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## 6. Staging Testimony: The Creation of the Addressable Other in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*

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### Abstract

Although the representation of trauma testimony in Black women's literature has been previously analyzed, scholarship on testimony in theatre and performance is much less abundant. This article discusses how Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (frequently referred to by its shortened title, *for colored girls*) physically and textually depicts the formation of a successful witnessing community among its cast of Black women. By developing a close reading of the poems where all characters are onstage ("dark phrases," "my love is too," and "a layin on of hands"), this article explains how Shange depicts the characters' journey from attempted trauma testimony without a witnessing community through the process of creating a group of addressable others, to the successful transmission of testimony. The techniques of plurisignance and translucence (as defined by Karla Holloway) are crucial elements of the Black female literary tradition that *for colored girls* successfully uses to enact the development of a witnessing community of addressable others. Additionally, the choreopoem's usage of music, dance, and singing drives the physical depiction of trauma testimony on the stage and the divide (and ultimate reconnection) between body and voice for the characters. It is the formation of a unified yet diverse community of addressable others that enables the development of the main characters' independent voices and the beginning of a process of healing from trauma. The physical representation of trauma testimony onstage in Shange's choreopoem blends performance theory and literary techniques to demonstrate the necessary basis for the piece's cast of Black women to begin to heal from cultural trauma.

### Keywords

Trauma studies, cultural trauma, performance studies, Black literature, Black women's literature

### Introduction

Since Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (frequently referred to by its shortened title, *for colored girls*) premiered in 1976, it has been continuously readapted for the stage, as well as TV and movie audiences. Only the second piece by a Black woman to reach Broadway, *for colored girls* has a sizeable cultural legacy. In her chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre* on performance and community engagement,

Nadine George-Graves explains that “the show clearly attempts to function as ritual; the choreopoem is distinct in the way that it combines text with movement as ritual – a ritual that brings about healing” (209). Shange’s text certainly showcases racialized and gendered traumatic experiences through the voices of her various characters, all of whom are women of color. However, the question of whether the piece attempts to act as a healing process is relatively underexplored.

In her essay “The Middle Passage and Race-Based Trauma,” Luminita Dragulescu writes, “As a consequence of a violent racial history, there is a predetermination of trauma within race, so that mere racial identification is fraught with a history of racial violence that manifests itself in the trauma of race” (271). This type of cultural trauma (sometimes also referred to as collective or intergenerational trauma) manifests itself doubly for Black women, who are subject to both patriarchal and white hegemonic aggressions. Shange’s text does not only handle her characters’ individually experienced traumas; it also deals with “the original traumatic event of the black girl: she inhabits the space where gender and race intersect” (Hamilton 84). Although critical works bringing together literary trauma theory and postcolonial or cultural race trauma are not difficult to find (see, for example, book-length studies by Jennifer Griffiths, Sam Durrant, and Patricia San José Rico, among others), not all of them call attention to the traumatic “multipronged attack” (84) faced by Black women specifically. As a choreopoem, *for colored girls* combines poetry, theatre, dance, and song. This blend of different media, along with the piece’s thematic emphasis on the (often traumatic) lived experiences of Black women, allows for analysis along diverse lines of inquiry, including literary trauma theory, poetics, performance studies, and feminist and postcolonial theory. In order to investigate how the choreopoem’s characters’ experiences of trauma and healing are staged, attention must be given to both the literary text of *for colored girls* and how that text is influenced by the presence of actual bodies moving in real space.

Using the framework of what Karla Holloway terms plurisignance in her article “Revision and (Re)membrance: A Theory of Literary Structures in Literature by African-American Women Writers” allows for Shange’s text to be analyzed both as part of the Black female (written) literary tradition and as a performance piece that thematizes and enacts the connection between body and voice. Holloway explains that “the recursive structures of language in literature by contemporary African-American women writers are signaled by what is essentially a ‘multiplied’ text” (766). In the case of *for colored girls*, this multiplicity is not only found within the text of the poems, it also manifests in the division (and, ultimately, the connection) between body and voice enacted by the characters on stage. This multiplicity of voice is also apparent in the fact that Shange initially wrote many of the poems comprising *for colored girls* individually, and later worked to combine them into a unified performance piece (Mahurin 331). By developing the plurisignance in the choreopoem from a place of

disunity to one of cohesion, Shange's *for colored girls* thematizes how resolving the disconnect between body and voice by forming a witnessing community is necessary to begin the process of healing from and living in spite of racialized and gendered trauma.

### **Between Body and Voice: Creating the Addressable Other**

According to Laurie Vickroy in her book *Reading Trauma Narratives*, "The mechanisms of trauma, how it is caused and perpetuated, and the potential to heal wounds are all dependent on social interconnections, through witnessing or healing relationships" (23). Both the occurrence of trauma itself and the processes required to heal from it have social dimensions, and this is even more so the case for marginalized individuals struggling with cultural trauma. Patricia San José Rico points out that "in order for that witness-bearing to take place, it is not enough to simply express the trauma, to put it into words; a listener is needed" (38). The problem is that the socially mediated nature of witnessing is not immune to US society's racist and sexist discourses. In *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*, Jennifer Griffiths asks: "What happens when testimony occurs in a public space through the body of a woman? Or the racialized body? How does the spectacle of these 'othered' bodies interfere with the transmission of testimony?" (5). How does a victim of racialized and/or gendered cultural trauma find someone able to bear witness to their testimony in a society that is still dominated by the structures that caused their trauma in the first place?

It is difficult to apply traditional psychoanalytic approaches to healing from trauma when, as is the case with cultural trauma, the original traumatic event is still ongoing. Some postcolonial trauma theory posits that healing from racial trauma cannot take place within a still-racist society. Per Dragulescu, racial trauma's "only possible healing must engage active individual, social, and political involvement in disputing the racist culture's status quo and gradually changing the habits of white privilege" (279). While working to eliminate the racist structures present in US society is certainly a noble goal, what do such requirements for healing mean for the traumatized individual? Is one simply doomed to a lifetime of inability to handle the consequences of trauma, unable to live a fulfilled or positive life within a racist and/or sexist society? Rather than accept these preconditions for healing, *for colored girls* stages a narrative which showcases Black women developing the potential for self-love and the ability to pursue future opportunities despite past cultural traumas and despite still living within a highly flawed society. While moving beyond trauma by cultivating self-love does not directly enact sweeping societal change, Greg Forter writes that "within the current social and representational order, to 'give voice' to the silenced requires the violation of that representational order, an effort to shatter linguistic forms that conspire in the illusions of total understanding" (77). Thus,

presenting Black women narrating their cultural traumas and enacting a process of discovering self-love is, in itself, a radical rejection of sexist and racist discourses that continue to dominate US society today.

This particular type of healing, one that is tempered by the presence of ongoing misogyny and racism, is connected in *for colored girls* to the development of plurisignance throughout the choreopoem. According to Holloway, “The search for wholeness [in Black women’s literature] represents a sensibility that privileges the recovery of an individual (and independent) text over its fragmented textual dimensions” (774). Holloway claims that expecting traumatized Black women characters to undergo a complete recovery and become whole (both in their psyche and in the way their psyche is represented textually) by the end of a narrative fundamentally misunderstands the role of plurisignance in the Black female literary tradition. In a plurisignant text, healing from trauma does not necessitate wholeness or the unification of multiple or fragmented voices into a single, dominant narrative. Rather, restoring balance to the text comes through “the thematic emphasis on the recovery of some dimension of voice” (770-71). The rejection of the necessity of a unified voice to signify healing is a crucial element of the Black female literary tradition, with Holloway writing that “the polyphonic nature of these texts [by Black women] is essential not only to their internal figuration, but is also definitive of the tradition that collectively identifies them” (773). Therefore, what Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué describe as “visual images, textual gaps, repetitions, [and] shifting view-points” that “underline the chaotic aspects of trauma” are, in the Black female literary tradition, representative of more than a traumatized psyche that will coalesce into a peaceful aggregate by the end of the narrative (15). Instead, these features are characteristic of the Black female experience writ large, and can be expected to be maintained in one form or another throughout the text.

In *for colored girls*, this shifting plurisignance is not only seen in various textual characteristics, but it is also evident in the changing relationship between body and voice thematized throughout the choreopoem. Griffiths explains that “historically, people of color have entered the public space in body only. Marked already sexually and racially other within dominant cultural ideology, their displayed bodies presented their stories” (7). Black women bear a double burden here: already othered by being both non-male and non-white, the Black female body has deep historical associations with the traumas of rape and sexual violence. Since dominant cultural scripts already turn the Black female body into a historically determined object, the representation of physical and sexual trauma suffered by Black women is fraught with complexities. As Griffiths points out, “The image of a damaged black female body enters the public consciousness without a voice, a silent object in the performance” before “the dominant cultural voice performs a kind of dubbing over the scene of violence, imposing itself as the interpretive force and reinscribing oppression

through the dislocation of body and voice” (7, 9). In order for any healing from trauma to take place, not only must body and voice be reunited, but the body itself as the site of trauma must be redefined. Farah Jasmine Griffin writes that “this process of reimagining black women’s bodies moves from focusing on a body that is constructed in history and that carries that history within and on it, to a body capable of being remade” (525). As a plurisignant text, *for colored girls* does not conclude with a representation of the Black female body with its inscribed traumas completely resolved and its voice restored in perfect harmony; rather, the suggestion that the body is capable of being re-presented on stage serves as a form of healing in and of itself.

This plurisignant healing process takes place in Shange’s text through the creation of a witnessing community made up of what psychiatrist and trauma researcher Dori Laub refers to as the “addressable other” (“Bearing Witness” 68). Dragulescu explains that “the failure to recognize the survivors’ experience – be it at an individual or collective level – reproduces, and often augments, trauma” (272). Not just anyone can serve as a witness to trauma testimony. Per Laub, “The absence of an empathetic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (68). The traumatized Black women in Shange’s text need to find a specific kind of witness to hear their testimonies; their addressable other cannot be someone who will deny their experiences or reproduce the sexist and racist power structures that originated their trauma. Instead, in *for colored girls*, the group of seven Black women who make up the choreopoem’s cast form their own community that gives testimony to and witnesses each other and is able to maintain a multiplicity of voices while still coming together for support and affirmation.

Shange’s text is loosely structured into two parts which demonstrate attempts to give testimony before and after the formation of the witnessing community. The poem “my love is too” serves as the dividing line between the first and second sections. The opening and closing poems (“dark phrases” and “a layin on of hands”), as well as “my love is too,” include all seven characters, making them of particular interest when examining the formation of community and the changing nature of plurisignance throughout the piece. By analyzing the shift in how the characters interact and the connection between body and voice demonstrated in each of these three poems, we can come to a better understanding of the specific healing that Shange’s characters experience in order to develop the capacity for self-love and the ability to see future opportunities for themselves.

### **“dark phrases” and the Missing “black girl’s song”**

“dark phrases,” the opening poem in *for colored girls*, is primarily narrated by the lady in brown. Throughout the choreopoem, each of the seven characters is dressed in

and exclusively referred to as a color of the rainbow, with the lady in brown replacing indigo in the traditional rainbow color scheme. Throughout Shange's text, the rainbow stands for future opportunities and potential for Black women, as shown through the closing line of the choreopoem: "& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows" (89). It is important to note that a variation upon this phrase occurs in both "dark phrases" and "a layin on of hands," effectively bookending Shange's text and framing the choreopoem as the story of how these particular women came to a place where they are able to envision their futures, described as moving to the ends of their rainbows. The exclusion of the color indigo makes sense considering the dye's history in the US as a product of slavery. Robert Nash has documented how during slavery, in South Carolina, "indigo exports rivalled those of rice in value" and that indigo was "mainly responsible for the striking gains in slave-labor productivity" during the generation before the American Revolution (363). By replacing indigo with brown in her rainbow color scheme, Shange replaces a color tied to a traumatic history of enslavement with a color that reflects the skin tones of her characters and is traditionally excluded from depictions of rainbows, already highlighting her commitment to depicting healing and forward movement away from cultural trauma. In addition to this, the lady in brown can be read as a metonym for the Black female community as a whole, with her inclusion alongside the other colors as a part of the rainbow representing the necessity of Black women being able to access the entire range of opportunities in life.

The fact that the cast consists of seven women who are only identified by the color of their clothes is an important component of the text's plurisignance. Sarah Mahurin explains that "because the identities of the colored girls are not fixed, the selves their actions produce are likewise in flux. Their bodies are not theatrical or historical, and the images they produce can feel iconic instead of individual" (330). The women adopt different personas when narrating different poems throughout the course of the choreopoem, creating an unstable and shifting sense of identity, a textual component of plurisignance that Holloway refers to as translucence. According to Holloway, "The quality of translucence that reveals such plurisignant texts is also one that complicates the identities of the tellers of the stories. The boundaries between narrative voices and dialogue often become obscure, merging one into the other" (770). The result of this translucence is that Shange's text can operate both reflectively and reflexively, enacting Black women's trauma testimonies while simultaneously commenting upon the circumstances of such testimonies (766). In the beginning of the choreopoem, "dark phrases" both enacts and comments upon the futility of testifying to cultural trauma without a witnessing community of addressable others.

At the beginning of “dark phrases,” the lady in brown is unable to communicate with any of the other characters. The stage directions note that during the opening scene, the women enter and “freeze in postures of distress” (Shange 19). They remain frozen even while the lady in brown attempts to speak to them. Although all characters have experienced some form of trauma before the choreopoem begins (as reflected by their distressed poses), they are not able to function as witnesses for each other at this point, as shown by their complete inability to engage with one another. The audience also does not function as an addressable other here. The fact that the audience exists on a different diegetic level than the characters prevents the mutual exchange required for the formation of a witnessing relationship. Laub writes that “for the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other – in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude” (“Bearing Witness” 70-71). Laub’s use of the word monologue is significant; the characters on stage cannot form a genuine witnessing relationship with the audience since there is no back-and-forth between them. Thus, the lady in brown has access to neither the audience nor the other women on stage in order to form a witnessing relationship. Her inability to communicate with the other characters in particular is not only symbolic of her inability to access opportunities in her life (as represented by the rainbow); it also shows the futility of attempting to give testimony when an addressable other is not present to act as a witness.

The text of “dark phrases” suggests the presence of brokenness and fragmentation in the lives of Black girls and women as a whole. The poem’s title (which is contained in the poem’s opening line) already suggests that something is missing; *womanhood* here is only a phrase, not a complete sentence. The aural similarity the word *phrases* has to *phases*, further reinforces connotations of impermanence and transience. The phrases “half-notes scattered / without rhythm” and “the melody-less-ness of her dance” extend the imagery of something missing (Shange 17). As Holloway explains, speech in the Black female literary tradition is “often liminal, translucent, and subject to disarray, dislocation [...] and dispersion” (770). The lady in brown’s plea for “somebody/ anybody” to “sing a black girl’s song” (Shange 20) contains the implicit understanding that the current song, with its “interrupted solos” and “unseen performances” (19) is lacking some crucial element. For the characters in the choreopoem specifically, an appropriate space for trauma testimony has not yet been created, and thus the traumatic experiences that come alongside being a Black woman in the US have no space in which they can be witnessed. No matter how refined it becomes, the “black girl’s song” will always be incomplete without someone to hear it. The location of the characters outside major US cities further emphasizes this feeling of absence. George-Graves explains that “at the beginning of the play, each woman is on the outskirts of a city – outside. Spatially and psychologically, these women exist on borders and frontiers” (208). The traumatized Black women

of the play not only suffer from the lack of a specific witnessing community, but they have no broader community at all in which to find (or create) these spaces for witnessing. In “dark phrases,” the audience is able to see how the lack of a community of addressable others has confined each woman to the outskirts of life, unable to access self-love or future opportunities, and literally begging for someone to be able to sing their song.

The transition from “dark places” into the rest of the choreopoem comes after the women begin to sing childhood rhymes and play tag together. This shift back to rituals of childhood (a time that is the point of origin of many traumatic experiences) signals the start of the choreopoem’s main narrative. In this way, “dark phrases” functions as an opening frame which provides context for audiences to understand the rest of the choreopoem. As soon as each of the other characters are tagged by the lady in brown, they all freeze again and the first of the text’s individually narrated poems begins. This positions “dark phrases” as an articulation of the choreopoem’s goals: to enable the singing of the “black girl’s song” to a community of addressable others and to demonstrate the process of creating such a space for witnessing.

The three poems directly following “dark phrases” (“graduation nite,” “now i love somebody more than,” and “no assistance”) do not narrate traumatic events. The non-narrating characters remain on stage and make light comments, but a witnessing relationship is not formed since none of the narrators attempt to testify to trauma. “i’m a poet who” signals the shift from non-traumatic narration to attempted testimony that lacks an appropriate witness. At the end of “i’m a poet who,” the stage directions indicate that “there is a sudden light change, all the ladies react as if they had been struck in the face” (Shange 31). This occurs directly after multiple characters have expressed how they “gotta dance to keep from cryin” (31). It is clear that the Black female body is portrayed here as a site of trauma, and the transition into “latent rapists’,” where the women’s dance is interrupted by an unseen force of physical violence, showcases this. Multiple women narrate “latent rapists’” and express both the trauma surrounding rape and the additional traumatization caused when society at large refuses to accept their testimony. Laub describes this phenomenon, writing that “if one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma—a *re-experiencing of the event itself*” (“Bearing Witness” 67). For the narrators in “latent rapists’,” the lack of witnessing is not just inconvenient or frustrating, but actually re-traumatizing.

After the women’s narratives move from more general storytelling into the topic of specific traumas, the ladies in green, orange, and brown leave the stage. The ladies in blue, red, and purple (colors that, not incidentally, invoke the image of a bruise) are left alone on stage to narrate their traumatic experiences with sexual assault. The women speak of their trauma, but there is no external voice to serve as witness and

reaffirm that they are indeed survivors of sexual violence. Additionally, the three women narrating “latent rapists” cannot serve as witnesses to each other since they are not in direct communication with one another. They speak in parallel rather than to one another, and it is unclear if they are even aware of each other’s presence on stage. From the end of “latent rapists” until “my love is too,” poems are spoken by a single narrator, who is primarily on stage alone. Although traumatic events continue to be narrated, no witnessing relationship of any kind has been established, and thus there is no textual indication of healing or forward movement. Without the validating influence of a witnessing relationship, the attempted trauma testimonies in this first section of *for colored girls* exist without contextualization or indication of a future beyond the traumatic event. The characters’ inability to communicate with each other via speech or movement such as the previously-mentioned dancing “to keep from cryin” (Shange 31) demonstrates the isolation and disconnection of their voices. Although the women are attempting to sing the black girl’s song, there is still no audience ready to hear them.

### **Finding a Witness in “my love is too”**

“my love is too” begins in much the same way as “dark phrases,” only this time it is the lady in yellow attempting to communicate with the other characters while they are frozen and unresponsive. However, just as she is about to exit the stage, the others begin to come to life and begin to assume a witnessing role. The lady in yellow declares “my love is too delicate to have thrown back on my face” (Shange 61), an affirmation of self-worth despite her traumatic experiences with romantic relationships. But rather than letting her attempt at self-affirmation remain her own, the other characters begin to echo the phrase back with slight individualizations. Per Laub, “Testimony is, therefore, the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as witness; reconstitutes the internal ‘thou,’ and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself” (“Truth and Testimony” 70). By echoing back the lady in yellow’s powerful statement of survival to her while simultaneously applying it to their own lives and traumas, Shange’s characters begin to form a community able to genuinely act as witnesses to each other’s trauma testimonies. In another similarity to “dark phrases,” the women begin to dance and chant together. However, instead of childhood songs, the women take turns all repeating each other’s affirmations. This act of establishing a community of addressable others contains multiple indicators of plurisignance. Writing about Shange in particular, Holloway remarks, “Poetry and music exist in the same spaces as dialogues and dreams. Women’s sharing of their most intimate and creative language with each other is a significant feature of Shange’s method” (768). The blending of music, poetry, and ritual chant showcases the translucence and multidimensionality

of Shange's writing and the dynamic and fluid nature of the community that the women in the choreopoem have formed.

Despite some structural similarities, however, there is a significant difference between the endings of "dark phrases" and "my love is too." While the transition into the poems following "dark phrases" occurs as the characters are playing freeze tag, the transition after "my love is too" is much more overtly positive. When the characters fall down after dancing together, the stage directions specifically note that they are "full of life and togetherness" (Shange 65). The inclusion of dance as productive physical movement takes a step towards reunifying the characters' disparate voices with their bodies. Mahurin explains that, for the women in Shange's text, "the movement of the body through dance is also evidentiary [...] offering visual confirmation of the women's existences" (338). In "my love is too," the women onstage do not only begin to speak together and to each other, they also begin to dance together and thus affirm the connection between their bodies and their voices. This point in the choreopoem marks not only the formation of a genuine witnessing community, but also a strong movement towards a plurisignance of cohesion and unity that still maintains the text's fluid and translucent components.

The poems following "my love is too" continue to contain traumatic content; however, a palpable shift in how characters interact with one another has occurred. While poems were narrated separately in the first section of the choreopoem, after "my love is too," characters interact with one another during and after their narration of their experiences of trauma. The entire group of women remains on stage together and they respond to each other's narratives with concern and commiseration, reinforcing their bond as a community of trauma survivors who are able to bear witness for each other. During the poems "positive" and "a nite with beau willie brown," multiple speakers narrate together. However, instead of the disparate, though thematically similar, threads making up "latent rapists'," the narrators in these poems narrate a single story of trauma as a group. This shared narration demonstrates the fluid process of giving and receiving testimony. Laub states that "to a certain extent, the interviewer-listener takes on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he bore alone, and therefore could not carry out" ("Truth and Testimony" 69). Although the stories told in both "positive" and "a nite with beau willie brown" happen to an individual woman, the communal form of narration employed by Shange emphasizes how this community helps the trauma survivor shoulder the burden of witnessing. The shift occurring after "my love is too" makes it apparent that the seven women in the choreopoem have finally found their addressable others in one another.

### **The Integration of Body and Voice in “a layin on of hands”**

The final poem making up *for colored girls* is “a layin on of hands,” a demonstration of the self-love the characters have been able to cultivate due to their witnessing community. The poem opens with the line “i waz missin somethin” (Shange 86), taking the audience out of the storytelling poems and back to the narrative frame introduced in “dark phrases.” As the line is in past tense, there is the implication that the speaker (the lady in red) has found whatever she was missing, and is now narrating from a future position. It is fitting that the choreopoem concludes with the characters speaking about their discovery of self-worth within their witnessing community. While “dark phrases” was a cry for someone to sing and someone to listen, “a layin on of hands” is a reflection upon the moment their songs found an audience.

In “a layin on of hands,” the characters are also finally able to unite their voices and bodies. When the lady in red says, “i found god in myself / & i loved her” (Shange 88), the characters are finally able to transition into song, rather than just dance or speech. In *for colored girls*, singing serves as the ultimate unification of body and voice. The music that previously appeared in the piece was external, emitting from offstage and containing voices not belonging to the characters. However, in “a layin on of hands,” the women are finally able to sing. The stage directions indicate that “the ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks the ladies enter into a closed tight circle” (88-89). Pamela Hamilton describes this as “a song that stimulates rebirth, necessary for the survival of the black woman” (85). The characters’ previous dances have been interrupted by either the intrusion of physical violence or their own tiredness and their voices have been subject to the patriarchal white hegemony they live in, but their song is self-sustaining and evidence of their connection. Mahurin claims that this song “suggests a plentitude of – and, too, a strength in, as the threefold chord is not easily broken – experiential diversity” (339). This is the ultimate articulation of a positive plurisignance in Shange’s text; not the consolidation of individual voices into a single narrative, but a celebration of the strength to be found in textual translucence. Holloway writes, “Only the thematic emphasis on the recovery of some dimension of voice restores the balance to the text between its voices and those collected into its rearticulated universe” (770-71). In *for colored girls*, the thematic recovery is not of voice but of voice and body in harmony. It is the song in “a layin on of hands” which brings balance to the text’s individual narratives and the choreopoem as a whole.

It is also significant that the characters address the audience for the first time during their song. Bringing the articulation of their communal testimony and witnessing outside their group and into dialogue with the public signifies that the characters are not only now able to move forward with their journeys of self-love, but that they may finally be able to address the root causes of their trauma: racist and misogynistic

societal structures. Griffin explains the need for *for colored girls* to ultimately turn outward towards its audience. She writes, “Clearly the reclamation of the sexual body and affirmation of the spiritual self are not in and of themselves enough to constitute acts of resistance; in and of themselves they do not alter the conditions that oppress black women” (533-34). By ending her choreopoem with a turn outwards, Shange demonstrates the power of Black women forming their own witnessing communities, while not forgetting that until there is significant systemic change, traumas like those narrated in the choreopoem will only continue to be perpetuated.

## Conclusion

San José Rico writes that “asking a fictional text about trauma to somehow lead to a process of psychological healing in the real world would be a rather tall order, perhaps completely unattainable, nonsensical and even unethical” (34). Scholars on postcolonial and racial trauma understand that an artistic work alone is not enough to change the structures causing these collective traumas in the first place. Although *for colored girls* does not serve as a remedy for the racism and sexism still faced by Black women today, that does not make it unimportant or useless. Holloway’s conception of plurisignance reminds us that the ultimate goal of works in the Black female literary tradition is not necessarily complete unity and wholeness. Certainly, not every narrative articulated in Shange’s choreopoem ends happily. However, it is the unification of body and voice, as well as the ability to testify to one’s traumas within a community of survivors able to act as witnesses that enables the Black women on stage to claim self-love and gain the ability to strive for future opportunities. Griffiths articulates the role *for colored girls* can play well, explaining that “when the state offers no opportunity for justice and renders meaningless the history of oppression that traumatizes communities, art can provide a public space in which bodies and memories unite to offer testimony” (108). Shange’s text both enacts testimony of Black women’s trauma and comments upon the importance of forming witnessing communities outside the world on stage. As Shange herself wrote in the introduction to the 2010 publication of the choreopoem, “*for colored girls* still is a woman’s trip, and the connection we can make through it, with each other and for each other, is to empower us all” (13). Although empowerment is certainly not the end, it can offer a powerful beginning, and the plurisignant yet unified community in place at the end of *for colored girls* is an important example of that.

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