

“BEIN ALIVE & BEIN A WOMAN & BEIN COLORED”: THE METAPHYSICAL DILEMMA IN NTOZAKE SHANGE, SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS, AND TONI MORRISON

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Abstract

This essay is an analysis of three literary works by black women writers from the U.S.: Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, Sherley Ann Williams' novel *Dessa Rose*, and Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. In my analysis, I use Shange's trope of the “methaphysical dilemma” to consider the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality in these writers' textual representations of black women's bodies. Writing against a historical legacy of colonialism and domination that defined black bodies as “primitive” or “unbridled” (bell hooks 1991), I argue that these works illustrate some of the artistic/literary strategies contemporary black women writers use to re-claim the power of voice/voicing as they depict black women's subjectivities as unfinished, complex, but self-fashioned creations.

Keywords: Black women writers. Black women's bodies. Literary representations.

Resumo

Este ensaio é uma análise de três obras literárias produzidas por escritoras negras dos Estados Unidos: *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, de Ntozake Shange; *Dessa Rose*, romance de Sherley Ann Williams; e *Beloved*, romance de Toni Morrison. Em minha análise, uso a alegoria do “dilema metafísico”, criada por Sahnge, nas minhas considerações acerca das intersecções entre as categorias de raça, gênero e sexualidade em representações textuais do corpo da mulher negra nas obras dessas escritoras. Procuo demonstrar que, ao escreverem na contra-corrente da herança colonial que define os corpos negros como “primitivos” ou “selvagens” (bell hooks 1991), estas obras literárias ilustram algumas das estratégias artístico-literárias usadas por escritoras negras contemporâneas para reclamar o poder da fala/voz em representações das subjetividades de mulheres negras como criações inacabadas, complexas, mas auto-geradas.

Palavras-chave: Escritoras negras. Corpos de mulheres negras. Representações literárias.

Historically, black women’s body has been considered, as well as represented as, an object of speculation, exploitation and “bestialization” throughout the centuries¹. Inscribed in slavery, black bodies were pushed into a process that sought to promote the legitimation of a system of oppression that subsequently promoted a series of stereotypical and derogative images. Patricia Hill Collins has done extensive work in analyzing and categorizing those monolithic stereotypes of black women, particularly in the U.S. For Collins, the “controlling images” of black women—the mummies, the matriarchs, the Sapphire, the Jezebel, and welfare queens—have been “essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women’s oppression” (Collins 2009: 67). In her essay “Black Women Intellectuals”, another U.S. African American cultural critic, bell hooks, corroborates with Collins’ analysis, highlighting that, in order to justify the sexual and labor exploitation of enslaved black women, the dominant white elites created “an iconography of Black female bodies” as hypersexual – “the perfect embodiment of primitive, unbridled eroticism” (hooks 1991: 153). Thus, within ideologies of domination from which colonialism and slavery branch, the naming and defining of black womanhood (and their bodies) become crucial instruments of power.

Having their bodies objectified and then used to “serve” the purposes of dominant social systems, black women were, at the same time, regarded as creatures with no intellectual capabilities. These images, hooks explains, have gradually and progressively been installed in the collective consciousness and reinforce the idea that the black female body belongs to a category placed very far from intellectual life (hooks 1991: 154). Taking this discussion into consideration, this essay aims at analyzing how long-established images of black women and their bodies have been (re)(de)constructed in three contemporary works by U.S. African American writers:

¹ One of the most emblematic figures that illustrate how black women were target of pseudo-scientific speculation and exploitation is Saartjie Baartman, or the “Hotenttot Venus”, a Khoisan woman, captured in the Cape of South Africa, who was taken to Europe Dutch exhibitor Hendrik Cezar and put on display, first by, as a mythical and exotic-shaped “Hottentot”. Her body was dissected later by French anatomists and her genitalia was exhibited in the Musée de l’Homme, Paris, until 1974 More on Baartman, see Stephen Jay Gould’s 1985 “The Hottentot Venus” in *The flamingo’s Smile: Reflection in Natural History* (New York: Norton Press).

Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1976), Sherley Ann Williams’ 1986 novel *Dessa Rose*, and Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved*. As these writers depict black women’s bodies in their literary works, they develop, I will argue, a set of alternative literary constructions that open up for the reaffirmation of the black female body from multiple cultural perspectives and identities. I will particularly focus on Shange’s use of the trope of “metaphysical dilemma” to explore some of the artistic/literary strategies contemporary black women writers use to re-claim the power of voice/voicing as they depict black women’s subjectivities as unfinished, complex, but self-fashioned creations.

When her choreopoem was produced in 1975, Shange was very much aware that she was writing about the dilemmas, complexities, contradictions of women, in general, and black women, in particular. For Shange, the issues she raised in *For Colored Girls* had a symbiotic relationship with the racist, sexist and misogynistic society of that period. In the 1987 interview published in *The Massachusetts Review*, as the author responds to a question about the critiques following the Broadway production of her choreopoem, which positioned her as an “angry young black feminist”, Shange expresses her feminist consciousness:

I got very pointedly satirical about people, for example in ‘Just Like a Man’, at about that time. There are some things in *Sassafras* that are about that, too, where I can make fun of sexism, misogynists... It’s like creating a world of women that’s woman-centered, so aberrant male forms really look aberrant” (Lyons and Shange 1987: 687).

In the very beginning of the choreopoem, Shange’s narrator raises questions about how black women have been represented or treated; and how their voices have been silenced throughout history:

are we ghouls?
children of horror?
the joke?
...
are we animals? have we gone crazy?
...
somebody/anybody

sing a black girl's song
 bring her out
 to know herself
 ...
 she's been dead so long
 closed in silence so long
 she doesn't know the sound
 or her own voice
 her infinite beauty (Shange 1997: 4).

By making a call for black women² to voice their own stories, as the stage remains dark and the seven women in the choreopoem run to the stage in a state of distress, Shange's lady in brown prepares the audience to hear a "black girl's song", the voice of the one who has been dead so long/ closed in silence". In a ritual of resurrection, Shange's text brings to the reader's attention and senses the "melody", the "unseen performances", the "hysterical", the "funny", and the "hard times" of the stories told by black women and other women of color. Shange addresses black women's subjectivities from the perspective of black subjects depicted in her text. In privileging that textual perspective, Shange's poetic voices speak out about a series of complex situations in which sexism, misogyny, and the cultural legacies of domination over black women's bodies are interwoven in the fabric of intimate relationships.

In "latent rapists", for instance, the issue of rape is depicted from multiple angles related to the abuse of power. The act of rape does not only relate to the exploitation of the black female body—and the trauma of its violation; but it is also inscribed within a context where values such as trust and friendship become shattered. Shange's boldness in bringing to light the silenced stories of sexual assault survivors who, in most cases, know well their perpetrators: "these friends of ours/ who smile nice/ stay employed/ and take us out to dinner" (Shange 1997: 18). The rape stories in the choreopoem unveil the insidious practices of a rape culture that is a manifestation of long-established ideologies of ownership

2 Although I am referring to black women and the black female body in Shange's *For Colored Girls*, her choreopoem does consider other groups of non-white women within the term "colored girls". In the aforementioned 1987 interview, Shange herself speaks about how she understood the term "colored": "I know that fifteen years ago when I said 'colored girls' I meant 'people of color.' ... 'Color' meant 'black people', so that's what it became, but syntactically and in terms of what's in the piece itself that's not true. I think now when you say 'people of color' that's another way of saying 'colored girls' but getting away from the trap I fell into" (Lyons & Shange 1987, 688).

of black women's bodies. Shange's "ladies" also unveil a culture of shame and judgement of women who dare reclaim their sexual freedom and become targets of sexual assault in their own intimate circles: "cuz it turns out the nature of rape has changed/ we can now meet them in circles we frequent for companionship/ we see them at the coffeehouse/ wit some else we know" (Shange 1997: 21). However, Shange's text functions as a subversion of the dilemma imposed by trauma and silence because its textual manifestation as storytelling by women-survivors is, in and of itself, an exposure, a resurrection of the voices lost in the darkness of history. By telling their stories, Shange's "ladies" become themselves the embodiment of the "black girl's song", dead/silenced for so long. Structurally, Shange uses several voices in her text to tell these stories, and although the perspective in the text leans towards a particular character/voice, the anonymity and blending of voices at different points in the text indicates a collective, a shared space and time, and, like a chorus, Shange's "ladies" amplify the sounds of their songs.

In the passages entitled "no more love poems", Shange's choreopoem focuses on the women-characters' pursuit of love, the ways in which they are seen and want to be seen in their relationship with love. The first impulse, here, is to distance themselves from the stereotypes imposed on black/colored women: "ever since I realized there waz someone callt / a colored girl an evil woman a bitch or a nag / I been tryin not to be that & leave bitterness / in somebody else's cup" (Shange 1997: 42). The notion that permeates these passages lies in black women's struggle (and the suffering caused by it) for being a "whole" in a world that imposes a fragmentation of self and body, where "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma/ I haven't conquered yet" (Shange 1997: 45). Another idea in this passage—and one that cuts throughout the entire textual fabric—is the continuous burden carried by black women (and other women of color) of always having to prove their value while being denied the experience of being who they really are on their own terms. Shange's metaphysical dilemma is a perpetually unresolved one.

In exposing this complexity in black women's subjectivity, Shange's choreopoem reveals, once again, how her characters forge strategies to experience their own desire. This revelation exposes black women's

consciousness of their own self as depicted, for instance, in the passages in “toussaint”. Here, the encounter between an eight-year-old black girl and her “secret love”, an invisible black boy named Toussaint, invokes the Haitian history of black revolution (lead by Toussaint L’Ouveture) as a backdrop to represent an experience of agency and freedom in the life of a young black girl. What one may characterize as a childish, naïve, fantasy, Shange’s text brings to surface as a strategic (i)materialization of a young black girl’s desire for a dignified life; and an encounter with another (black) human being with whom she could “just read & talk all the time/ & eat fried bananas”; a human being who could just be “awright wit me”.

Under the institution of slavery, the scope of black women’s agency was not only limited, but also regulated. Within that context, to consider the “metaphysical dilemma” for black women’s subjectivity is to consider the feasibility of their very existence. As property, black women’s bodies did not belong to themselves: their reproductive capabilities were a source of profitability for the slaveholding system. Therefore, within slavery, any autonomous exercise of black women’s sexuality could be understood as transgression. This transgressive attitude is the background for *Dessa Rose*, Sherley Ann Williams’ 1986 novel. William’s narrative starts with the protagonist, Dessa Rose, a pregnant runaway enslaved black woman, in an Alabama jail cell, charged with attempted murder. It is in the confinement of the jail cell that the reader learns about Dessa’s journey of revenge against the master who kills her lover, Kaine, in a whim; a journey of rebellion that results in the deaths of white men, for which Dessa ends up in jail. However, before presenting a story of loss, suffering, and incarceration, Williams gifts her readers with a prologue in which Dessa recalls the pleasures of being with her lover. Written in italics, Dessa’s recollections are filled with desire, sexual delight, and fulfillment:

Talk as beautiful as his touch. Shivering, she pulled at his shirt. This was love, her hand at his back, his mouth. “Sho you want,” she asked him, “sho you want this old—?” His lips were on hers, nibbling, nipping, “Dessa,” a groan in his throat. Her sentence ended in a moan. Thighs spreading for him, hips moving for him. Lawd, this man sho know how to love... (Williams 1999: 14).

Throughout the novel, Dessa is punished for her attempts to resist or to defend herself, but what is behind this punishment is the fact that she dares to exercise agency; she dares to fight back; and, finally, Dessa dares to express her sexual desire and ability to love in a way that does not promote any gains (nor pleasure, nor property) to her master. Williams’ protagonist carries the scars of her punishment in the very same place on her body from which she enacted sexual agency. Strategically naming this part of the narrative “The Negress”, Williams shows that Dessa’s realization of the inhumane condition she was subjected to as a slaved is also a realization of its interconnectedness with her womanhood:

I was like an animal; whipped like one; in the dirt like one. I hadn’t never known peoples could do peoples like this. And I had the marks of that on my privates. It wasn’t uncommon to see a negro with scars and most of us carried far more than we ever showed... (Williams 1999: 191).

Patricia Hill Collins notes that “Sexuality in the individual, interpersonal domain of power becomes annexed by intersecting oppressions in the structural domain of power in order to ensure the smooth operation of domination” (Collins 2009: 185). In this sense, Williams inscribes Dessa’s sexual agency as the very expression of the character’s struggle for liberation – liberation of her body as a whole.

The narrative structure of *Dessa Rose* allows for different perspectives on the black female body. Divided into three parts, the novel presents to the reader a progression in terms of how Dessa is seen and how she projects her own voice (and image) into the narrative. In “The Darky”, in part one, what predominates is the point of view of the male white writer, Nehemiah, who, unable to acknowledge Dessa’s humanity and intelligence, often associates her body to bestial and evil characteristics:

Nehemiah still marveled at how wide and black her eyes had appeared in the half-light of the cellar... He had understood then something of what the slave dealer, Wilson, might have meant when he talked of the darky’s ‘devil eyes’ her ‘devil’s stare’” (Williams 1999: 20).

The second part of the novel is told by an omniscient narrator that introduces the white mistress Ruth Elizabeth's point-of-view, but it is constituted by passages in italics that could be related to Dessa's own perspective of the events. Although there is here a feeling of sympathy on the part of Ruth (or Rufel or Miz Ruint, as later named) towards Dessa and her circumstances, the way Ruth perceives Dessa's body and her scars is still attached to the alterity that distinguishes one woman from the other. Ruth's patronizing perspective over Dessa is the fundamental point of difference and hierarchy William's use to name this part of the narrative "The Wench". Here, the reader learns about how Ruth/Rufel feels when she glances at Dessa's black and mutilated body—a mix of empathy, repulse and horror: "The wench's loins looked like a mutilated cat face. Scar tissue plowed through her pubic region so no hair would ever grow there again. Rufel leaned weakly against the door, regretting what she had seen" (Williams 1999: 154).

Narrated in the first person, the final part of the novel, "The Negress", is completely aligned with Dessa's perspective and voice. Here, Williams empowers her protagonist with the gift of story-telling, but also the ability of portraying herself according to her own perceptions. Her self-image is constantly depicted in relation to her view of white women and men and her current lover, Harker. For instance, Williams' change in perspective enables her readers to learn how Dessa perceived the so-called benevolence of white masters and mistresses in a comment filled with irony: "I'd only heard of 'good masters'—I didn't know nothing about no good white folks—and none of them claimed Miz Ruint was a 'good master.'" (Williams 1999: 165).

The final part of Williams' also closes a cycle with the prologue in the beginning of the novel and takes the reader to an epilogue that does not only highlights Dessa's resilience and final survival. Within the literary genre of a neo-slave narrative, Williams takes her readers to contemplate and wonder about the possibility of a controversial, complex, and uneven alliance between Dessa Rose, an intelligent, self-directed, vocal black woman, and Ruth, a white plantation owner who chooses a black man for her lover. As the narrative cycles, Williams offers a moment of inquiry about how these women come together in defiance of a patriarchal system that commodifies black bodies and criminalizes interracial bonds.

The story of oppression against black women during slavery is also imprinted in the bodies and souls of the characters of Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*. The marks in Sethe's body re-stage acts of domination and exploitation of the system of slavery throughout the narrative. Morrison dramatizes Sethe's story of suffering—also reflected in the sufferings of all the others in her family—through the healing process of her own inflicted body. In this sense, Sethe's process of "rememory" of her act of infanticide forces a revisit to her own history of enslavement. As Saidiya Hartman affirms, these painful recollections of the past become "the ways memory acts in the service of redress rather than an inventory of memory" (Hartman 1997: 73). From this perspective, Morrison's *Beloved* promotes the "rememory" of slavery so that the dismembered and the violated body can be restored, *re-membered*.

The re-incarnation of *Beloved*, the murdered daughter, and her presence in the cursed 124, is initially soothing and nurturing to Sethe and Denver. However, as the ghostly presence starts to make irrational demands for the fulfillment material and immaterial insatiable desires, Sethe and Denver become hostages of the past and unable to move forward with their lives. Morrison's narrative becomes a cautionary tale about the dangers of a monolithic past history that does not bring a sense of renewal and the possibilities of future. Thus, if *Beloved* can be understood, on one hand, as the reincarnated being that used to haunt and oppress the "spiteful" 124 and make it a place "full of baby's venom" (Morrison 2004: 72); on the other hand, she can also be considered as the channel through which Sethe's pained body and tormented soul is redressed and healed, which is finally represented by the unification of mother and daughters as one single body: "Beloved/ You are my sister/ You are my daughter/ You are my face; you are me" (Morrison 2004, 3478). In unison and timeless poetic language, these three women speak as one: mothers and daughters; past, present and future; and words are blended together in a reimagined vision of the world. It is, however, the artistry of recovering the past and letting go; the learning from the past in order to build a future; the ultimate message of Morrison's final repeated lines: "It was not a story to pass on".

Almost everything about Morrison's narrative highlights the unsurmountable trauma of exploitation and oppression under slavery, passed on to generations in the black community. Almost everything... However,

Beloved also reveals that self-love is possibly the most revolutionary act of individual and community resistance and survival. A self-love manifested in the (black) flesh. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, as the guardian of ancestral wisdom, preaches a sermon that has become an iconic call for that kind of revolution:

In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart... She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. ‘Here’, she said, ‘In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it... You got to love it, you!... This is flesh I’m talking about here’ (Morrison 2004, 1471).

As a counter-narrative to the dehumanization of black bodies in the post-emancipation Southern U.S., Baby Suggs’ command “Love it. Love it hard” represents the authoritative and wise voice of a black woman prophet who carries in her own flesh the marks of abuse. She testifies to her own survival, human dignity, and yearning, and that of the community. There are two main reasons why I want to conclude this essay with Baby Sugg’s sermon in Morrison’s novel. First, her sermon articulates an embodied poetic discourse of resistance and agency, reclaiming the black body from the long-lasting effects of trauma, captivity, and regulation. Second, Morrison’s imagery--Baby Suggs in the clearing preaching love for the self--illustrates the use of an artistic strategy that draws our attention to the historical, political, geographical, and social contexts from which oppression and resistance, exploitation and agency, trauma and healing come from. The multilayered tapestry of Morrison’s writing into Baby Suggs’ preaching self-love unravels the poetics and politics of black women in art and in history; their strategies of representation and resilience; the beauty and pain of their metaphysical dilemma.

Ultimately, Shange, Williams, and Morrison invite us to listen as they sing a black girl’s song; as they tell stories of sorrow and desire; as they preach self-love in the woods. In their works, listening to one’s body, acknowledging its beauty, and fulfilling its needs becomes a subversive act against long-imposed silences and invisibility. It may also

represent a tool with which black women can foster self-empowerment, self-affirmation and liberation. Each one of these works contributes to the understanding of the ideologies and conditions that imprison black women’s bodies into categories of inferiority or dysfunctionality. However, Shange, Williams and Morrison also construct artistic representations that exposes black women’s long tradition of agency and cultural intervention.

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