

“¡¡¡SOY NEGRA!!!”/“i found god in myself”: Shange, Santa Cruz, and Self-Love as Savior

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“I believe in ritual,” Ntozake Shange shared with La Donna L. Forsgren, shortly before passing from this plane of existence in 2018. “Not words but through sound and movement and breath. Sounds of breath and movement tracing life from the womb to womanhood before you heard somebody sing a black girl’s song.”¹ What are some of the transnational resonances of something we might call the Black Feminist aesthetic/thought/politic that Shange articulates here as breath, movement, life, and “a black girl’s song”? How have Black women theatre artists the world over used the embodied performance of poetry, choreography, drama, and the combination of the three in order to articulate, excavate, and propagate their unique experiences as Black women—from “womb to womanhood”? How have they done so in a way that emphasizes a lived politic? What role do affect, self-honor, and feeling play in the rituals Shange speaks of and the resonances they might create? And, if you’ll honor (or excuse) the Tina Turner reference, “What’s love got to do with it?”

In 1976, the luminary playwright and poet Ntozake Shange sent shockwaves through the Black Arts Movement, the theatre community, and the world at large with the Broadway debut of her testimonial choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. Shange’s iconic piece was the first play by a Black woman to appear on Broadway since Lorraine Hansberry’s *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (1964) and *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) before that. *for colored girls...* had been steadily increasing in recognition, reach, and resonance over the early 1970s. The play built on the experimental aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and anticipated the emergent (though certainly not “new”) Black Feminist/womanist/Third World Feminist thought(s) ringing throughout the Afro-Diaspora in the 1970s and 1980s. “I was very much a part of the feminist writing movement,” Shange stated. “I was at the beginning of a woman-centered sense of writing in terms of journaling, self-examination, attention to the personal, and believing that the personal is political without unashamedly believing that.”² The writer’s claiming of the women’s movement here through the affective rejection of “shame” stands out among other Black Arts Movement women dramatists

¹ Ntozake Shange, as interviewed in La Donna L. Forsgren, *Sistuks in the Struggle: An Oral History of Black Arts Movement Theater and Performance* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 197.

² Shange in Forsgren, 196-197.

like Sonia Sanchez and J.e. Franklin who, as Forsgren demonstrates in her first book *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers*, were less likely to claim feminism or the feminist movement outright.³ Thus, Shange's explicitly feminist centering of Black women's oral histories and her innovative use of the multimodal choreopoem as an artistic form in *for colored girls...* can be seen as both rooted in and a nuancing of the radical praxes of the Black Arts Movement aesthetics in a way that extended her into the fecund period of Black Feminism(s) in literature and drama that was soon to follow. With her choreopoem, Shange danced in the past, present, and future.

Two years later, and over three thousand miles away, Afro-Peruvian choreographer, poet, and legendary theatre artist Victoria Santa Cruz sent shockwaves of her own. Working within the Afro-Peruvian Black Arts Revival movement—not dissimilar or divergent from the United States-based Black Arts Movement previously referenced—Santa Cruz and her brother, Nicomedes, revitalized Peruvian theatre as a site of identity exploration and pride for Afro-Peruvians by exploring the dramatic form's relationship to folk culture and diasporic Blackness. Santa Cruz's most famous work in a long line of vital theatrical, poetic, and choreographic presentations was a movement-based testimonial poem not unlike many of the most powerful dramatic moments in Shange's *for colored girls...* It was called "Me Gritaron Negra." An ensemble-based poetry/theatre/movement piece, "Me Gritaron Negra" utilized powerful spoken word, group call-and-response, stark percussion, and choreographed gestural movement to tell the story of a young Peruvian woman's personal and political journey into recognizing/claiming/embracing Blackness. Like Shange chronologically before and geographically distinct from her, Santa Cruz seemed to be dancing between past and future, simultaneity and paradox. While her work formally innovated the theatrical genre, it did so by reflexively looking back into the histories of misogyny, coloniality, and anti-Blackness and (re)articulating Afro-diasporic aesthetics of multimodal performance as potentially antidotal to the consequences of such histories.

Perhaps the most striking similarity, though, between the two works is their thematic parallelism. Both works use their genre-defying form in order to radically center explorations of Black womanhood, self-love, the body, political consciousness, and the intersection of the four. Throughout this article, I will assert that Shange and Santa Cruz engage in a "diasporic dialogue" through their two pieces—a dialogue that transcends language, time, and geographies. I believe they do so not through the actual exchange of words, but rather through the Afro-diasporic aesthetics and Black Feminist messaging at the heart of both *for colored girls...* and "Me Gritaron Negra." Indeed, rather than focus on a dialogue between Shange and Santa Cruz as artists, I am invested in the conversation between their pieces—and the consciousness transformation such a conversation allows. By placing these works in conference for the first time and investigating the ways they "talk" to each other, I seek to demonstrate the unique

³ La Donna L. Forsgren, *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers: Women Dramatists of the Black Arts Movement* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018).

vitality of theatre pieces—especially those led by Black women from across the African Diaspora—as embodied practices of liberatory politics and the transforming (and transformational) Black Feminist thought of the 1970s. Furthermore, by honing in on and getting up close to praxes and articulations of self-acceptance, self-definition, and self-determination in both Shange’s and Santa Cruz’s works, I will demonstrate the usefulness of this kind of embodied performance to something we might think of as the radical political potential of self-love.

Throughout this article, I utilize the term “diasporic dialogue” as a sort of guiding light to simulate a conversation between Shange and Santa Cruz—a conversation that did not occur in reality (at least from my research), but that I contend occurs thematically and formally through the proximity (temporally, aesthetically, dialectically) of their works. Such a dialogue reveals the ways Black women of this period from the Global North to the Global South were wrestling with and emerging from the other side of societally systemic issues of anti-Black racism, misogyny, and disempowerment. When I speak throughout about Black Feminist thought, politics, and aesthetics, I am drawing on the wealth of knowledge and diversity of thought penned by luminary figures like Barbara Christian, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Michele Wallace, and Barbara Smith (including the Combahee River Collective Statement), and also brilliant contemporary scholars like Jennifer C. Nash and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. I also lean on scholars like Heidi Carolyn Feldman and Kirstie A. Dorr, whose works *Black Rhythms of Peru* and “Afroperuvian Feminisms and Performance Geographies of Diasporicity,” respectively, provide robust structural foundations from which to build my argument, especially as it relates to the artistic choices of Santa Cruz.⁴ Such scholarly interventions not only prove the possibility of imagining the diasporic dialogue I assert occurs between Shange’s and Santa Cruz’s theatrical poetry pieces, but they also foreground the necessity and radical potential of such an imagining. Placing *for colored girls...* in diasporic dialogue with “Me Gritaron Negra” while also looking at the ways Black Feminist thought was coalescing during roughly the same period demonstrates, I hope, the centrality of art, performance, and Black women theatre practitioners to theoretical work—whether or not that centrality has been accounted for in our dominant narrative of Black Feminism’s formal establishment. I am inspired by the words of Barbara Christian in the introduction to her seminal text, *Black Feminist Criticism*, the importance of using a Black Feminist lens in all arenas of literature written by Black women. As Christian asserts, “[We must] call attention to the form, show how it comes out of a history, a tradition, how the writer uses it. If we, and others don’t understand [...] that it *is* a form, we can’t even hear what she’s

⁴ Heidi Carolyn Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006) and Kirstie A. Dorr, “Afroperuvian Feminisms and Performance Geographies of Diasporicity, 1953–2013,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 29, no. 4 (2017): e12253, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12253>. I am specifically thinking of Feldman’s concept of the “Black Pacific” and Dorr’s detailed drawings of diasporic presence in Black women’s theatre.

saying or how meaningful it is.”⁵ I am invigorated by this call, then, to demonstrate care by really working to hear what Shange and Santa Cruz were saying through the form(s) of their pieces, through their words, gestures, silences, stillness, and through their embodied performances. I want to understand the meaning(s) created through their diasporic dialogue.

My methods are primarily those of a literary and theatre scholar: close readings of written language, spoken word, prosody and inflection, choreography, gestural movement, and the relationship(s) between the primary performer, ensemble, and audience. My assertions and analyses throughout this article are buttressed by the work of brilliant scholars from a variety of academic disciplines: performance studies; theatre; literature; Black Studies; women, gender, sexuality studies; and even art history. They include the aforementioned thinkers, but also DeLinda Marzette, Jean Young, Nicole M. Morris Johnson, and more. I assert that this diversity of methodologies and epistemologies speaks not only to the transdisciplinary nature of Black Studies (the field in which I am housed) but also to the genre-defying, experimental ontologies of both Shange’s and Santa Cruz’s works. Because *for colored girls...* is significantly longer and arguably more thematically capacious than “Me Gritaron Negra,” I choose to concentrate my theoretical energies on two particularly revealing movements in Shange’s choreopoem: the “no more love poems” series and the renowned and resuscitating finale, “a layin on of hands.” Through the intimate readings of both Shange’s and Santa Cruz’s works, I will demonstrate the diasporic dialogue it is possible to hear between the two and hope to argue (implicitly or otherwise) for this diasporic dialogue methodology of sorts to be applied to other transnational works of Black women creatives—especially those that are embodied through the dramatic form of theatre—as a means to further discover Black Feminist aesthetics and resonances.

It is striking that such a comparative analysis between Shange and Santa Cruz has not yet been performed, considering the generic and aesthetic similarities between their creative praxes. To that end, let us begin by setting up the genesis of *for colored girls...* and explore how it aligns with Santa Cruz’s practice. In her entry on Shange in *Encyclopedia of the Black Arts Movement*, Michelle L. Hayes writes, “She started [*for colored girls...*] by working on a series of poems that verbalized diverse perspectives representing the seven different black women’s experiences. [...] The initial poems were woven together representing extensive monologues coupled with rhythmic dances to explore the joys and tribulations of black womanhood.”⁶ Such a “weaving together” eventually manifested in the creation of the choreopoem—a moniker Shange invented in order to speak to the multimodal, interdisciplinary expression at the center of this new theatrical piece. And yet, although the moniker of “choreopoem” may have been new, its form

⁵ Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, 7th ed., (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), xiii.

⁶ Michelle L. Hayes, “Ntozake Shange,” in *Encyclopedia of the Black Arts Movement*, eds. Verner D. Mitchell and Cynthia Davis (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 292.

was very much in conversation with the Black Aesthetic as defined and re-defined throughout the Black Arts Movement, an aesthetic of the late 1960s and 1970s that emphasized the rejection of Western forms and the embrace of artistic forms connected to the African Diaspora. Shange's consistent collaborator and choreographer, Dianne McIntyre, spoke to this (re)investment in Afro-diasporic aesthetics, sharing, "Choreopoem is an ancient [African] form—words and movement happening simultaneously...Zaki [Shange] made a name for it."⁷ The very mode of Shange's most famous performance piece, then, located her in a diasporic dialogue not only with other contemporary creators like Santa Cruz or Dr. Barbara Ann Teer of the National Black Theatre but also with the African past. For her part, too, Santa Cruz viewed such an interweaving of modes—movement, poetry, drama, percussion—as inherently connected to this past and to the diaspora of people of African descent throughout the world. However, rather than through the genre of the choreopoem, this Afro-diasporic connection was for Santa Cruz most clearly represented through the concept of *ritmo*.

Victoria Santa Cruz's historical significance as an Afro-Peruvian artistic innovator and cultural curator cannot be overstated, though it is not widely taught in surveys of American theatre. Both she and her brother, Nicomedes, are remembered as the emblematic figures of the Afro-Peruvian Black Arts Revival, not only as creative practitioners but also as arts theorists and institution builders. In *Black Rhythms of Peru*, Heidi Carolyn Feldman explains, "Under the direction of the Santa Cruz siblings, theatrical productions reconnected Black Peruvians with an African past that preceded the colonial era."⁸ A central part of this connective practice for Victoria Santa Cruz was her belief in the internal (perhaps inherent) rhythm—or *ritmo*—uniting those of/in the African Diaspora. As Feldman explains, "Victoria believed that the African origin of all Black people is an organic culture with an inherent knowledge of the secret of rhythm."⁹ For Santa Cruz, such *ritmo* was made manifest through aesthetic choices in her work, including the primacy of movement and choreography in her theatre pieces; the uplifting and employment of Afro-diasporic-derived instruments like the *cajón*; the stark and spiritual rhythms created by ensemble call-and-response; and the sonic, dynamic, and rhythmic qualities of the words themselves. Indeed, Santa Cruz's consistent investment in *ritmo* is one of the ways she continued to mark Blackness, manifest Blackness for Afro-Peruvian audiences, and (re)connect them to a shared African past—abstracted, literal, or otherwise. For Santa Cruz, such a concept of *ritmo* even extended beyond her geographic plane of existence and into something more ethereal, metaphysical, and existential. In her reflective 2004 text, *Ritmo: El Eterno Organizador*, Santa Cruz writes from a distance of "Me Gritaron Negra" and other pieces, yet her investment in *ritmo* has remained, even evolved: "[...] continuing to reach deeper—throughout my life—into

⁷ Nicole M. Morris Johnson, "Ntozake Shange and the Choreopoem," in *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance*, ed. Kathy A. Perkins, Sandra L. Richards, Renée Alexander Craft, and Thomas F. DeFrantz (London; New York: Routledge, 2019), 334.

⁸ Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru*, 49.

⁹ Feldman, 68.

the formidable, inherited rhythmic foundations, these rhythms revealed to me, with the clarity of the organic, that although African, *they are cosmic*.”¹⁰

And such an ancestral—perhaps astral—(re)connection was vital for Afro-Peruvians in Santa Cruz’s time, for their stories, identities, and experiences were (and perhaps still are) often sidelined in discussions of the African Diaspora at large. Contemporarily intervening into a body of diasporic scholarship that has not historically centered Afro-Peru and other Western South American populations, Feldman writes, “Expanding upon [Paul] Gilroy’s important model, I use the term ‘Black Pacific’ to describe the newly imagined diasporic community as the periphery of the Black Atlantic.”¹¹ I want to follow the thread of Feldman’s thinking and ask, then, what becomes possible when we remember that Shange’s *for colored girls*... initiated and gestated on the Pacific coast, while she was teaching, writing, communing, and creating in Women’s Studies and Africana Studies communities in a multicultural San Francisco?¹² While I am of course not arguing here that the United States—even its westernmost parts—is a part of the Black Pacific as Feldman crafts it in her text, I am curious as to the potentials presented if we conceive of Shange’s and Santa Cruz’s diasporic dialogue occurring up and down the Pacific, rather than the Atlantic World. How does this dialectic compare or differ from, for instance, relationships between Black women playwrights of the Caribbean, United States East, and Eastern South America as previously researched in works like DeLinda Marzette’s *Africana Women Writers*? Rather than assail Shange to the New York City-centric artistic realm, simply because she attended Barnard College and moved to the city when *for colored girls*... was first premiering Off-Broadway, I believe it is intellectually generative to consider the San Francisco Bay Area/Pacific context within which *for colored girls*... first came to be. Through such consideration, Shange and Santa Cruz become connected not only through their thematic and modal similarities, as previously articulated, but also through the churning waters of the Pacific Ocean.

Let us, then, look at the texts themselves to reveal what conversations Shange and Santa Cruz were having and what they may reveal to us about the Black Feminist theatrical aesthete that was evolving alongside the Black Feminist theory of the same period. I will move chronologically through each dramatic poem to reveal the diasporic dialogue occurring in three thematic locations: 1) the formative experience of Black girls being forced to confront their own embodied “difference” in a racist patriarchal system that has created and relied upon this “difference” towards exploitative ends; 2) the visceral sensation of being pushed to an emotional and psychological brink as a result of living under such a system—and the radical potential the site of “the brink” may offer; and 3) the consequent personal-as-political decision to affirm

¹⁰ Victoria Santa Cruz Gamarra and Susan G. Polansky, *Ritmo: El Eterno Organizador = Rhytm: The Eternal Organizer* (Lima, Perú: Ediciones COPÉ, Departamento de Relaciones Públicas de PetroPerú, 2004), 32.

¹¹ Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru*, 7.

¹² Hayes, “Ntozake Shange,” 292.

oneself through self-love and self-definition as the starting point of political transformation and radical liberation. Importantly, while the works center on the unique experiences and social positions of Black women across two different cultures, all three thematic locations communicate resonances for communities who are *not* Black women. Such communication is in alignment with Black Feminist thought from the period, as in the Combahee River Collective Statement's articulation in 1977: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."¹³ To this end, both Shange & Santa Cruz make essential the role of the ensemble and audience as symbolic of both the complicit *and* communal society in which the Black woman speaker exists. They explore each of these thematic sites in a particularly affective and effective way through the embodied form of dramatic poetry.

In theatre, interiority becomes externalized—thus, my repetitive articulation of “an embodied art form.” Shange’s “no more love poems” series demonstrates this well. Arriving towards the end of *for colored girls...*, “no more love poems” explores the precarious social and political position of Black women in the United States through the interpersonal and intra-cultural relations of romantic love—and the complications found therein. Shange begins the “no more love poems” series with stage directions that emphasize both inner life and corporeality: “Sharp music is heard, each lady dances as if catching a disease from the lady next to her.”¹⁴ But what is this “disease”? And why or how are the women “catching” it from each other? The lady in orange steps forward and explains, “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.”¹⁵ The “disease” then, is *not* Black womanhood but rather a socially constructed consequence of the intersections of racism and sexism during this period. This consequence is demonstrative of the pressures Black women faced (and, many would argue, continue to face) in the United States and throughout the diaspora as they contended with the labels, judgments, and histories non-consensually placed upon their bodies. Indeed, this is what the Combahee River Collective Statement calls “the pejorative stereotypes attributed to Black women.”¹⁶ We must wonder when the lady in orange first learned that to be a Black girl in the world also meant to be called an evil woman, a bitch, or a nag. How old was she? How might this have psychically affected her—what the Combahee River Collective referred to as becoming “dispossessed psychologically”?¹⁷ And what are the means through which she might unlearn such harmful messaging?

¹³ “Combahee River Collective Statement (1977),” in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, ed. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 22-23.

¹⁴ Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem*, 1st Scribner Poetry ed. (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1997), 56.

¹⁵ Shange, 56.

¹⁶ “Combahee River Collective” 18.

¹⁷ “Combahee River Collective,” 22.

Compare this “realization” the lady in orange experiences, then, with the opening lines of Santa Cruz’s “Me Gritaron Negra.” The speaker begins by stepping forward from the ensemble and recalling:

Tenía siete años apenas,/ apenas siete anos,/ Qué siete años?/ No llegaba a cinco
siquiera./ De pronto unas voces en la calle/me gritaron: <<¡Negra!>>

Translation: I was just seven years old,/ just seven years old./ What, seven years old?/ I
wasn't even five./ Suddenly, some voices in the street/ yelled at me, “Black girl!”¹⁸

Santa Cruz’s speaker, like the lady in orange, intimately remembers *in her body* the emotional experience of first learning about being a “colored girl” a “negra.” For both speakers, this moment—a moment, we are to understand in both, that occurs at such a young, impressionable age—spurs a sense of corporeal shame, a rupture from the Black girl’s “Black girl body”. Being subjected—made into a subject—by the gaze and the “grita” of others through epithets, steals the inherent youth from Black girlhood that even in our present moment is so scarce to begin with due to gendered and racialized social experiences. (We might think, here, of the important contemporary work being done on Black Girlhood Studies by scholars like Crystal Lynn Webster and Sadiyah Malcolm.) Kirstie A. Dorr speaks to this moment, writing, “For Santa Cruz, the psychic experience of gendered racialization entails not only the ideological violence of denigration; it likewise involves the negotiation of an imposed and naturalized sociospatial order.”¹⁹ The invocation of the spatial is significant here, because it again locates us in embodiment. In “no more love poems” and “Me Gritaron Negra,” this negotiation manifests as an initial distancing from the Black woman’s body—a body that has been rendered outside of the social center, at the bottom of an anti-Black, misogynist hierarchy—in an effort to escape the pain.

For Shange’s lady in orange, her (dis)embodied shame manifests through romantic relationships, relationships that rehearse and rehash the kind of psychic pain previously explicated. In Shange’s signature confessional style, the lady in orange shares, “come somebody to love me/without [...] whisperin/slut bitch bitch n*****.”²⁰ Here, we are to understand that the lady in orange has been choosing partners that replicate the very shame-responses she seeks to avoid; she is called the very derogatory words she has already told us she is “tryin not to be.”²¹ Such epithets, then, represent the dominant narrative the lady in orange finds herself operating

¹⁸ Victoria Santa Cruz, “Me Gritaron Negra,” as seen in “Victoria Santa Cruz | Me Gritaron Negra (Afro Perú) Music MGP,” *YouTube*, accessed on June 2, 2024 on the Music MGP channel, video, 0:09-0:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHr8DTNRZdg>.

¹⁹ Dorr, “Afroperuvian Feminisms,” 12.

²⁰ Shange, *for colored girls*, 56.

²¹ Shange, 56

under, within. And though she seeks to avoid the effects of this narrative, she has not yet found a way outside of it. Even as the lady in orange divorces herself from her own identity as a Black woman in an effort to avoid debasement (“i been tryin not to be that [a colored girl]”²²), she is still confronted with the realities of racist patriarchy over and over again. Shange suggests that distancing oneself from the Black woman’s body is not the means to Black women’s liberation, then. Such distancing merely compounds and/or elongates the psychic experience of oppression.

We see this kind of distancing in “Me Gritaron Negra,” too, to similar foreclosing ends. Even as Santa Cruz’s speaker changes her appearance to divest from Blackness, the ensemble—representing the anti-Black misogynist society the speaker moves through—continues to berate her. No external changes she makes can upend the oppressive society that both creates and perpetuates Black women’s oppression. Amidst a backdrop of a mounting *cajón* beat, Santa Cruz’s speaker confesses: “Me alacé el cabello,/me polveé la cara,/y entre mis entrañas siempre/resonaba la misma palabra [Translation: I straightened my hair,/I made up my face,/and within my soul I always heard,/the same word resonating]”; the ensemble furiously yells back at her, “¡Negra! ¡Negra! ¡Negra!”²³ It should strike us as significant, I think, that Santa Cruz plays the speaker in this clip of “Me Gritaron Negra,” just as Shange was a part of the original Broadway cast of *for colored girls*... The dramatists thus literally embody the Black woman’s experience they are attempting to elucidate and the Black Feminist messaging they are attempting to inscribe. We thus see Shange and Santa Cruz pushing back on their speakers’ internalized idea that it is the Black woman’s responsibility to “change” in order to be treated with dignity in society. (We might think here of Malcolm X’s famous question: “Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet?”²⁴) Just as the lady in orange cannot escape the epithets she so desperately seeks to avoid by distancing herself from Black womanhood, so, too, Santa Cruz’s speaker continually confronts the calls of “Negra” even as she assimilates her appearance. Art historian Kanitra Fletcher emphasizes the diasporic dialogue occurring in this section through her engagement of “Me Gritaron Negra” in the *Afro-Atlantic Histories* guidebook from its exhibit at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Fletcher writes, “Her struggle resembles those of Black women across the Afro-Atlantic, beyond Peru and South America, to accept and eventually appreciate, even celebrate physical aspects of Blackness in the face of historical denigration.”²⁵ Thus, both Shange and Santa Cruz seem to be engaging in a Black Feminist discourse that asserted: Black women during this time could never escape the systems of oppression that rely on their objectification by working within those systems to assimilate. Instead, they must seek to overturn such systems. One of the first steps to overturning

²² Shange, 56.

²³ Santa Cruz, “Me Gritaron Negra,” 1:34-1:48.

²⁴ Malcolm X, as seen in “Malcolm X - Who Taught You To Hate Yourself?”, *YouTube*, as accessed on July 13, 2024 on the Jesus4TrueFreedom channel, video, 0:30 - 0:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaXPhR7aWvo>.

²⁵ Adriano Pedrosa and Tomás Toledo, eds., *Afro-Atlantic Histories* (New York and São Paulo: DelMonico Books and Museu de Arte de São Paulo, 2021), 44.

this status quo is to undermine the dominant narratives such systems established in the consciousnesses of those who live beneath them. They could engage in this step through the radical politics of self-love.

Before such an overturning can occur in these theatre pieces, though, each speaker is pushed to the brink of sanity and stability within the context of gendered racialization. Both Shange and Santa Cruz recognize the way that the “brink” is both a deeply personal and societally structural experience. For instance, before stating she had “convinced/myself colored girls had no right to sorrow”²⁶ and “i cdnt stand bein sorry & colored at the same time/it’s so redundant in the modern world,”²⁷ the lady in orange shares, “this is a requium [sic] for myself/cuz i/have died in a real way.”²⁸ Here, Shange’s invocation of “requium” calls to mind social death, funeral rituals, and liminal rites of passage. Could we understand what I have theorized as the “brink” as a place of metaphorical death for the Black woman—what Shange’s contemporary, Sonia Sanchez, called “the slow suicide/of seclusion”—in order to be born again into new consciousness?²⁹ And if so, how do we understand our positionality as audience members to such a death? Are we the mourners? Or are we the killers who pushed the Black woman to this brink in the first place? Such questioning is a product of Shange’s formal decision to blur actor/audience lines through the use of ritual. Jean Young speaks to this in her article “Ritual Poetics and Rites of Passage” when she writes, “The ritual [in *for colored girls*...] becomes participatory as boundaries between actor and audience fall away.”³⁰ Such a blurring of boundaries was in alignment with the theories of Black Arts Movement theatre artists like Sanchez and Dr. Barbara Ann Teer who sought to negotiate the fourth wall divide typical of the Western theatrical form. In this moment, it is not just the actors who are embodying the funerary experience, then. As audience members, we are asked to participate in the lady in orange’s “requium”; we are witnessing her death at the brink by the hands of the racist patriarchal system. Thankfully, we will ultimately also bear witness to her rebirth.

In “Me Gritaron Negra,” Santa Cruz too stages such a “death,” though in less strictly morbid terms. Her primary speaker, desperate in her inflection, sharply accenting her sentiments with gestural hand clapping, cries: “Seguía llevando a mi espalda/Mi pesada carga/¡Y cómo pesaba! [...]Hasta que un día que retrocedía,/Retrocedía y que iba a caer. [Translation: I

²⁶ Shange, *for colored girls*, 57.

²⁷ Shange, 57.

²⁸ Shange, 57.

²⁹ Sonia Sanchez, “summary,” as seen in John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Edward Smethurst, eds., *SOS/Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 296.

³⁰ Jean Young, “Ritual Poetics and Rites of Passage,” in *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, eds. Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 301.

continued to carry on my back/My heavy burden/And how it weighed! [...] /Until one day I stepped back,/I stepped back and I was going to fall out.]”³¹ I argue that, when thinking through diasporic dialogue, this image of “iba a caer” that Santa Cruz draws is connected to the death imagery the lady in orange invokes in Shange’s text. Into what is Santa Cruz’s speaker about to fall? The “brink” here is a precipice off the side of which the speaker may surely experience death—social death, death to self. How far can the Black woman speaker be pushed? It is through the diasporic dialogue between these two works that we can understand the precarious realities of Black womanhood during this time throughout the diaspora—the extent to which Black women were being pushed and the mortality (abstract, literal, or otherwise) that was risked as a result. Though the very presence of the brink in both works is deeply disheartening, there is validation in recognizing the realities that resonated across continents as shared experiences of Black women. After all, as Barbara Christian writes in *Black Feminist Criticism* within the decade following both pieces, “People do things, one of which may be writing, to help themselves and other people ask questions about who they are, who they might be, what kind of world they want to create, to remind ourselves that we do create the world.”³² Thus, we may understand that the question Shange and Santa Cruz ask through articulating their shared experiences of the “brink” is not in fact, as I previously queried, “How far can the Black woman be pushed?” Rather, the question may be: How can we embody the “political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women’s lives”?³³ Or, said another way, what world do we want to create on the other side of the brink?

Now let us (re)turn to Dorr’s rendering of “Me Gritaron Negra” as exemplary of a Black Pacific diasporic piece in order to analyze the consciousness transformations that occur in both works. Summarizing Santa Cruz’s piece, she writes, “Integrating poetic storytelling and choreographed gesture with rhythmic accompaniment and choral antiphony, ‘Me gritaron negra’ relates a semiautobiographical accord of Santa Cruz’s process of coming into political consciousness as an Afroperuvian woman.”³⁴ Although I previously mentioned the salience of both Santa Cruz’s and Shange’s positions as writer/subject/performers, I am more interested, here, in Dorr’s assertion that the speaker comes “into political consciousness.” I see this occurring in both *for colored girls...* and “Me Gritaron Negra,” and it relates intimately to what I have previously introduced as the politics of self-love. It is not simply that the transformation of consciousness is one where the Black woman learns to accept, define, and love herself. This is important, of course, but it is the way such self-acceptance, self-definition, and self-love are tied to *political consciousness* that places the two works in a diasporic dialogue of international Black Feminist thought. Take, for instance, the way Shange’s ladies assert themselves at the end of *for*

³¹ Santa Cruz, “Me Gritaron Negra,” 1:21-1:55.

³² Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, xiv.

³³ “Combahee River Collective,” 17.

³⁴ Dorr, “Afroperuvian Feminisms,” 9.

colored girls... in the communal “a layin on of hands” section—a section, I argue, that is the consequence of the deeply moving truths shared in the “no more love poems” series that leads directly into the “a nite with beau willie brown” climax. After speaking into existence “a layin on of hands/ the holiness of myself released,” Shange’s ladies perform a ritual of communal healing and self-love through group movement work, call-and-response, and continued repetition of the corporeal phrase “a layin on of hands.”³⁵ Here, the invocation of such rites through their linguistic/bodily connection is of deep importance. We must read this embodied ritual as connected to the rebirth of the “dead” ladies whose requiems we witnessed earlier. Additionally, as Jean Young writes, “In traditional African belief, the concept of Nommi, or *the spoken word*, legitimizes or actualizes life. [...] A newborn life is not fully manifest until it is given a name, and no medicine or potion is considered affective without words or incantation.”³⁶ The repetition of “a layin on of hands,” then, becomes a chant that calls the reclaimed life of Black womanhood (back) into existence—one that announces its arrival through a politics of self- and communal love.

Might we not read Santa Cruz’s final reclamation of the term “negra” in the same way? After almost falling out (“iba a caer”), Santa Cruz’s speaker chooses rebirth and shouts *back* at those who called her “negra,” with the vocal and choreographic support of the ensemble, who transform. Alongside us as the audience, perhaps as an example for a society capable of change, the ensemble members shift from attackers to supporters of the speaker. The speaker cries, with the backing of the ensemble: “¡Y de qué color!/¡Y qué lindo suena!/¡Y qué ritmo tiene! [Translation: And what a color!/And how good it sounds!/And what rhythm it has!]”³⁷ It should be no surprise, here, that Santa Cruz chooses to emphasize “el ritmo” in her speaker’s reclamation of Blackness—through both the invocation of its name *and* the demonstration of its power through the ensemble’s percussion and dance. After all, we know that Santa Cruz theorized “ritmo” as a unifying feature among members of the African Diaspora, one that, Santa Cruz would later write, “will give us the unmistakable flavor of *unity*, the *unity* we have lost due to age-old disconnection.”³⁸ What’s more, the “ritmo” of her speaker coincides communally with the percussive elements called back to the speaker by the ensemble. When the speaker shouts, “Yo soy!/ Negra!/ Negra soy! [Translation: I am!/ A Black woman!/ I am a Black woman!]”, the speaker’s reclamation of “negra” overlaps with the ensemble’s simultaneous repetition of the word.³⁹ And yet, it is a changed repetition from before. After this moment, throughout the rest of the theatrical piece, rather than shouting *at* her, the ensemble is somehow shouting “Negra” *with* her. The political consciousness Santa Cruz’s speaker comes into, then, is both a personal and ensemble (and thus communal) experience. As she is reborn into the pride of (re)claimed Black

³⁵ Shange, *for colored girls*, 86.

³⁶ Young, “Ritual Poetics,” 301.

³⁷ Santa Cruz, “Me Gritaron Negra,” 2:29-2:35.

³⁸ Santa Cruz Gamarra and Polansky, *Ritmo*, 27.

³⁹ Santa Cruz, “Me Gritaron Negra,” 2:07-2:11.

womanhood—like Shange’s ladies before her in “a layin on of hands”—she connects not only to her Afro-Peruvian community but also to members across the African Diaspora. In resonance with Black Feminist thought, the speaker’s self-love is never merely about the self.

The radical nature of the politics of such self-love manifests in both works in stark penultimate lines. Perhaps one of the most famous lines in *for colored girls...*, the lady in red ends the “a layin on of hands” ritual by announcing: “i found god in myself/& i loved her/i loved her fiercely.”⁴⁰ This line always sends chills through my body, because it is about so much more than self-love. It is about self-elevation, self-divinity, and self-sanctuary in a world that has historically told Black women that they are unworthy of dignity—what Michele Wallace called in 1975 “being on the bottom.”⁴¹ What could be more radical? The lady in red—and all of Shange’s ladies, for they “repeat [the line] to themselves”⁴²—commits to a radical politics of Black Feminism through the elevation of the Black woman as divine. In so doing, she implicitly rails against the gendered racialization that divorces her from herself in the first place, as we saw earlier in the analysis. The politics of self-love for Black women extends communally. As the Combahee River Collective and other thinkers/activists purported: when we consider Black women’s positionality as a starting point, we are able to consider clearly society as a whole.

When read through the lens of diasporic dialogue, similar political consciousness work is occurring in the penultimate lines of “Me Gritaron Negra.” Santa Cruz’s speaker states jubilantly, “Y bendigo al cielo porque quiso Dios/que negro azabache fuse mi color,/Y ya comprendí/Ya tengo la llave. [Translation: And I blessed the heavens because God desired/That jet-black was my skin color,/And I now understood/That I already had the key.]”⁴³ What a change has occurred in both works over the course of the speaker’s journey! What liberated reclamation of Blackness, of Black womanhood! While some translations read, “Ya tengo la llave” as “I have total control,” I translate the line more literally based on the revelations provided through placing “Me Gritaron Negra” in diasporic dialogue with “a layin on of hands.” I believe Santa Cruz’s speaker is saying, directly, “I already have the key”—this key is the divinity of Black womanhood the lady in red invokes. Together, after Santa Cruz’s speaker states, “Ya tengo la llave,” the ensemble calls, “¡NEGRO! ¡NEGRO! ¡NEGRO!” before the speaker cries, “¡¡¡NEGRA SOY!!!”⁴⁴ By choosing to move from the Black woman-specific “negra” to the more generalized (and masculine) “negro,” the ensemble is reclaiming Blackness for all of the Afro-Peruvian population. This movement, along with the gestural reaching out of each ensemble member towards the audience, illustrates the ways a Black Feminist politic can uplift all Afro-diasporic members, regardless of (but informed by) gender.

⁴⁰ Shange, *for colored girls*, 87.

⁴¹ Michele Wallace, “A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood,” *Village Voice*, July 28, 1975, 7.

⁴² Shange, *for colored girls*, 87.

⁴³ Santa Cruz, “Me Gritaron Negra,” 2:50-2:57.

⁴⁴ Santa Cruz, 2:58-3:05.

Placing Shange and Santa Cruz into diasporic dialogue allows us to comprehend the ways Black Feminist discourse was resonating across transnational boundaries during the late 1970s. It encourages us to seek out such aesthetic and thematic conversations between Black women artists throughout history. Moreover, their works' status as embodied poetic/theatrical stagings shows us the ways choreographed explorations of the corporeal experiences of Black women—from shame to grief to understanding to pride—are an essential, not tangential, part of the Afro-diasporic political consciousness transformation project. While Shange was tracking the journey of her ladies from “colored girls” to Black women (a shift that reflects her place within one of the Black Arts Movement’s primary conversations), Santa Cruz is credited with “empowering [Afro-Peruvians] to use the word ‘Black’ with pride, rather than hiding behind euphemisms of like ‘moreno.’”⁴⁵ Continents away, Shange and Santa Cruz were building off of and anticipating each other’s work and that of the contemporaneous Black Feminist theorists of the time. Acting in their own work, Shange and Santa Cruz used Black Feminist dramatic poetry to explicate the relationship between the individual and the society that organizes her life. In so doing, they not only emphasized a politics of self-love vital to the Black woman, but they also conjured a way of being together otherwise, of (re)organizing the world. In the words of Santa Cruz herself: “There is no revolution without an evolution, and this evolution is born inside each and every one of us.”⁴⁶ In the 1970s, on the path to transforming society to be more just, more antiracist, more equitable, and more *free*, these theatre artists/theorists first found God in themselves. They already had the key.

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⁴⁵ Feldman, *Black Rhythms of Peru*, 71-72.

⁴⁶ Santa Cruz Gamarra and Polansky, *Ritmo*, 28.

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