Glissant, born in 1928 in Martinique, is a poet, playwright, novelist, and essayist. His belief is that people's culture and destiny, various and independent, suffer due to others' need to communicate and understand collectively *(L'Intention Poetique,* Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969).

cuz lee morgan's blood doesnt dot the sawdust
ayler's echoes cant be heard in the john &
sun ra doesn't work here on mondays
i'm not 19 years old/in tie-dyed jeans
& pink satin/watchin 3rd street burn down lil by lil
while the yng ones with mouth pieces & brushes
wait to sit in/this isn't slug's cuz death seems
so fir away/not boomer's where death is sold in packages
it's ten years later/& the changes are transcribed

--A Daughter's Geography, 1983

The type of language you use is a vernacular language?

I go in and out *of* formal English and various regional black dialects because there are a whole lot them. I try to tune my ears carefully so that I don't Carolinese with people from Chicago or mix people from South Central L.A. with people in Dallas. I can hear, and when you read [aloud] what I have written you can hear. We are not now where we were before. These are still black people, but they don't speak same as black people before. I really enjoy that, that kind of specificity.

I read a quote some time ago in which you said you poems were too sensual for most people.

That's what people tell me. What can I do? I can't get into someone else's body. I don't really want to, I can only relate to the world tactically. I can imagine how other people do, but I am satisfied with the way I relate to the world. What I might have meant by that is in spite of our myths as black people—it's very disturbing to black people, for a woman especially, to articulate ideas about sex and sensuality. It's very uncomfortable for us. I think that is one of the things we have to give up as we go into the twenty-first century. We have to start articulating our reality as well as just having it.

You have written four collections of poetry, the last being <u>The Love Space Demands: a continuous saga</u>. What is that about and how did title come about?

This is how I think. This is my regular thought process. I'm not in advertising. Nobody is telling me to make up something. I'm pitching myself and the world I live in. It's a literal title. It literally means what it says. Just like *colored girls* literally meant what it said to me. Now I can't help them beyond that. The exegesis of that you'll have to get scholars to do. The title literally means what it says: *The Love Space Demands.* Black people want to know where the great black love story of their time is, This is a burning issue. This is my contribution to ending this dilemma. I have two nameless lovers who go through their various stages of enamorment, This will help us as people of color define the terms with which we will approach one another since the AIDS epidemic and alleged financial liberation of women. It's a documentation of a great romance. Love among people of color who speak English in this country is constantly traumatized. Our personal relationships are constantly under siege because of the nature of racism and the nature of impoverishment. The brutality of all that at some point in all our lives penetrates the most beautiful thing we want to offer one another. So that's what it's about: trying to sustain a romance in a very hostile environment.

What, for you, is aesthetically pleasing?

I've been running bridges. It is called "The Bridge Party." I've been doing ritual bridge runnings with women friends and my mother's friends, my mother and daughter, ~in' orde4 to create a female myth and symbol system for women to be safe in public spaces. The first one I did was in Philadelphia. My mother's bridge party played bridge while I read to them. My dancer friends, who were female, helped me get across the bridge. It was a wonderful, mythological experience. We've been in-

vited to run bridges in other parts of the world. I literally meant what I said. I run bridges. You don't have to get the concept. This is what she does.

> my work
> attempts to ferret out
> what i know & touch in a woman's
> body...
>
> i discuss the simple reality
> of going home at night,
> of washing one's body, looking out
> the window
> with a woman's eyes.
> we must learn our common symbols,
> preen them
> and share them with the world.
>
> —introduction to *for colored girls...*

When I inquired about interviewing you, I was told that you hated doing interviews.

I hate them.

Why?

Because they are thoughts of mine that get taken away and then I can't do anything with them. I lose them or something. It distresses me. Sometimes people want to ask me questions I think are really none of their business and so I feel like I am constantly in battle defending my own emotional security. I don't like being in battle constantly. So, I try to stay out of it. I don't do a lot of them.