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“THERE IS NO INCONGRUENCE HERE”: HISPANIC
NOTES IN THE WORKS OF NTOZAKE SHANGE

BY VANESSA K. VALDÉS

In her 1977 essay “taking a solo/ a poetic possibility/ a poetic imperative,” Ntozake Shange urges her audience to recognize and demand a poet’s uniquely singular voice in the same way it does with a musician. She notes: “the tone. the lyric. rhythm & cadence of the musician is a personal thing to you. you listen & learn the particular flow of a particular somebody” (26). In this, her rallying cry, Shange demands that her audience learn to differentiate between poets in the same way that they can tell apart the sound of different musicians. She continues: “tell me what does ‘some day my prince will come’/ mean to you. that is not snow white or walt disney/ that is miles davis. some of us can even differentiate mongo santamaria from pablo ‘potato’ valdes [sic] and ray barretto from pacheco” (26). Though even the occasional listener of jazz may at least recognize the name “Miles Davis,” the same may not be said for the others that she mentions. Indeed, Mongo Santamaría, Carlos “Patato” Valdés, Ray Barretto, and Johnny Pacheco are all musicians of Hispanic descent who played various kinds of Latin music (son, conga, and salsa, to

name a few) as well as jazz, and who are very well known within the Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Dominican communities, particularly in the 1940s, '50s, '60s, and '70s. For those who are not aficionados of Latin music, however, these names mean nothing. Interestingly, Shange does not identify the "some of us" to whom she refers, though it is likely that she is speaking of the African-American community. Her use of the adverb "even" calls her audience's attention in that it reveals a small group, a subset of the larger population. This group has an additional skill set not yet shared by the greater population. Their collective ear is more finely tuned, so that what may sound like simple percussion to a novice listener is distinct to them.

In a 1983 essay celebrating black dance, Shange writes: "We are a blossoming people, 'flora negras.' [. . .] We must sing and dance or we shall die an inert, motionless, 'sin ritmo' death. 'Negros muertos,' killed by a culture afraid of who we are and what we have to say with our bodies, our music, and our brains" (48-49). Shange chooses to include Spanish phrases without stylistic differentiation such as a change of font or the use of italics. Nor does she translate these phrases, allowing them to stand on their own. Implicitly, then, both languages carry the same weight; that is, they have equal value and are therefore both legitimate. Her message does not change if one removes the Spanish words; on the contrary, she manages to make clear her ideas in English as well. Nevertheless, she deliberately includes them. Her expectations of her audience are clear: Shange's readers should be able to read and understand both languages and acknowledge the viability of both, for both narrate the black experience in the Americas. Her use of the first person plural subject pronoun is significant: "we" includes both those who speak Spanish as well as English. In this article, I explore how Ntozake Shange consistently incorporates Hispanic artistic motifs throughout her work. Her deliberate inclusion of Latin musicians and writers, as well as phrases in Spanish,

serves as a challenge to her audience to be more familiar with the rhythms of salsa and samba, for example, to know the music of Celia Cruz as intimately as they do that of Billie Holiday. Both kinds of music recount different versions of black life in the Western hemisphere. I argue that in regularly mentioning musical forms and artists from throughout the Americas, not only from the United States, Shange gives a more full representation of African Diasporic life, suggesting an alternative, more ample definition of blackness.

Shange first received critical acclaim in 1976 for her choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, a chronicle of the interior lives of seven women of color, for which she won the Obie Award and the Outer Critic's Award, as well as received nominations for the Grammy, Tony, and Emmy Awards. With her *Lady in Blue*, who stands outside of Manhattan, Shange alludes to the vibrant Nuyorican' community of the 1970s. She says:

olà

my papa thot he was puerto rican & we wda been

cept we waz just reglar niggahs wit hints of Spanish (11)

She does not define what she means by "reglar niggahs," nor does she clarify what those "hints of spanish" are, only that they exist in her family line. Does this mean that a near ancestor, a grandparent or great-grandparent, was from a Spanish-speaking country? Possibly, yet Shange does not elaborate. Instead, we see how she alters the Spanish language, as the *Lady in Blue* places the stress on the second syllable of "hola" instead of on the first. To some extent, then, this change in emphasis underscores the "hint of Spanish" that remains in her family line. When we first meet her, the *Lady in Blue* is preparing for her 36-hour salsa marathon, which will feature an appearance by the salsero Willie Colon. She is enraged when she comes to learn that he, in fact, will not keep his en-

gagement. Still, she proclaims her love for him at the end of her introductory piece, when she says:

& poem is my thank-you for music
 & i love you more than poem
 more than aureliano buendia loved macondo
 more than hector lavoe loved himself
 more than lady loves gardenias
 more than celia loves cuba or graciela loves el son
 more than flamingoes shoo-do-n-doo wah love bein pretty (13)

In expressing her gratitude for his music, then, she offers Colon poetry, which is precious and sacred to her. The extent of her love for him, in fact, exceeds her own love for poetry. In fact, she loves him more than a good number of singers and writers from the Americas. In these lines she refers not only to Billie Holiday (“the lady loves gardenias”) but also to Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and his protagonist, Aureliano Buendia; to Hector Lavoe, the Puerto Rican salsero recently portrayed in the film *El Cantante* (2007); to Celia Cruz, the great Cuban salsera; to Graciela Pérez-Grillo, the Cuban singer known as the First Lady of Latin Jazz.³ While at first glance these allusions may seem arbitrary, they reveal Shange’s interest in including different *kinds* of colored girls. Critic Olga Barrios writes: “It is important to highlight the fact that there are seven different colored women in stage in *colored girls*, which allows the playwright to dismantle past stereotypes and the concept of dealing with black women as a monolith by presenting a plurality of colored female voices and their personal experiences” (618-19). “Colored,” therefore, does not specifically mean only those females of African descent born and raised in the United States; instead, it is a broader term that includes females of African ancestry throughout the Americas.³

One of the defining traits of the Lady in Blue is her love for music, and how this passion is greater than the love

artists have for other human beings. She explicitly chooses to express her appreciation for this music through dance and poetry. Shange herself has received great attention for her linking of poetry, music, and dance. Returning to her essay entitled “taking a solo/ a poetic possibility/ a poetic imperative” (1977), she writes: “my basic premise is that poets address themselves to the same issues as musicians/ but that we give the musicians more space to run with/ more personal legitimacy than we give our writers” (5). There is little difference, therefore, in the work of poets and musicians; they are only distinguished in the expectations held of them by their audiences. While musicians have the flexibility to craft and cultivate individuality, poets of color are bequeathed the charge of representing an entire people, and they are often poorly rewarded for their efforts. She later warns: “until we believe in the singularity of our persons/ our spaces, language & therefore craft, will not be nurtured consciously” (9). Here, in her call-to-arms, Shange states clearly that she will consistently cultivate her own unique voice: it is one that ardently highlights an African diasporic presence in the Americas.

In a 1979 essay, “Unrecovered Losses/ Black Theater Traditions,” Shange encourages fellow artists to faithfully represent the black experience on stage. She attributes the failure of successful plays by dramatists of African descent to the attempt to abide by rules that do not honor the truth about the lives of their peoples: “we are selling ourselves & our legacy quite cheaply/ since we are trying to make our primary statements with somebody else’s life/ and somebody else’s idea of what theater is” (19). For Shange, these playwrights are betraying themselves and their peoples by looking outward to another culture’s definition of theater, of success, and of successful theater, rather than examining their own cultures. Silence is the prominent characteristic of this “foreign” theater which dishonors the lives of Africans throughout the Americas and their descendants: “we have integrated the notion

that a drama must be words/ with no music & no dance/ cuz that wd take away the seriousness of the event" (19). Her derision is plain: in desiring success as defined by another, one betrays that which is most true. She continues: "& the reason that so many plays written to silence & stasis fail/ is cuz most black people have some music & movement in our lives. we do sing & dance. this is a cultural reality" (19). She acknowledges the derision that has come from a legacy of racial discrimination ("we all remember too well/ the chuckles & scoffs at the notion that all niggers cd sing & dance"), but her message is clear: there will be no triumph trying to succeed at using someone else's standards. In focusing on only one of the five senses, artists of African descent are doing themselves a disservice. As an alternative, she lays out a new vision, one that acknowledges the richness of these traditions. She writes: "the fact that we are an interdisciplinary culture/ that we understand more than verbal communication/ lays a weight on afro-american writers that few others are lucky enough to be born into. we can use with some skill virtually all our physical senses . . ." (20). For Shange, there is no division between mind and body: words without music, either on stage or on paper, are inherently false and therefore without value. Instead, there must be a complete incorporation of all the senses in order to best represent the lives of peoples of African descent, for there, she finds truth.

In her 1983 collection of poems entitled *A Daughter's Geography*, Shange demonstrates this marriage of music and language. She writes what resembles a musical round in her second section, "Bocas: A Daughter's Geography." In the title poem of that section, she writes:

i have a daughter/ mozambique
 i have a son/ angola
 our twins salvador & johannesburg/ cannot speak
 the same language

but we fight the same old men/ in the new world

 i have a daughter/ la habana
 i have a son/ guyana
 our twins
 santiago & brixton/ cannot speak
 the same language
 yet we fight the same old men

 there is no edge
 no end to the new world
 cuz i have a daughter/ trinidad
 i have a son/ san juan
 our twins
 capetown & Palestine/ cannot speak the same
 language/ but we fight the same old men
 the same men who thought the earth waz flat
 go on over the edge/ go one over the edge old men (21-22)

The poetic voice is that of the mother, reclaiming all of her children, though they live throughout the world, scattered, unable to speak to each other because of their various tongues. She begins on the African continent with two countries that only recently declared their independence from Portugal,⁴ moving to the colonial capital of Brazil, before moving back to Africa. Next she travels to the Caribbean (Cuba and Guyana), the colonial capital of Central America (Santiago, now known as Antigua, Guatemala), and a suburb of London. She returns to the Caribbean, then moves once again to South Africa before finishing in the Middle East. Slavery has touched all of these places, leaving behind broken bodies, broken spirits, and an inability to connect with each other, male and female, adult to child. The New World experience has left the children of the African Diaspora living in Babel, incapable of communication with each other. Despite a common experience perpetrated by a shared enemy, children of the Diaspora remain lost, fragmented. The title of the poem highlights

once again the poet's attention to language: "Bocas," or "Mouths," that place with which we speak, we exclaim, we cry out, we communicate, we reach each other, we fight. With the dispersal of human lives, knowledge and wisdom scattered, these mouths are silenced.

She returns to the same theme, therefore completing the round, in the final poem of that section in the collection, "New World Coro." Again she uses a Spanish term without explanation; with "coro," or "chorus," she emphasizes the voice, or in this instance, a multiplicity of voices, implicitly raised in song:

our language is tactile
colored & wet
our tongues speak
these words
we dance
these words
sing em like me we mean it
do it to em stuff drag punch & cruise it
to em/ live it/ the poem (52)

The poetic voice has changed from the singular "i" to the collective "we": there is now a community, a convergence of peoples who share a traumatic history and yet who emerge triumphant. Alive once again, language is now suffused with sensory meaning. No longer dead, dry, and colorless, but alive, "colored & wet" (52). No longer does language belong only to the mouth, but now is something that consumes an entire body. And so we, children of Africa, dispersed throughout the New World, we once again, regain our ability to live, to move poetry, which is the written word. No longer is there a separation between body and mind, a legacy of European thinking. Now all is one, a totality. She writes:

we're trying to feed our children the sun
but a long time ago we boarded ships/ locked in
depths of seas our spirits/ kist the earth

on the atlantic side of nicaragua costa rica
our lips traced the edges of cuba puerto rico
charleston & savannah/ in haiti
we embraced &
made children of the new world
but old men spit on us/ shackled our limbs
old men spit on us/ shackled our limbs
for but a minute

.....
you'll see us in luanda or the rest of us in Chicago (52-53)

Here, she focuses specifically on the experience of slavery, once again reminded her audience of the scope of this tragedy by naming various countries built by African slaves. And yet Shange does something new, in that she ignored the regularly used tropes about the subject. She reminds us that the children of the African diaspora have made the New World their own, admittedly, through their bodies, but not through brute strength. She instead emphasizes the sensuality of these beings: "kist the earth," "our lips traced the edges," "we embraced &/ made children" (52-53). She resurrects the sexuality of the children of Africa: no longer are we mandingo and whore, demeaned and debased, but rather Adam & Eve, Mother and Father of the Americas. Though the old men succeeded in putting bodies in chains "for but a minute" (53), they could do nothing to damage the spirits of these peoples. Again, she does not make the physicality of enslavement her focal point in describing the experiences of Africa's children. The dispersal itself commands no additional attention. She reminds her audience that in the grand scope of humanity, a few hundred years is nothing but a blink of an eye. Instead, she highlights our victory, hence our continued existence on both sides of the Atlantic, in Angola and the United States.

Shange returns to this theme of the Diaspora in *Ridin' the Moon in Texas* (1987), her collection of prose and po-

etry inspired by works of visual art. In her poem "Passages: Earth Space," she writes:

between soweto & masaya
are bodies the breadth of the atlantic ocean
bones & spirits mingling with ours/ children
of the *Diaspora*/ yet we are not rising
to the occasion/ not approaching the surface/
our noses hover over mirrors/ look we can almost
see our faces between the lines of snow (31)

Once again, she tackles the theme of the Diaspora, naming areas in South Africa and Nicaragua. In this instance, however, the reader notes the frustration of the poetic voice. We, as a group, have shamed our ancestors, whose remains line the ocean floor, because we do not unite, do not rise in one collective voice. Instead, we remain in our respective towers of Babel, isolated and separated from the spiritual ancestral connection that links us all. Still, she provides a glimmer of hope, in that the spirits of those who died on that voyage continue to interact with us, the living. Though we have yet to rise and honor them in the manner that they deserve, they have yet to abandon us: they continue to live in our midst. There one finds the poet's faith in the face of despair.

In her third novel, *Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter* (1994), Shange briefly mentions the theme of African slavery and language. The protagonist's lover, Víctor-Jesús María, observes the following about the protagonist:

She was driven, by some power I never understood, to learn every language, slave language, any black person in the Western Hemisphere ever spoke. She felt incomplete in English, a little better in Spanish, totally joyous in French, and pious in Portuguese. When she discovered Gullah and Papiamentu, she was beside herself. I kept tellin' her wasn't no protection from folks hatin' the way we looked in any slave owner's language, but she had to believe there was a way to talk herself outta five hundred years of disdain, five hundred years of dying cause there is no word in any one of those damn languages where we are simply alive and not enveloped by scorn, contempt, or pity. (66)

In this passage, the reader comes to learn that Liliane's quest for selfhood is intimately linked with the language she utilizes to think of herself, to describe herself, as a descendant of slaves. Liliane is an African-American woman, one who feels "incomplete" in English, her mother tongue. Though she does not attain a sense of wholeness in her native language, she comes closer to reaching that goal in the Romance languages that have also marked the lives of millions of Africans and their descendants. Interestingly, she is elated to learn of the Creole languages of Gullah and Papiamentu. Notably, both of these idioms are ones that have blended African languages with those of Western Europe; that is, both Gullah and Papiamentu reflect the synthesis that occurred when colonizers and enslaved converged. It is this convergence that Shange explores throughout her work.

Ten years after the publication of her last novel, Shange's poems appeared alongside a collection of photographs, *The Sweet Breath of Life: A Poetic Narrative of the African-American Family* (2004). In the midst of the book is a striking image of a young girl holding her hands against her chest, brow furrowed. In the accompanying poem, "i believe it too," the reader learns that the girl is Cuban. Only upon close examination of the photograph does the viewer see that behind the girl is a wall with "CUBA" written in graffiti. Again, Shange chooses to highlight the life of someone of African descent outside of the United States.⁵ She writes:

she knows that isn't sposed to happen to her /
her nose is flat / her skin sepia / her
hair nappy / it's not supposed to happen here
fidel declared cuba an afro-cuban nation⁶
that's what they taught her / all her life (48)

Shange here refers to a major speech delivered by Fidel Castro in 1975, the year in which he began to send Cuban troops to West Africa in support of Angolan and Mozambi-

can independence. Already the poetic voice hints at an underlying tension: despite nationalist rhetoric, this child's experience has already taught her that racism within her beloved Cuba is alive and well. The poetic voice concludes the poem with an offer of love:

she's never heard pedro's words
 "to be called 'negrita' is to be called love"
 i wish i cd hear her now / baby i'll do her hair
 & massage that frown away (48)

Here, Shange refers to another poet of the Diaspora, Pedro Pietri, and perhaps his most famous poem, "Puerto Rican Obituary."⁷ There, he laments the lives of Puerto Ricans displaced by economic necessities who have moved to the United States mainland and who have, in the process, lost the values of their culture that focused on love and family. Instead, they have become competitive with each other and envious of the little bit they have. Unable to find jobs, they turn to alcohol and drugs as an escape. Pietri implies that United States capitalism is to blame for the loss of Puerto Rican culture; he mourns the fact that they have yet to return to the island where "to be called 'negrita' is to be called love."⁸ Shange's reference to Pietri's poem reveals that she agrees with his political critique of the United States.⁹ Also, she clearly bemoans the fact that this child will never know the words of this poet as a result of the embargo. Finally, she makes clear once again that in spite of the difference in nationality, sadly, racial discrimination against peoples of African descent continues unabated in the twenty-first century. Hence the desire on the part of the poetic voice to soothe this young girl by "do[ing] her hair" and "massag[ing] her frown away" (48). Again, we see Shange's inclusion of all of the senses: the child's frown, her inability to hear the words of the poet, the poet's desire to fix her hair, massage her, calm her with sound and touch. Speaking to her would be insufficient: utilizing all of the senses honors the truth of this

girl's experiences. With a single poem, Shange makes art of this child's life.

In the original ancient Greek, "diaspora" referred to the scattering of seeds. Through a recent development, the field of inquiry known as African Diaspora Studies continues to grow, as does recognition that the majority of African slaves in the New World landed not in the United States but rather in Latin America and the Caribbean. Ntozake Shange's consistent usage of Spanish words as well as references to musical forms and artists from throughout the Americas, not only from the United States, acknowledges this reality. In his introduction to an interview he conducted with Shange, Neal A. Lester writes: "Shange champions the woman of color specifically and people of color generally as they move toward optimal self-consciousness, positive self-identity, and unlimited self-realization in an oppressive and blatantly sexist and racist modern society" (717). For her, this realization is dependent upon the recognition of the fullness of the black experience. There is no incongruence in her depiction of lives lived throughout the New World: all belong to the American experience. Throughout her oeuvre, then, Ntozake Shange provides her audience with a more full representation of African Diasporic life, suggesting an alternative, more ample definition of blackness.

Notes

¹ Originally used as a pejorative by Puerto Ricans living on the island, this term refers to the Puerto Rican Diasporic community living in New York City. Some islanders were offended by the claim that Puerto Ricans living in the mainland United States were as "authentic" as they were, and so they chose to distinguish the latter as "New York Puerto Ricans," hence "Nuyoricans." See Mohr.

² See Varela.

³ In a 2007 interview, Shange says, "When I wrote *for colored girls*, I meant it for all women of color. When I took that idea to New York, they took out all my Puerto Ricans, and when I wanted to include Asians, they looked at me like I had lost my mind!" (32).

⁴ Both gained independence in 1975.

⁶ I am not certain of the details of the collaboration between Shange and the photographers. Needless to say, however, all of the parties involved in the creation of the collection participate in the broadening of the term "African-American" with their inclusion of this photograph and Shange's poem.

⁷ The speech is which he did so was entitled "Estamos con el pueblo de África." See Johnson.

⁸ Pieri is one of the most important of the Nuyorican Poets. See Mohr.

⁹ See Pietri, *Puerto Rican Obituary*.

¹⁰ Shange's criticism of United States foreign policy is apparent throughout her work, especially as it affects Latin America. Unfortunately, this topic is outside the scope of the present article.

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TRANSLATING MARYSE CONDÉ'S CARIBBEANNESS INTO ENGLISH

BY FRANÇOISE PFAFF

Internationally acclaimed, Maryse Condé is a novelist, playwright, essayist, and author of short stories and children's books. With her provocative and intriguing characters, arresting themes, crafted language, and innovative narrative techniques, she is widely recognized as a major author of the French and Francophone literary worlds. Her contributions as a writer won her the coveted French awards Le Grand Prix Littéraire de la Femme (1986) and Le Prix de l'Académie Française (1988). She was the first woman honored as a Puterbaugh Fellow by the University of Oklahoma (1993) and has been appointed to two prestigious French orders as Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (2001) and Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur (2004). Condé is also a sought-after lecturer and was the keynote speaker at one of CLA's Annual Conventions (1995).

Maryse Condé's works have been translated into many languages, including English, Spanish, German, Italian, Polish, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, and Japanese. Here, we will show how Maryse Condé's voice has been translated from French into English and particularly how various translators, myself included, have attempted to render French Caribbean culture in English.

My experience in translating Condé began with my 1993 book of interviews with her, *Entretiens avec Maryse Condé* (henceforth referred to as *Entretiens*), as I converted it into English under the title *Conversations with Maryse Condé* (further referred to as *Conversations*), published in 1996.