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*Tribute to Ntozake Shange,
Part 2*



February 28 – March 15

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Photo: Jati Lindsay

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325 Lafayette Ave., C.F. Suite,
Brooklyn, NY 11238
Phone: 212-865-2982
www.africanvoices.com

PUBLISHER/EDITOR
Carolyn A. Butts

BOARD CHAIRPERSON
Jeannette Curtis-Rideau

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR
Debbie Officer

POETRY EDITOR
Angela Kinamore

ART DIRECTOR
Derick Cross

ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR
AZIZA

PRODUCTION EDITOR/
COPY EDITOR
Denile Doyle

LAYOUT & DESIGN
Graphic Dimensions
Lorraine Rouse

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

"Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation."

— Toni Morrison



We're still processing Toni Morrison's recent passing. As a spiritual mother who guided us towards writing, publishing and reading great art, we cannot express the loss of her voice during a challenging time when her voice in this realm was solace. Her courage in using her art to crack open and break down all the "isms" with a deep love for us will be passed on for generations to come.

Part 2 of our Ntozake Shange issue honors two Black women writers whose language ignited movements around the principles of self-love, healing and interconnectivity. Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange freed us from restricting cultural mores while stretching our language and shifting our gaze. We tip our pens in gratitude to Toni and Ntozake for being a wealth of inspiration and knowledge.

In "Early Zake Memories," dancer/writer/scholar Halifu Osumare shares Ntozake's transformative years as an artist living in San Francisco's Bay Area where she started merging language with movement. Osumare states, "Her words can only be written by a Black woman writer who is also a dancer. In *Nappy Edges*, published right after *for colored girls*, Zake says 'no gust of wind tickle me.' Here she speaks of Black dancer's woman-body, not an anorexic ballerina, but a Yoruba descendant woman-body that has butt and some thighs and enjoys the relationship between the two."

Our issue includes pieces from artists influenced by her work alongside writers paying tribute to Ntozake. Poets Abiodun Oyewole, Venus Jones and scholar/writer Pamela Booker offer their dedications of Zake's impact on personal liberation. Scriptwriter Chanel Dupree gives us a Black girl's tale in *Salvage*, a story of cultural appropriation.

In storyteller/poet Gha'il Rhodes Benjamin's "Tiddies Ain't Everything" a woman reclaims her power as a cancer survivor. She writes, "i still got a heart a soul and a brain/two legs that walk without a cane/and a girlfriend who says/'with the one you have left...and the one I have left/they make a nice pair of tiddies'."

Our back cover includes a piece by photographer Charise Isis who started The Grace Project, a portrait series honoring women who have triumphed over breast cancer to seize their power.

Ntozake's art celebrates a woman's body as the ultimate temple where freedom resides. We close our tribute with a dedication to breast cancer survivors for reminding us the importance of embracing love as a guiding principle in all we do through our healing journeys. This is the legacy left by Toni and Zake.

Front Cover: Ntozake Shange, *Adúl*, 1992.
Back Cover: Charise Isis, *The Grace Project*.

POETRY EDITOR'S NOTE

PART 2 TRIBUTE TO NTOZAKE SHANGE

By Angela Kinamore

It has been an honor and a pleasure to work on the second part of this very special tribute to our beloved warrior sister, the legendary Ntozake Shange. After announcing our intention to acknowledge Ntozake, countless testimonies came pouring in from those who were impacted and inspired, if not transformed by her work. The love really was palpable. We've tried our best to capture the essence of the response and heartfelt appreciation, as expressed throughout these pages.

Ntozake's life has been representative of what it means to give 110% to your work, to strive for excellence, and to be true to oneself. She's moved countless audiences from around the globe with her powerful words, illuminating many of life's challenges and stark realities. Her poetic gems of healing words free our minds. She fulfilled her purpose and encouraged others to do likewise by speaking their own truths. Ntozake's enlightening prose encourages: *"rise up fallen fighters/ unfetter the stars/dance with the universe and make it ours."*

In this issue, we also celebrate the rich legacy of our esteemed linguistic master, American novelist, book editor and college professor, Toni Morrison. She too left a profound legacy of great works to the world. Attending her historical memorial service on Nov. 21, 2019 at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, was an awe-inspiring experience that neither Carolyn, our founder here at AV, nor I will forget. We live in a time where there are many "giants" among us and it is indeed a blessing. However, trailblazers Ntozake Shange and Toni Morrison were exceptional souls, obviously on missions to complete arduous work and be of service to others. They lived life to the fullest and motivated others to do likewise. As ancestors, they are still among us. It's as if they are saying: "the time is now, and the turn is yours!" Enjoy these expressions of love for these two great legends we were fortunate enough to have among us.

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Ntozake Shange: A Vision of Authentic Artistic Leadership

by Pamela Booker

“...somebody told me worshipping others leads to mediocrity. So I stopped looking for roots and heroes and heroines and I found my peers ... poets.”¹

(from Lost in Language & Sound or how I found my way to the arts)

Just as I’d completed the most readable draft of my first novel a few years ago, I fell into a deeply irrational fear for the manuscript’s worth and by extension my writerly merit. As a consequence, I made a decision that I’ve so often “staged” over the years of my inconsistent, woefully under-published existence, and retreated into academic study. Already drawn to cycles of obscurity with diminished, literary publication options, I raised my aspirational bar by gaining admission into a Ph.D. program. Although I eventually grew bored with arguments, intersectionalities, theories, and paradigms that, for me, were mostly redundant or forced, I stayed for one year and of course, performed exceptionally. By the close of the spring term, I was suffering from a neatly concealed emotional fallout that would eventually dump me at the roadside of my tattered edges. The colors of my own rainbow had grown painfully fallow. Yet in responding to this call that celebrates the visionary, artistic task-mastering of our most affecting “colored girl,” I am moved by the realization that Ntozake Shange has remained a distinctive force throughout my generative, though often uncertain academic and creative sustainability.

Unlike many of you readers and contributors, Zake and I were not personal friends, although I was part of any number of introductions and conversations with other writers who were. I remember meeting her once at a literary conference in Brooklyn, somewhere between the years of completing my undergraduate studies in 1999 as a returning adult learner, which included a comparative study of her work during a semester abroad at Oxford University and prior to applying to graduate programs. After a brief introduction by a mutual friend, I revealed to Shange that I was an emerging playwright but “a late bloomer.” She looked me hard in the eyes, squinted hers and bellowed, “Girl, we are all still blooming.” Then she sashayed away in a halcyon pool of color generated by her tightly formed lime green linen suit and stiletto pumps to match.

More than a decade later at the Barnard College consortium that celebrated her work in 2013, I waited patiently in line with others to thank her for having imparted such vividly memorable wisdom to my earlier, less confident self. Though confined to a wheelchair by then, she still possessed a determined and regal voice that affirmed her enduring legacy in the company of knowledge workers, artists and scholars, who’d all been transformed by the ingredients that comprised Shange’s artistic potency. As I stood awkwardly rubbing her arm, Shange gestured for me to move closer and whispered, “Sweetheart, was I nice to you when we spoke?”

Patricia Hill Collins reasons on the subject of *Black Feminist Epistemologies* “that anyone who reflects on his or her practical experience is an intellectual, a creator of knowledge.”² Collins’ assertion, much like Shange’s question, encourages us to seek the necessary momentum to care for anything that appears so out of our reach and indeed, may be astounding. When partnered to any of the performed or whispered truths made by Ntozake Shange over her enduring half a century’s worth of “talking to the folks” — she always

rewarded us with her candor, genius and curiosity, that was at once unnerving and authentically centered.

At the early stages of my thoughts when coming into my research that would feature Shange as a case study on Authentic Artistic Leadership, there was only a vague recognition of what exactly I was seeking in both the writing and conveying of my ideas. While the ideas were not concretely formed, they were nonetheless forming as initially culled from Shange's vibrant, multilayered memoir, *Lost in Language & Sound* or how I found my way to the arts (2011). What I did know was that "the artist," as she is both marked by and marks others with the "constructs of knowledge" that Collins investigates within the larger framework of Black feminist "knowledge," appeared a more complex phenomenon when the contributors and builders are also Black, creative women. In my attempt to better understand the origins of Shange's "leadership" traits through the practices and stages of building her many and varied ensembles of artists, for example, she operates from intuitive and carefully considered "blueprints" as the creative practitioner/leader who was committed to gender advocacy, race diversity and visibility. Shange writes about the inception of the *for colored girls* project as one that was part of a "multilingual women presence, new to all of us & desperately appreciated." Not only did her vision comprise a startling number of collaborators, but as much, she noted, "[We] were promoting the poetry and presence of women in a legendary male-poet's environment. This is the energy & part of the style that nurtured for colored girls..."³.

In formidable ways, Shange's originality and boldness serve as a prescient shout-out to "#BlackGirlMagic"⁴ – a contemporary "movement" or "concept" premised on Black women getting about the business of loving themselves "fiercely" while in service to community and larger societal ideals. Not only did she create room for healing and self-care, but these ideals and intentions remain the most defining of her creative gifting. Now all colored and Black girls know that liberation can be restorative.

Despite her self-derived artistic emergence and identification process with her peers, as the opening statement at the start of my essay establishes, Shange remained acutely alert to the social and economic privileges that were rarely afforded even accomplished women of color artists. She echoes as much in her remarks on the mutually sought "essential" agendas required of herself and mainstream "institutions" to bring to fruition *for colored girls*— which was destined to be only the second play by an African American woman (after Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin In the Sun*), to move to the Broadway stage. Shange writes:

"Those institutions I had shunned as a poet — producers, theaters, actresses, and sets — now were essential to us. *For colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* was a theater piece. [...] With the assistance of the New York Shakespeare Festival [...] we received space & a set, lights and a mailing list, things Paula & I had done without for two years. [...] Lines of folks & talk all over Black and Latin community propelled us to the Public Theater in June. Then to the Booth Theater on Broadway in September 1976." ⁵

The production's commercial victory culminated following more than two years of wrangling an often unwieldy though dedicated community of "organizational citizens" in actors, dancers, musicians, poets, that performed in bars and cafes in San Francisco and workshop productions in Manhattan's Lower East Side, who nevertheless remained committed to Shange's engaged leadership strategies. While driven to "handle her business," her efforts were realized as a strained vision in which she was required to play multiple roles initially, often with little administrative infrastructure and almost always surrendering to the wisdom and impulses of her "followers," the needs of white mainstream institutions and producers, and of her lurking internal monsters.

Both on stage and beyond, Shange modeled in her lived theatricality what is seen as our anticipatory

leadership. One that thrives as a beautiful entanglement of sorts shared between artistic colleagues and is crafted of resilient tools critical to articulating creative integrity and expressions of personal character and systems of beliefs. “Later on I sought out language that somehow echoed inarticulate impulses I lived with,” Shange contends, “in the same way I watched Carmen de Lavallade’s body make sense of an irrational vicious place I was supposed to pledge allegiance to everyday.”⁶

In truth, Shange’s most compelling personal, creative and political characterizations of how to manage and be outraged by the demands of a “vicious place” in context with an artist’s embodiment of fluidity, freedom and resistance, enables each of us, to mine those similar risks on a daily basis. She taught us that to impart empathy one must also know the precariousness of emancipation.

Thank you Ntozake Shange for your ability, perhaps your explicit intention, to provide Black women artists, if not all attentive, creative seekers across the rainbows, the gift of recovering our most authentic selves.

Ashe.

¹ Shange, Ntozake.

- *Lost in Language and Sound - or how I found my way to the arts*. St. Martins Press: New York, 2011.

- *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, 1975.

² Sprague, Joey. *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers: Bridging differences*. Walnut Creek, CA; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, AltaMira, 2005 (45).

³ Shange, Ibid. (Lost...)

⁴ “What-is-black-girl-magic-video_n_5694dad4e4b086bc1cd517f4.

⁵ Shange,, Ibid (Lost...11-12).

⁶ “Ibid 4.