WOMANIST RESTORATIVE DRAMA: VIOLENCE, COMMUNITY, AND HEALING BY
CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

A Dissertation in
English
by
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

December 2010
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This study engages the rich tradition of African American literature with a focus on drama. Specifically, I examine the very real phenomenon of violence against black women through the study of dramatic texts and the application of relevant critical discourse and theories. In my readings of these texts, I identify and trace a tradition of black women playwrights who use drama as a tool of resistance and I suggest that African American women’s plays can be explored as a site for an alternate form of healing. Abused women can be physically and psychologically affected by gender oppression and patriarchy, but race and other factors (such as class, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status) can compound the problem in complex ways. For example, American rape myths about African American women can impede, halt, or prevent victimized black women from reaching a place of wholeness, which positions racism as the most significant hurdle affecting their healing process.

In Chapter 1, I provide a foundation for this study and define womanist restorative drama. Chapter 2 introduces pioneer black women playwrights who have paved the way for contemporary playwrights to produce the canonical works discussed in this study. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are organized thematically to focus on intimate partner violence and sexual assault, respectively. The chapters cover Lynn Nottage’s plays *Poof!* and *Ruined*, Pearl Cleage’s *Flyin’ West*, and Suzan-Lori Parks’s *In the Blood*. These chapters work together to illustrate how black women
playwrights use theatre to encourage the restoration of abused women, and justify the need for a new sub-categorization of plays that I label “womanist restorative drama.” Playwright Anna Deavere Smith recently stated that black plays “should bring to the fore that which is unspoken. We should be forced to speak about the things we only mean to keep in the problematic area of innuendo... black ‘plays,’ like the black church, have social and political significance” (573). My goal in this project is to illustrate how black women playwrights have exhibited these qualities for decades and to showcase contemporary playwrights who continue to mold the social and political significance of African American drama.
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PREFACE

The Reason I Write

There are two distinct but related origins of my dissertation. One origin derives from personal experience and the other stems from my academic and literary pursuits. Because I believe, like most feminists, that the personal is political and that personal experience can operate as fertile soil to nourish one’s scholarly endeavors, this preface is an important component of my work. In a project about removing silences, I feel that it is critical to begin removing some of the silences around my own story. In short, my personal experiences as an advocate for abused black women affect the way I read, write, and interpret literature.

According to my mother, my earliest stance against domestic violence occurred before I could complete a sentence. In her memoir about leaving an abusive marriage, my mother recalls that, as a toddler, I routinely cried as soon as we would enter our driveway. She felt I intuitively knew as a baby that home was not a safe place. However, my most vivid memory of protest happened when I was in elementary school and my two older cousins (Johnny and Jacqueline) were visiting for the weekend. One night while the three of us sat in the living room watching television, my father started physically beating my mother in their bedroom located in the rear of our home. Her screams combined with the sound of things being broken drowned the voices of our favorite cartoon characters.
After what seemed like hours, I begged my older cousins to call the police and help my mother. I was the only one too short to reach the telephone mounted onto the kitchen wall. At first they refused, but because I was persistent, they decided to let me discover on my own why they did not interfere. We agreed that Johnny would take the phone off the base, dial the number, and then go back to the sofa leaving me to speak with the police alone.

As the words “My daddy beating my mama,” escaped my lips after the operator said “Hello,” I started trembling with fear. The phone was located in the hallway and if my parents stopped fighting and exited the bedroom, I would be in plain view, but they did not stop. The operator kept me on the phone until the police arrived, but once they came, I was confronted with an even bigger decision. I did not know whether to hang up the phone and release the only comfort I had felt since my cousin handed me the phone in order to answer the front door where a police officer waited on the other side, or to hang up and walk to the rear bedroom like my father screamed for me to do. I was so terrified. Recognizing that the police were only a temporary fix to the problem, I obeyed my dad’s voice. When I reached the end of the hallway, I saw my mother standing inside their bedroom naked, bruised, exhausted, but undefeated. I hoped she could see in my eyes that I loved her enough to intervene and could not stand to hear her scream “Stop” or “Don’t” one more time.

“You CALLED THEM CRACKERS ON ME? YOU CALLED THEM CRACKERS ON ME?” my daddy yelled, breaking the fixation I had on my mother. I flinched, not
knowing what he would do to me. As I stared at him in silence, his words raged at me again, “YOU HEAR ME? YOU CALLED THEM CRACKERS ON ME?” And when my silence lasted too long, my mother beckoned me to come to her and I walked further into the room. I stood next to my mom’s bare body as my dad barked at me. The word “yes” slowly emerged from my lips in a fearful tone after he demanded that I answer his question again. Just as I replied, in almost a blink of an eye, my father grabbed a can of Raid bug spray from the top of the dresser and threw it at me. But, as if she had already anticipated his next move, my mother shoved me behind her and rather than a can cracking my skull, I only felt the wind from it seconds before the can went through the bedroom wall.

I am not sure if he was disappointed that he did not maim me or if he was surprised that his anger caused him to lash out against his only daughter—something he had never done—but he quickly exited the bedroom to talk to the police. To this day, this incident is the only time my father expressed any violent behavior toward me. He not only calls me his “Princess,” but has strived to always treat me as such. Therefore, I feel that calling the police was the ultimate betrayal because it meant introducing white outsiders into our black home.

Although fear prevented me from calling the police again, I refused to give up protesting against the domestic violence I was forced to witness. I started running away. On numerous occasions I packed a small, navy blue suitcase and walked four streets over to my grandmother’s house. This was my safe haven. On one of those “runaway” trips to grandma’s house, I found her in the bathroom standing in front of
the mirror with one hand covering her forehead. I called, “grandma.” When she faced me, I could see that she was attending to a fresh bruise on the right side of her head. I stood there with my suitcase in tow—the symbol of my refusal to live in a chaotic house furnished with physical abuse. The moment I saw my grandmother standing there, looking just like my mother, I felt like my safe place had dissolved. I started to envision her home as a house of horrors too. My grandmother closed the door to hide the look of surprise in her eyes, to eclipse the look of hopelessness in mine, or to take the time to transform back into the superwoman I knew her to be. She eventually emerged from the restroom as the caregiver she had always been and we never spoke about the incident. Sadly, before the age of 10, I understood that both my mother and grandmother needed protection from the men they loved, and I witnessed countless incidents of intimate partner violence in my family and neighborhood.

As an adult, I am still surprised at how common intimate partner violence is within our society and among African American women in particular. In 2007, televangelist Juanita Bynum made headline news after her husband, Bishop Thomas Weeks III, physically assaulted her in a hotel parking lot. And last February, most of the world saw the horrific evidence of intimate partner violence in a photo of another high profile case—songstress Rhianna. She was brutally beaten by R&B singer Chris Brown following the Clive Davis pre-Grammy party. There were neither massive movements from the black church on Bynum’s behalf nor rally of fans and other artists to end violence against women. As a matter of fact, when these two
Stories were featured on national and international news stations during their immediate aftermaths, many people spoke in defense of the men and some even blamed the women. America's complacency about intimate partner violence is partly the blame for these stories quickly becoming forgotten archival news and for my inability to identify an adult woman my age or older in my family or from my neighborhood that has never been hit by a man. Indeed, my neighborhood is similar to many black neighborhoods around the country. The years I spent witnessing women I love suffer physical injury at the hands of the men they love propel my interest in researching intimate partner violence in black communities.

The other topic I discuss in this study is sexual assault. I became aware of rape before leaving elementary school. One spring day, Mr. Sanders (my African American fourth grade teacher) called the African American students outside and asked if we heard anything about Nicole, but on that day we had not. The next day, however, two of those students started telling me about the tragedy that happened to my best friend. Her father raped her. Mr. Sanders overheard us and quickly and sternly called the three of us outside again. After listening to our versions of the story, he told us not to talk about it again until we were on the bus heading home to the black side of town. Just as my father made it clear that involving white people in "our" business was forbidden, so had Mr. Sanders. Because of forced integration laws in the State of Florida, I was one of a bus load of children required to ride thirty minutes away from the school in our neighborhood to attend a majority white elementary school. Mr. Sanders said that once we returned to the room we were not
to share this information about Nicole with our white peers, because most of their parents were waiting for any reason to appeal the decision to bus us into “their” schools. Yet again, I was taught to keep African American affairs within the community.

Unlike many of my peers, I was somewhat sheltered from the direct physical, emotional, and psychological pain of rape for a long time. College, however, changed that. I knew enough to avoid strange men, dark places, and secluded first dates, but nothing prepared me for the two sexual assaults by two different men during the fall of my junior year. The first man had been my best friend since the eleventh grade and the second was my first boyfriend who asked for my hand in marriage. I was in the midst of crisis counseling and coping with the painstaking bureaucracy of reporting a sexual assault with the police department when the second sexual assault occurred. When I told my boyfriend about what my closest friend had done to me, he raped me. I instantly understood why so many women choose to remain silent. I decided to remain silent—it can prevent further victimization. Because I felt unable to deal with two traumatic situations at once, I remained silent about it them for over a year. However, ignoring the problem and keeping quiet lead to silent suffering rather than healing. I was so emotionally and psychologically traumatized that I had to withdraw from school and seek medical attention because I was internally bleeding. The silence was literally killing me. I could not speak about my post-traumatic anxieties and it caused a snowball effect. As I kept all those feelings
bottled up inside, the unmanaged anxiety festered and manifested into physical illness.

By the end of the semester, I had gone from two counseling sessions a week to one; I was securely planted on the never-ending path of healing, and I witnessed strides of improvement in my physical health. When I re-enrolled the next semester, my experiences helped to characterize this time in my life as the development of my academic and literary interest in issues of violence against black women and their subsequent silences. My interests began after I was assigned Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) for an English course. My personal experience impacted my level of sympathy and concern for Bessie Smith, Bigger Thomas’ African American girlfriend who was raped, murdered, and forgotten. After the discovery of Mary Dalton’s cremated white body, the novel becomes a witch-hunt for her killer and Bessie’s existence is at most an afterthought. I connected emotionally to Bessie, because I too felt tossed away, forgotten, and silenced.

As a graduate student, I sought authors who would breathe life into Bessie by telling her story, and I initially found a number of African American women novelists who discussed the issues of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster’s Place* (1989), and Sapphire’s *Push* (1996) are a few examples. However, I eventually expanded my knowledge of the African American literary canon to include drama and it is within this genre that my personal experience and literacy interests have merged.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I am thankful to God who restored my strength to endure this race on more occasions than I can count. When thoughts of giving up seemed to resonate louder and louder, it was my faith in God and my family that kept me grounded. I would like to thank my grandmother for being my rock, my mother for being my defender and biggest cheerleader, my husband for constantly encouraging me, my brother for inspiring me, and my best friend for reminding me of my dreams. I do not take for granted the wisdom my father, uncles, granddad, and great granddaddy shared with me about life because I often used their words as fuel to keep going.

The extra boosts of energy I needed to complete the dissertation came from my family, but the knowledge and skills I needed to write the dissertation came from my advisor, committee members, and mentors. First, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Iyunolu Osagie who displayed persistent faith in my abilities and aspirations. I am appreciative of the encouragement and support of Drs. Iyunolu Osagie, Lovalerie King, Keith Gilyard, Bernard Bell, and Cheryl Glenn. And, I would like to thank my colleagues Yaa Christopher-Williams, Pia Deas, Ersula Ore, David Green, and Sharise Wilson whose laughs and shoulders-to-cry-on got me through the last leg of this race.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge all those whom God put in my path to offer me an encouraging word. They are too many to name, but too important to forget—THANK YOU!
Chapter 1

Womanist Restorative Drama as a Catalyst of Healing from Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault

This woman is Black
So her blood is shed into silence
This woman is Black
So her blood falls to earth
Like the droppings of birds
To be washed away with silence
and rain

-Audre Lorde

Introduction and Background of Study

The above epitaph is from Audre Lorde’s poem “A Chorale for Black Woman Voices,” which she dedicates to Ms. Patricia Cowan and Ms. Bobbie Jean Graham. Both women were brutally killed by men in the late 1970s. Cowan’s death is particularly relevant to this study because it marks a fatal collision among gender violence, domestic violence, and theatre. In Highland Park, Michigan, the twenty-year old Patricia Cowan answered a call requesting a black actress to read scenes for an upcoming play. She was informed that she would be paid $100.00 for the audition and given a chance to advance her career because there was a possibility
that a scout from ABC Television would be present. Cowan was a budding actress with Detroit’s Finest Love Theatrical Company. The supposed play entitled *Hammer*, written by twenty-one year old James Thomas, included a domestic violence scene between a married couple; Thomas played the husband and Cowan the wife. Although no one from ABC Television was present at the audition taking place in Thomas’s garage, Cowan’s four-year old son and Thomas’s girlfriend were in attendance. At the climax of the violent argument between the husband and wife, Thomas, who entered into the theatrical space as a husband, struck his wife (played by Cowan) from behind with a four-pound, short-handled sledge hammer and proceeded to bludgeon her to death. Thomas crossed the line between theatre and reality when he turned what was supposed to be a theatrical performance into a real-life murder scene.

In the essay “Roots in African Drama and Theatre,” theatre scholar J.C. de Graft warns against crossing the line between theatrics and reality:

> The actor who understands his art knows that he must try to strike a fine balance between his awareness of the fictional world of the character impersonated and his awareness of the work-a-day world of his audience and his artistic self; he knows that no matter how deeply he immerses himself in the world of the fictional character there is always a psychological point of safety beyond which he dare not go, least he be swept out of his depth and carried away on the uncertain currents of hysteria and ecstasy… It also means that acting is at its
most electrifying when it dares to go as close as possible to the psychological safety point, *the farthest limit within control*—the brink of possession! (22)

Thomas became fully possessed by the role of an abusive, violent husband and was carried further away into the realm of insanity. When Thomas moved beyond the psychological limit, he simultaneously became a brutal wife-battering murderer as well as the murderer of an innocent young woman whom he did not know. After attacking Cowan, Thomas then struck Cowan’s son unconscious and with assistance from a friend, threw the murder weapon on a nearby roof and dumped both of their bodies in a garage around the corner. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported that Thomas’ girlfriend witnessed the attack and fled into the house. She was not charged with a crime or as an accomplice.

Police found no evidence indicating that the killing was premeditated, a finding that suggests that Thomas believed, in that moment, that he was a husband in a heated argument with his wife. Patricia Cowan’s death, as both the real-life mother and the imagined wife, is an example of the larger problem of femicide.¹ The only speculation police offered for the reason Thomas became a killer that day is “thrills.” Whether he was motivated by hatred, pleasure, fear, or something in between, it is clear that Thomas used theatre to lure Cowan. When the two entered into the realm of performance as husband and wife in his garage, the climactic scene turned deadly. Cowan’s death is an articulation of the interrelation among theatre, 

¹ Femicide refers to the “murders of women by men motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women” (Sheffield 115).
intimate partner violence, and black women. As such, this violent scene remains connected to theatrical accounts of violence against women. When playwrights use drama to promote the end of violence against black women, a symbolic wreath is laid at Patricia Cowan’s tomb.²

This study expands the works of black feminists who promote the end of violence against black women, and it aims to build upon the tradition of speaking out so that others might be healed. The tradition of voicing societal injustices can be traced back to spirituals, slave narratives, protest pamphlets, novels, and other venues of resistance black women used to express themselves. Ntozake Shange’s famous choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enough (1974) is one of the earliest, most well-known theatrical productions about sexual assault and intimate partner violence against women of color. Shange’s choreopoem has been described as a “bolt of lightning” that “captured the lives of black women as they moved from childhood into adulthood, from segregation to integration, from joy to pain and back to joy” (Anderson 10).

Guided by the desire to explore the healing and recuperative qualities of black women’s drama, this project examines the connection between feminist and womanist activism, and black feminist drama. By combining research on intimate partner violence and sexual assault with studies of black women’s drama, I aim to answer several key questions. First, can we trace a history of black women’s plays

² I became aware of Patricia Cowan’s murder while reading Audre Lorde’s Sister Outsider (1984). I was intrigued by the tragedy and explored various newspaper archives for more details. On April 12, 1979, the story appeared in various newspapers from Washington to South Florida.
about domestic violence and sexual assault? Second, where do the feminist and womanist elements about ending violence against women surface within black feminist drama? Third, what might these plays have in common and is there a uniform aesthetic or theoretical concept among them? And lastly, what are the overarching reasons playwrights express for bringing these issues to the stage?

This study examines six plays by five playwrights: Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Blue Blood*, Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*, Pearl Cleage’s *Flyin’ West*, Lynn Nottage’s *Poof!* and *Ruined*, and Suzan-Lori Parks’s *In the Blood*. This dissertation is grounded by three main goals. The primary purpose of this study is to demonstrate that within black feminist theatre there is a select group of plays that are primarily concerned with exposing, discussing, and ending physical and sexual abuse against black women. I refer to these plays as *womanist restorative drama*, which I explain in depth later in the chapter. The secondary purpose of this study is to illustrate how these plays function as a catalyst for healing. The third goal of this project is to uncover a legacy of plays that address both feminist concerns on violence against women and introduce to the study of drama new language that builds upon Lisa Anderson’s recently articulated black feminist theatre aesthetic in *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (2008). My project derives and departs from Anderson’s black feminist theatre aesthetic. I intend to demonstrate that black women playwrights use drama to display the effects of intimate partner violence and sexual assault against African American women and girls and they aspire to encourage
conversations that promote healing for many victimized women. Focusing narrowly on two of the most prevalent offenses against women—intimate partner violence and sexual assault—enables us to appreciate the way contemporary playwrights identify the relationship among race, violence, and gender. My research draws upon a variety of critical frameworks offered by scholars, writers, and critics. Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins, Paula Giddings, bell hooks, Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, among others have been particularly influential in helping me frame a theoretical framework for womanist restorative drama. Aside from literary womanists and black feminists, I also consulted other critics within different disciplines such as Tameka L. Gillum, Michael P. Johnson, David Kranser, Kathy Perkins, Laura L. O’Toole, Bethe Richie, Oliver Williams, and Sharon Williams. These sociologists, criminal justice scholars, social workers, theatre critics, and drama specialists have been instrumental in transforming this project from a simple study of literary texts to an interdisciplinary investigation of violence against women and theatre.

The sociologists help me to understand that many of the mainstream interventions—shelters, support groups, hotlines, and other programs—have too often failed to provide adequate services for abused black women. In addition to the lack of services, black women also have to deal with a lack of protection. Clifton Marsh states that the lack of support “makes it systematically easier to sexually assault and violently harm an African American woman and not be punished.... [Therefore,] African American women have no faith in the criminal justice system to
protect their rights as citizens” (Marsh 149-152). No protection means that there are more women being violated and the ill-equipped services for black women create the need for more suitable methods of assisting black women in the healing process. One of the most prevalent reasons many of these mainstream services have not adequately addressed the needs of black women is because black women have been disproportionately absent in the development of services designed to assist women. When these programs claim to be gender neutral, they lead to the erasure of low-income women and women of color. And this in turn compromises the transformative potential and effectiveness of these services (“A Black Feminist,” Richie 52).

**Definitions and Concepts**

Any academic study about violence against women comes couched with its own language and distinct set of terminology. Therefore, it seems advisable to provide definitions for the type of violence and violent behaviors that are emphasized in this project. In 1994, the Violence against Women Act passed through the United States government’s legislature and identified three types of violent behavior as the most prevalent in women’s lives—rape, domestic violence, and stalking. Since 1994, the catchphrase “violence against women” has expanded over the years to include several other terms specifying the degree, dynamic, and kind of violence performed against women. The most relevant terms in this study are gender violence, intimate partner violence, domestic violence, intimate male partner
violence, intimate terrorism, situational couple violence, rape, sexual abuse, and sexual assault. These terms represent the common types of violations found within the plays I examine.

Gender violence is a broad term that includes violence between a husband and wife, unmarried heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian couples, transgendered individuals, and children. Gender violence is divided into three sub-categories of violence 1) the Family 2) the Community, and 3) the State. Each subcategory of gender violence occurs within a different space. While gender violence within the family occurs in the home, gender violence in the community occurs in social groups and the workplace. Gender violence orchestrated by the state is performed by police and or military and is best categorized as political violence against women (O’Toole xii). Although the playwrights in this study focus primarily on gender violence within and among the family, they nonetheless display awareness of the intersectionality among all three subsets and their impact on black women’s lives.

Within family violence, the most common type of violence is domestic violence. On a very basic level, domestic violence refers to men battering women. Inherent in the definition is the implied notion that men always occupy the position of power in the relationship and are never on the receiving end of violence. This means that women are often assumed to be helpless receivers of abuse and do not retaliate or initiate. The term domestic violence poses limitations for researchers to

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3 Battering includes, but is not limited to “physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual violence and control against women’ it is defined as ‘a purposeful course of action buttressed by familial, institutional, social, and cultural practices’” (Sokoloff 1)
adequately address cases of husband-beating (as opposed to wife-beating) and abuse between same-sex couples. Assaults can be reported less when there is not adequate language that is inclusive of men who have been abused either by a female or male perpetrator. Additionally, reports of female on female or female on male violence occur on a much smaller scale. In recent research studies, “intimate partner violence” has replaced “domestic violence” because the former term provides the necessary space to examine the various types of violence that materialize from any intimate partner.

In “Gender Violence: The Intersection of Gender and Control,” Michael P. Johnson outlines three distinct types of intimate partner violence: intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence. *Intimate terrorism* is somewhat synonymous with domestic violence, however, it is devoid of the implication that the violence only comes from the man. *Intimate terrorism* suggests that violence is not always one-directional (male to female), but that it can be bi-directional (between male and female). Although intimate terrorism receives the most coverage in the media, it is widely written about, and is usually the type of violence that first comes to mind. Johnson asserts that violent resistance, (“the use of violence in response to intimate terrorism”) and situational couple violence (“an attempt to take general control on the part of either partner”) are also two

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4 See Figure 1 in the Appendix. It is a copy of the popular Power and Control Wheel, a recognized tool to explain domestic violence/intimate terrorism.

5 An example of situational couple violence can be found in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. When Mrs. Breedlove, who could have gotten the coal from outside or sent Pecola, picked a physical fight with her husband Cholly.
important types of intimate partner violence. Situational couple violence, which means that the man or the woman may instigate the violence, is the most frequent form of family violence (Kaslow 48). In fact, “one out of eight married couples in the United States experiences some form of situational couple violence each year—[yet] most of our policies and interventions are designed to address intimate terrorism rather than situational couple violence” (Johnson 266).

Most of the plays in this study highlight problems with intimate terrorism (mainly violence exercised by men against women) over the other two types of intimate partner violence. I use the term *intimate partner violence* to convey an understanding of contemporary, scholarly trends; however, because these plays almost exclusively highlight men battering women, I will use “intimate male partner violence,” “intimate partner violence,” and “domestic violence” interchangeably throughout the study. Intimate male partner violence (IMPV) refers to any one of the following: physical abuse (hitting, choking, slaps, kicking, etc.), emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment (i.e., verbal debasement or marital infidelity, both of which foster loss of self-esteem or feelings of hopelessness), economic or financial abuse, or sexual abuse (i.e. forced participation in nonconsensual sex) perpetrated by a male spouse (Nash 98).

The importance of having adequate language to describe black women’s experiences with violence is explained vividly by bell hooks in *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* (1981). hooks describes two incidents of violence that occurred during her decade-long relationship with an older man which were never discussed
because the language of the time was ineffective. The language of the time, “battered woman,” was mainly created by white women for white women and was not appropriate for hooks for a couple of reasons. In *Wounds of Passion*, hooks describes the first incident of violence in her relationship as a feverish attack of predator against prey. hooks “jumped on [Mack] like a wild cat attacking prey hitting out wildly” (138). In this initial incident, hooks was the perpetrator and Mack, her partner, was victimized. In the second incident, the tables were turned. Mack “suddenly makes a fist, throws back his hand with such force it smashes [my] glasses, even though he hits [me] repeatedly in the mouth. Blood splatters everywhere. He smiles and says, I see you’ve shut up now” (189).

hooks recalls that she refused to immediately go to the hospital or dentist because she did not want to face the possibility of encountering racism while trying to recover from a violent conflict with sexism. hooks recalls, “Conscious of race, sex, and class issues, I wondered how I would be treated in this white doctor’s office” (hooks *Talking Back* 84). She was hesitant of being viewed as just another battered black woman. She never thought the term “battered woman” was appropriate for her situation because she was both a perpetrator and receiver of one-time violent incidents. Although these were the only occurrences of violence, the threat of violence remained in their relationship. In the late 1970s, the term “battered woman syndrome” was popularized, but some scholars like Lenore Walker found the idea problematic because, as outlined in her book *The Battered Woman Syndrome*, the language fostered a sense of “learned helplessness.” The term intimate partner
violence accurately addresses hooks’ situation for two reasons. One, she was not married to her partner at the time, and, two, she was also the instigator of violence.

This project is also concerned with sexual assault. Because sexuality is often personal, culturally, and religiously defined, sexual violations can be ambiguous. It is therefore important to provide definitions that facilitate a common understanding. Sexual assault is an umbrella term that “includes various types of deviant sexual conduct such as incest, sodomy, molestation, fondling, exhibitionism, and rape” (Marsh 149). While the form of sexual assault most prevalently depicted is rape, I use the terms almost interchangeably because some of the rapes depicted in these texts are surrounded by or include other deviant sexual acts such as fondling.

Like the term intimate partner violence, the term rape can also be problematic. Rape is generally defined as non-consensual penile-vaginal penetration, “but may include oral and anal sodomy or penetration by fingers or other objects” of the female body (Sheffield 116). There are, however, more specialized definitions that take into account the social and gendered aspects of rape. Katie Roiphe believes some definitions of rape comprise all competent female college students by ascribing defenseless language to women such as “gullibility, low-self esteem, and the inability to assert ourselves with our position in relation to men” (68). In addition there are legal definitions of rape. The ALM’s law dictionary defines rape as:

1) the crime of sexual intercourse (with actual penetration of a woman’s vagina with the man’s penis) without consent
and accomplished through force, threat of violence or intimidation (such as a threat to harm a woman’s child, husband or boyfriend). What constitutes lack of consent usually includes saying “no” or being too drunk or drug-influenced for the woman to be able to either resist or consent, but a recent Pennsylvania case ruled that a woman must do more than say “no” on the bizarre theory that “no” does not always mean “don’t,” but a flirtatious come-on.

2) to have sexual intercourse with a female without her consent through force, violence, threat or intimidation, or with a girl under age. Technically, a woman can be charged with rape by assisting a man in the rape of another woman.

In these definitions, rape is sexed and gendered. Because legalese narrowly defines rape as the penile penetration of a woman by a man, it eliminates legal protection of men who have been sexually assaulted by women or other men. As Roiphe explains, “The suggestion lurking beneath this definition of rape is that men are not just physically but intellectually and emotionally more powerful than women” (68). However, an insightful examination of Roiphe’s observation may nonetheless commit the same exclusionary practices as that of law makers. Because the legal definition of rape is held to the purview of the anatomically female and the socially constructed category of woman, it fails to protect all individuals who suffer at the hands of this violence.
There are also social stipulations regarding relationships between men and women that complicate women's ability to stand as survivors of rape. Married women and sex workers are two categories of women thought to give up their sexual autonomy through either their newly acquired status as spouse or temporary property. As a result, these women are typically not perceived as being able to be raped because the contractual status relinquishing their sexual autonomy is seen as willful rather than coerced.

Because “rape” inherently evokes gender, racial, and marital status biases, new terminology has been introduced to accommodate a wider range of victims and situations. Terms such as “sexual assault,” “sexual violence,” and “sexual abuse” are inclusive of those who are marginalized by restrictive definitions of rape and the deviant practices suffered by them. These terms are more applicable to discussions of male rape, oral and anal rape, or physical harm inflicted upon sexual organs with foreign objects such as broom handles, guns, or knives.

In addition to providing a clear designation among types of violence, this project also takes into account the language used to describe women affected by violence. I refer to the women affected by intimate partner violence and sexual assault as “abused women,” “survivors,” or “victimized women,” rather than “victims.” Despite the research studies and stories that refer to women as “victims,” I feel this label robs women and girls of their agency and can compound the sense of helplessness, destitution, and victimhood many of these women experience. Sharon Lamb’s *New Versions of Victims: Feminists Struggle with the Concept* describes many
problems with the term victim and how it has created both progression and setbacks within the feminist struggle to end violence against women. Ultimately, being victimized does not make one a victim and I feel the victim-based language ascribes negative images of black womanhood that only serve to silence them further or negatively affect their identity, because this is perhaps not the language they would use to describe their experiences.

**Statistics and the Need for an Alternative Approach to Assisting Black Women**

Some grim statistics about rape indicate that “Every two and a half minutes, someone is sexually assaulted” (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network); “An estimated 5.3 million intimate partner victimizations occur annually among women ages 18 and older, resulting in more than 2 million injuries and nearly 1,3000 death” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention); “Intimate partner violence often results in chronic health problems, heightened stress, and other mental health problems as well as puts women at increased risk of poverty, divorce, and unemployment” (Gillum, Improving Services 57); and “murder by intimate partners is the leading cause of death among young African American women between the ages of 15 and 45” (West Black Women 1489). These statistics do more than remind us of a serious problem plaguing American society; it brings attention to the fact that there are countless women in need of healing.

Abused women cannot receive adequate treatment and assistance by medical physicians solely; their support must come from a variety of sources. The majority
of women affected by violence and violations need awareness and validation that healing and hope exist outside of hospitals and correctional facilities. Ann Folwell Stanford demonstrates this in her book *Bodies in a Broken World: Women Novelists of Color and the Politics of Medicine* (2003). By examining novels for their usefulness in the recovery process of abused women, Stanford demonstrates that healing can stem from resources other than those provided and regulated by the government. Stanford poignantly asks, “Where is the community when nearly thirty-five percent of women seeking emergency room care are battered?” (11) and why, if “health is inextricably bound to social conditions” (2), is there not yet an abundance of services widely available for women in America? Black women seeking medical treatment discover, as activist and scholar Angela Davis notes, that “all too often the enemies of our physical and emotional well-being are social and political” (*Sick and Tired* 19). Biomedical medicine does not intervene, ease, or treat these roots of suffering when they manifest physically because, more often than not, it is institutionalized racism and sexism that cause black women to be abused and

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6 Gail Garfield, former Director of the Institute on Violence, Inc and sociologist, explains in *Knowing What We Know: African American Women’s Experiences of Violence and Violation* (2005) that black women make a distinction between violence and violations. She proposes, “violence and violation coexist within a complex nexus of uneven social and cultural arrangements and though they often appear to be one and the same, there is an important distinction to be made. Unlike the real or tangible evidence of violence usually associated with physical injury and harm when we consider markers for women’s experiences, violation is primarily intuitive; it is about feelings that affect what women think and do when they perceive their personhood threatened, jeopardized, and compromised.” “My point is twofold violence is not always accompanied by a sense of violation; yet violation is inextricably linked to physical, personal, and social violence” (16).
violated. It is therefore imperative for individuals working with women in need of assistance to seek and investigate other catalysts for healing (Stanford 3).

Many of the mainstream services designed to assist women who have survived sexual assault and intimate partner violence are not adequate for African American women. Patricia Washington explains that,

Although black women’s experiences of sexual violence intersect with those of White women in many ways, the historical and contemporary realities of Black life in the United States lead to fundamental differences in the nature and quality of resources available to Black survivors, their willingness to access those resources, and the treatment they receive when they do seek help. (1254)

Tameka Gillum extends Washington’s observation by saying that many of the services designed to assist survivors “take a mainstream, color-blind approach to their interventions. As a result, many African American women are not seeking and/or are not receiving the full benefit of these services because of the cultural insensitivity of service providers.” The three main reasons why black women do not take advantage of the services is because of the color-blind approach which does not acknowledge cultural differences among women; the “attitudes and actions” targeted toward non-white women in need were more attentive; and white privilege which resulted in a reluctance to amend policies to meet the needs of women of color (58).
The aforementioned problems African American women in need face when seeking assistance is the reason alternatives to medical treatment should be explored. Whereas Stanford's study examined alternative forms of healing presented in the works of select African American novelists Sapphire, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, and Bebe Moore Campbell, my study moves away from novels and considers how the stage—specifically, plays that depict violent interactions between black men and women—can become spaces of healing. African American women have culturally specific experiences with sexual assault and intimate partner violence and they therefore require modes of interventions that address those differences. Combating domestic violence within the African American community requires an approach that relies more on the community than on law enforcement. African American drama is rich with plays about abuse within the African American community. This project offers a critical examination of a select group of these works and considers how these practices may be transformed into real-life practices that can assist women suffering from violence.

Work exploring the relationship between the stage and activism has gained some headway. In “Preventing Domestic Violence in the African American Community: The Rationale for Popular Culture Interventions,” William Oliver explores the stage as an alternative approach to bringing attention to the issue of intimate partner violence. He argues that the gospel play is a catalyst for talking about the effects of domestic violence within the African American community, and more particularly, how to put an end to it and other kinds of violence within it.
Oliver’s focus on the gospel play (also called a gospel musical) is particularly interesting for the way it defines a specific type of theatrical performance. Oliver defines the gospel play as a:

theatrical production in which the plot is centered around the main characters’ efforts to cope with a particular situation or adverse circumstances, including alcoholism, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, female-headed families, domestic violence, poverty, and criminal behavior. Throughout the productions, gospel and secular songs are incorporated to create a mood, reflect a transition or transformation, or serve as a course of inspiration. (541)

The gospel play or gospel musical is a popular form of black theatrical productions; however, these plays are almost exclusively produced on the urban circuit—a cultural space that consists of a group of theatre houses located in predominately African American urban communities.

Oliver carefully refers to gospel plays and musicals as black popular culture rather than African American theatre because plays produced and performed on stages on the urban circuit have been problematized by theatre scholars. For example, an excerpt from Paul Carter Harrison’s introduction to Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora attempts to draw a definitive line between African American plays and African American theatre.
Certainly there has always been and will undoubtedly continue to be something called African American drama—including popular entertainments such as revues and urban circuit musicals, melodramas and stock comedies that parody the black experience, as well as socio-historical docudramas and biographies constructed in the usual linear convention of social realism that hold black performance hostage to crude, reductive imitations of life that reliably adhere to the descriptive interpretation of sociological facts….Consequently, it should be evident that the mere presence of black actors on stage, including the novelty of a nontraditional all-black cast performing European classics such as The Cherry Orchard, does not constitute Black Theatre. (4)

Unfortunately, within the field of black theatre, tension exists between urban circuit plays (predominantly attended by poor and working-class African Americans) and black theatre that is sanctioned by both black and whites as a talented craft usually worthy of being produced on Broadway or off-Broadway and is predominantly attended by middle and upper-class African Americans. This divide even goes back to the Harlem Renaissance with a well-known Locke vs. Du Bois debate about the direction of black arts. On the one hand, Alain Locke believed that the construction of the “New Negro” living in a post-Slavery era should display a range of African American characters without being married to and limited by social commentary
and politics. On the other hand, Du Bois did not give a damn for art that was apolitical in nature and believed that all art is propaganda.

Despite the complexities involved with categorizing urban circuit plays as theatre, Oliver’s discussion about the usefulness of these staged performances is important. He highlights the fact that urban circuit producers boldly address domestic violence and other topics like rape, drug use, and substance abuse. Moreover, these plays are successfully attended by poor and working-class African Americans to address the seriousness of intimate partner violence. This demographic is important because contemporary research on domestic violence suggests that economic hardship is one of the leading contributing factors of domestic violence. As critics Miller and Iovanni note, “Women living in poverty face greater risk of violence than other women and have fewer resources to draw on for assistance” (288).

Oliver outlines five ways that gospel plays can be used to prevent or intervene in domestic violence. First, the production can be used to educate African Americans about the root causes of domestic violence. Second, it can inform the audience about suitable types of intervention services. Third, the performances showcase nonviolent ways of communicating and model positive behavior. Fourth, the characters promote peer communication about the issue of domestic violence. Fifth, the plays operate as an educational outing for people involved in support groups or living in shelters (Oliver 541).
Urban circuit theatrical productions do a good job of getting their messages to low-income and poverty-stricken blacks who represent a dire social group. However, the plays produced on the urban circuit are criticized as being formulaic, not fully developed, or an illegitimate form of black theatre. Simply put, urban circuit plays, gospel plays and musicals have a negative reputation of being incapable of crossing over from mere entertainment into art. This in turn creates a gap whereby many middle-class blacks may not get the message urban circuit playwrights employ, because the aforementioned class separation within black entertainment could prevent middle and upper-class black theatregoers from visiting urban circuit performances where resolutions around intimate partner violence are routinely displayed on stage. Even Henry Louis Gates was warned by Amiri Baraka to avoid going to watch an urban circuit performance because he was about to step into trouble. By “trouble,” Baraka meant performances by and for urban African Americans.

Distinctions between classes are practically non-existence when comparing the rates of physical and sexual abuse black women endure. While it is true that African Americans from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds may experience domestic violence more than middle-class women, reports claiming that “African American women experience intimate partner violence at a rate 35% higher than that of white women and approximately 2.5 times of that of women of other races,” do not separate the race into class categories and therefore refer to all black women.

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(Arnette, Mascaro, Santana, Davis, Kaslow 910). This means that African American women across class lines can benefit from alternatives that service different cultural needs.

Prince George County, Maryland for example, is the richest predominantly African American county in America, but a U.S. Census Report of the county found they have a high rate of intimate partner violence. Sadly, while it is one of the most affluent black communities, Prince George’s County also has one of the state’s highest rates of reported domestic violence cases. In October 2006, *Essence Magazine* published “The Secret Shame of Prince George’s County,” which exposed the horrible truth that intimate partner violence is plaguing Prince George’s County’s affluent residents. *Essence Magazine* reported that between June 2005 and publication of the article in October 2006, there were nine domestic-abuse deaths (218). Additionally, the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence reported that there were more than 5,000 cases of domestic violence filed, a finding that earned Prince George’s County the highest rating for reports of domestic disputes in the state of Maryland in 2005.\(^8\) These statistics repudiate the idea that domestic violence is a poor people problem. And, if we factor in the number of women who do not tell others about the abuse in their home, like Veronica Ginyard, then we see the problem as escalated beyond the reported numbers. Ginyard, a mother of eight told *Essence* that she was so embarrassed about being in an abusive marriage that she avoided her family. She disclosed this about her 13-year marriage, “On the outside I

\(^8\) In 2005, Prince George County had over 21% reports of domestic disputes earning the highest rate of reports in the state (*Thomas-Lester and Helderman*).
was smiling, but on the inside as soon as we hit the doorway, all he had suppressed during the day would come flying out” (218). When it came to getting the police involved, Ginyard said, “I called the police a couple of times, but then I’d tell them to go away [...] Until you’re ready to leave, you don’t want the police involved because you know you’re going to get hurt later. He once told me, ‘If I get arrested, I’m going to kill you’” (219). Clearly, there is a need for all African American women to have alternative means of support, knowledge, and refuge besides dialing 911 after a physical fight with a partner.

**VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND FEMINIST INTERVENTION**

Unfortunately, far too many African American women who feel cornered by the lack of support and understanding from mainstream services decide to retaliate violently and this response can be fatal and life-changing. Beth Richie assesses this scenario in *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women* (1996). She states that the white feminist movement’s increased reliance on law enforcement has been detrimental for black women. In “A Black Feminist Reflection on the Antiviolence Movement” Richie said that

while the anti-violence movement is working to improve arrest policies, everyday safety in communities of color is being threatened by more aggressive policing, which has resulted in increased use of force, mass incarceration, and brutality. The conflict between the anti-violence movement’s strategy and
the experiences of low-income communities of color has seriously undermined our work as feminists of color fighting violence against women. (54)

Richie’s five-year research study on the overlap between domestic violence, the feminist movement, and the criminal justice system has shown that women of color in general and black women in particular have suffered from the movement’s dependence on law enforcement. Richie uses gender entrapment to “describe the socially constructed process whereby African American women who are vulnerable to men’s violence in their intimate relationships are penalized for behaviors they engage in even when the behaviors are logical extensions of their racialized gender identities, their culturally expected gender roles, and the violence in their intimate relationships” (Richie 4). The theory of gender entrapment further advocates for alternative approaches to end domestic violence in order to appropriately address the needs of African American women.

While organizing at the grassroots level, second-wave feminists created positive strides such as the national domestic violence hotline. Although intended to help, many of these national services started by feminists in the 70s and 80s have silenced, erased, and aided in the increased incarceration of black women and men. Grouping all women into one category seemed like a good idea at the height of the antiviolence movement, but mantras like “It can happen to any woman” became synonymous with “it can happen to the ones in power” (Richie 53). The outcome of overlooking cultural, racial, economical, and geographical differences has been
erasure. And when women from the margins are not heard, appropriate prevention programs are not valued or incorporated into the infrastructure on a national level. Black women, then, clearly need support services and approaches to end intimate partner violence that address their specific needs.

Intimate partner violence is one important area of this study and sexual assault is the other. Therefore, it is also important to explore some of the ways racism has impacted the sexuality and the physical body of African American women. In the opening chapter of her book *Women, Race, & Class*, “The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood,” Angela Davis talks about the dehumanizing process of American Slavery on both black women and men. She reminds readers that black women were equal in their oppression in that they were expected to pick as much cotton as black men and were seen as able to work just as hard. However, Davis notes, “it is important to remember that the punishment inflicted on women exceeded in the intensity and the punishment suffered by their men, for women were not only whipped and mutilated, they were also *raped*.” She adds that “Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men” (24-25).

Under a system that legalized sexual terrorism against black women, there was no legal defense for black women and many relied on alternative means of take control over their body. Under Slavery, black women’s bodies were property, raped frequently for both the sexual satisfaction of white men and procreation. The story
of Margaret Garner, inspiration for Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, highlights the extreme measures used by some enslaved women in order to prevent their children, especially their daughters, from experiencing inhuman conditions. Garner killed her daughter when slave catchers found her and threatened to return the family into Slavery. While the Garner case was rare; poisoning the food of slave masters, committing infanticide, administering home-remedy abortions, burning down homes, and running away were more popular forms of resistance. Black women in the United States have a long history of fighting against rape and for the ability to control their bodies (Giddings 39-40).

While enslaved black women resisted legalized sexual terrorism during Slavery, post-Emancipation black women are still affected by the stereotypes created by white men used to justify their inhuman behavior. As Carolyn M. West’s edited collection of essays written by clinical psychologists and medical practitioners, *Violence in the Lives of Black Women: Battered, Black and Blue* (2002), informs, black women face an *added burden* because of American sexual myths, stereotypes, and caricatures that are aimed specifically at them. The rape myths\(^9\) of the matriarch and the jezebel aimed at African American women have historically made it more complicated for black women to tell their stories because the women risk not being heard, believed, or understood. Therefore, rape myths impede upon, decrease, or halt the healing process (97).

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\(^9\) Rape Myths are “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (West 97).
The myth of the matriarch, popularized in the 1960s government report by Daniel Moynihan, portrays black women as able to leap over tall buildings in a single bound, withstand all forms of oppression, and fight any man, woman, or child that stands in their way. Accordingly, the matriarch stereotype presents women as overly aggressive, able to tolerate all adversity, and emasculates men. The matriarch is the antecedent of the contemporary “Independent Woman” or “Strong Black Woman.” However, black women’s acceptance of the strong black woman stance is often in defense of being burdened by racism, sexism, and classism. In Cheryl Thompson’s *Psychotherapy with African American Women: Innovations in Psychodynamic Perspectives and Practice* (2000), she notes that “African American women have a tradition of bearing their suffering as if it is inevitable and sometimes as if it is a manifestation of their ethnic identity.” She adds that this perception of one’s self prevents many black women from seeing their sufferings (240). Such practices lead many African American women to perceive “the need to ask for and accept help from anyone as an intolerable expression of weakness. Seeking psychotherapy is often seen as a sign of weakness for many African American women, a problem that can delay their obtaining much-needed help” (240). In Trudier Harris’s *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*, she highlights that even within the pages of African American literature, there is a running theme of black women who are “perceived as working beyond endurance, always giving, and capable of protecting others, but never themselves needing protection” (Harris 4).
Besides the super-hero myth of the matriarch, black women are also hindered in their healing process by the myth of the jezebel which defines black women as sexually available. Historically, this caricature gave an alibi to white men who sexually assaulted black women (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 80). Rather than admitting that they found black women attractive, white men constructed lies that eroticized black women’s bodies and created the tale of black women being sexual temptresses. The pervasiveness of this asking-for-it myth is in direct opposition to black women defending themselves once they have been sexually assaulted. Black women’s believability is at stake—“compared to other women, Black rape survivors are judged as less truthful and more to blame for their rapes” (Donovan and Williams 103).

Together, rape myths about black women present a complex and complicated web that is harmful for black women. As Clifton Marsh points out, Images and expectations of Black women are both super-human and sub-human: unattractive but exotic, passive but rabble rousing, street-wise but insipid, considered evil but self-sacrificing, stupid but conniving, domineering yet obedient to Black men, and sexually inhibited yet promiscuous. (Marsh 150)

The images available to black women who are abused are conflicting and when added to living in a society saturated with institutionalized racism, many black women are left with nowhere to turn. Their response, overwhelmingly, has been to
remain silent. Black women have developed a culture of silence around sexual assault and intimate partner violence. “Although stories of victimization were passed down through the generations as a way of preparing Black girls to protect themselves, in general, Black women [are] reluctant to speak publicly or privately about their assaults” (Donovan and Williams 100). Unfortunately, this silence makes it extremely difficult for black women to receive the proper support.

When black women do overcome the culture of silence around abuse they are most likely to confront inept and inadequate mainstream services. Consequently, these inadequacies provide exigency for projects that explore alternative ways to speak out and about intimate partner violence and sexual assault. Patricia Hill Collins has commented that “African American women not only have developed distinctive interpretations of Black women’s oppression but have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself (Black Feminist Thought 746). One place known for promoting healing through expression is found within African American art. This dissertation aims to show that African American drama can be one of those varied sources of healing because these plays written by African American women playwrights elucidates the importance of having a public dialogue about violence against black women.

Theoretical Concepts Within Black Feminist Theatre

Although Oliver Williams examines the stage as a catalyst for getting the black urban community to openly discuss intimate partner violence so that healing
may begin, what is left unexplored is how black theatre uses the stage and the topic of sexual assault. In short, his analysis of black popular entertainment rather than black theatre, but my discussion of the stage as a catalyst of healing focuses on black theatre—black feminist theatre more specifically. Similarly to critics of black feminist thought, scholars working in black feminist drama have a long history of speaking from the intersection of gender, class, and race. As early as the nineteenth century, black women produced literature—slave narratives, novels, drama, poetry, and criticism and theory—that has relentlessly called attention to sexism and racism. Although the writings from women like Anna Julia Cooper, Sojourner Truth, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett enacted before feminist terminology evolved (Guy-Sheftall), contemporary black feminists rightfully claim these women as foremothers. Patricia Hill Collins reminds us that these famously known women were “nurtured by the support of countless, ordinary African American women who, through strategies of everyday resistance, created a powerful foundation for this more visible black feminist activist tradition. Such support has been essential to the shape and goals of black feminist thought” (Collins, “The Social” 338).

Black feminism, defined in a variety of ways by numerous scholars, critics, and activists, is broadly “the belief that [black] women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities—intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic” (Cleage 28). Black feminism looks specifically at violence against women and family life of black women in America (Collins). Black feminism, as defined by Deborah E. McDowell,
“proceeds to challenge a fundamental assumption: that they experiences of white women, white men, and black men are normative, and black women’s experiences are deviant” (7).

In 2008, Lisa Anderson published Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama, the first book-length study that transports black feminism into theatre to uncover a black feminist theatre aesthetic. Anderson’s rubric for the black feminist theatre aesthetic has ten main aspects. She notes that no single play has to have all the elements; they are:

1. Uses incidents in the history of black in the United States, the diaspora, and Africa to tell a history that is generally unknown to most people in the United States, black and whites;
2. Creates “imagines histories” to fill in the gaps in the histories of black women, particularly black lesbians, gay men, and other black “queers,” whose histories have been left out;
3. Directly confronts the racist, sexist images of black women that have been projected by the dominant culture;
4. Also confronts the racist images that describe black men as aggressive and/or as rapists;
5. Reveals the abuse that black women suffer at the hands of men of all races;
6. Demonstrates the ways in which institutional racism affects blacks in their dealings with whites and with other blacks;
7. Emphasizes the importance of reproductive freedom for black women;

8. Incorporates oral folk culture or oral urban culture, depending on the focus of the work;

9. Looks deeply into the lives of young women and the challenges that face them, including gang life and education;

10. Addresses an important audience, whether that audience is black women, black people in general, or everyone. (115-116)

These ten points denote style, themes, and context of contemporary black women playwrights as well as the evolution of black feminist theory and criticism. In fact, these ten elements are the “dramatic representation” of black feminism and the “realization of the aesthetics embedded in black feminist theory” (116).

Anderson places importance on black women scholars recognizing and defining their own aesthetic in theatre, because others can misread, misunderstand, or miss altogether the ways that black women playwrights express their feminism. She remarks that black feminist drama has been poorly handled and misunderstood by non-black feminists scholars. For example, Anderson refers to a comment by Sue-Ellen Case, one of the preeminent scholars of feminist drama, to illustrate how non-black women can fail to recognize the significance of race and gender in drama. Case says this of Adrienne Kennedy’s play Funnyhouse of a Negro, “though Kennedy’s plays are not explicitly feminist, her leading female characters situate the effects of racism within a female subject (Case 102). Anderson offers the following criticism
A black feminist analysis of Kennedy's work reveals that she cannot separate the effects of racism and sexism; characters such as Sarah in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* are in their predicaments precisely because of their race and sex. In other words, Kennedy does not just create black characters; she creates black *female* characters who struggle with their sex and race. (13)

Anderson uses this excerpt to illustrate the significance of introducing black feminist criticism in theatre. Just as black women within the larger feminist movement found it necessary to point out the monolith, color-blind, and therefore inherently racist applications of feminist theories, Anderson shows that this must be done in theatre studies as well. Because the worldview of black women playwrights is different from white women playwrights, they may express their feminism in esoteric ways and black women scholars should stand in the gap.

Although Anderson developed this aesthetic based upon contemporary plays of the late 20th century and early 21st century, she acknowledges that the roots of black feminist drama are evident in the plays written by early black women playwrights. Black feminist drama, according to Lisa Anderson, is grounded in black

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10 I agree most with the definition of Black feminist criticism as defined by Deborah McDowell. She defines it as “black female critics who analyze the works of black female writers from a feminist perspective. But the term can also apply to any criticism written by a black woman regardless of her subject or perspective—a book written by a male from a feminist or political perspective, a book written by a black woman or about black women authors in general, or any writings by women” (McDowell 11).
feminist aesthetics. She credits Barbara Christian, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith, Valerie Smith, Deborah E. McDowell, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and many other pioneering black feminists for inspiring her theoretical framework.

Anderson presents an inclusive, rather than a restrictive, definition of black feminist drama. She does so by pointing out the way in which Black feminist drama “embraces the history of black women in the United States, Africa, and the rest of the [black] diaspora, and seeks to recover and remember our foremothers. It is critical of violence against women, and critical of men when necessary. It is at times nationalist, and separatist, or both, or neither” (Anderson 14). True to a feminist ideology in any discipline, violence against women remains an aspect of concern for black feminist dramatists.

Although black feminist drama has evolved over the decades, from one-act propaganda plays to multi-act dramas, it continues to posit violence against women as a paramount concern. Many of the early black women playwrights (writing before 1950) like Georgia Douglas Johnson, the most prolific anti-lynching playwright; Eulalie Spence; Zora Neale Hurston; Myrtle Smith Livingston; and Marita Bonner are known for writing plays that bring attention to America’s racially hostile environment. During the dawn of the 20th century, these women contributed to the rich body of literature called “native dramas.” Native dramas “emerged in Harlem during the early 1920s as part of the Little Negro Theatre Movement” and they are comprised of two types “race or propaganda plays” and “folk plays” (Perkins 3). The close examination of early twentieth century playwrights illustrate
that black women playwrights were concerned about the status of black women’s ability to handle color and gender oppression. Contemporary black female playwrights write about the same social ills.

**Womanist Restorative Drama: A New Theoretical Concept**

This study builds upon Anderson’s definition of a black feminist theatre aesthetic by looking within the category of black feminist plays and locating ones that situate violence against women as a dominant theme. I have labeled these plays Womanist Restorative Drama. Womanist restorative drama encompasses staged poetic expressions, theatrical productions, one-act skits, and full-length plays. In thinking about a phrase that would best fit the subcategory of plays, I chose the term “womanist” rather than “feminist” because the plays use black feminist tropes (which emphasize the end of sexual and domestic violence) to facilitate restoration of the entire black community—and community is a dominant trait of womanism. Most of these playwrights define themselves as feminists rather than womanists. I, however, feel that their work—as a collective whole—is womanist. In short, these feminist plays when examined together, do not stop at feminism, but become a tool to be used to get to a broader end—healing of the entire black community.

“Womanist” is a term that Walker first used in a short story “Coming Apart” (1979), but later developed into an ideology and theoretical concept in 1983 in her text *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. For Walker, womanist is “A black feminist or feminist of color... committed to the survival and wholeness of an
entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health” (Walker xi). In Layli Phillips’, *The Womanist Reader*, she defines womanism as a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension (xx).

Phillips promotes the idea that womanism is much larger than feminism. In fact, she says that feminism is just one part of womanism. “Feminism is like a particular kind of magnifying lens that highlights certain womanist political concerns but not others.” One of these concerns, she explains “is that critical perspective and social movement that revolves around the eradication of sexism, the dismantling of patriarchy, and the elimination of violence against women (xxxv). By employing a feminist methodology, I have gathered plays that are primarily invested in combating violence against women. However, the majority of the playwrights present in this study use black feminism toward a womanist end. Phillips poignantly and succinctly wraps up womanism as a “social-change perspective that focuses on harmonizing and coordinating difference, ending all forms of oppression and dehumanization, and promoting well-being and commonwealth for all people, regardless of identity, social address, or origins” (Phillips xxxv).
Just as black feminism has evolved over time, so has womanism. Since Alice Walker first introduced the theoretical approach into literary criticism, it has been applied by scholars in Gender studies, Ethnic Studies, Anthropology, Psychology, Education, Religious Studies and many other fields. In addition to the term being used in other fields, it has also gained some interesting qualifiers. For example, Chikwenye Okono Ogunyemi, who claims to have arrived at the term “Black womanism” independently from Alice Walker’s womanism, defines Black womanism as “a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideas of black life, while giving balanced presentation of black womandom ... its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive integrative endings of womanist novels” (Ogunyemi 72). Additionally, Clenora Hudson-Weems introduces Africana Womanism which she, like Ogunyemi, describes as different from Walker’s concept.

Hudson-Weems claims that Africana womanism is unlike Walker’s womanism and in that it is significantly different from the mainstream feminism. She explains,

Africana men and women do not accept the idea of Africana women as feminist. There is a general consensus in the Africana community that the feminist movement, by and large, is the White woman’s movement for two reasons. First, the Africana woman does not see the man as her primary enemy as does the White feminist, who is carrying out an age-old battle
with her White male counterpart for subjugating her as his property. Africana men have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress Africana women as White men have had to oppress White women. ... Second, Africana women reject the feminist movement because of their apprehension and distrust of White organizations. (Phillips 50)

Hudson-Weems’ Africana womanism is not only separate from feminism, but also different from Walker’s womanism. I, however, find Walker’s womanism much more useful because it recognizes the connections between womanism and feminism. After all, Walker’s final definition of womanism is “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (xii).

“Restorative” is a term appropriated from the alternative judicial process of restorative justice. Restorative justice “is a movement within (and sometimes outside of) the criminal justice system, a victim-centered approach, with special relevance to marginalized populations, one of which is women” (van Wormer 109). The essential premise of restorative justice, according to Presser and Gaarder’s article “Can Restorative Justice Reduce Battering?” is that the victim cannot heal nor the offender change without receiving community support and addressing any social norms that tacitly tolerate violence against women. Restorative justice holds the offender accountable, placing the one abused in a position to speak about the situation and receive a public apology. In order to do this, the community must be a supportive entity. Kay Pranis explains, “Community-based processes that have
emerged in the restorative justice movement offer hope that in the response to family violence a larger group of parties can be engaged to influence the offender, to create safety nets for victims and to stimulate a larger community discussion about the origin of such behavior” (25).

I find restorative justice’s purpose of “reconciliation rather than punishment, healing rather than retribution,” (van Wormer 107) dependence on community, and feminist foundation—“All human beings have dignity and value, relationships are more important than power, and the personal is political” (Pranis 23)—compatible with the goal of the plays. Restorative justice, in some circles, is being called a “feminist version of justice” (Presser and Gaarder 176). Restorative justice is a concept that was also explored because there was an “increase awareness of inadequacies in the criminal justice system in meeting the needs of victims of crime” (van Wormer 107). Additionally, like the plays within woman restorative drama, restorative justice acknowledges that “Healing for the victim involves the opportunity for story-telling in a forum that encourages the telling and validates the story” (Presser and Gaarder 184).

With a tool box equipped with black feminism, womanist theory, and restorative justice, I have constructed the six core components of womanist restorative drama. The plays may emphasize one more than the other, but all the elements are present in each play. The six elements are

1. The plays emphasize the narratives or experiences of black women and/or girls who have been sexually abused or directly involved in intimate partner
violence.\textsuperscript{11} These women and/or girls may be American, Caribbean, African, or from any place within the black Diaspora. Their painful stories are allowed to be graphic, crippling, or paralyzing, and the plays may require the use of disturbing on-stage imagery to convey the depth of a woman's and/or girl's emotional scars.

2. The plays demonstrate the playwright's awareness, appreciation, or understanding of black feminist and womanist aesthetics and theories. Complex theories about black women's oppression are usually presented in universal terms that audience members or readers can understand.

3. The plays discuss or highlight the important connection between an individual and the community with regard to healing. Healing is a never-ending journey. A suggestion toward healing or the display of a healing process can happen on stage in the midst of the production, during a post-performance activity, or both. The community support emerges thematically as a strong undercurrent that can propel a woman's and/or girl's recovery when actively involved or that can lead to her physical or psychological demise if it is absent.

4. The plays may or may not include male characters, but the impact of a male presence is usually discernable. Men may be scrutinized harshly, mildly, or not at all given the play's secondary agendas.

\textsuperscript{11} I will use the term “intimate partner violence” interchangeably with “domestic violence” throughout the paper. The terms refer to violent abuse between man and woman, husband and wife, and lesbian couples.
5. The women and/or girls who have survived the abuse rarely or never describe themselves as “victims” or “battered women.” Playwrights select language carefully so that it does not remove agency and the feeling of empowerment from the survivors.

6. The plays contain elements of spirituality, ritual, or communion. God Himself/Herself functions as an active force; a spiritual realm is acknowledged and called upon, or a connection between two or more characters is perceived as having a positive impact on one’s soul.

Womanist restorative drama functions as a vehicle for exposing race, class, and gender silences that black women encounter. These plays serve to inspire real-life liberation and healing. Women characters are more than supporting cast members left alone to cope with their oppression, silence, and violation. Womanist restorative drama positions black women’s narratives of sexual assault and intimate partner violence center-stage, allowing them to speak, sing, dance, or express themselves any way they find suitable.

To further illustrate my point, I will use a tree metaphor. From the fertile soil of black literature, various trees are birthed—just like in nature there are different types, colors, and sizes of trees. Some trees can represent the literary expression of Caribbean life, West African culture, or black American experiences. This project identifies one of the branches growing from the trunk of black feminist drama. Black feminist drama, identified in Lisa Anderson *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (2008) represents a type of tree. Womanist restorative drama is then, a smaller,
growing branch on that tree. It encompasses a lesser quantity of plays because not every play written by a black feminist or womanist is a womanist restorative drama.

For example, Lorraine Hansberry’s award-winning play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) belongs to the tree of black feminist drama, but is does not have the necessary elements to be classified as a womanist restorative drama. *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first play written by an African American woman to be produced on Broadway. The performance is described as being “a peak of feminist playwriting” (Anderson 7). The play was the longest-running play by an African American woman until Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* was produced on Broadway almost two decades later. Shange’s work will be discussed in Chapter two.

*A Raisin in the Sun* consists of a mounting domestic conflict before the Younger family moves to Clybourne Park—the segregated white neighborhood. Mama even has to tell Walter Lee (her son) to “talk to your wife civil.” And right after Mama reprimands Walter Lee, Ruth (Walter’s wife) responds “Oh, let him go on out and drink himself to death! He makes me sick to my stomach! *(She flings her coat against him),” to which Walter Lee “(violently)” replies “And you turn mine too baby!” (Hansberry 123). Because Lorraine Hansberry chose to allow other characters to take over the stage, the marital tension between Ruth and Walter Lee is gradually diffused into silence and forgotten. Elements of womanist restorative drama are present here, but they are not fully developed. The play would be an example of womanist restorative drama if Ruth were allowed to take center-stage
and give voice to the frustration of living with her mother-in-law when her husband should be the provider, the heartache of watching her husband turn cold towards her and spend more time at the bar, the sadness of discovering that she is pregnant and Walter is not happy, the torment of contemplating an illegal abortion in unsanitary conditions, and the pain of her coping with her young son's desire to work after school because he recognizes the family is poor. As not all plays that are written by a black woman playwright are categorized as feminist, not all feminist plays are womanist restorative dramas. When the presence of violence and violation are moved from the wings and placed center-stage, womanist restorative drama emerges.

**Structure of Study and Biographical Information of Playwrights**

This dissertation contains five chapters. Chapter 1, provides the rational and exigency for this project. It illustrates the various theories and methodologies that I build upon and depart from in my arrival of womanist restorative drama as well as shows which scholars I situate my scholarship alongside. This chapter’s goal is to define the concept of womanist restorative drama so that all the other chapters, where I apply the frame can be understood easily.

Although my focus is on contemporary black women playwrights, I found it paramount to show that today’s playwrights are not writing in isolation and that their works are an evolution of themes that have appeared in some black women’s plays since the early 20th century. In Chapter 2, “Breaking the Silence: The
Conception and Birth of Womanist Restorative Drama,” I discuss Georgia Douglas Johnson, a writer during the early twentieth century, and label her as one of the most prominent playwrights to focus on sexual assault. During this earlier period, when black American writers were developing the written craft of playwriting, all six elements of womanist restorative drama were not apparent in each of these plays, but the evidence of the coming genre is present.

Georgia Douglas Johnson, born in 1880 in Marietta, Georgia, is known most often as a poet, but she also wrote musical compositions and twenty-eight plays. Of these plays, five were published in her lifetime—*A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), *Blue Blood* (1926), *Plumes* (1927), *Frederick Douglass* (1935), *Williams and Ellen Craft* (1935)—and only three (*Blue Blood*, *Plumes*, and *Frederick Douglass*) were produced. Unlike Eulalie Spence, Johnson wrote folk dramas and propaganda plays. Her plays can be divided into four categories: Radio Plays, Primitive Life Plays, Plays of average Negro Life, Lynching Plays (Stephens 3). Johnson was the most prolific anti-lynching playwright in America. According to Judith Stephens, Johnson is the central figure in the lynching-drama tradition, a dramatic genre formed by the responses of playwrights to the racial violence of lynching. She was the first playwright to name and develop a category of drama that drew attention specifically to the injustice of lynching and its effects on families. (33)
In addition to plays about lynching, Johnson wrote about sexual assaults against black women in some of her plays. Perhaps because of her biracial background—her father was a wealthy white man who was not present in her life and her mother was black, she understood black women's sexual vulnerability. One of these plays, *Blue Blood* will be analyzed in Chapter 2.

Georgia Douglass Johnson represents the conception of womanist restorative, but the birth occurred in 1974 with the release of Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*. In 1948, Ntozake Shange (Paulette Williams) was born in Trenton, New Jersey. In 1966, at the age of eighteen she attempted suicide for the first time. Over the years, the attempts continued and included sticking her head in a gas oven, drinking chemicals, slashing her wrists, overdosing, and even driving her car into the ocean. All of these attempts were “predicated upon her suppression of rage against a society that places harnesses on women” (Brown-Guillory 42-43). Shange wrote a novella, two novels, a nonfiction book, and three volumes of poetry. Her theatrical pieces (a name she prefers over “plays”) are *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1974), *A Photograph* (1977), *Black & White Two-Dimensional Planes* (1978), *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* (1978), *Spell #7* (1979), *From Okra to Greens* (1981), *Three Views of Mt. Fuji* (1981), *A Daughter’s Geography* (1982), *Daddy Says* (1989), and *The Love Space Demands* (1992). *For colored girls* was very popular during its release, has been revived on Broadway, is still being performed on college campuses and by theatre groups across the country, and is
one of the most memorable performances that many of the contemporary playwrights note as their inspiration. Pearl Cleage said “Ten minutes into the piece, I started weeping in surprise and gratitude and I wept throughout the play. It was like hearing my own voice in seven different bodies... seeing the play changed my life” (Turner 100). Ntozake Shange introduces the choreopoem onto the American stage. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory noted

Shange carved for herself a permanent and classic place in American theater history when she successfully broadened and redefined American theatre to include the choreopoem as an acceptable, legitimate dramatic form. Not only did she popularize the choreopoem, but she brought to the American theater an art that is undeniably African. Shange’s choreopoem, like African theater, is comprised of chants, poetry, dance, and rituals. With the popular appeal and commercial success of For Colored Girls, American theater would never be the same. (41)

I selected Shange’s theatrical piece because not only was it avant-garde at the time, it also marks the first Broadway success for a performance written by an African American woman about the sexual assault and intimate partner violence black women experience. Her choreopoem includes both themes almost equally, but as shown later, contemporary playwrights have developed womanist restorative drama to have a primary focus on one of the other. Shange’s choreopoem rounds the
historical chapter. The latter chapters are divided up thematically between intimate partner violence and sexual assault—there are two plays per theme.

Chapter 3, “Zero Tolerance: Womanist Restorative Drama and Intimate Partner Violence,” examines Lynn Nottage’s *Poof!* and Pearl Cleage’s *Flyin’ West*. This chapter explores how these two plays demonstrate the elements of womanist restorative drama as well as how they use spirituality as a dominant theme and as a source of power to end intimate partner violence for good. Both of the plays rely strongly on the spiritual world as conceived within African cosmology. Lynn Nottage is one today’s most popular playwrights. Her collection of plays include: *A Stone’s Throw* (2006); *Intimate Apparel* (2004); *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (1995); *Mud, River, Stone* (1997); *Poof!* (1993), *Por’ Knockers* (1995); *Las Meninas* (2000); *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004); and *Ruined* (2009). Nottage is from Brooklyn, New York and is a 2007 recipient of the MacArthur Genius award in 2007. In an interview with Sandra Shannon, Nottage said that she feels that she is “rescuing our voices from history. We, as African American women, don’t see ourselves in the history books. We don’t see ourselves in the literature, unless of course, we’re serving the cold refreshments or nannying the children. And I think we play a much greater role” (200). Nottage is invested in bringing black women out from the marginal backdrop and in the center. She says, “The black male is there, but I am telling a story of the black woman. It’s my story, and I don’t feel like I have to tell this story of the black male. August Wilson told that story” (Shannon 199).
Pearl Cleage has published two one-act plays *Chain* and *Late Bus to Mecca*; three full-length plays *Flyin’ West*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, and *Bourbon at the Border* and a number of unpublished plays she wrote as a college student. Cleage was born in Springfield, MA, but arrived in Atlanta, GA as a twenty year old college student and has remained there. Although the aforementioned six plays have been popular for Cleage, she has devoted the last ten years to writing literary fiction and has published five novels. Because of funding cutbacks that created compromises in the work, she feels “with a novel you can control everything—the quality was guaranteed by me” (Turner 101). Although Cleage has experimented with form, she is most comfortable using a traditional structure as she does with *Flyin’ West*, the plays analyzed in Chapter 3. In addition to this being one of Cleage’s most produced plays, it is the first time she introduces two men. *Flyin’ West* is a way to “talk about contemporary issues, like race, gender, class, feminist issues” (Monroe 31).

Chapters 4 and 5, “We are Because I am”: The Importance of Community in Womanist Restorative Drama” and “Transcending Differences to Connect with Our Sisters: Womanist Restorative Drama and Sexual Violence in the Congo” by Susan-Lori Parks and Lynn Nottage respectively, are about sexual assault against black women. The sexual assault plays warranted their own chapters, because these two playwrights represent the only black women to have won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and their styles, techniques, and content ventures into new territory. Chapter 4 explores Suzan-Lori Parks’s play *In the Blood* (2001). Suzan-Lori Parks is a trailblazer. She is the first black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, which
she won in 2002 for her play *Topdog/Underdog*. The in the author’s note about the play she remarked that “This is a play about family wounds and healing. Welcome to the family.” Parks has her own style of playwriting which comes equip with its own language, original songs, unusual line breaks in her stage directions, and more. She is a recipient of the MacArthur “Genius” Award and she was included in *Time Magazine*’s “100 Innovators for the Next New Wave” (Geis). Parks is a former student of James Baldwin and, similarly to his work, hers is now a part of the American canon. She, however, not only benefitted from the legacy of a great African American male playwright, novelist, and essayist, James Baldwin, but also black women playwrights. Ntozake Shange and Adrienne Kennedy, according to literary scholar Deborah R. Geis, are among the most influential women playwrights. Geis writes, “While Kennedy’s work inspired Parks’s fragmentation of characters and diminishment of play in favor of repeated and unfolding stories, Shange influenced her freedom with language, specifically the freedom to rebel against white, Western standardizations of English” (9).

Parks has been criticized for questioning, defying, and challenging the status quo in not only the black American theatre scene, but also in the canon of American theatre. As a young African American adult who was raised in a family that exposed her to other cultures during the 1980s, her outlook on blackness shaped her theoretical approach to African American literature. This, I argue, aligns her with the New Black Aesthetic (NBA) writers. The New Black Aesthetic, as introduced by Trey Ellis, consists of “cultural mulattoes” who
“synthesize that last two black art revivals, the Harlem
Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. In the Twenties
blacks wanted to be considered as good as the dominant
culture. In the Sixties we wanted no part of dominant culture at
all. Today the NBA wants to dominate it. We feel ‘separate but
better’.” (Ellis 250)

Those writers that Ellis claims are his allies in creating the NBA are almost exclusively black men—Spike Lee, Percival Everett, Colson Whitehead, Charles Johnson, and Nathaniel Mackey. Nevertheless, there are fundamental commonalities to approaching and expanding the black literary tradition between Parks and the NBA writers. For instance, Ellis states that the New Black Aesthetic is “an anti-aesthetic that defies definition. The NBA is an attitude of liberalism rather than a restrictive code” (Ellis 251). In her essay “An Equation for Black People Onstage,” Parks writes

“As there is no single ‘Black Experience,’ there is no single
‘Black Aesthetic’ and there is no one way to write or think or
feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted. As African-
Americans we should recognize this insidious essentialism for
what it is: a fucked-up trap to reduce us to only one way of

12 In “The New Black Aesthetic,” Trey Ellis does include the two daughters that Amiri Baraka had with Hettie Cohen as being a part of the NBA.
being. We should endeavor to show the world and ourselves our beautiful and powerfully infinite variety (21).

This quote exemplifies Suzan-Lori Parks’s awareness of the fact that black people are a heterogeneous group. Beyond acknowledging this truth, Parks takes stock in parading black people’s myriad sides, shades, and styles. Even ten years after writing “An Equation for Black People Onstage,” Parks took eight pages to define a black play. This is a sampling of what she told Theatre Journal when she was asked “What is a black play?”

A black play is late.
A black play is RIGHT ON and RIGHT ON TIME.
A black play is deep....
A black play don’t exist.
Every play is a black play.
SAY WHAT?
A black play is a white play when the lights go out.
A black play is a white play when you read between the lines.
A black play knows that when audiences read it primarily though the rubric of ‘race relations,’ that though audiences are suffering from an acute attack of white narcissism. (If you have a need to see yourself reflected in things that are not directly about you, then you are the one afflicted.) (576-578).
While it can be easily proven that African Americans have a wide range of experiences, I believe that there are elements of essentialism within these communities based upon shared racial oppression. If a black play “does not exist,” then black experiences do not exist. It is this idea that Parks enjoys challenging homogeneous notions of blackness. And, she has a creative niche for portraying black diversity and displaying the uncommon story on stage in an appealing fashion. Like many of her early plays (Imperceptible Mutabilites, Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, and Topdog/Underdog), In the Blood is also an example of her ability to select one of the many available tales from the story book of blackness.

Chapter 5 ventures into the black Diaspora with Lynn Nottage’s Ruined (2009). On April 20, 2009, Lynn Nottage was awarded one of America’s highest literary honors—The Pulitzer Prize. This is monumental for a couple of reasons. Firstly, Nottage is only the second African American woman to win the Pulitzer for drama and secondly, it marks the first time that a womanist restorative drama has been honored with, arguably, the highest drama prize.\textsuperscript{13} Because Nottage’s play emphasizes the black Diaspora (an example of awareness intrinsic to having a womanist ideology), she could have been found ineligible for the award. The Pulitzer Prize Board’s criteria for the award states that it is “for a distinguished play by an American author, preferably original in its source and dealing with American life” (Pulitzer.org). Nottage’s win for a play not set in America and about the sexual violence against black women means, if even in part, that womanist restorative

\textsuperscript{13} In 2000, Suzan-Lori Park’s womanist restorative drama In the Blood was a finalist, but not the winner.
drama is gaining ground in the mainstream. Additionally, the notoriety brings attention to the fact that many womanist and black feminist playwrights are not divorced from the black Diaspora and that connection is being acknowledged and celebrated in new ways. During an interview with PRI's The World Nottage was asked if she was surprised to find out that she won the Pulitzer Prize for Ruined because it focuses on Africans and she responded “I was a little surprised, but if I just say something about it not being about the US: I do feel to a certain extent, the play is set in the Congo, it very much touches upon themes that are relevant to the United States.” Because roughly eighty percent of the cell phones, computer chips, and laptops in America rely on a black mineral named coltan, Americans are directly benefitting from the chaotic war in the Congo. As long as no one “technically” owns the precious minerals, the militia men and government officials fight over territory and mass quantities of coltan are stolen and sold on the black market. Moreover, American society, like the Congo, has a high rate of rape cases, a lack of adequate support for rape survivors, and a strong need to cultivate alternative outlets to assist in the healing process.

Together these five chapters work in harmony to expand black feminist and womanist theory into African American literature by emphasizing the genre most overlooked—drama. By focusing on dramatic literature, I aim to add to the growing body of scholarship in the field as well as introduce a new concept. Womanist restorative drama is derived from an interdisciplinary blend of research that delves deeper into the black feminist theatre aesthetic. As the remaining chapters will
demonstrate, womanist restorative drama is invested in breaking silences around black women’s abuse in order to restore the entire black community. When one understands that until women, who are the first teachers, are healed, respected, and proud then the entire community is in need of healing.
Chapter 2

Breaking the Silence: The Conception and Birth of Womanist Restorative Drama in *A Sunday Morning in the South* and *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*

...holding and hiding speech, seems to me now one of the barriers that women have always needed and still need to destroy so that we are no longer pushed into secrecy or silence. (7)

*Talking Back* bell hooks

The early twentieth century was marked by the concept of a New Negro and with it came a surge of black women playwrights who published important works about the lives of Black women, including Zora Neale Hurston, Shirley Graham, Mary P. Burrill, Angelina Grimké, Thelma Duncan, May Miller, Helen Webb Harris, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Myrtle Smith Livingston, Eulalie Spence, Lucy White, and others. The aforementioned list of names is comprised of the more well-known women playwrights who published plays before 1950. Fragments of womanist restorative drama surfaced during the beginning of the twentieth century in conjunction with the development of black American theatre. In 1879, Pauline

\[14\] In terms of black drama Locke explained, “The day of ‘aunties,’ ‘uncles’ and ‘mammies’ is equally gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on, and even the ‘Colonel’ and ‘George’ play barnstorm roles from which they escape with relief when the public spotlight is off. The popular melodrama has about plays itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts” (Locke 5).
Hopkins became the first published African American woman playwright. Her play, *Slaves’ Escape; or, The Underground Railroad* (later renamed *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad*) was published twenty-two years after William Wells Brown became the first African American published playwright for his play *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom.* Hopkins’s nineteenth-century, post-Emancipation musical drama broke ground for black women who aspired to be writers of multiple genres. Following in Hopkins’ precedent, Georgia Douglas Johnson would compose one of the first plays by a black woman about sexual abuse of black women.

This chapter locates the origins of womanist restorative drama in the plays of Negro Renaissance writers and then examines the development of the category in the Black Arts Movement. I will begin by analyzing Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Blue Blood* and then Ntozake Shange’s famous choreopoem. By demonstrating how an early twentieth century playwright used drama to conceptualize the breaking of silence around issues of sexual assault through drama, I hope to situate Shange’s black feminist performance *for color girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* as the birth of womanist restorative drama. The performance combined sexual assault with intimate partner violence. The two plays discussed in this chapter exemplify the foundation upon which contemporary black women

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15 The African Gove Theatre Company is noted as producing the first African American play in 1823, but this play along with William Wells Brown’s first play *Experience; or, How to Give a Northern Man a Backbone* (1856) were never published and there are no known copies of the plays available. In 2008, Eric Gardner’s article on William Jay Greenly’s *Three Drunkards* pose a threat to Brown’s reputation, because his play was published in January of the same year Brown published *The Escape* (Gardner).
playwrights have constructed the six core elements of womanist restorative drama.

Even as Negro Renaissance playwrights were in the active process of debating, drafting, and designing the direction of Negro Art, the six elements of womanist restorative drama could be identified. It would, however, be Shange’s choreopoem that solidifies what elements womanist restorative dramas include.

Black women playwrights writing before 1950 when African American drama was being developed wrote about an array of family issues. In *Black Women Playwrights* Kathy Perkins outlined some of the important characteristics blacks had written during this time. She explains,

> While many of the male playwrights wrote about life in Harlem and other major cities, black women were more diverse in their geographic location, providing a greater sense of the black community on a national level by setting the action in rural communities throughout the country as well as in large cities. The main characters in plays by black women were usually female. These women were often placed in major decision-making roles. In many instances the husband was dead, or absent from the household—perhaps working in another town. The central focus in these women’s plays was usually on the children, with the mother being overly protective because of the times in which they lived. The action for the most part occurred in a domestic setting—the kitchen,
dining room, of living room, and the play usually opened with a woman sewing, cooking, cleaning, or praying—rarely outside or far from the home. Because of this domestic setting, white characters were often absent in these works (2).

Perkins’ description of the characteristics used by early black women dramatists is useful. Perkins’ text is an anthology and therefore, none of the plays are accompanied by an in-depth analysis; however, her description is critical, because as I will demonstrate, many of the same themes, characteristics and settings are used frequently in womanist restorative drama. Johnson’s play is one example of how the domestic setting is selected as focal point of action for the play. However, my discussion of Johnson’s play moves beyond the presentation of facts.

A well documented truth, historically, black women’s bodies have been used as a commodity to be bought, sold, traded, and bred as human capital. As Angela Davis notes, “slaveowners encouraged the terroristic use of rape in order to put Black women in their place” (Women, Race, and Class 24). Black women’s reproductive organs were also examined, prodded, used for medical experimentation, like perfecting the Cesarean section-birth (Taylor). The rape of black women was a way to terrorize the entire black community. During the years immediately following the post-slavery era, black women and girls continued to be raped. Part of Ida B. Wells’ crusades focused on educating a general public that “the rape of helpless Negro girls, which began in slavery days, still continued without reproof from church, state or press” (qtd in Giddings 31). Additionally, when white
men no longer “owned” black women, their perception of black women in the early twentieth century had not changed much. David Krasner notes, “For many white men, [black women] represented an image of foreignness and a ‘colorful’ panacea” (196). Given their social standing, guilt, and personal shame, many Black women turned to silence as a way to cope with rape. Understanding that rape was a prominent, though rarely addressed, issue of concern for Black women, Georgia Douglas Johnson aimed to break the silence surrounding the subject.

Johnson was one of the most prolific anti-lynching women playwrights during the Negro Renaissance era and wrote over a dozen plays (Stephens). However, Blue Blood written by Johnson in (1926) helped to break the silence surrounding the issue of sexual assault. Johnson encouraged black women to break the silence and in this play, she does so by writing about a horrible dilemma that affected the children of two women raped by a white banker. Blue Blood is one of her “Primitive Life Plays” (Stephens). “Primitive” performances were the name whites called productions starring black casts and they were popular in the 20s. “The primitive trope allowed for the reduction of black culture to either inferiority or idealization; primitives may be childlike and violent, but they may also be ‘noble slaves’ (Krasner 195). The “Exotic Primitive” is a close cousin to the Brute and was often used to refer to the black man who was having a good time with women, alcohol and song (Hamalian and Hatch 25). Blue Blood won an honorable mention in Opportunity’s drama competition, it established (along with Plumes) a female-centered precedent for most of Johnson’s later plays, and placed a generally ignored
population on the American stage. It was produced in 1927, published in 1928, and the play was a major contribution to the development of black theatre in the New Negro era (19-21).

Both Stephens’ and Perkins’ texts are helpful in uncovering overlooked plays by early twentieth century women dramatists, but their books do not analyze the plays. Therefore, I have been hard-pressed to find additional analysis of Johnson’s plays that offer a critical examination of this play. *Blue Blood* has five black characters; May Bush, Mrs. Bush, John Temple, Mrs. Temple, and Randolph Strong. The one-act play is located in Georgia “shortly after the Civil War” and it opens inside a large kitchen—a popular setting in black women’s plays. Randolph walks into the home of Mrs. Bush. He is a dark-skinned suitor of Mrs. Bush’s daughter May. Unfortunately, she turned down his marriage proposal the Christmas before and has instead decided to marry John Temple. Mrs. Bush is not happy about her daughter marrying John because “Dark should marry light,” and Mrs. Bush is deeply invested in upholding and perpetuating colorism within the black community (64). Although she does not want her daughter to marry another light-skinned black, she encourages her daughter to be proud that “she’s got blue blood in her veins” (67).

On the day of the wedding, the two mothers find themselves in the kitchen together preparing for the union. What begins as mild feud between the two mothers about who should be happiest that their child is marrying the other’s child, becomes a revelation of a deep secret. While in the kitchen bragging about her
daughter being a mulatto, Mrs. Bush tells Mrs. Temple “you’d fall flat if I told you who he is” (67). When Mrs. Temple asks her to go ahead and tell it, she begins

Who is May? Huh! (proudly tossing her head) Who is May?

(Lowering her voice, confidentially) why ...do you know Cap’n Winfield McCallister, the biggest banker in this town, and who’s got money ‘vested in banks all over Georgia? That ‘ristocrat uv ‘ristocrats ... that Peachtree Street blue blood—

Cap’n McCallister—don’t you know him? (67)

When Mrs. Bush reveals the name of May’s father, Mrs. Temple is paralyzed with shock. Mrs. Temple chokes on a few words trying to find the right ones to say. Mrs. Bush continues to brag about her daughter having the “bluest blood in America in her veins” (68).

Upon hearing the name of May’s father, Mrs. Temple grabs Mrs. Bush’s hands and starts crying. Mrs. Bush is confused and wonders what is wrong. Mrs. Temple begins telling her that when she was engaged to Paul Temple she needed to visit a bank in Georgia.

...one day, in that bank, I met a man. He helped me. He didn’t sign his letters, though. I wouldn’t answer. I tried to keep away. One night he came to the place where I boarded. The woman where I boarded—she helped him—he bribed her. He came into my room—

Mrs. Bush: The dirty devil!
Mrs. Temple: *(continuing her story)*: I cried out. There wasn’t any one there that cared enough to help me, and you know yourself, Mrs. Bush, what little chance there is for women like us in the South, to get justice or redress when these things happen!

Mrs. Bush: Sure, honey, I do know! *(69)*

The verbal exchange between the two women starts to turn from a slight quarrel between two opponents into a supportive conversation between two women. Immediately, when Mrs. Temple begins to tell Mrs. Bush about being sexually assaulted, she transforms into a compassionate person who will stand in as a community for Mrs. Temple. Johnson uses this point to bring attention to the widespread epidemic of sexual assault against black women. Mrs. Temple understands and can relate to Mrs. Temple’s pain because she has been there. Mrs. Temple expounds,

Mother knew—there wasn’t any use trying to punish him. She said I’d be the one...that would suffer.

Mrs. Bush: You done right ... and whut your ma told you is the God’s truth. *(69)*

Johnson draws attention to this point to discuss the history of black women’s silence around sexual assault. Mrs. Temple’s mother tells her to remain silent and it could be assumed that this was advice that her mother received and her mother before
her, which deepens the history of black women's vulnerability. Additionally, Mrs. Bush who is from her same generation offers the same advice. Even today many survivors of sexual abuse are encouraged to remain silent and this scene elucidates that reality that survivors of sexual abuse are encouraged to remain silent. In “Fragmented Silhouettes” an article by Salamishah Tillet, she sheds light into this situation. She writes: “our daily abuses are continually sidelined and how we are forced to remain silent, because of American patriarchal racism on the one hand and African American sexism on the other” (162).

The story of Mrs. Temple’s abuse is kept between the two women for the moment. In this black female space where understanding crosses color and class lines, the two share a common bond. Tillet further explains that “It is within these intellectual and political circles that African American women are able to tell their stories without immediate disbelief. In this place, we will hear about the everyday lives of African American rape survivors. We can also hear the deafening silence” (173). The dialogue between Mrs. Temple and Mrs. Bush illustrates the need to break the silence and how complicated it can be for some sexually abused women. Mrs. Temple speaks about her abuse and Mrs. Bush, while remaining silent about her sexual assault, informs Mrs. Temple that she too understands.

To further highlight the tragedy and pain that silence causes, Johnson adds a tragic twist to Mrs. Temple’s story. As Mrs. Temple continues telling Mrs. Bush about the sexual assault, she informs her that John’s father is Cap’n Winfield McCallister. Realizing for the first time that the two children who are about to marry are brother
and sister, both women are reduced to tears. Their silence has only made things worse. As Tillet explains,

these silences do not mean that these women have healed or have become whole, but rather they cannot speak out. Their victimization is coupled with guilt, inadequacy, self-blame, and self-mutilation. These women walk around with generations of pain inside their bodies, which they pass on to their daughters and their sons. (173)

Silence has been passed on for generations in the Temple family and it is now affecting Mrs. Temple son.

The news changes Mrs. Bush. She no longer wants to keep the sexual abuse a secret because it is affecting her daughter’s prospect of being a bride.

Mrs. Temple *(Looking at watch. Get up, walks up and down excitedly)*: Yes ... we’ve got to think and act quickly! We can’t tell the world why the children didn’t marry ... and cause a scandal ... I’d be ruined!

Mrs. Bush “*(getting irate)*: So far as you is consarned... I ain’t bothered, ’bout your being ruined. May’ll be ruined if we don’t tell. Why—folk’s all be saying John jilted her, and you can bet your sweet life I won’t stand fur that. No siree! I don’t keer who is hurts ... I’m not agoin’ to see May suffer ... not ef I kin help it!

(70)
By making their children the bearer of the consequences of the women's silence, Johnson tries to call immediate attention to the issue of silence among black women. This climatic moment is unexpected to both the audience and the two women. They are left scrambling to deal with it in the middle of what should be one of the happiest days of their children's lives. Mrs. Bush calls May downstairs into the kitchen right after Randolph walks in. The women decide that they can no longer remain silent; they ask God to forgive them for not telling earlier and proceed to inform May and Randolph why the wedding cannot take place.

The conclusion of the play offers a little bit of irony. Randolph agrees to take May away and marry her, even though May admits that she does not love him. May wants to tell her groom, but her mother says “Keep it from him. It’s the black women that have got to protect their men from the white men by not telling on ‘em.” And to this Mrs. Temple replies, “God knows that’s the truth” (73). The irony is that while Johnson illustrates a plausible atrocity resulting from silence, she also problematizes its re-telling by reminding the audience that the practice continues largely because of the stigmatization sexual abuse carries with it for both Black women and men.

Johnson’s Blue Blood presents the six elements of womanist restorative drama in the one-act drama. First, the play focuses on black women’s experience with sexual assault. Mrs. Temple tells enough of her story that it is clear that she was raped by the captain and it can be inferred that Mrs. Bush shares the same
experience. Mrs. Bush tells Mrs. Temple “Sure, honey, I do know!” and proceeds to show her compassion from the perspective of sharing a common bond.

Secondly, one of the biggest political concerns of early black feminists was speaking out against the injustices of black women and the black community at large. Just as Ida B. Wells went on crusades bringing awareness to the issue of lynching through protest pamphlets, Johnson used her writing ability to do the same thing. These women wanted to give voice to the problems of the day and the sexual abuse of black women was one of those problems. Johnson presents this black feminist concern in accessible language and terms so that anyone could understand.

Thirdly, the community functions twofold. On one hand, the community represented by Mrs. Bush is a supportive force that consoles Mrs. Temple when she does break the silence about the sexual assault she has survived. The community helps to restore Mrs. Temple when she is clearly having an emotional breakdown from the post-traumatic stress of having been raped, impregnated, and raising the son of her rapist. On the other hand, the sense of community that we gather from the conversation between the two women is a community that condones a necessary silence. In this case, silence is viewed as necessary in order to keep black men from being lynched, beaten, and/or jailed. Mrs. Bush remarks “We can’t let him know or he’ll kill his own father...” and “It’s black women that have got to protect their men from the white men by not telling on ‘em” (72-73). Through Mrs. Bush’s words, the audience is reminded that during this time, black men are lynched and in order to save their black male sons, husbands, fathers, neighbors, friends, and relatives, they
may need to use necessary silence. During the time this play was released, lynchings were an infamous cruelty that the black community dealt with. This silence, however, should not come at the detriment of preventing women from being a support to each other or withholding lessons about self-defense from young black girls. Silence, necessary or not, is also something the women understand as wrong, because even for the necessary silence, they ask for God’s forgiveness. Mrs. Bush croons “God forgive me... God forgive that man. Oh, no... I don’t want Him to forgive him” (72).

This brings us to the fourth element: spirituality. When Mrs. Bush withdraws her prayer of God forgiving McCallister, she removes God’s protection and thus allows God to punish him. She leaves his punishment up to a vengeful God. Throughout the play, the women refer to God by saying things like “God knows the truth” (73). The women are spiritual and most likely churchgoing women who turn to their spirituality to get through an awful situation. Fifthly, there are two black men present in the play, John and Randolph, but because John is never seen or heard from during the play Randolph is the only man who is present on stage. The image of John as a young innocent African American man who is eager to be a groom is contrasted with the image of the older, white male, Captain who sexually assaults black women. Both black men in the play are affected by McCallister’s actions, which further highlights the impact on the entire black community when a black woman is raped. And finally, the women do not describe themselves as victims or in debilitating language. This example of early drama by black women is void of
language like “survivor,” because the overall point here is to speak. By breaking the silence, healing can be encouraged. The contemporary playwrights use various terms that express the development of language, but first there must be speech and this is what Johnson tries to spur.

In the decades between the Negro Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, black women playwrights were not as popular as their male counterparts. However, with the assistance of feminist writers like Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry, black women playwrights made some positive strides. Even though their plays did not tackle head on the problems of sexual abuse and domestic violence, they paved the way. According to Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, “the works of Childress and Hansberry are an outgrowth of the militant tradition in that their black characters are atypically assertive, brutally caustic, and unyielding to the demands of whites” (27). Many of the dramas in this era were ritualistic dramas and in the 70s (and beyond) much of black theatre has been dedicated to building a nation and raising black consciousness. This has also meant the inclusion of music, dance, African American vernacular, new language, lifestyles, and forms. This drama of “self-celebration,” Brown-Guillory states, “aims at capturing the flavor of the black experience and at uniting black people” (27). Because early black women playwrights boldly approached the stage to cover an array of topics, the 70s were ripe to accepting Ntozake Shange’s drama of self-celebration.
for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf

arguably one of the most groundbreaking feminist theatrical performances written by an African American woman. The choreopoem is “a theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance, and music—those elements that, according to Shange, outline a distinctly African American heritage—arouse an emotional response in an audience” (Lester, Ntozake Shange 3). Neal A. Lester’s book Ntozake Shange: A Critical Study of the Plays evaluates Shange’s contribution to African American theatre. Lester says that “as a theatrical expression, the choreopoem emerges from an African tradition of storytelling, rhythm, physical movement, and emotional catharsis” (Lester, Ntozake Shange 3). Choreographer Dianne McIntyre told Lester that the

Choreopoem is an ancient African form—words and movement happening simultaneously. It's natural. [Ntozake] made a name for it. The uniqueness of the form as I know it and have worked with it, is that the words are not separate over there and danced to. The words and the dance become one—intertwined so you couldn’t imagine one without the other. (Lester, Ntozake Shange 4)
This newness of the form to the American stage is worth recognition and notoriety. For the first time, black women’s drama could embrace a wider range of possibilities. Possibilities that are in obvious need of exploration, black women in need of healing have largely been excluded from obtaining useful mainstream services. Shange, understanding that black women must find ways of helping each other based on past experience, does not rely on mainstream drama to carry the fullness of black women’s stories to the stage. Rather than acquiescing to an “acceptable” form of theatre, black theatre more specifically, she created her own. The play is an example of a black feminist play transcending art, evoking action, and going beyond entertainment to cultivate healing. And more important is its commitment to speaking out about various violations black women face.16

I argue that select plays written in the early twentieth century by black women were the conception of womanist restorative drama and Shange’s choreopoem materialized those earlier ideas. Shange made her mark as a literary genius during the tail end of the Black Arts Movement. She produced various performance pieces, novels, and children books. *for colored girls* emphasizes black women’s experiences in healthy and unhealthy relationships. It was first performed in December 1974 at the Bacchanal women’s bar in Berkeley, California. Two years later it was transported to New York City’s Broadway stage and was solidified as her most popular work (Shange). After Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*

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16 It is the second play written by an African American woman produced on Broadway. It won Obie, Tony, Grammy, and Audelco awards. Even though the 2008 Broadway revival was canceled, the play is still being performed across the country by high school drama clubs, collegiate, and community theatre groups.
(1959)—the first play by an African American woman to grace the Broadway stage—Shange’s *for colored girls* made another permanent mark on the history of America theatre. Not only did Shange become the second African American woman to have a play produced on Broadway, but she also “simultaneously changed the definition of acceptable theatre by making the choreopoem a legitimate form” (Brown-Guillory 41).

While many scholars and critics have discussed the choreopoem, my discussion of Shange’s work adds a new perspective because I am looking at the work not only as setting a precedent like so many have pointed out, but as establishing a sub-category of plays with elements that contemporary playwrights have built upon. Lester Neal, probably the most notable among Shange scholars, has written not only a book dedicated to her work but also a number of articles and interviews that help defend, explain, and praise her artistry. Sandra Richard’s “Conflicting Impulses in the Plays of Ntozake Shange” critiques the spiritual element of her work by examining the “will to divinity” that causes her readers to feel “startle[d] and energize[d] but also infuriate[d] and disturb[ed]” (73). Barbara Frey Waxman explores Shange’s use of dance in the choreopoem. Her essay examines both American and African ideas about dance—self-affirmation, eroticism, spiritual renewal, communal bonding, and healing—to explore the possibilities dance illuminates. By incorporating dance into the performance, Waxman states that *for colored girls* acts like a “religious ritual that binds the community and spiritually renews the individual” (91). One of Elizabeth Brown-Guillory’s article, “Black
Women Playwrights: Exorcising Myths,” connects Shange with earlier playwrights Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Childress. She acknowledges that all three women present new images of black women in their plays, but Brown-Guillory also notes that Shange departs from her predecessors by advocating that “women band together to shield themselves from the enemy: men” (237). While I find this statement problematic in that it generalizes all men and ignores the presence of positive interactions with men in the play, I agree with Brown-Guillory’s point that the “women in Shange’s play have journeyed through one emotional minefield after another, bouncing back from the blows which have been leveled at them by [some] males” (237).

*for colored girls* is a poetic performance with an all woman cast. The seven women wear vibrant-colored dresses—yellow, brown, purple, red, green, blue, and orange. Brown has been added to the rainbow to reflect the color of the women present in the play. The women hail from metropolitan cities throughout the United States: Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Baltimore, San Francisco, Manhattan, and Saint Louis. The cast of black women divide their presence on stage between twenty poems that each gives the audience a peek inside an African American woman-centered community where sharing is central. At various points throughout the play, Shange uses vivid language, monologues, and songs to welcome or encourage audience participation. These characters are unafraid to exchange physical contact, share deep emotional secrets, personal sorrows, exuberant joys, and gruesome experiences about romantic relationships with each other.
Through the various poems that operate similarly to “scenes” found in traditional plays, Shange brings to the stage a wide range of sexual and psychological violations common among African American women. I have selected scenes that illustrate the formation of womanist restorative drama’s six elements. If the Negro Renaissance playwrights of the early twentieth century broke the silence about black women’s abuse and used the stage as a voice, then the voice resounded when Ntozake Shange brought her choreopoem to the stage. She commanded that everyone listen.

*for colored girls*, as the premier womanist restorative drama, presents topics of sexual violations and intimate partner violence equally. The play opens with a poem modeled like a soliloquy recited by the *lady in brown*. She prepares the audience for not only what is in store, but also why this piece is important. *Lady in brown* begins,

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dark phases of womanhood
of never havin been a girl
half-notes scattered
without rhytm/ no tune
distraught laughter fallin
over a black girl’s shoulder
it’s funny/ it’s hysterical
the melody-less-ness of her dance
don’t tell nobody don’t tell a soul```


she’s dancing on beer can & shingles

[…]

i can’t hear anything
but maddening screams
& the soft strains of death
& you promised me
you promised me...
somebody/ anybody
sing a black girl’s song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you bust sing her rhythms
carin/struggle/hard times
sing her song of life
she’s been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn’t know the sound
of her own voice

[…]

let her be born
& handled warmly… (3-5).
From this excerpt of the opening speech, Shange informs the audience that while the black woman’s story has been given a small space, the fullness of her tale has yet to come to fruition. In order for the “black girl’s song” to be sung, it must first be born. In African cosmology birth can be a re/birth of sorts, thus Shange understands her efforts to give birth to a new form of drama is a rebirth of the work written by her playwright foremothers. She even alludes to her place within the lineage of black female playwrights by saying that the “black girl’s song” was heard once in history, but it has “been dead so long/closed in silence.” Shange, then, takes it upon herself to both resurrect and give birth to womanist restorative drama. She realizes that speaking back is the only way to prevent black women from being “half-notes scattered” and start down the path of restoration and healing. This requires pulling off layers of silence. She dedicates the choreopoem to “colored girls who have considered suicide but moved to the end of their own rainbows”—in short, she dedicates it to survivors.

One of the main characteristics of womanist restorative drama is that the drama must place emphasis on sexual assault or intimate partner violence. Shange does both. Lady in yellow begins by telling the other women how she lost her virginity on graduation night. Bobby began looking at her differently the night she graduated, “like I waz a woman or something” and he “started talking real soft/ in the backseat of that ol buick/ WOW/ by daybreak/ I just cdnt stop grinning.” When the lady in blue asks if she has really lost her virginity in the backseat of a buick, she
replied “yeah, and honey, it was wonderful” (Shange 10). This was an example of an enjoyable sexual encounter, but shortly after this the atmosphere changes.

The fourth poem, “latent rapists,” makes the lady in yellow’s story about having wonderful sex seem rare, because not as many women can relate as they can to the latent rapists. In the comparison, it becomes clearer to see when one woman is sharing her story and other listen or when other characters can identify with the experience being talked about in a given scene. For example, in this poem, three women come together to demystify assumptions about rapists being strangers. Shange’s stage directions foreshadow the seriousness of what is going to be said. As if there is a break in the choreopoem for a public service announcement, her stage directions indicate “a sudden light change, all of the ladies react as if they had been struck in the face. The lady in green and the lady in yellow run out up left, the lady in orange runs out the left volm, the lady in brown runs out up right” (16). The women begin to express themselves:

lady in blue

a friend is hard to press charges against

lady in red

if you know him/ you must have wanted it

lady in purple

a misunderstanding

lady in red

you know/ these things happen
lady in blue

are you sure/ you didn’t suggest

lady in purple

had you been drinkin

lady in red

a rapist is always to be a stranger/ to be legitimate/ someone

you never saw/ a man wit obvious problems

[...]

lady in red

these men friend of ours

who smile nice

stay employed

and take us out to dinner

[...]

lady in blue

bein betrayed by men who know us

lady in purple

& expect

like the stranger

we always thot waz comin (17-19)

One of the first things this poem does is to deconstruct the myth that all rapists are

men who lurk in bushes or in deserted parking lots waiting on a innocent woman to
walk by and attack her. Women are raped by friends, relatives, neighbors more frequently than they are by total strangers. According to the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report “Forcible Rape Statistics” released in 2002, the year marked “the third consecutive year of increase, the UCR program's estimate of female forcible rape was 95,136 offences. That's 264 rapes each day of the year, or 11 rapes every hour.” And since the 1970s when Shange’s theatrical piece was performed, there have been considerable strides to help make reporting rape easier. Even still The Bureau of Justice Statistics released a paper Selected Finding on Rape and Sexual Assault: Reporting to Police and Medical Attention, 1992-2000 that gave some grim news. Unfortunately,

   When the offender was a current or former husband or boyfriend, about 75 percent of all victimizations were not reported to police, and when the offender was a friend or acquaintance, about 71 percent were not reported. When the offender was a stranger, only 44 percent of the assaults were not reported to the police. (qtd in Transforming a Rape Culture 7)

As Shange highlights, male friends can and do rape women at rate higher than strangers, even though they are reported significantly less than other types of rape. Shange uses this scene to break the silence surrounding this awakening truth because during the mid 70s knowledge about acquaintance rape was just gaining ground.
She is not bothered by keeping a code of silence among friends. Nor is Shange
fazed by “airing dirty laundry” about the black community. Additionally, she offers
no sympathy as to what should happen to men to who sexually violate women.

\textit{lady in red }

women relinquish all personal rights
in the presence of a man
who apparently cd be considered a rapist

\textit{lady in purple}

especially if he has been considered a friend

\textit{lady in blue}

& is no less worthy of bein beat witin an inch of his life
bein publicly ridiculed
havin two fists shoved up his ass

\textit{lady in red}

than the stranger
we always thot it wd be

\textit{lady in blue}

who never showed up

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} In 1978, Ishmael Reed published an article in the Village Voice entitled “Airing Dirty Laundry.” In this article he lashed out against some of the black literary expressions popular at the time—which would include Shange’s choreopoem. He criticizes “The profitable literary scam nowadays is to pose as someone who airs unpleasant and frank facts about the black community, only to be condemned by the black community for doing so. This is the sure way to grants, awards, prizes, fellowships, and academic power” (3; emphasis mine).}
Through the ladies’ words, Shange calls attention to the lack of criminal punishment given to men who know their victims. This also brings to mind the biased convections men receive when the woman who was sexually assaulted is African American. Black women are less likely to be believed and more likely to be perceived as seducing the man. This section of the poem permits zero tolerance for a society that permits rape. bell hook’s words “we live in a culture that condones and celebrates rape” demonstrates that this is a monumental task (hooks, “seduced,” 295).

In addition to discussing acquaintance rape, she also covers “running trains”, or the practice of gang rape on women. According to Jody Miller’s text Getting Played: African American Girls, Urban Inequality, and Gendered Violence, “running trains” is “a form of sexual aggression that is very common in the urban areas” (134). And, all the characters in for colored girls are from urban cities. The lady in blue says

pressin charges will be as hard

as keepin yr legs closed

while five fools try to run a train on you (17)

Shange’s vivid comparison of a black woman’s ability to successfully get a rapist punished for his crime to a woman being gang raped is a telling. It means that she recognizes that “research has found that gang rap incidents are more likely than individual rape incidents to target victims who are strangers or casual
acquaintances (which facilitates the use of the girl as an object) and involve younger victims and perpetrators” (Miller, Getting Played 136).

By deconstructing a lengthy list of rape myths surrounding the reality of sexual assault, women in the audience gain insight, awareness, and comfort. For those who may have been coerced into sexual activity by a once-trusted friend, neighbor, or family member this poem serves to connect that woman to a community and legitimize her personal emotional turmoil as valid.

The next feature of womanist restorative drama is the presence of male characters or their presence. for colored girls is an all woman cast, but the impact of a male presence saturates the choreopoem. In perhaps the most popular and memorable scene in the entire performance, Shange discusses intimate partner violence in the poem “a nite with beau willie brown.” 18 This poem is told by the lady in red and is, perhaps, the most riveting scene in the play. The story of crystal, the lady in red, and beau willie begins “there waz no air” and this phrase is repeated in the poem to elucidate the suffocating feeling of their relationship, social status, and social condition. Beau willie brown is a Vietnam vet who “came home crazy as hell” even though he kept telling crystal “there waznt nothing wrong with him” because “any niggah wanna kill Vietnamese children more n stay home & raise his own is sicker than a rabid dog” (55). He tried to get veterans benefits to attend school, but

18 This has been critiqued and criticized by scholars, theatergoers, practitioners, and the like. There is even a parody of this scene in George C. Wolfe’s popular satire “The Colored Museum.” Wolfe named one of his male characters “Walter-Lee-Beau-Willie” (a blend of the men from Shange’s for colored girls and Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun) and he is married to “The Lady in Plaid.”
he was illiterate and kept being placed in remedial classes. After beau realized that
good school was not working out, he started driving cabs and “the cops was always
messin wit him” (56). Beau willie is described as a drug addicted, paranoid, veteran
who has returned home from war hoping to have a better life, but things are not
working out for him.

Shange’s presentation of beau willie’s circumstances through the voice of
lady in red are read matter-of-factly rather than sympathetically. As discussed later,
this would be a problem for many black men who accused her to portraying the
black man as ruthless. As a feminist, Shange is primarily interested in women’s
experiences and so the story is told from her perspective with the spotlight on her.
Crystal has two kids from beau willie—a girl, naomi kenya and a boy kwame beau—and
“she’d been in his ass to marry her since she waz 14 years old & here when she
22/ she wanna throw him out cuz he say he’ll marry her” (56). It is not altogether
clear that when she met beau willie at the age of thirteen that he did not force
himself on her, which is why she’s been asking him to marry her at such a young age.
The ambiguous description reads “she’s been his girl since she waz thirteen/ when
he caught her on the stairway” (55).

It is extremely clear, however, that crystal’s and beau willie’s relationship is
abusive. There is evidence of physical, verbal, and psychological abuse. The physical
abuse began when crystal got pregnant the second time, “beau most beat her to
death when she tol him/ she still gotta scar under her right tit where he cut her up”
(56). This scene is highlight against the backdrop of an alarming statistic—homicide
is the number one cause of death for pregnant women (Curtis). Beau willie, like most abusers, did not stop at one time. The day after she went to the police and put a restraining order on him, he

came in blasted & got ta swingin chairs at crystal. Who cdnt figure out what the hell he was doing ... beatin on crystal/ & he cdnt do no more with the table n chairs/ so we went to get the high chair/ & lil kwame waz in it/ & beau was beatin crystal with the high chair & her son/ & some notion got inta him to stop/ and he run out/ crystal most died/ that’s why the police wdnt low beau near where she lived (57).

Beau willie is a violent man and this scene shows that he does not have any respect for crystal or his children. Crystal does contact the police for assistance, but they fail her. Their inability to arrest beau willie highlights a point made in Andrea Smith’s article “Looking to the Future: Domestic Violence, Women of Color, the State, and Social Change.” In her essay she advocates for a new approach to handle issues of intimate partner violence and sexual assault. With regard to domestic violence she reminds readers that

Reliance on the criminal justice system to address gender violence would make sense if the threat was posed by just a few crazed men whom we can lock up. But the prison system is not equipped to address a violent culture in which an
overwhelming number of people batter their partners, unless
we are prepared to imprison tens of millions of people (419).

Because the fact remains that for black women, the issues are always couched in
racial and economic oppression. In order to prevent the home for being one of the
most violent places for women, other issues must be addressed and tackled.

Beau willie never got financial, emotional, and psychological help and with
no one to stop his violence he murdered his children. Beau willie returned to
crystal’s place, violating the restraining order, and beat the door down. As crystal
screamed for the police to come help her to no avail, beau willie grabbed both of his
kids, begged crystal to marry him, kicked the screen out the window and held his
children out the fifth story window. The lady in red’s final words in this poem are “I
stood by beau in the window/ with naomi reachin for me/ & kwame screamin
mommy mommy from the fifth story/ but I cd only whisper/ & he dropped em.”
(60). This is the most memorable scene in the play. The image of beau willie
dropping his children from the fifth floor with crystal standing there is chilling.

Crystal’s whispers as beau willie held the kids in the window is one of the
few times that crystal is almost speechless. This abusive relationship is drenched
with domestic violence, however, the abuse is not always one-directional. Crystal
does not quietly sit back and allow beau willie to abuse her. She defends herself with
her tongue, which at times can be sharp. For example, when beau willie breaks
down the door (the second time) and begs crystal to marry him she says “o no I
wdnt marry yr pitiful black ass for nothing” (57).
She does seek assistance from the police department and not only does that prove unfruitful, but it is also a decision that cost her two children’s lives. According to Walter DeKeseredy’s *Dangerous Exists: Escaping Abusive Relationships in Rural America*, women are “frequently advised to break up such relationships when they turn violent, a move that could actually put them at greater risk” (3). Crystal embodies this quote, because it was after she tried to leave beau willie that his already violent behavior turned fatal.

In the next two poems “no assistance” and “sorry” Shange portrays strong-willed women who perhaps would not so easily find themselves in crystal’s shoes. The first, “no assistance” is also lead by the *lady in red*, but in this poem she has just ended a long-term relationship after being strung along for too long. When she realizes the time spent experimenting with her ability to see if she could “stand not being wanted/ when [she] wanted to be wanted” was over, the *lady in red* ends her monologue by saying “this note is attached to a plant/ I’ve been waterin since the day i met you/you may water it yr damn self” (14). The depth of the *lady in red*s pain and her commitment to reclaiming her dignity is signified by the swear word “damn.” The woman has reached her breaking point and can no longer place his desires over her need to be loved. Self-love is the initial step in recovering from abusive relationships—the woman must acknowledge her value before she can see it as something worth fighting for.

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19 While I understand that men and children can suffer from abuse, I use the term woman here because the playwright places emphasis on women.
The second poem encouraging women to empower themselves is “sorry.”

This time all the women congregate and share their disgust with men violating them and then think that a verbal apology can erase the women’s emotional pain. A few lines from that poem read:

*Lady in blue*
that niggah will be back tomorrow, sayin ‘i’m sorry’

*Lady in yellow*
get this, last week my ol man came in sayin, ‘i don’t know how she got yr number baby, ‘I’m sorry’

*Lady in brown*
no this one is it, ‘o baby, ya know I waz high, I’m sorry’

*Lady in purple*
‘I’m only human, and inadequacy is what makes us human, & if we was perfect we wdnt have nothing to strive for, so you might as well go on and forgive me pretty baby, cause I’m sorry’

*Lady in green*
‘shut up bitch, I told you I waz sorry’. (51-52)

The list of apologetic scenarios continues for a few more stanzas. This scene encourages audience members to identify, because there are ample situations. It suggests to real-life women to stop accepting insincere apologies. This is one of
several exchanges where the women coalesce into a community. When the women’s voices merge into the voice of the *lady in blue*, the *lady in blue* firmly declares

one thing i don’t need

is any more apologies

i got sorry greetin me at my front door

you can keep yrs

i don’t know what to do wit em

they don’t open doors or bring the sun back

they don’t make me happy/ is any more apologies.(52)

Shange encourages women not only to recognize their personal worth, but to demand that men treat them with a level of respect that demonstrates appreciation.

Although in "sorry" all the women come together share in their mutual experience with men, the importance of women having a supportive community is more prevalent in the poem “pyramid.” Shange uses her characters to express the importance of a female community. The *lady in purple*, three women (*lady in blue*, *lady in yellow*, and *lady in orange*) were close friends, “like a pyramid” with “one laugh/ one music/ one flowered shawl/ knotted on each neck” until he (an unnamed man) came (Shange 39). After consummating a relationship with one of the three women, a nameless man notices the hunger, desperation, and loneliness in the other women’s eyes and sets out to satisfy their sexual famine. His plan of infidelity is quickly discovered; one woman confesses to the other, and the two of them confront the man while he is in the midst of being with the third woman. The collision
between the women ends with the *lady in purple* describing their physical and emotional state of bonding. She confesses with "her head on her lap/ the lap of her sisters soakin up tears/ each understandin how much love stood between them/ how much love between them/ love between them/ love like sisters" (42). Unlike the popularized reality television, daytime soap operas and talk shows about similar situations, these women decide their love for each other is more important than momentary sexual gratification offered by an unfaithful man. Inherently, when the women value themselves as individuals, they in turn are able to encourage their sisters to do the same, and together they become a fortress for each other.

Violence—domestic, sexual, emotional, psychological—affects numerous women's lives from all races either directly or indirectly. For black women in America, however, the chances of assault increase exponentially because they often lack access to public services for abused women; their healing process thus becomes complicated. Gail Garfield, the former executive director of the Institute of Violence, Inc., and author of *Knowing What We Know: African American Women's Experiences of Violence and Violation* found that black women's "experiences reveal the tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas that lie beneath the dominate norms, explicit assumptions, and structural arrangements that now influence how we should view violence against women" (9). Black women differ from women of other races only because of their historical, cultural, and social experiences and therefore scholars, activists, and practitioners must approach violence against black women from this perspective to convey the most accurate representation.
These plays express this point beautifully. Shange craftily portrays women who despite having negative sexual encounters, still have the ability to laugh and dance while coping with disappointment and learning to love themselves entirely. To outsiders, this idea may seem too complex and perhaps even forced, but perceived violence against African American women is not always viewed as a binary. Not all black women see every “incident of violence as violations that disrespect their sense of being” (16). “Violence is not always accompanied by a sense of violation; yet a sense of violation is inextricably linked to physical, personal, and social violence” (16).

The need for particular language around violence against women that adequately addresses African American women’s social, cultural, and historical position is crucial to their ability to begin dialogue. This is why in Shange’s choreopoem terms like “raped” and “sexually assaulted” are not expressions the women use to label themselves.

Although Shange’s choreopoem is characterized as the quintessential black feminist dramas by Lisa Anderson, not everyone saw or understood the powerfully positive message inherent within the poems. Backlash from African American men was widespread and their complaints were with Shange’s public broadcast of the in-house fights among black women and men. When for colored girls went to Broadway, the debates between the sexes were characterized as battles and were circulated in journals, newspapers, and even on The Phil Donahue Show. Black men said that Shange was “a goddamn traitor to the race. In a time when black men were
striving for respect, here comes some middle-class, light-skinned bitch, putting black men down before the eyes of the white world” (Hernton 140). The harsh criticism by men, however, only validates the importance of talking about violence against black women. Disappointed in men’s reactions, Shange responds, “This is where I think men have been cowardly, because they have allowed the victims—the women who have been raped and the mothers of children who have been attacked—to be the voices of change in this matter when in fact we’re not perpetrators of these crimes” (Lester 722). In other words, the energy used to denounce Shange, Michele Wallace, and other black female writers during the late 70s and early 80s, could have been more adequately used to make the streets safer for black men’s daughters, sisters, and mothers (Hernton). Neal Lester’s 1992 article, “Shange’s Men: for colored girls Revisited, and Movement Beyond,” aims to clarify that Shange was not engaged in white feminist man-hating when she wrote the play and if she was attacking any man, “she attacks those men who abuse women as a well as those men who, despite the fact that they do not participate in such abusive behavior, remain passive in educating other men—and not a few women—regarding the truth of the patriarchal oppression of women (327).

for colored girls, the theater performance piece I posit as heralding the arrival of womanist restorative drama, is remarkable because it was fearlessly written to restore to foster hope and healing. Shange provides a voice for the numerous black women not yet brave enough to speak, still burdened by silence, and/or not strong enough to endure verbal assaults in response to telling their stories. In an interview
with Henry Blackwell, Shange blatantly remarks that *for colored girls* “was meant for a women’s audience” (Blackwell 137). Although the title may imply that its characters suffer from suicidal thoughts, the lack of reference to suicide promotes recovery and reclaiming one’s purpose. Indeed the rainbow metaphor “suggests the mythic covenant between God and Noah, symbolizing hope and life” (Mitchell 270). Shange wanted do to more than persuade black women of their beauty, by encouraging them to move beyond that she wanted them restored.

The choreopoem’s ability to bring individuals into a woman’s ritual space is one of the reasons the performance is so groundbreaking and profound. Literary scholar Kimberly Benston describes African based theatre as:

> A process that could be described alternatively as a shift from *drama* the spectacle observed— to *ritual*—the event which dissolves traditional divisions between actor and spectator, between self and other. Through this process, the Black beholder is theoretically transformed from a detached individual whose private consciousness the playwright sought to reform, to a participatory member of tribal or, in this case, national ceremony which affirms a shared vision. (63)

By introducing the American stage to the choreopoem Shange simultaneously re/introduced African theatre into the black community. The play becomes a spiritual journey for many audience members and remains a powerful production even thirty years after its premiere.
The lady in red recites the final poem and it is fitting because the words are powerful. She says “i found god in myself / & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely” (Shange 63). Shange turns this moment into a ritual by having these words metamorphose into a song and she breaks the fourth wall. Her stage directions read

All of the ladies repeat to themselves softly the lines “I found god in myself & I loved her.’ It soon becomes a song of joy, started by the lady in blue. The ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks the ladies enter into a closed tight circle. (63-64)

This communion of black women recognizing god in the likeness of her own image extends beyond the cast and touches the audience. They no longer represent “dark phases of womanhood/ of never havin been a girl/ half-notes scattered/ without rhythm,” but rather women on the path to healing themselves.

While writing to a primary audience of colored girls and women, Shange chose not to culminate her rhetoric to the point of persuasion. To the women “who have considered suicide but moved to the ends of their own rainbows” (Shange 6), including those who have considered possible psychological, emotional, and spiritual suicide (Mitchell 270), Shange brings sisterhood. At the end of this rainbow is a place where women can be restored, healed, loved by self, each other, and God.

As two seminal works in the formation of womanist restorative drama, Blue Blood and for colored girls introduce theatre that targets issues about violence against women, display concern for entire black community, and acknowledges the
importance of spirituality. These pioneers pave the way for today’s contemporary playwrights. In the following chapters, I present, thematically, the way contemporary playwrights display the components of womanist restorative drama beginning with intimate partner violence.
Chapter 3

Zero Tolerance of Intimate Partner Violence in *Flyin’ West*

Among the three types of violence listed in the Violence Against Women Act, Sexual violence represents one of the two prominent types and intimate partner violence, discussed in the later chapters, is the other. In this chapter, I explore how Lynn Nottage's, *Poof!* and Pearl Cleage's, *Flyin’ West* bring attention to issues of intimate partner violence. Nottage, a Pulitzer Prize winning dramatist, and Cleage, a well-known Southern dramatist and novelist, have publicly vocalized their commitment to ending violence against women. *Poof!* and *Flyin’ West* are excellent examples of these efforts. In the two plays, the commitment to ending violence requires the use of supernatural intervention, which is a facet of healing and community work that is usually not recognized by the secular American society. The women in these plays call upon the spiritual world to bring justice, protection, and help for a world where there is zero tolerance of violence against black women.

After a brief review of how intimate partner violence affects African American women, I move on to analyze the ways in which Nottage’s *Poof!* (1993) and Cleage’s *Flyin’ West* (1992) exhibit the concept of womanist restorative drama.

While working as a national press officer at Amnesty International—“a worldwide movement of people who campaign for internationally recognized human rights for all” (Amnesty.org)—Lynn Nottage got the inspiration to write the play *Poof!* (1993). The project she was assigned at Amnesty involved being
inundated with images of physically abused women. In an interview with Kentucky Educational Television, Nottage remarked, “I found myself doing something that I hadn’t done for years which was going into my office, closing the door, sitting down at my computer and writing a play about a woman discovering the power of voice” (KET). *Poof!* marked a turning point for Nottage as a playwright. It was the first play she had written in years, and she wrote the play in just one sitting. “I don’t think until I put the last punctuation mark on the last sentence in *Poof!* that I decided that this is what I am going to do,” said Nottage (KET). She then submitted *Poof!* to a short play competition sponsored by Louisville’s Actors Theatre and won the Heideman Award in 1993. The play premiered in Louisville that same year as part of the Humana Festival (KET).

*Poof!* is a short, one-act play about a woman taking a stance against a habitual history of domestic violence. The play consists of three characters—Samuel (Loureen’s husband), Loureen (a demure housewife in her early 30s), and Florence (Loureen’s best friend also in her early 30s).20 The introductory material provided in the published version describes the time only as “the present” and the place is identified as the “kitchen” (Nottage 91). These descriptions provide contextual information for the reading audience and are important points of analysis. Situating

20 Although Lynn Nottage does not ascribe a racial identity to her characters here, the original cast featured black women in the initial production and uses in-text language markers to personify an African American racial identity. The Kentucky Educational Television Network (KET) production removed the linguistic markers like “colored” in an effort to give the play a more “universal” appeal. The main characters in KET’s version are racial black, but their ethnicities are African American and Puerto Rican.
the play within “the present” allows it to transcend any one particular era and reinforce the reality that intimate partner violence is an ongoing problem that continues to plague society right now. Additionally, locating the play in “the present” operates as a reminder that every minute is the right moment to take a step toward leaving or helping someone leave an abusive relationship.

The play is set within the kitchen. The kitchen is a space within the home that has been critiqued as a female-gendered space. Black feminist scholar Barbara Smith, for example, said that the kitchen is the “center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other” (Smith 3). The kitchen is the place where women gather, create, and organize. Nottage remembers that her personal journey to become a writer started at the kitchen table. “To come home from school, and my grandmother would be sitting at the table, and my mother would be sitting at the table. The woman from across the street would be sitting at the table. And they all had stories to tell” (KET). The kitchen is a place where the women assemble to share, be creative, pass along life lessons, and collect strength. The actions taking place in the kitchen—a location of gendered strength and a source of comfort—help to situate Loureen’s actions against her husband and their fatal consequences as meaningful because her stance was within her “safe haven.” Within the walls of the kitchen, she finds the strength to defend herself.

Following the play’s “Time” and “Place,” Nottage also includes “A Note” for her reading audience that informs them on the status of intimate partner violence. “Nearly half the women on death row in the United States were convicted of killing
abusive husbands. Spontaneous combustion is not recognized as a capital crime” (91). With this humorous note, Nottage displays her knowledge about black women and the criminal justice system which becomes more prominent later in the play. She is also massaging the creative imagination of her readers to prepare them for believing in the powers of supernatural intervention as an alternative end to intimate partner violence. Nottage’s choice to stage the play in the home is worth noting. The home has been a part of the long tradition of African American women playwrights as mentioned in the previous chapter. However, at the same time, the home also continues to be an unsafe place for women. As a startling report by Murray Straus and colleagues stated, “with the exception of the police and the military, the family is perhaps the most violent social group, and the home is the most violent social setting in our society” (Oliver 533). Because the home is often overlooked as a place where individuals first experience a sense of terror, these plays on intimate partner violence work to reveal the widespread problem. In order to change the home from being the most violent setting in our society, we first have to acknowledge that it is.

*Poof!* begins in darkness. Samuel is in the midst of verbally harassing Loureen in a harsh tone which is portrayed as regular behavior for the couple. Loureen, however, has had enough of Samuel’s verbal abuse (which has led to physical abuse in the past) and decides to finally speak up for herself. When Samuel yells, “WHEN I COUNT TO TEN I DON’ WANT TO SEE YA! I DON’ WANT TO HEAR YA! ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR—,” Loureen replies, also in darkness, “DAMN YOU TO
HELL, SAMUEL!” (93). The above actions that take place in the darkness elucidate the haunting and frightful feeling that women in abusive situations experience. After all, when performed in total darkness, the viewing audience (not privy to the introductory material provided in the published version) does not know where the screaming match is taking place. In turn, not being able to locate a specific place offers the possibility that the exchange could happen anywhere. Immediately after Loureen dams Samuel to hell, there is a bright flash of light. When the lights rise, the center of the kitchen floor is occupied by a huge pile of smoking ashes. Only a pair of eyeglasses can be identified in the rubble.

When Loureen vociferates at Samuel, her words become fatal. The possibility of Samuel’s death, for a brief moment, is almost comical. Even Loureen chuckles at the idea that Samuel is now a pile of ash. Loureen, however, begins to realize the seriousness of the situation. While she stands over the pile of remains, she experiences a gambit of emotions. She laughs, she begs him to come back, and she apologizes for not washing a shirt. However, Loureen only succumbs to the emotional rollercoaster for a moment. She soon finds self-worth again and antagonistically retorts, “Maybe I didn’t even intend to wash your shirt” (94). This quick witted remark is followed by an equally quick witted gesture. Loureen’s conditioning to violence inclines her to contort her body as if in preparation “to receive a blow.” (94).

Loureen’s response is indicative of her experience with intimate partner abuse. Her body language announces her as beginning on the never-ending journey
toward recovery. She will have to break away from the idea that “talking back” to Samuel will be responded to with violence. Her physical reaction also indicates to the audience that this play is no comedy.

A Community of Two

When Loureen realizes that Samuel is not coming back, she seeks help. Loureen calls Florence, her best friend, fellow housewife, and neighbor to come downstairs to join her. Rather than dialing 911, a domestic violence hotline, or a member of the clergy, Loureen reaches out to a close friend. It is very common for victimized black women to avoid contacting social services or to do so only as a last resort. Sharon Williams explains in her article “Domestic Violence and African American Women in Rural Communities,” that African American women are “more reluctant to seek services due to distrust of social service agencies. They tend to rely on informal networks of support” (79). And Tricia B. Bent-Goodley’s “Perceptions of Domestic Violence: A Dialogue with African American Women” reveals the “lack of cultural competence has been noted as a reason that African Americans often do not complete or obtain domestic violence services” (308). These points are highlighted through Loureen’s initial reaction to call her close friend and together they become a community of two.

21 Bent-Goodley defines cultural competence as “a set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable a system, agency, and/or individual to function effectively with culturally diverse clients and communities” (Bent-Goodley 308).
Loureen turns to Florence, her best friend, fellow housewife, and neighbor, to aid her. Florence’s presence within the home represents a supportive entity in whom Loureen can confide. Once Florence gets there Loureen demands that she dial 911. However, after she says “I think I killed him,” Florence quickly concludes that getting law enforcement involved is not the right thing to do. The police have not been a source of support in the past and the unexplainable circumstances of Loureen’s situation would only serve to further complicate things.

Loureen explains to Florence that she killed her husband and begins to whimper. Florence tries to encourage Loureen to consider Samuel’s death a blessing. “But you got a broom and a dust pan, you don’t need anything more than that...He was a bastard and nobody will care that he’s gone (Nottage 102). But Loureen’s conditioning makes her wavier.

“I should call the police, or someone.”

“Why?” asks Florence. “What are you gonna tell them? About all those times they refused to help, about all those nights you slept in my bed ‘cause you were afraid to stay down here? About the time he nearly took out your eye ‘cause you flipped the television channel?”

Loureen remembering her disappointment from previous encounters with community services that do not offer community or adequate service, sadly replies “No” (102).

This dialogue elucidates Nottage’s awareness of black feminist and womanist theories about the judicial system’s maltreatment of African American women. For
example, Florence’s investment in making sure Loureen understands that the system is not concerned about her stems from the consequences many black women endure after calling the police and getting social services involved. It would be more detrimental for Loureen to tell the police or a domestic violence hotline about Samuel’s combustion than to keep what happened inside the community. Black feminist scholar Beth Richie’s concept of gender entrapment outlines that black women’s “everyday efforts to survive are not only discounted or invisible, but are increasingly criminalized in contemporary society” (5). In short, Black women are more likely to be seen as “criminals” rather than “victims of crimes” when seeking assistance from the police or various services designed to support women victimized by intimate partner violence. If Loureen involves the authorities, she risks being convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. Loureen fits the population that Beth Richie researched at Rikers Island Correctional Facility. She notes,

By far, the majority of the detainees are women of color from low-income communities. Over fifty percent are African American. While the ‘official’ sources report that at least half of the women there are battered women, my experience as an activist and advocate in anti-violence programs had me convinced that far more than that have been abused by their partners. (3)
The possibility that Loureen could be incarcerated is more realistic when considering the fact that the prison population is highly populated with women who were victimized by intimate partner violence. As Richie points out, there are so many abused women in prison they constitute their own community. With the physical evidence—plus the system’s lack of understanding for alternative ways of knowing, such as conjure, Loureen would most likely join them. The evidence against Loureen all leads to a murder—Samuel is dead, the kitchen smells like something was burned, and the only thing identifiable from the ashes are his eyeglasses. A defense for Loureen would be very weak, because the laws in America do very little to protect women from intimate partner violence.

THE POWER OF THE TONGUE

Throughout the play, Loureen comes to understand the power of her voice and how it has functioned as a weapon against her husband. Her awareness of the force that her voice wields directs her to recount the details of that morning’s incident in a whisper.

LOUREEN (Whimpers): I killed him! I killed Samuel!

FLORENCE: Come again? ... He’s dead dead?

(Loureen wrings her hands and nods her head twice, mouthing “dead dead.” Florence backs away.)

No, stop it, I don’t have time for this. I’m going back upstairs. You know how Samuel hates to find me here when he gets home. You’re not going to get me
this time. *(Louder)* Y’all can have your little joke, I’m not part of it! *(A moment. She takes a hard look into Loureen’s eyes; she squints)* Did you really do it this time?

LOUREEEN *(hushed)*: I don’t know how or why it happened, it just did.

FLORENCE: Why are you whispering?

LOUREEN: I don’t want to talk too loud—something else is liable to disappear.

FLORENCE: Where’s his body?

LOUREEN *(Points to the pile of ashes)*: There! ...

FLORENCE: You burned him?

Florence’s struggle to believe prompts Loureen to raise her voice, “I DON’T KNOW!” However, remembering what happened the last time she spoke forcefully, Loureen quickly reprimands herself by covering her mouth. When Florence asks “Why are you whispering?” Loureen replies, “I don’t want to talk too loud—something else is liable to disappear” (95). The actions highlight the level of psychological control Samuel had on Loureen who admits that “Samuel always said if I raised my voice something horrible would happen” (97). And something did happen, he was killed, but his death was not completely horrible for Loureen. In fact, Loureen is not sure how to take the news; if she should be depressed or celebrate. She says that she is not sure if she should have a “stiff shot of scotch” or a “glass of champagne” (96). As she becomes more comfortable with the idea that her words were the first step toward freeing herself, she becomes less unstable. “I should be mourning or praying,
I should be thinking of the burial, but all that keeps popping into my mind is what will I wear on television when I share my horrible and wonderful story with a studio audience” (98).

Loureen’s mixed emotions elucidates her transformation to the place that bell hooks mentions in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989). hooks writes, “Certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard.” Loureen changed the direction of her speech from the confidential purging between her and Florence to an outward retaliation. This change commanded Samuel’s attention and it appears that it got the spiritual world listening too.

**MALE PRESENCE AND THE LANGUAGE OF EMPOWERMENT**

A male presence in *Poof!* is evident even though a man does not join the two women on stage. Samuel, the only male character in the play, is heard once in the beginning of the play and is then represented by a pile of ash. His presence in this womanist restorative drama is haunting similarly to Shange’s Vietnam War veteran Beau Willie Brown. Both men are denied an embodied presence on stage; in lieu of being constructed through the use of descriptive and vivid language. Samuel materializes as Florence and Loureen dialogue about the events of the day and her abusive marriage. One excerpt from their conversation that forges a lasting negative
impression of Samuel occurs right after Florence questions Loureen about what happened to Samuel. She asks,

FLORENCE: Did that muthafucka hit you again?

LOUREEN: No...he exploded. Boom! Right in front of me. He was shouting like he does, being all colored, then he raised up that big crusty hand to hit me, and poof, he was gone... I barely got the words out and I'm looking down at a pile of ash. (96)

This exchange is informative because we learn that Samuel was not only verbally abusive toward Loureen, but also physically abusive. The physical abuse may or may not have been as habitual as the verbal abuse, but it is clear that Samuel has used physical violence in the past.

Unlike Beau Willie Brown, Samuel's existence extends beyond verbal construction. The pile of ashes located in the center of kitchen floor operate as a tangible reminder that Samuel is (in one form or another) still present. So, Loureen must rid herself emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, and physically of Samuel's existence in her life. And at the end of the play, her moment of resolve is signified by her disposal of Samuel's remains.

The words exchanged between the women never diminish Loureen's self-esteem or reduce her to a place of victimhood. The word “battered” is used once in the play and the way Loureen uses it is a movement toward personal empowerment. She says,
He’s not coming back. Oh no, how could he? It would be a miracle! Two in one day...I could be canonized. Worst yet, he could be... All that needs to happen now is for my palms to bleed and I’ll be eternally remembered as Saint Loureen, the patron of battered wives. Women from across the country will make pilgrimages to me, laying pies and pot roast at my feet and asking the good saint to make their husbands turn to dust. How often does a man like Samuel get dammed to hell, and go?

(97)

As shown by the above excerpt, Loureen uses the word “battered” not as a label she imposes upon herself, but as a way to identify with the larger community of women who are abused by their intimate partners. Even so, she is becoming more comfortable in her reality that Samuel is dead and that her life as a widower may be of assistance to someone else. The vision of helping other women liberate themselves from abusive marriages is reminiscent of the National Association of Colored Women’s motto “Lift as we Climb.” From a womanist perspective, Loureen sees her freedom from an abusive marriage as an opportunity to assist other women in gaining freedom as well.

Loureen anticipates that the mere act of sharing her story with others will be a catalyst of healing for other women. She appears hopeful that after they hear her experience that they will reflect on their own marriages and intimate partner relationships and prevent themselves from enduring intimate partner violence. The
hope is short-lived, however, because her close-friend and community support (Florence) is not satisfied with just hearing her story. Florence wishes she could get more concrete and even physical assistance from Loureen.

LOUREEN: ... And out of my mouth those words made him disappear. All these years and just words, Florence. That's all they were

FLORENCE: I'm afraid I won't ever get those words out. I'll start resenting you, honey. I'm afraid won't anything change for me.

LOUREEN: I been to that place.

FLORENCE: Yeah? But now I wish I could relax these old lines (Touches her forehead) for a minute maybe. Edgar has never done me the way Samuel did you, but he sure did take the better part of my life.

LOUREEN: Not yet, Florence.

Florence (Nods): I have the children to think of... right?

LOUREEN: You can think up a hundred things before...

FLORENCE: Then come upstairs with me ... we'll wait together for Edgar and then you can spit out your words and ...

LOUREEN: I can't do that.

FLORENCE: Yes you can. Come on now.

(Loureen shakes her head no.) (101)
Loureen understands the sweetness of being empowered enough to leave on your own. She tries to convey to Florence that healing is a path that each person must walk or run down for themselves, they can be motivated by others, but ultimately they must stand display agency. Although she expresses sympathy by saying “I been to that place,” Loureen will not go upstairs and speak to Edgar on Florence’s behalf, because she knows that Florence will not experience the same level of gratification if she does not speak up for herself. Florence must examine her situation and see that it is not that much different from Loureen’s and make a stance to leave.

The conversation one stage should transcend the fourth wall and operate as a wakeup call for the audience. If someone in the audience thinks similarly to Florence that her situation is not as bad as Loureen’s and Samuel’s marriage, Loureen politely injects a wakeup call of “Not yet” (101). Loureen is compassionate in understanding that no woman envisions their husband’s violence to escalate, but encourages Florence and the audience to believe that it will eventually. Also, this verbal exchange between the women deflects the acceptance of reasons to stay in an abusive relationship as excuses. In short, Loureen wants to help empower other women to acknowledge their self-worth and leave unhealthy relationships, because intimate partner violence can and often does escalate into more abusive behavior.

**Spiritual Armor against Intimate Partner Violence**

The presence of spirituality in this chapter is different from the representation in the previous chapter. Whereas Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls*
when the rainbow is enuf evoked a female-dominated spiritual presence for communion and renewing, the plays on intimate partner violence acknowledge an active spiritual realm through conjure. Spirituality is a shield as well as a weapon.

One of the first things Florence comments on when entering Loureen’s home is the fact that the air smells like something was burnt. When she sees the huge pile of ashes, Florence asks “what the devil?” (94). The smell of the ashes followed by the comment about the devil alludes to the fact that Samuel really did go to hell like Loureen demanded. In Poof!, hell ceases to be an imagined spiritual possibility, but rather becomes a material location.

 Conjuring, often referred to as “mojo,” “roots,” or “root working,” is closely connected to the spiritual world in which African cosmology is based. According to Yvette Chireau, conjuring encompasses “an extensive area of magic, practices, and lore that includes healing, spells, and supernatural objects. Conjuring belongs to a broader realm of beliefs that have historically occupied the spiritual imagination of both blacks and whites” (Conjure and Christianity 226). Although blacks and whites have been captivated by conjuring, the basis upon which each group arrived at conjuring is different and these foundational differences led to varied practices and impetuses for participating in conjure. European-based conjuring derives from “folk superstition, miracle lore, and mystical philosophies, a process that began in Europe and reached far back to medieval time” (227). African-based conjure is “profoundly

22 An African cosmology has three core elements and one of those components is “unconscious, and operationally defined by the concept of ‘spirituality’—a dynamic energy that allows the self to merge (extend) into the totality of phenomenal experiences (Joseph Baldwin 180).
shaped by the religious worlds in which Africans had lived prior to the diaspora...

The African person was immersed in a spiritual universe; spirituality provided the basis for knowledge. African societies were organized around belief in a wholly sacred reality, which was manifested both by the material realm of the senses, inhabited by human beings, and by the realm of the unseen, inhabited by spirits, ancestors, and the dead” (227). In short, African cosmology shaped African American occultism and black spirituality that is now a way of life for many blacks in America.

Both Lynn Nottage and Pearl introduce African American occultism into their plays as a way to end intimate partner violence. In Poof!, conjuring is alluded to after Loureen takes a stance against the violence in her marriage. When Loureen refuses to tolerate verbal abuse, and perhaps even more physical abuse, from Samuel, her words serve as a protective shield against more emotional, verbal, and physical harm. Upon acknowledging her breaking point and discovering the courage to defend herself, Loureen’s decision to shout the magic words “DAMN YOU TO HELL, SAMUEL!” grants her freedom from marital bondage. After Florence asks if Loureen has been visiting them mojo women again, Loureen’s belief in the powers of conjure are revealed.

Awareness of Loureen’s belief in conjure furthers the audience into a realm where the validity of conjure cannot be questioned. Because there are no other available options, Loureen’s visits or devote belief in conjure is a reality. Furthermore, it is never clear whether Samuel’s death is a result of what the “mojo
women” conjured up or of Loureen’s words. Nonetheless, Loureen’s refusal to take the abuse one more day is a powerful statement. The use of conjure and supernatural intervention are present in *Poof!,* but in Pearl Cleage’s *Flyin’ West* (1993), conjure is more pronounced and directly linked to the wife beater’s death.

**Pearl Cleage’s Flyin’ West**

Pearl Cleage is a self-professed womanist invested in the fight to end violence against women and *Flyin’ West* is one of her most popular plays and it prominently showcases her anti-violence stance. *Flyin’ West,* a two Act play, is set between the fall of 1898 and the spring of 1899 in the outskirts of the all-black town of Nicodemus, Kansas. The play consists of six characters—Sophie Washington (born into slavery, age 36), Miss Leah (born into slavery, age 73), Fannie Dove (32), Wil Parrish (born into slavery, 40), Minnie Dove Charles (21), and Minnie’s husband Frank Charles (a very light-skinned black man born into slavery, age 36). In the tradition of plays written by early 20th century black women playwrights, *Flyin’ West* and *Poof!* are both set in the domestic sphere and the majority of the actions occur in or around the kitchen. The house is occupied by Sophie, Fannie, and Miss Leah (an older woman who recently moved in with Sophie and Fannie) who are all wheat farmers that traveled West to start a better life.

When the play opens, all the characters are not yet present in Nicodemus. Minnie, the youngest sister, has graduated from college and married Frank who moved the two of them to Europe. Both of them are prepared to visit Nicodemus,
because Frank has run out of money and plans to get his portion of his father’s inheritance and immediately return back to London. Wil is highly interested in courting Fannie and she is enjoying both the attention and his companionship. Sophie is busy with the politics of the town and Miss Leah preparing for the winter.

The biggest concern in the city of Nicodemus before Minnie and Frank arrive from Europe is racism. There appears to be rather peaceful interactions. Wil and Fannie are in the early stages of courtship, Miss Leah has left her farm to stay with Fannie and Sophie in preparation for the upcoming winter season, and Sophie is absorbed in the political struggle necessary for Nicodemus to become an operational black town. She works towards getting individual African American residents of Nicodemus to view themselves as a community. Sophie is in the process of drafting a contractual agreement to ensure that no one in Nicodemus sells his/her home or property to white dwellers seeking to purchase prime black real estate for a low price. Sophie is also a gun-carrying woman who does not mind being single, because she “does not want no white folks tellin’ [her] what to do all day, and no man tellin’ [her] what to do all night” (21). And, although Sophie is not biologically Minnie and Fannie’s sister, she is treated as their sister and she is the reason why they moved to Kansas.

*Flyin’ West* is largely a historical drama written about the plight of African American Homesteaders. The author’s note provides a brief historical overview of the location. In 1860 the Homestead Act offered over three hundred acres of land originally belonging to the Native Americans, to “U.S. citizens” to develop. By 1890
about 250,000 of these citizens were single or widowed women who farmed for themselves and helped each other by creating close community ties. The “Exodus of 1879” produced the large amount of African Americans (25,000-40,000) that left the South after the Civil War and settled all-black towns in the mid-west. The crowds of African Americans were fleeing racism and Jim Crow, but by the early 1900s most of these black towns were destroyed by the same racist laws. Ramped lynchings and race riots had a tremendous impact on the destruction (6).

The subject of intimate partner violence emerges almost unexpectedly in *Flyin’ West*. Lisa Anderson remarked, “I was frustrated that Cleage complicated the story of the ‘Exodusters’ with a plot about domestic violence—or the opposite, that a story about domestic violence was complicated with the important historical moment of the Exodus of 1879” (18). I do not share her frustration. I think Cleage follows the pattern of Georgia Douglas Johnson’s Blue Blood. Johnson grabbed the audience’s attention by picking a theme (in Blue Blood it was a wedding) and then midways through the play, she introduces a more serious, woman-centered concern. Cleage does the same thing. The historical plot is an attention grabber, a way to lure the audience in to give them some awareness. In an interview with Beth Turner Cleage says, “I’m always conscious of trying not to write an issue play because I think that’s not why people come to the theatre ... They will go there with you but you gotta...make some story that they’re interested in first” (Turner 106). In *Flyin’ West*, Cleage approaches this goal by introducing her audience to a history of black sharecroppers who lived in women-centered enclaves during the exodus movement.
The “issue” evolves slowly. So, the play is really about the need to create a black society where there is zero tolerance for intimate partner violence or other types of violence against black women. Thus, in a way, Cleage uses history almost like Octavia Butler does in *Kindred*—as a way to create the world where all possibilities can be a reality.

The arrival of Minnie and her husband Frank introduce two major threats to the life Sophie has worked tirelessly to build and defend. Frank is the common thread in both threats. First, his physical and verbal abuse toward the youngest sister, Minnie, uproots their peaceful home; and second, Frank’s greed disrupts Sophie’s vision of the transformation of Nicodemus from a group of black landowners to a communal new black society. Frank coerces Minnie into signing the deed over to him and then tries to sell the property to white prospectors.

**Male Presence: Foils for Balance**

A male presence in *Flyin’ West* elucidates a distinction between womanism and feminism. Womanism expresses a need for women and men to work together to improve the state of the whole community as oppose to feminism which more often than not positions women over men. Cleage creates foils in her black men characters, Frank and Wil. Frank and Wil represent the opposite sides of masculinity. Frank is controlling and suffers from a superiority complex that prohibits him from feeling like a man unless he is lord over his wife. He believes in
holding up patriarchal behaviors that Wil does not ascribe to or validate. During the welcome dinner Frank asks Wil if he is being forced to do “woman’s work?” Wil replies “Makes it go quicker when everybody does a part” (43).

Unlike Frank, Wil does not view certain tasks as beneath him based on his gender privilege. On the contrary, because he is secure in his manhood and Wil takes joy in mutually building a safe black neighborhood as compared to Frank who’s insecurity and need for power lead him to sabotage it. Wil provides a balance to this womanist restorative drama that previous plays without male characters or with only a villainous-type of man cannot, because he models what manhood should be. His presence in the play serves numerous purposes. First, he signifies the importance of the entire community getting involved with ending violence against women and he also helps to transport the play into a womanist drama that posits the whole family as important. Secondly, Cleage constructs Wil as the perfect gentleman. However, she is clear not to label him as a “male feminist,” because she does not believe that men can be feminists.\(^{23}\) Wil is secure and displays both a

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\(^{23}\) In *Mad at Miles*, Pearl Cleage offers this in response to the idea that men can be feminists. “Although men are allowed to call themselves feminists in some liberal feminist circles, I do not endorse this practice. Men can be enlightened, but I have never met a man who did not cling to and exemplify sexist behavior from time to time in spite of himself. Letting them dub themselves feminist tends to lead to smugness, self-satisfaction and the feeling that the man who is struggling to overcome his own sexism and the sexism of his brothers has somehow achieved a more exalted status, a safe conduct pass that allows him to be a little less rigorous on himself, having demonstrated his good intentions” (42). Since the late 90s when Cleage wrote both *Mad at Miles* and *Flyin’ West*, there has been an increase of scholarship on black male feminists. Gary L. Lemons, Mark Anthony Neal, Greg Tate, Kevin Powell, and Michael Awkward are a few of the self-professed black male feminists. Two of the most relevant articles on the subject are Gary Lemons’ “To be
concern for women and a zero tolerance for wife-beating. Thirdly, the mere presence of a black male offering an alternative to Frank’s cruel behavior allows Cleage to be able to side-step the male-bashing backlash that Ntozake Shange received from *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*.

Frank is a money-hungry, light-skinned, charismatic, mulatto poet, who physically, emotionally, and verbally abuses his wife Minnie. His fair-skinned complexion plays a large role in his sense of superiority. While in London, Minnie and Frank were supported by an allowance from Frank’s white father. This money allowed them to live lavishly. Additionally, Frank’s light complexion allowed him to pass for white. However, the death of his father which also meant the end of his financial support forced Frank to return to America where Minnie’s sisters live. While there, Frank awaits news from white half-brothers in New Orleans. It is up to them to determine how their father’s belongings will be divided and Franks hopes to get enough money to get back to Europe and live life as normal.

In Act II when the telegram arrives, Frank is devastated to discover that he has been denied not only rights to the property, but also paternity. The telegram reads, “Paternity denied. Stop. All claims to money, property, land and other assets of Mr. John Charles, late of New Orleans, Louisiana, denied. No legal recourse available” (66). Frank is experiencing what Lindsey Patterson calls a Nigger Black, Male, and Feminist: Making Womanist Space for Black Men on the Eve of a New Millennium” (1998) and “When and Where [We] Enter: In Search of a Feminist Forefather—Reclaiming the Womanist Legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois” (2001).
moment. Patterson explains that, “there comes a time in life when one loses his innocence and is pushed boldly into the real world...I mean by lost innocence that specific moment when a black discovers he is a ‘nigger’ and his mentality shifts gears and begins that long, uphill climb to bring psychological order out of chaos” (234). Frank responds to his nigger moment with aggression. He says to his wife,

    FRANK: ...They think they can make me an ordinary Negro.
    That’s what they think. They think they’re going to have a chance to treat me colored and keep me here where every ignorant white man who walks the street can make me step off to let him pass. They think they can pretend I’m nothing and – presto!—I’ll be nothing.
    MINNIE: You won’t let them do that.
    FRANK: Let them? They’ve done it! We don’t even have passage back to London. We’re stuck here being nigger. Common, ordinary, niggers!

It is obvious from the above passage that Frank is having an extremely difficult time with his racial identity and as a light-enough-to-pass black man, he would rather pass. In the end, Frank’s anger and resentment about being denied his whiteness is transferred to Minnie.
Community and spirituality are linked closely in *Flyin’ West*. When Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie decide to follow Pap Singleton (the black Moses who leads African Americans West) they create a ritualistic sisterly bond. Minnie could not go to sleep without having the sisters come together and perform their sisterly ritual. The women perform this bond in a circle holding hands, just at the women at the end of Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*. So, the first moment the sisters are alone Minnie begs, “Oh, yes, please! Can we?” The sisters take their positions in a circle and begin the ritual

SOPHIE: Because we are free Negro women...

FANNIE AND MINNIE: Because we are free Negro women...

SOPHIE: Born of free Negro women...

FANNIE AND MINNIE: Born of free Negro women...

SOPHIE, FANNIE AND MINNIE: Back as far as time begins...

SOPHIE: We choose this day to leave a place where our lives, our honor and our very soul are not our own.

FANNIE: Say it, Sister!

SOPHIE: We choose this day to declare our lives to be our own and no one else’s. And we promise to always remember the day we left Memphis and went West together to be free women as a sacred bond between us with all our trust.
FANNIE AND MINNIE: And all our trust...

SOPHIE: And all our strength...

FANNIE AND MINNIE: And all our strength...

SOPHIE: And all our courage...

FANNIE AND MINNIE: And all our courage...

SOPHIE: And all our love.

FANNIE AND MINNIE: And all our love.

(A beat.)

SOPHIE: Welcome home, Baby Sister.

(The three embrace, laughing happily. ...) (44)

This ritual nourishes the women’s spirit, especially Minnie’s because she is in an abusive marriage and needs the support of and connection to her sisters to ground her, renew her spirit, and shower her with non-violent, unconditional love. The ritual, equip with positive language, a complete circle, and the joining of hands offers both physical and spiritual protection of Minnie from Frank’s maltreatment.

Additionally, the ceremony the sisters created on the day of their departure from Memphis gives them the ability to (re)write their past and present. Sophie, all their mothers, and their mother’s mothers were born into the American slavery system. However, in their version of history/herstory, Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie were all born free, are currently free, and so were their mothers and their mothers’ mothers. When the three women speak of their freedom, they do not define themselves solely as Negroes, but as “free Negro women.” The implication to adding
gender to their racial identity is that they envision being liberated from both racism and sexism.

Through the ritual the women acknowledge and elevate their spiritual body. When they speak of freedom, they posit the spiritual bodies of Negro women (that cannot be bought and sold) over the physical body that has been stolen from Africa, bound and chained and sold all over the Diaspora by European slave traders. From the earthly perspective, Sophie was born into slavery as were the black women in their immediate family, however, from the spiritual view, the statements in their ritual are true. Their souls can be down-trodden and malnourished by the chains of slavery, but the freedom they evoke is a state of mind and not a physical condition.

**Community of Strength and Conjure as Protection from Intimate Partner Violence**

Over the course of the play, the abuse escalates to be the dominant problem, superseding the fight against whites wanting to purchase property from black landowners. Signs of the abuse appear in Act I, Scene Three, on the morning after Minnie and Frank arrived. Minnie stands in front of a bedroom mirror “trying to convince herself that her bruised face isn’t that noticeable” (31). Fannie and Miss Leah, however, see the bruised left eye at breakfast and comment on it. Minnie evades the truth by saying that she tumbled on the train and bumped her head. Throughout the play there are places where Frank is verbally abusive toward Minnie as well. After she gets her hair braided, Frank says “You look like a damn picaninny! We haven’t been here twenty-four hours and look at you” (50). On the
train ride to Nicodemus, Frank lost all his money in a card game with white men.

Frank recalled the experience and told Minnie,

And I lost every dime. And I want to thank you for that. Things were going fine until one of them asked me about the nigger woman who kept following me around the train. I laughed it off, but my luck changed after that so I know they suspected something. But I should have known better than to depend on you for luck. You’re too black to bring me any good luck. All you got to give is misery. Pure D misery and little black pickaninnies just like you.

Later in the same scene after Frank becomes angrier at the fact that his white brothers have disowned him he takes it out on Minnie. He makes a threat against her life,

I’ll kill you right now, Min. I’ll break your damn neck before your precious sisters can hear you holler. I’ll kill everybody in the house, don’t you understand that? You want to know who I told those white men you were, Min? You really want to know? (She struggles, but he holds her.)

I told them you were a black whore I won in a card game. (He laughs and presses his mouth to hers roughly. Blackout.) (69)
These comments reinforce the fact that physical violence usually accompanies verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse. Frank’s behavior reaches a point where Minnie is unable to hide it from her family. Especially because he does not restrain himself even after she announced that she is having a baby.

At the end of Act II, Scene Three, Frank’s violent behavior intensifies. He beats Minnie so badly that she is forced into adding his name to the deed. After he obtains the right to sell Minnie’s portion of the land, he gloats to Sophie that he will have “their” portion sold within a day. The violent beating in combination with the assault against their hopes of having a neighborhood of their dreams, become the climax of his abusive behavior since their arrival in Nicodemus and it is so severe that Minnie is unable to hide it from the family like she has done in the past. As Frank gleefully exits the home in search of white investors to buy the land, the stage directions inform us of Minnie’s actions,

In the rear bedroom Minnie rises up slowly. She is obviously in great pain and has been badly beaten. She almost cannot stand. She staggers out of the bedroom. As Frank exits laughing, Minnie stumbles into the room where Miss Leah and Fannie are working” (72).

Minnie’s decision to stand up (physically and emotionally) for herself and her unborn baby is an important decision. This marks the moment when she decides to leave the abusive marriage and seek help from her community. When she stumbles out of the bedroom and into the living room where her help is located, she takes the
first step toward healing. The two women come to her rescue and the next morning
Fannie, Miss Leah, Sophie, and Wil become Minnie’s supportive community.

As the community rallies together in support, there is a unanimous
agreement that wife-beating is a crime in Nicodemus and is punishable by death. Wil
arrives to the house with a shotgun in tow and has volunteered to protect the
women by talking to Frank man-to-man and expresses no reservations about killing
Frank. However, Sophie (who almost always has her shotgun near her) has declined
Wil’s assistance in killing Frank. She tells Wil, “I appreciate the offer, but the day I
need somebody else to defend my land and family is the day that somebody’s name
will be on the deed. I need you to help me do what needs to be done. Not do it for
me” (77). Sophie, being the most offended by Frank’s actions toward her sister and
her dream for Nicodemus, wants the satisfaction of causing him as much pain as he
has caused the family. Although she is the most understanding, forgiving, and
sympathetic person in the community, Fannie does not want anyone to kill Frank,
especially Wil or Sophie. After Sophie reminds Fannie that “there are no laws to
protect a woman from her husband” and that their former neighbor Josh had not
been convicted of a crime until he killed his wife Belle, Fannie understands why
Frank must be killed (76). Fannie, nevertheless, wishes there was some other way to
get rid of Frank than shooting him.

Miss Leah, the elder in the group, comes to the rescue with wisdom and an
alternative to shooting Frank. Miss Leah says to everyone, “It’s a messy business,
shootin’ folks. It ain’t like killing a hog, you know. Sheriff has to come. White folks
have to come. All that come with shootin' somebody. But folks die all kinds of ways” (78). Miss Leah, like Florence in *Poof!*, decides to deal with intimate partner violence within the African American community rather than getting the police involved which means compounding the issue of sexism with racism. She provides an alternative that requires baking rather than guns and as the elder in the community, everyone else follows her instructions.

Miss Leah’s plan to end intimate partner violence in the home requires the use of conjure. While she gathers the necessary utensils, Miss Leah tells everyone (except for Minnie, because she is upstairs resting) the story about how she came into the knowledge of root-working. Ella, a woman who had known herbal secrets from Africa, was the cook on the plantation with Miss Leah. One day when Colonel Harrison left and the overseer tried to sexually assault her, she baked an irresistible, sweet-smelling apple pie. Once the overseer had a slice of the pie, his “heart stopped right in the middle of a great big bite” and Ella was gone by the time the Colonel returned. Miss Leah slyly adds that before Ella left, she gave her the apple pie recipe. Miss Leah in turn, has presented an alternative end to the violence that does not require the use of fire arms and the involvement of white outsiders, rather she revisits the African and African American connection. As religious scholar Yvonne Chireau notes, “The Conjuring tradition allowed practitioners to defend themselves from harm, to cure their ailments, and to achieve some conceptual measure of control over personal adversity” (239). The plan to feed Frank the apple pie upon
his return is the way for the community to cure themselves of both the sexist oppression he embodies and the racist oppression he attempts to introduce.

Frank’s use of violence against Minnie is viewed as a violation against the entire community and therefore everyone participated in getting rid of Frank. When Frank returns from town, Fannie offers him a slice of Miss Leah’s freshly baked, hot piece of pie to which he obliges. Frank asks Fannie for water and she refuses. Frank chokes and dies and Fannie gives the signal to everyone to come out of hiding and witness Frank’s lifeless body.

Pearl Cleage uses the stage directions, rather than dialogue to capture Minnie’s reaction to Frank’s death. The scene captures the need for abused women to have a supportive community and how emotionally difficult embracing a new start can be for some. Like Loureen in *Poof!*, Minnie visits a gambit of emotions that range from joy to grief, but ultimately settle in a place of relief and resolution that their decision to stand up for themselves was the best decision they could have made. This scene also highlights the importance of psychological healing being a catalyst for total wellness. Because Minnie made up in her mind that she would no longer be victimized by Frank, she is able to recover emotionally and physically quicker. Neither she nor her community refers to her or her marriage in defeated terms, such as battered or victim. They value Minnie’s worth and encourage her self-esteem as an African American woman.
Both Nottage’s and Cleage’s plays about intimate partner violence against African American women display a zero tolerance approach. Samuel and Frank abuse their wives and prior to their deaths, display no desire to cease. The playwrights rely on conjure as an alternative means to ending the violence, but the message is clear—the African American community must not accept violence against black women and the black community must be the first line of defense for black women. In her performance piece and book with the same name Mad at Miles (1990), Cleage incites her audience to rethink their complacency with black men who abuse black women by asking,

How can they hit us and still be our heroes?

And the question is: How can they hit us and still be our leaders? Our husbands?

Our lovers? Our geniuses? Our friends?

And the answer is...they can’t.

Can they?

The message in these two plays are clear—black men who abuse women are a harmful threat to the entire community and in order to correct the problem there must be a collective effort from both men and women to put the social, financial,
emotional, physical, and psychological wellbeing of black women and girls as a primary concern. Nottage and Cleage bring intimate partner violence, racism, sexism, womanist intervention to the stage in these morality plays as a way to educate and promote real-life discussions around the topic. *Flyin’ West* is perhaps Cleage’s most produced play also bringing awareness about effects of intimate partner violence on women. These two plays demonstrate the power of community and how the community functions as a catalyst toward healing. Contemporary playwrights not only have modeled community, but as shown in the next chapter, they illustrate the impact the absence of community can have on victimized black women as well.
Chapter 4

Who Can I Turn to?: In the Blood’s Absence of Community

Unlike the other contemporary plays in this study, In the Blood (2001) written by the Pulitzer-prize winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks does not offer a model of healing, recovery, and community. Parks instead adopts a naturalistic narrative that highlights a dismal fate of an African American woman living in a racist and sexist society. Naturalism is a literary movement of the early 20th century that “typically depicts outmatched individuals fighting against an oppressive world order of some kind” (Sage 462). In the Blood’s main character Hester La Negrita suffers from a daunting outcome that is reminiscent of Lutie Johnson, the protagonist of Ann Petry’s novel The Street (1946). Ann Petry, an African American novelist writing during the 1940s and beyond, was among a group of black writers commonly referred to as the “Wright School.” The group was given this name by scholars because after the publication of Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940), it became popular for black novelists to write in the naturalist mode. Chester Himes’ If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945), Cutis Lucas’ Third Ward Newark (1946), Ann Petry’s The Street (1946), and William Gardner Smith’s Last of the Conquerors (1948) are among the most popularly noted. As Bernard W. Bell notes, “Their salient themes are color and class violence, and their protagonists are generally victims of forces beyond their control or full understanding” (122). Lutie Johnson, like Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas, is submerged by the oppressive weight of anti-black
prejudice and violence. However, unlike Bigger Thomas, Lutie Johnson experiences an added burden of sexism and is sexually violated numerous times over the course of her life. Additionally, Johnson is a working, single-mother driven by a desire to be a good parent so that she can provide a better lifestyle for her son. In the end, she violently fights back and kills a man who tries to take advantage of her. She flees the town and the audience is left hoping that her son will be fine (or understanding that he will not be fine) and that she will not be caught by the police, but Johnson ends the novel.

Bigger Thomas could not relate to being a parent and a woman, but it is within these two identities that Suzan-Lori Parks’ character Hester La Negrita connects with Johnson. Parks’ plays have been described as “multi-layered, historically aware, and linguistically complicated” (Thompson 170). While Parks’ approach to playwriting is more multifaceted than just naturalism, the naturalistic elements of In the Blood are the most prominent features of the play that sets it apart from the other womanist restorative dramas. The play also builds upon a tradition of black women’s naturalistic writing because this remains one of the biggest draws of In the Blood’s call to action.

In this chapter, I examine In the Blood and analyze how Suzan-Lori Parks adds an interesting twist not only to African American theatre but also to womanist restorative drama. In describing how In the Blood maintains the six elements of womanist restorative drama, I will pay special attention to the way Parks emphasizes the importance of community intervention. Additionally, this play
uniquely elucidates the need for alternative methods of reaching victimized, abused, and violated African American women. Unlike the other plays in this study, *In the Blood* paints a vivid picture of what happens, and will continue to occur, if we all keep turning “a deaf ear and a blind eye” to the reality of gender violence against black women. Parks uses the absence of community to show the dire need for one within the African American community. Through Hester La Negrita, Parks brings attention to one of the most silenced groups of black women—urban, homeless, welfare-recipient, and mother of multiple children from different men. While black women as a whole are silenced, women who struggle for financial independence are further muted and marginalized because they are not yet self-reliant.

Dána-Ain Davis’s *Battered Black Women and Welfare Reform: between a Rock and a Hard Place*, examines the difficulties black women face when they are reliant on the system. Davis aims to contextualize the “forms of resistances and resilience” and to show how underprivileged black women cope. She reports that black women’s “resilience [is] often sandwiched between a rock and a hard place, and they [are doing] the best they [can]” (11). Stello M. Resko’s *Intimate Partner Violence and Women’s Economic Insecurity* reports “violence would decrease when women’s economic resources increase because, in gaining greater resources, women also gain more power.” Unfortunately, the solution is not so simple or easily rectified because, “women’s greater relative economic power increases men’s likelihood of being abusive” (3). The situation for abused black women is compounded and complex,
thus it is fitting that Parks adds a necessary complexity to the discussion of black women by selecting a member of the homeless community.

VIOLANCE AGAINST URBAN WOMEN

The urban landscape was used by Shange in for colored girls in giving birth to womanist restorative drama, but she did not explore the lives of homeless women. Crystal and Beau Willie are inside a home when their fatal intimate partner violence episode occurs. Pearl Cleage’s contemporary play Flyin’ West explores violence against black women in a rural environment. As America becomes increasingly urbanized, it becomes more important for researcher to explore how urban landscapes affect black women; especially because urbanization usually means a process of gentrification for African Americans. “Homeless women are some of the most vulnerable and poverty-stricken persons in the nation” (Ryan, Stern, Hilton, Tucker, Kennedy 536). This drama about a black woman living on the street in an urban community encourages audience members to recognize the privileges they have because once those privileges are acknowledged, then they can see these privileges as tools for change that can help someone. Thus, Park’s In the Blood, is timely and is a part of a growing body of research examining more fully the relationship between urban environments, African American families, and violence.

24 Gentrification is “the buying and renovation of houses and stores in deteriorated urban neighborhoods by upper- or middle-income families or individuals, thus improving property values but often displacing low-income families and small businesses” (Webster’s Dictionary).
Stories and research about black women and, more particularly, their experiences with violence, sexism, and racism have been gaining serious scholarly attention, but there is still room for growth. Criminologist Jody Miller’s *Getting Played: African American Girls Urban Inequality and Gendered Violence* is an investigation of how “race and class inequalities, in conjunction with urban space, shape women’s and girls’ experiences of gender-based violence” (3). Miller explains that, “violence against young women is a ubiquitous but too often invisible feature of the urban landscape, and it remains largely underexamined and thus undertheorized” (1). The primary reason for this oversight, Miller claims, is because violence in urban cities has been commonly assumed as the relationship between violence and *young men*. Some of the ideas may include gang violence, drive-by shootings, gambling, pimping, the selling of illegal drugs, etc. All of the aforementioned ideas are primarily participated in by boys and men rather than girls and women. Rarely, are the effects of gendered violence considered from the girls’ and women’ prospective.

Additionally, Leiner, Compton, Houry, and Kaslow point out that, “Although women from all ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic levels experience intimate partner violence, women who are African American, young, poor, divorced, or separated, and residing in *urban areas* are the most frequent victims” [italics mine] (473). Parks’ play adds to this growing attention to poor, black, urban, and homeless women.
Miller’s work focuses on the realities of young adult women. Three key points of her research are useful in considering Parks’ *In the Blood*. First, Miller provides evidence that the culture of urban environments is a breeding ground for violence against women. Dominance over women has become a “highly visible means of performing masculinity, specifically because alternative forms of status and prestige are denied to young men living in disadvantaged communities” (5). Second, many urban communities show a lack of unity around ending violence against women. As criminologist Michael Benson writes

> In these neighborhoods people are expected to mind their own business and to stay out the personal affairs of others. In neighborhoods low on collective efficacy it is not customary for residents to take action for the common good. Hence, no one feels responsible to intervene on behalf of victimized women.

When members of a given community do not care enough about its women to intervene, the women are silenced even further. Black women are often silenced in a white world, but when their own communities rob them of their voice, then the problem is exacerbated. This is the case with Hester La Negrita. The only time the community comes together with a concern for Hester is to bad-mouth her.

Thirdly, Miller suggests that there is need for “better information about violence against urban African American [women and] girls, including an improved understanding of how disadvantaged neighborhood contexts place them as higher
risk for victimization” (11). This project as a whole and In the Blood in particular aims to show how theatre can be used as information to better the situation for women who have been abused. Womanist restorative drama attempts to address the need for better information and serve as an alternative means of educating people about violence against black women. These three points help to contextualize the reason why Suzan-Lori Parks may have used a naturalistic approach when writing In the Blood. There is something very striking about removing all examples of how one might be able to help and focus exclusively on the need for help. By using naturalism, Parks’ adds a new twist to womanist restorative drama, but that is also something New Black Aesthetic writers thrive on—bringing something new to the black literary tradition.

Suzan-Lori Parks’ play In the Blood was performed in 1999 at The Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York City. The play consists of eleven characters which are split between six cast members. Hester La Negrita is the only character that does not double as another person. The Place is “here” and the Time is “now.” This description of time and place is a similar to the one Lynn Nottage uses in the play Poof! These descriptors are important because they situate the play in the moment and help to instantly grab the audience. In order for Parks to create a strong sense of personal responsibility in her audience, she eliminates distances of location and time. Putting the play here (rather than in a faraway land) and now (in neither the past nor the future) allows the audience to feel a sense of connectedness to the play. Also, because the city in which Hester lives is never named, she could be living
anywhere in America. Parks put forth considerable effort in making the fourth wall transparent.

*In the Blood* is a riff off Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*. Hester La Negrita is different from Hester Prynne, because Prynne’s stitched-on letter “A” has been replaced with a skin color, socio-economic status, and homelessness. Hester La Negrita bares societal criticism from all angles. The prologue begins by introducing the audience to Hester, through the eyes of society. I agree with Carol Schafer’s remark that “we learn from the chorus that Hester is to be vilified as a burden to society. She is to be scorned as an unmarried welfare mother of five children, all of whom have different fathers, and she is to be ridiculed for being unable to read or write, the skills that would make her civilized” (189). The chorus opens the play and their exchange is by far the most prominent example of how the pressures of society can negatively affect a woman in Hester’s situation. The play begins,

*All cluster together.*

THERE SHE IS!

WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS

THE NERVE SOME PEOPLE HAVE

SHOULDN’T HAVE IT IF YOU CAN’T AFFORD IT

AND YOU KNOW SHE CAN’T

SHE DON’T GOT NO SKILLS

CEPT ONE
Parks allows the cast members to belch commonly held prejudices and opinions as a means of introducing Hester to her audience. There lengthy soliloquy-like rant presents an image of Hester removes all human qualities—she’s an illiterate whore not a woman. They berate her for not being responsible about her sexuality and represent the lowest wretches of humankind.

**Black Feminist and Womanist Awareness**

Parks’ awareness of black feminist and womanist theories is evident from the opening. The words of the chorus reduce Hester to having one skill—the ability to get pregnant which implies that she is sexually available, sexually promiscuous, and sexually talented. These assumptions are derived from racist stereotypes about black women’s sexuality and they also allude to the Moynihan Report (1965) which blamed black women for the downfall of the black community by castrating black men and being promiscuous. Before Hester La Negrita arrives on stage, racist comments foreshadow her coming. These prejudice and racist comments ring true to audiences already doused in negative perceptions of black women. Parks uses this introduction to show her knowledge of the black women’s conditions and political plights as well as an attempt to issue a wakeup call. This opening highlights the fact that even years after the Moynihan report, American society offers little in the way of defending black women when they are called “SHIFTLESS/ HOPELESS/
BAD NEWS/ BURDEN TO SOCIETY/ HUSSY/ SLUT” (7)—because those stereotypes still are believed.

Surprisingly, when Hester enters the stage she instantly places herself in opposition to the rest of the world. She lifts her youngest child up toward the sky, a symbolic gesture of thanking God for the gift of life. In the face of ridicule Hester, a woman with five children from five different men, proclaims her offspring as her “treasures.” After Hester grabs her youngest child and lifts him up toward the heavens, reminiscent of the films *Roots* and *The Lion King*, she says to her baby and the heavens “My treasure. My joy.” The prologue concludes with the crowd negatively saying “PAH!” as they stand and stare at her (7). This highlights how marginalized Hester is from the community and how the community is disconnected for the issues facing homeless black women. In “When, Where, Why, and with Whom Homeless Women Engage in Risky Sexual Behaviors: A Framework for Understanding Complex and Varied Decision-Making Processes” the authors discover that “Homeless women are more likely to use alcohol and drugs, experience victimization by violence and, in part, due to their need to survive difficult circumstances, engage in unprotected sex and other risky sexual behaviors that may lead to infection by HIV and other STDs” (Ryan, Stern, Hilton, Tucker, Kennedy 537). Although Hester is not a drug abuser based on the fact that she has five kids by five different men, she too has found it difficult to combine her need to survive with protected sex. Parks’ knowledge of research on homeless women and
their inability to purchase condoms at the same rate as women who are more financially stable is presented in a way that all can understand.

There are nine scenes in the play, “Under the Bridge,” “Street Practice,” “The Reverend on His Soapbox,” “With the Welfare,” “Small Change and Sandwiches,” “The Reverend on the Rock,” “My Song in the Street,” “The Hand of Fate,” and “The Prison Door.” Together these nice scenes employ the six elements of womanist restorative drama. “Under the Bridge” situates the play within a particular setting, but the actual city remains nameless.

**ON MY OWN TERMS**

Hester never ascribes or accepts other people’s definitions of who she is. One of her primary identities is being a mother. Throughout the play, this side of her becomes a more prominent feature because the audience witnesses her her extreme concern for her children. In fact, she has not eaten in days because she is makes sure that her children eat first. And after Hester finally got a sandwich, she gives it to her children and the rest her supposed friend Amiga takes. The display of positive motherhood combined with everyday frustrations help to humanize Hester. It is clear that she loves her five children and will do anything to protect them. Her style of motherhood is in contrast to the imagery that the chorus supplies in the prologue. She is depicted like an average mother with the exception of being homeless. Hester corrects her kids’ speech when they do not speak standardized English, she encourages their academic pursuits, helps to build their self-esteem, and has their
best interests at heart. For example, when Jabber replies “Naaaa—” his mother says, “What did I tell you bout saying ‘Naa’ when you mean ‘no’? You talk like that people wont think you got no brains and Jabbers got brains. All my kids got brains, now” (In the Blood 9). Parks does not present her as a one-sided, perfect mother—she spanks her children, scorns them, and occasionally shows that she is irritated by them. In an instance she says to one of your children, “I was sick when I was carrying you. Damn you, slow fool. Aaah, my treasure, cmmeer. My oldest treasure.” (12). She does not accept other people’s opinions about her being an unfit mother.

Hester creates new definitions of motherhood and she rejects language attacks her. Hester lives under a bridge with the word “SLUT” scrawled on its side just above where she and her children live. This graffiti announces to everyone how people feel about Hester and her children. Hester, however, is oblivious what the letters mean because cannot read. In the beginning when she asks her eldest son Jabber to read the words, he refuses. He would rather focus on teaching his mother how to read. Unfortunately, in Scene 8 he tells his mother what it means and she responds by killing him. In essence, she returns violence with violence.

Jabber: I know what it means. Slut.

Hester: (Shut up.)

Jabber: Slut.

Hester: (I said shut up, now.)

Jabber: I know what it means.

Hester: (And I said shut up! Shut up.)
Jabber: Slut. Sorry.

_The word just popped out, a child's joke. He covers his mouth, sheepishly. They look at each other._

Hester

Jabber

Hester

Jabber

_Hester quickly raises her club and hits him once. Brutally, He cried and falls down dead. His cry wakes Bully, Trouble and Beauty. They look on. Hester beats Jabbers body again and again and again. Trouble and Bully back away._

_Beauty stands there watching._

_Jabber is dead and bloody._

_Hester looks up from her deed to see Beauty who runs off. Hester stands there alone—wet with her sons blood. Grief-stricken, she cradles his body. Her hands wet with blood, she writes an “A” on the ground._ (106)

This is not the first time in African American literature a black mother has killed her child, as Verna Foster highlights in “Nurturing and Murderous Mothers in Suzan-Lori Parks’s _In the Blood_ and _Fucking A_.” She connects Hester’s killing to Sethe’s
killing in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. I agree with Foster, however, that the difference between Sethe and Hester is Hester's rage is misplaced. Foster acknowledges that her rage is not directed Jabber, but rather “what the child represents, what society had made of the child or will do the child” (75). Hester refuses to allow her child to call her a “slut” and become like the outsiders. She could not retaliate against the systems that abused her and render her powerless, but she does have the power within her family. In *Mothers Who Kill their Children*, Cheryl Meyer and Michelle Oberman report that killing one's children “may be understood as a response to the societal construction of and constraints up mothering” (13). Hester is certainly constrained. Her mothering abilities emerge from being an African American in a racist society, as a woman within patriarchy, a homeless person in a culture where owning property is important, and a survivor of multiple sexual assaults without adequate resources. Hester's need to define herself under her own terms and to resist the language of others is very important. Likewise, Parks does not describe Hester is language that would prompt negativity—rather she reflects these prejudices to the audience so that they can rethink their own opinions.

**Hungry for Community**

Before killing Jabber in Scene 8 and ending the play in Chapter 9 as a prison inmate, Hester is suffering from extreme hunger. This hunger represents Hester's need for a supportive community. In the city where Hester lives, there are no services that are willing to help her and every time she tries to find food or a better
way of life to purchase food for her and her kids she is sexually violated. Had a community been present for Hester, she might have avoided killing her eldest son and ending up in prison. The play elucidates Toni Irving's findings in “Borders of the Body: Black Women, Sexual Assault, and Citizenship”—she reports that “rape cases illuminate that for black women the law is not a source of justice or protection, but contains, constitutes, and generates violence” (68). The five characters Hester comes in contact with represent the people or institutions that should be able to help her—The church; embodied by Rev. D (father of one of her children), the medical profession; represented by a man named “The Doctor,” Social Services; played by a woman named “The Welfare,” her friend; “Amiga Gringa” represents capitalist individualism, and finally one of her father’s children; “Chilli who is the father of her oldest son.

All these people should represent a place of rest and recovery for Hester. Unfortunately, as explained in Chapter 1, “African American women are not ... receiving the full benefit of these services because of the cultural insensitivity of service providers” (Gillum 58). Gillum’s article mainly refers to black women seeking help from majority non-black services, but Hester’s experience proves that even the places created by blacks for blacks, like the African American church, can be insensitive nonetheless.

One of the characters Hester reaches out to for help First, Reverend D. who represents the black church. When the Reverend D enters the stage in Scene 3 “The Reverend on His Soapbox,” he is found preaching a sermon. He is preaching so hard
that one might say that he is “bringing the house down,” but shortly after Hester arrives the hypocrisy is uncovered. Before Reverend D recognizes who Hester is, he gives her advice about how to handle the father of her child. She has not only come to the church for help, but she has also come to see her youngest child’s father for help. When Hester tells the Reverend that the father has denied him, he says

You must go to him and say, “Mister, here is your child!”

Hester: Mister here is your child!

Reverend D: “You are wrong to deny what God has made!”

Hester: You are wrong to deny what God has made!

Reverend D: “He has nothing but love for you and reaches out his hands every day crying where’s daddy”

[...]

Reverend D: If he don’t respond to that then he’s a good-for-nothing deadbeat, and you report him to the authorities. They’ll garnish his wages so at least you all won’t starve. I have a motivational cassette which speaks to that very subject. I’ll give it to you free of charge. (48-49)

As soon as he recognizes that the woman he has been talking to is Hester and the child is his, he changes completely.

You should go. Home. Let me call you a taxi. *Taxi!* You shouldn’t be out this time of night. Young mother like you. In a
neighborhood like this. We'll get you home in a jiff. Where ya live? East? West? North I bet, am I right? TAXI! God.

[...]

Do the authorities know the name of the father?

Hester: I dont tell them nothing

Reverend D: They would garnish his wages if you did. They would provide you with a small income. If you agree not to ever notify the authorities, we could, through my institution, arrange for you to get a much larger amount of money. (51)

Certainly, the Reverend is trying to get rid of Hester. He does not even know where she lives which highlights the lack of care that he has for Hester. Presumably, he appears to be an upstanding man and a pillar in the community, but this crumbles. Hester’s relationship with Reverend D highlights another serious problem within the African American community. In Bent-Goodley and Fowler’s essay “Spiritual and Religious Abuse: Expanding What is Known about Domestic Violence,” they find that “Women of color often turn to their faith-based communities before they go to mental health, social service, or medical care providers.” The problem is not that women turn first to the church for help, but that “Despite religious groups’ policies on domestic violence [I argue all types of violence] women often continue to encounter rejection by faith-based leaders” (282-283). Hester is rejected by Reverend D who tells Hester “suck me off” when she returns for the financial support he promised. When she replies “No,” the Reverend pleads.
Itll only take a minute. Im halfway there. Please.

_She goes down on him. Briefly. He cums. Mildly. Into his handkerchief. She stands there. Ashamed. Expectant._

Reverend D: Go home. Put yr children to bed.

Parks includes a scene of onstage sexual abuse with the Reverend to sharpen the audiences’ awareness of black women’s exploitation. The black church is the bedrock of many African American communities and by having the Reverend sexually assault Hester on stage her point that we need a community of support for black women intensifies. And, spirituality has a tremendous effect on one’s healing process (Bent-Gooley and Folwer).

Hester discovers that she is not able to find a supportive community in the church and sadly, she does not have a community in her friend (Amiga), social services (Welfare), or the medical profession (Doctor). They too sexually exploit Hester. Amiga confesses,

_In my head I got it going on._

_The triple X rated movie:_

_Hester and Amiga get down and get dirty._

_Chocolate and Vanilla get into the ugly_

_[...]_

_She likes the idea of the sex_

_At least she acted like it._

_Her looking at me with those eyes of hers._
You looking like you want it, Hester.

Shoot, Miga, she says that’s just the way I look she says.

It took a little cajoling to get her to do it with me

for an invited audience.

For a dime a look.

Over at my place. (72).

Amiga is no friend. Unlike Florence in Poof! who came to help Loureen and step in as a support, Amiga further harms Hester. Amiga is aware of some of the abuse she experiences, but does not flinch on trying to further exploit Hester.

Welfare, a woman who represents the social services also adds to the lack of community. In her confession, she says,

My dear husband he needed

A little spice.

And I agreed. We both needed spice.

[...]

She was surprised, but consented.

[...]

I was so afraid I’d catch something

But I was swept away and couldn’t stop.

[...]

She let me slap her across the face

And I crossed the line.
It was my first threesome
And it won't happen again.
And I should emphasize that she is a low-class person.
What I mean by that is that we have absolutely nothing in common.
As her caseworker I realize that maintenance of the system
Depends on a well-drawn boundary line
And all parties respecting that boundary.
And I am, after all,
I am a married woman.

Parks names this character Welfare to highlight how the system further exploits black women. As many researchers have concluded, the systems set in place are often more detrimental to black women than they are helpful. In “Social Support Choices for Help With Abusive Relationships: Perceptions of African American Women,” the authors report that many black women find themselves in homeless situation because services that provide shelters are not appropriate or are scarce. Also, “Living in a racist society creates stressors, such as stereotypes and unequal employment and educational opportunities, that in turn affect the way African American women perceive and respond to abuse” (364). In this case, Welfare is unable to provide any assistance that will help to improve her situation because she is too busy exploiting her. The welfare system has been criticized for years
negatively affecting the African American family and Parks’ character further exposes the problems.

Finally, the medical profession is represented through a male character known as Doctor. He stops by her home under the bridge, misdiagnoses her stomach pain, strongly encourages that she gets a hysterectomy, and like all the other institutions designed to provide assistance, he sexually abuses her.

In his confession he admits,

I was lonesome and
She gave herself to me in a way that I had never experienced
Even with women I’ve paid
She was, like she was giving me something that was not hers
To give me but something that was mine
That I’d lent her
And she was returning it to me.
Sucked me off for what seemed like hours
But I was very insistent. And held back
And she understood that I wanted her in the traditional way.
And she was very giving very motherly very obliging very understanding
Very phenomenal.
Let me cumm inside her. Like I needed to.
What could I do?
I couldn’t help it. (44-45).

The doctor has dehumanized Hester. His retelling of the way she gave him something that he was entitled to and only lent Hester is disturbing because it speaks to the dept in which he ignores her rights as a person. Aure Lorde called this abuse. In “Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde writes “When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse” (qtd in Phillips 6).

Hester has chronic stomach pain and the doctor offers her pills that do not ease her pain. What the doctor fails to realize is that “all too often the enemies of our physical and emotional well-being are social and political” (Sick and Tired 19). The medical field does not intervene, ease, or treat these roots of suffering when they manifest physically because, more often than not, it is institutionalized racism and sexism that cause black women to be abused and violated (Stanford 3). Also, the doctor’s desire to give Hester a hysterectomy refers to the “genocidal sterilization programs throughout the twentieth century at the hands of medical establishment and at the behest of the government, the courts, and the insurance companies (Black Women’s Activism 1). Once again, Parks’ knowledge of these black feminist arguments is apparent.

The men in the play all take advantage of Hester and even the eldest boy on the verge of manhood brings harm to Hester. Parks, however, has managed to escape a lot of the “she’s a man-hater” backlash Shange received because she
portrays a woman being exploited by both sexes. There are two women in the play who take their turn in being a sexual predator. The presence of spirituality should come from church, but Reverend D does not offer Hester much hope. The pain in her stomach is because she is starved emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

Ultimately, Parks uses the play to highlight the point that in today's urban environment—the lack of caring is to the detriment of the black community. Parks showcases the harsh effects of what happens when no one takes a stance to help or protect. This ending dismal—Hester in prison, one of daughters has runaway, he oldest son is dead, and her kids will most likely end up in the hands of the system—the very thing Hester fought against.

This naturalistic ending, similar to Ann Petry's *The Street* is designed to awaken the audience and thrust them into a desire to change. One of the major features of naturalism is its focus on criminal or criminal behavior and the ways that society, as an omnipresent force, guides human life. By showing the absence of a caring society and a community support system, Hester's imprisonment is inevitable. In a way Suzan-Lori Parks uses *In the Blood* like a carnival mirror to reflect and exaggerate the worst parts of urban communities. She shows how the rampant individualism becomes a way of life and this helps to maintain the absence of adequate services designed for black women. The dismal ending is call to action that is different from other womanist restorative dramas and can arguably be one the second most effective play about violence against women; with the first being *Ruined* covered in the final chapter. The audience should be disturbed at the idea
that this could be one woman’s reality that once they will be moved beyond the realm of theatre and make real-life changes.

As Carol Schafer wrote,

The audience now has been confronted with multiple excuses and rationalizations for the refusal to take responsibility for being part of the systematic exploitation of Hester, La Negrtia. The audience must choose whether to embrace irresponsibility and identify with the chorus who objectify Hester or to empathize with Hester, the hero who takes responsibility for her choices and her children and who refuses to name or black those who would oppress her” (192).

The audience who agreed, even passively, with the chorus that Hester’s only skill evolved around sex must now rethink their position. Not only rethink it, but the play forces the audience to see her sexual awareness and knowledge as sexual abuse and misuse. Ultimately, the audience should be transformed—moved to a place where they would want to help Hester rather than talk about her. Hester needs help and without a community to offer it, she is doomed. As shown by earlier plays in my study, having the support of a community is extremely instrumental in the healing process of abused women. As Miller and Iovanni stated, “neither can the victim heal nor the offender change without receiving community support (293). In Poof! Loureen had a supportive community in Florence and in Flyin’ West Minnie had her sisters, Miss Leah, and Wil Perish. I agree with Carol Schafer that In the Blood "places
African or African-American women center stage in order to question representations of women’s bodies as possessions, as objects of desire, and as bloody biological battlefields” (181). I would also like to that that this play helps to elucidate the fact that it only takes having a village mentality, as opposed to having a village of people, to operate as a community for a woman in need. And, yes, In the Blood is “twisted enough to inhabit that gratuitously violent world” of Jacobean drama as Rena Fraden claims in “Suzan-Lori Parks’ Hester Plays: In the Blood and Fucking A,” but it uses a twisted ending to awaken the audience (437). An awaken audience can take steps toward making a change. As Suzan-Lori Parks remarked, “A black play is doctor heal-good cause theatre is a healing thing” and that is what this play is attempting to do—heal the wounds of abused women (“An Equation” 582).
Chapter 5

Transcending Differences to Connect with Our Sisters: *Ruined* and Sexual Violence in the Congo

We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves.

And ... we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere.

*The Color Purple*, 137

Whereas other black American women playwrights in this study such as Ntozake Shange, Pearl Cleage, and Suzan-Lori Parks have primarily written staged performances which concentrate on gender, race, and class oppressions experienced in the United States, Lynn Nottage’s latest play, *Ruined* (2009), exhibits the Diasporic aspect of womanist restorative drama by focusing on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC or Congo). It is estimated that over 200,000 women and girls have been raped over the past twelve years in the country. According to the UN there were 15,996 rape cases in 2008 and two out of every three were children (Drash). This problem is so vast that in August 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton “unveiled a $17 million plan to fight DRC’s stunning levels of sexual violence, a problem she called ‘evil in its basest form’” (Gettleman “Clinton”).

Following the Rwanda genocide, during which almost 100,000 people were killed within a 90-day period in 1994, many Rwandan/Hutu rebels crossed from
Rwanda into foreign territory in DRC. The people of eastern DRC are suffering tremendously since this spill over into their country. In 1997, Laurent Kabila overthrew Mobutu’s US-supported regime from its 32-year reign and this resulted in Africa’s First World War (Baaz and Stern 500). The fight over DRC’s rich natural resources (coltan, diamonds, gold, and timber) includes Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, Burundi, and Western nations, like the US, that buy these products. On the one hand, villagers are ravaged by rebel militia who desire to destroy their enemies and prove the rebels’ absolute power. On the other hand, the Congolese army, notoriously known for being the most poorly paid army in all of Africa, sustain themselves by preying upon the local villagers (Baaz and Stern 501). Residents of the war-torn country have a popular saying, “the soldiers are not so much hunting rebels as hunting women” (McCrummen). If citizens of eastern DRC are fortunate to escape being slaughtered to death in the midst of frequent massacres, they can expect to live in the terror of being violently raped or witnessing a family member, friend, and/or neighbor raped at gun point; sometimes, relatives are ordered to participate in the gang rape. There are, however, thousands of citizens who fight for a better life and opt to relocate. It is estimated that 500,000 villagers have been

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25 In 2007 it was estimated that about one million US dollars worth of coltan was stolen daily (Lisa F. Jackson).
26 In a 2007 documentary, “The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo,” by Lisa F. Jackson, a Congolese woman told the story of her brother’s death. Soldiers raided their home and gang raped her. After making her brother watch the act they demanded that he rape her too or be killed. When he refused to rape his sister, the soldiers murdered him right before the woman’s eyes. She was impregnated during the ordeal.
forced from their homes and many villages have been set ablaze (Gettleman “Clinton”).

The situation in DRC is overtly disturbing. Firstly, violent rapes occur on a massive scale because not only are rebel forces assaulting women but so are Congolese soldiers and UN Peacekeepers. This eliminates the possibility of Congolese citizens having the safe haven of protection that residents might normally during times of war. Secondly, the level of physical damage caused to the bodies of women, girls, and recently men, during and after sexual assault is unparalleled. Stephen Lewis, the co-director of AIDS-Free World, said: “There is no precedent for the insensate brutality of the war on women in Congo. The world has never dealt with such a twisted and blistering phenomenon” (Wakabi 15). Karin Wachter, an adviser in the region working for the International Rescue Committee, noted that the brutality exerted upon survivors of rape causes

women and girls [to] suffer from debilitating damage to their reproductive systems, resulting in multiple fistulae, as well as

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27 A New York Times article, “Symbol of Unhealed Congo: Male Rape Victims,” published on August 4, 2009, featured the story of Congolese male rape survivors. Men raping men is a growing problem and by mid-summer it was estimated that 10% of all rape survivors in DRC are men and boys. These men are outcasts, just like the women, but are often laughed at and marked by their neighbors who say “Those men in the bush made you their wife.” Also, hospitals are reporting an increase in castrations.

28 According to the Fistula Foundation, there are two causes of Fistulas: child birth and sexual violence. “The consequences of fistula are life altering when the injury goes un repaired. In Congo, rape is being used as a tool of war on a massive scale. The result is often traumatic fistulas, which are holes in bladders, vagina and rectum that are caused by rape or attack using bayonets, wood, and even guns. The Economist magazine recently estimated that 80% of the fistula cases in the Congo
broken bones, severed limbs, and burns. From a public-health perspective, the psychological and social consequences of sexual violence are equally as devastating. There are serious consequences for women's and girls' mental health, including depression and suicide, as well as for the family and community members who witness or are forced to participate in the violence. (Wakabi)

Unquestionably, these aspects of DRC’s situation take rape and war to a horrific new level.  

CONNECTING WITH HER SISTERS: LYNN NOTTAGE’S QUEST FOR RESTORATION

Moved by her womanist ideological impulse to assist in the black community’s healing process, Lynn Nottage traveled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in September 2004. She initially planned to write a black adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, but upon visiting DRC and talking to sexual violence survivors, she tossed the idea. Nottage felt that African women had such unique, powerful, haunting, and inspiring stories of their own that Brecht’s (a white, were the result of sexual violence. For the women with the injury, they are still very much in need of treatment, and psychological counseling as well. The Panzi Hospital in the Congo, founded by Congolese gynecologist Denis Mukwege is a pioneer in helping these victims of rape” (A1)

29 It is a misconception, although a very popular assumption, that rape is an inevitable part of every war. Elisabeth Jean Wood’s essay “Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When is Wartime Rape Rare?” examines wars that did not involve rape. She does this to eliminate excuses that may prevent holding groups accountable for engaging in sexual violence (132).
German man) play could not sustain their fullness. His form, structure, and plot (albeit epic) was too limiting for the reservoir of these black women’s resilience. The published version of *Ruined* includes an introduction by Kate Whoriskey, the artistic director who accompanied Nottage to DRC. Whoriskey notes that her overall goal as the director was to maintain a commitment to “staging complexity” and that her task was to “counter the drama with humor, spirit and wit, and to treat the stories collected in the Central Africa with the understanding that at every moment the Congolese are determined to survive” (*Ruined* xiii).

*Ruined* premiered at the Goodman Theatre (Chicago) in November 2008 and opened off-Broadway at the Manhattan Theatre Club (New York City) in February 2009 (*Ruined*). The two-act play takes place inside a bar that doubles as a whorehouse for soldiers. Set in a small mining town in the tropical Ituri rain forest, the bar opens its doors to everyone. The modest bar is often without the supplies it needs; like condoms, liquor, soap, and cigarettes, because Christian, the supplier, is often robbed by looters. Christian is also an admirer of Mama Nadi, the owner of the bar/brothel. When she verbally reprimands Christian for arriving late and without goods on her list, he interprets her attention as encouragement for his romantic gestures. Mama Nadi’s place is a nugget of calm in the midst of chaos. She welcomes all paying customers—the white foreigners who visit seeking coltan and other precious minerals, rebel militia, neutral parties, peacekeepers, and Congolese military. Everyone, however, must obey her house rules. Customers are to respect the women, the building, the meager furnishings, and drink the watered down and
recycled liquor\textsuperscript{30} without complaining. Most importantly, all bullets to any gun in her place must be left at the bar. She insists on having some form of peace in her establishment.

The plot is complex, haunting, and moving. The play begins just as Christian arrives with one of his late, but routine deliveries. He negotiates with Mama Nadi to purchase other items he has in his cargo. It is not until the items of their bargaining enter the stage, that the audience/reader is made aware that the items are two young women. Their disheveled and ragged clothing, body posture, and described vaginal odor, like “the rot of meat,” informs the audience that the women are rape survivors (17). In an ironic twist, the only hope of survival is employment in Mama Nadi’s whorehouse. By the end of Act-one, scene one, the magnitude of sexual violence in DRC is made clear. Sophia and Salima (the “items” Mama Nadi purchased) have each been raped at gun point—Sophie raped by militia men with a “bayonet and then left for dead” and Salima’s experience (detailed in Act-two) involved being kidnapped and made into a sex slave for five months (13). The men killed her baby girl because she was crying while her mother was being gang raped. When Salima fled the military camp and returned home, her husband abandoned her. Josephine, a veteran at Mama Nadi’s establishment, takes the young women in the rear and prepares them for daily business. Mr. Harari—the Lebanese diamond trader, Jerome Kisembe—the rebel leader, Commander Osembenga—government

\textsuperscript{30} Recycled liquor is the wine leftover from customer's glasses that Mama Nadi pours back into bottle.
military leader, and random soldiers that double as both rebel and government soldiers complete the list of the cast members.

**SOLDIERS, REBELS, AND LOVING MEN**

Of all the plays in this study, Ruined has the most male characters. Nottage uses a technique of double casting to give the allusion of a male dominated setting. The crowding effect of rebels and military soldiers elucidate the threat toward women and Congolese civilians, because both groups are notorious for plundering, hunting, raping, murdering, and terrorizing. The women in Mama Nadi’s brothel have come seeking even a little control over their sexuality. This, however, is not always a guarantee. In one bar scene, the stage directions showcase the government leader Osembenga “pull[ing] Sophie onto his lap. He shoves his hand up her skirt. She gasps and struggles harder” (83). It is clear from this scene that the military men are constructed as harmful as the rebels. There are, however, two other men present in the play—Mr. Harari and Christian. Mr. Harari, the Lesbian diamond merchant, is present to partake in the booze, female bodies, and blood-soaked diamonds. Although it appears that Mr. Harari is not violently harmful to Mama Nadi or the women working in her brothel, this good-paying customer is a complex character padded with deeper meanings. First, Mr. Harari is able to pay for all the things he engages in, because he is an active participate in the exploitation of the Congo’s resources. Second, as a trader and as an outsider not of Congolese descent, he was able to flee the area when the war-like clash came to Mama Nadi’s door. He not only
left the bar before Mama Nadi could return from the rear with Sohpie, but he help her diamond (her most prize possession), his true intentions were revealed. Nottage, however, uses a technique similar to Pearl Cleage (discussed in Chapter 3) with Frank and Wil. Nottage presents a more well-rounded view of the black community and does not restrict her male characters to be men to only vicious, sexually starve, and malnourished men waiting to plunder and pillage.

Christian, whose name evokes a religious connotation of doing unto others as one’s self, is presented as a type of foils character. Unlike Wil in *Flyin’ West*, Christian does come close to being emasculated, by both Mama Nadi and Osembenga. In the same scene when Osembenga forces his hand up Sophie’s niece skirt, Christian attempts to protect his niece. Christian, however, is ill equipped in both attitude and weaponry to defend Sophie or Mama Nadi against Osembenga and his men. They push Christian aside and Mama Nadi, disappointed in the timing of Sophie’s resistance and Christian’s unsuccessful defense, gives Sophie over to Osembenga while Christian looks on.

**MAMA:** You’re lucky the commander is generous. I had to plead with him to give you another chance. Now you go in there, and you make sure that his cock is clean. Am I making myself clear?

**SOPHIE:** Please—

**MAMA:** No get out of my sight.
(Mama grabs Sophie and thrusts her into the back. Me. Harari, Christian, and Josephine stare at Mama. A moment. Mama goes behind the bar and pours herself a drink.)

What?

CHRISTIAN: Don’t make her do that! This girl is—

MAMA: What if Osembenga had been more than offended. What then? Who should protect my business if he turned on me? It is but the grace of God, that he didn’t mean her to the ground. And now I have to give away business to keep him and his filthy soldiers happy.

CHRISTIAN: But if—

MAMA: Not a word from you. You have a problem, then leave.

CHRISTIAN: “Business.” When you say it, it sounds vulgar, polluted.

MAMA: Are you going to lecture me, professor? Turn your dirty finger away from me.

(Christian is stung by her words.) (85)

Christian is not capable of protecting the women. When Mama Nadi asks Christian, “Who would protect my business?” she is also suggesting “Not you!” While Christian contrasts the men clothe their masculinity with guns and military power, at various times the mere presence of masculinity is questioned. Nevertheless, in the final scene when Christian returns and stands up to Mama Nadi, he displays an aspect of
masculinity that supersedes all other manifestations. He stood up against the pervasive stereotypes, myths, and rumors about women who had been raped as unworthy of love, romance, and even marriage. Christian, in the end, becomes the type of defense Congolese women need—a man who is willing to consider the wellbeing of the entire black community and one of those beginnings start with his ability to love her and help her heal.

**Finding a Supportive Community in a Whorehouse**

Thus far, other plays in this study portrayed women who were survivors of sexual assault and intimate partner violence and have been able to find a supportive community in their family, neighbors, and friends. In *Ruined*, a supportive community is found in the least likely of places—a whorehouse. Mama Nadi’s brothel/bar is the safest place in the area. This is ironic because a brothel exists so that men can come in, have sex with women that they pay for, and then leave. These places are not where men go to find love, a relationship, or any long-term commitment. Women who are involved in prostitution are usually characterized as being “trapped” or “enslaved.” Prostitution is considered as the antithesis of feminism by many feminist, while a select few have argued the opposite in the name of women’s rights and personal liberation. In Rebecca Whisnant’s and Christine

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31 Prostitution is a multi-billion dollar industry that includes adult and child pornography, bartering sex for food and shelter, massage parlors, prostitution rings, stripping, saunas, live sex shows, street prostitution, escort services or outcall, ritual abuse, peep shows, phone sex, international and domestic trafficking, mail order bride services, and prostitution tourism (Whisnant and Stark xi).
Stark’s edited collection *Not for Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography* contains twenty-eight essays by various feminist scholars rejecting and appreciating prostitution. Together, however, these essays come to prove that “the prostitution industry is an enormously powerful and pervasive cultural presence” (xi).

Nottage presents prostitution not as a binary—evil or liberating, but rather as a viable option of safety in the midst of chaos. Mami Nadi’s brothel offers shelter and most importantly a community. Surprisingly, the brothel is a safer place for a woman who has been raped than being among her own family. When Christian first brings his niece Sophia to Mama Nadi, he reminds her that she’s safer in the whorehouse than being at home.

CHRISTIAN: She’s my sister’s only daughter. Okay? I told my family I’d find a place for her...And here at least I know she’ll be safe. Fed.

*(He stops himself and gulps down his soda.)*

And as you know the village isn’t a place for a girl who has been...ruined. It brings shame, dishonor to the family.

MAMA: (Ironically): But it’s okay for her to be here, huh? ...

Mama Nadi recognizes the irony in the thinking. The idea that a woman would be able to find safety from men in a brothel indicates more explicitly the level of chaos Congolese women face daily. Mama Nadi’s is not only a place where the women seek
community, but the soldiers too. In Act I, scene 3, Salima tells Sophie that the soldiers desire her emotionally as well as sexually.

SALIMA: “Smile, Salima. Talk pretty.” Them soldiers don’t respect nothing. Them miners, they easy, they want drink, company, and it’s over. But the soldiers, they want more of you, and—

SOPHIE: Did that man do something to hurt you?

SALIMA: You know what he say? He say fifteen Hema men were shot dead and buried in their own mining pit, in mud so thick it swallow them right into the ground without mercy. He say, one man stuff the coltan into his mouth to keep soldiers from stealing his hard work, and they split his belly open with a machete. “It’ll show him for stealing,” he say, bragging like I should be congratulating him. And then he fucked me, and when he was finished he sat on the floor and wept. He wanted me to hold him. Comfort him. (31)

Not only are the women in need of a community, but so are the men. Nottage wonderfully captures the plight of a people searching for a community. Similarly to Hester La Negrtia, the women are starved for a community, but they find it in the least likely of places.

Mama Nadi is protective of her establishment and her workers. The most symbolic act of community came when Mama Nadi risks her most precious
possession in order to help Sophie get her fistula fixed. After Mama Nadi allows Sophie to assist her with the bookkeeping, Mama Nadi catches Sophie stealing from her. When Mama Nadi asks what she is planning to do with her money and what can be so important that she would risk being thrown back into the bush, Sophie informs her that she has heard about a doctor in the city that helps repair women's vaginas. He had the ability to restore women and young girls “ruined” by sexual violence. Sophie was hoping to steal enough money from Mama Nadi to get the medical treatment she needs. Mama Nadi has sympathy for Sophie and does not kick her out.

Moments before the brewing clash between rebels and government soldiers occur; Mama Nadi demonstrates a climatic act of kindness. She gives Mr. Harari her most precious diamond to sell in the city, so that Sophie can get the operation to repair her body and have a better life.

(Distance gunfire. Mr. Harari anxiously stands in the doorway.

*Mama goes to the bar, she appears conflicted. An internal battle.*

32 Sophie’s desire to travel to the city and have her vagina repaired alludes to the real phenomenon of many women in DRC who travel to Dr. Denis Mukwege’s Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, DRC. Dr. Mukwege “specializes in treating women and girls who have been victims of sexual violence in the Congo’s twelve-year war. Many of these patients have been gang raped, and some subjected to assault from the inside out with bayonets, chucks of wood and even rifles” (fistulafoundation.org). In an interview two years ago, he said that he operates on five women per day (Jackson). Last year, he was awarded the United Nations Human Rights Prize for “his work protecting the rights and dignity of tens of thousand[s] of Congolese women” (fistulafoundation.org).
MAMA: Ah...One thing, Mr. Harari. Before you leave, can I ask you a favor?

MR. HARARI: Of course.

(Mama opens the lockbox, and carefully lays out the diamond.)

MAMA: This.

(Mr. Harari’s eyes light up.)

MR. HARARI: Your insurance policy.

MAMA (With irony): Yes. My restaurant, my garden to dig in, and a chief’s fortune of cows. (Laughs)

MR. HARARI: You ready to sell?

MAMA: Yes. Take it. (Hands him Sophie’s piece of paper) It has the name of a man in Bunia, a doctor. (With urgency) He won’t trouble you with questions. Use my name. (90)

Mama Nadi offers up the diamond she has been saving to purchase land, just so that Sophie can have a chance at being healed. When Mr. Harari agrees to do as Mama Nadi asks, she exits to the back room to get Sophie. While she is in the back room an aid worker demands that Mr. Harari leave immediately. The worker warns Mr. Harari that there are three vehicles rapidly approaching and they should not be there when the vehicles arrive. “AID WORKER (Panicked): Now! I can’t wait. C’mon. C’mon. (Distant gunfire)” (91). Mr. Harari calls for Mama Nadi, but after hearing the sounds of gun shots and the engine revving, he leaves. When she returns with Sophie, Mama Nadi quickly explains what she has done and pushes her out the door
to run behind them. As Mama Nadi celebrates trading her most precious possession for a good cause, Sophie enters.

SOPHIE: he’s gone.


(92)

The shocking sound effects and lighting compound the sadness of knowing that Sophie will not get her fistula repaired and that Mama Nadi’s prized diamond is gone. The intensity of emotion elucidates the importance of community, the feeling of isolation, and the intensity of hopelessness real Congolese women experience daily.

One of the plays more disturbing moments followed the aforementioned scene. When the rebels enter into Mama Nadi’s place, Salima’s husband Fortune joins them. No one has confirmed to him that Salima is in fact living at Mama Nadi’s place, but he will not leave. Salima is pregnant and does not want Fortune to see her because she does not want to deal with him rejecting her again. In the midst of Osembenga’s raid, Salima enters the brothel from a rear room. She has been hiding in the rear of the bar for days avoiding Fortune because he abandoned her after she
was raped. When Salima needed him the most, he was not there. Her response to him sitting out in the rain waiting on her was

I walked into the family compound expecting wide open arms. An embrace. Five months, suffering. I suffered every single second of it. And my family gave me the back of their heads. And he, the man I loved since I was fourteen, chased me away with a green switch. He beat my ankles raw. And I dishonored him? I dishonored him? Where was he? Buying a pat? He was too proud to bear my shame...but not proud enough to protect me from it. Let him sit in the rain. (70)

Salima could not bear it anymore. She comes from the back where everyone can see her—she is dazed and soaked with blood from the waist down. The blood dripping from her legs means that she has an abortion by herself. Before this moment Salima did not want Fortune to see her pregnant with a soldier’s baby, but makes a more radical decision not to carry the baby full term.

(Salima slowly enters as if in a trance. A pool of blood forms in the middle of her dress, blood drips down her legs.)

SALIMA (Screams): STOP! Stop it!

FORTUNE: Salima!

SALIMA (Screams): For the love of God, stop this! Haven’t you done enough to us. Enough! Enough!

(The Soldiers stop abruptly, shocked by Salima’s defiant voice.)
MAMA: What did you do?!

*(Fortune violently pushes the Soldiers out of the way and races to Salima.)*

FORTUNE: Salima! Salima!

SALIMA: Fortune.

*(Fortune scoops Salima into his arms. Mama breaks away from the Soldiers.)*

MAMA: Quick go set some hot water and cloth. Salima look at me. You have to look at me, keep your eyes on me. Don’t think of anything else. C’mon look at me.

*(Salima smiles triumphantly. She takes Fortune’s hand.)*

SALIMA (To Osembenga, the soldiers, and Fortune): You will not fight your battles on my body anymore.

*(Salima collapses to the floor. Fortune cradles her in his arms. She dies. Blackout.)* (94)

With a triumphant smile upon her face, Salima dies in Mama Nadi’s arms making the play’s most climatic and paralyzing moment. Nottage does not shield her audience from the harsh realities facing Congolese women. In an interview with the New York Times Nottage said, “Most of [the women] where incredibly traumatized and yet they still found the strength to tell their stories. As painful as was, I felt this urgency for them to recount every comment...At times I wanted to close my ears and stop listening. But I think they really wanted to go on record...They wanted the
world to hear their stories” (New York Beacon). Nottage is dedicated to speaking out for black women who have been abused. The pioneers of womanist restorative drama worked to break the silence, the previous contemporary playwrights used their voice, and Nottage takes things a step further by speaking for those who do not have the means to speak for themselves. She uses the resources she has available and assists her African sisters in getting the attention of the world and it worked. This play won one of the highest honors in America and it captured the attention of the UN.

**Removing the Matriarchal Mask**

Nottage’s understanding of feminist theories is not only apparent in the way she speaks on behalf of other black women who are unable to speak for themselves, but she also tackles the myth of the strong black woman. She could have ended the play with Salima’s death, but that would have been traumatizing for the audience and would have perhaps preventing them from moving beyond that feeling and into a place of action. She told the New York Times,

> One of the greatest challenges I faced in trying to tell the story of these women is figuring out a way to end with optimism...to marry the horror with the humanity, and tell a balanced tale that reflected the complexities of the Africa that I experienced, which was not just the horror. There was also a great deal of
joy and humor that I encountered, and I wanted to capture those textures (weaver).

Nottage’s desire to capture the beauty of the women in the play is also a refusal to allow the women to be described as “victims” or treated as such. This play, like the other womanist restorative dramas presents women who are surviving the impact of sexual assault and intimate partner violence and are not swaddled in language that prevents their path to healing.

Before the play ends, Nottage challenges the myth of the matriarch. The play returns to the romantic saga between Mama Nadi and Christian that opened the play. Mama Nadi is in her mid-40s, attractive, blunt, and preserved as strong. She is a fortress who will pick up a machete and threaten rebels and soldiers alike if they threaten her safety. Her callous exterior dissolve slightly in Act two, but it is in the final scene that the need to dismantle this myth is more explicit. Nottage uses Mama Nadi to counter the matriarch stereotype and show how this can cause emotional problems for black women. When Christian brings up the idea of marriage in the beginning of the play by saying, “I know you want a husband,” Mama replies that she would like that as much as she would “like a hole in my head” (7). She is perceived as epitomizing the ideal independent, strong black woman who is liberated from the desire of men and marriage.

After the soldiers raided Mama Nadi’s bar and Salima has died from a self-induced abortion everyone’s mood changes. Christian returns sober and back to his usual self with the exception of having a little more aggression. After baring his
feelings that he misses Mama Nadi and she offends him, he retaliates “You are a
mean-spirited woman. I don’t know why I expect the sun to shine where only mold
thrives” (98). Mama Nadi caught off guard by his snappy comeback stands her
ground. Christian then boldly confesses his love for her:

CHRISTIAN: We joke. It’s fun. But honestly I’m worn bare. I’ve
been driving this route a long time and I’m getting to the age
where I’d like to sleep in the same bed every night. I need
familiar company, food that is predictable, conversation that’s
too easy. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, then I’ll go.
But please, I’d like to have the truth... why not us?

(A moment. Mama says nothing. Christian starts to leave, but her
words catch him.)

MAMA (With surprising vulnerability): I’m ruined. (Louder) I’m
ruined.

(He absorbs her words.)

CHRISTIAN: God, I don’t know what those men did to you, but
I’m sorry for it. I may be an idiot for saying so, but I think we,
and I speak as a man, can do better.

(He goes to comfort her. She pulls away until he’s forced to hold
her in a tight embrace.)

MAMA: No! Don’t touch me! No!
(She struggles to free herself, but eventually succumbs to his heartfelt embrace. She breaks down in tears. He kisses her.)

When Christian proves himself as capable of being her support, Mama Nadi is able to be vulnerable. The play ends with the two dancing as the lights fade.

In *Psychotherapy with African American Women: Innovations in Psychodynamic Perspectives and Practice*, Leslie Jackson and Beverley Greene write “Society expects the African American woman to handle losses, traumas, failed relationships, and the dual oppressions of racism and sexism. Failing short of this expectation is viewed by many African American women as a personal failure. This may bring about intense feeling of shame...” (227). Although Jackson and Greene are talking about African American women, the same can be applied to African women in this context. Mama Nadi needs Christian, but she is burdened down by pressures of society to be the tough woman. It is implied that she has been dealing with her pain alone. She has been able to facilitate a community within her brothel for the young women (Salima, Sophie, and Josephine), but she has not benefited from a community of her own.

It is important to point out that she needs Christian in order to begin healing herself. Christian symbolizes the community of men, Christian people, and to some degree the entire world. The play ends with a call to action for Congolese men to stop abandoning their wives and nudges at the world to assist rather than turn its backs upon these women left to survive some of the most violent forms of sexual assault. This womanist restorative drama, as illustrated in *Ruined*, captures the
impact of systematic rape against black women in DRC and simultaneously places the plight of all black women on the world agenda so that the world can be a safer place for all women and girls.
Conclusion

It has been my goal to introduce a new feminist theoretical concept that can be useful in literary studies, theatre, and feminist studies. This exploration of black women’s drama in “Womanist Restorative Drama as a Catalyst of Healing from Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault” should provoke other scholars to think more critically about black women’s drama on issues of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. In African American literary criticism, drama has been somewhat of a step-child compared to fiction and poetry. When drama is analyzed black women’s plays have not, historically, been as focused on as plays written by black men. In theatre studies, black women playwrights are disproportionately taught, performed, and published about less than their white counterparts. Feminist studies scholars, as a whole, have ignored the impact of black women’s drama on the feminist movement. The fact that black women are still writing and staging narratives about coping with, recovering from, and moving beyond the violence they experience indicates there is a larger need to be more active in the fight to end violence against black women.

Within this research study I have tried to introduce new language and make the discussion accessible. Pearl Cleage remarked that part of black women’s difficulty in defending themselves has been the lack of language that can appropriately describe their situation. She writes,

This is a difficult process, made no less difficult by the fact that we, black women, have no adequate language with which to
describe our situation to ourselves or to anyone else... We therefore don’t even have working definitions of the words needed to begin to articulate our specific black female reality.

(Mad at Miles 39)

I hope the term womanist restorative drama that I derived from black women’s ways of knowing can be useful for future scholars and ultimately everyday black women. The word “womanism” is from black culture and instantly evokes a relationship between black women.

Additionally, I strongly considered bell hooks criticism of academia when she expressed concern that feminist theories were becoming more and more convoluted, abstract, and therefore useless. She writes, “Each time this happens, the radical, subversive potential of feminist scholarship and feminist theory in particular is undermined” (hooks Talking Back 36). I tried to prevent this research from being undermined by convoluted language and I am hopeful that the concept of womanist restorative drama will be as useful as the plays themselves.

I was propelled in this research study by a desire to not only uncover commonalities between the plays, but to also find Ntozake Shange’s predecessors. These six elements are present, in varying degrees, in each of the plays analyzed in this dissertation. All the plays, including the ones written during the New Negro Renaissance share six core elements—a focus on sexual assault, an expression of black feminism and/or womanism, an emphasis on the impact of community in the healing process of women who have survived sexual assault or intimate partner
violence, a conversation about the impact of men on women’s lives even if there are no male characters in the play, the removal of language that can be harmful, debilitating, or stifling (i.e. “victim”) to women’s healing process, and an element of spirituality, ritual, or communion. The texts, Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Blue Blood*; Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*; Lynn Nottage’s *Poof!* and *Ruined*; Peal Cleage *Flyin’ West*; and Suzan-Lori Park’s *In the Blood* together represent a large sampling of the plays on sexual assault and intimate partner violence.

This study fills a gap in our view of African American literature, drama, black feminism, womanism, and movements that fight for the end of violence against women. Methodologically, it brings together concepts from all of these places so that each can benefit from an examination of black women’s drama. More directly, I have aimed to build upon Lisa Anderson’s text *Black Feminism and Contemporary Drama*. Her short, but groundbreaking collection published two years ago is the first book-length study that names and defines a black feminist theatre aesthetic. Her Chapter 7, “A Black Feminist Aesthetic,” summarizes previous chapters and condenses the analysis into a useful list of elements, thus enabling readers to identify a black feminist theatre aesthetic beyond the examples in her book. According to Anderson, a single play need not demonstrate all the elements, but plays that work within the elements can be classified as fitting the aesthetic. The ten elements are: use of black people’s history, creates “imagined histories” to fill gaps, directly confronts racist, sexist images of black women and men, reveals black women’s abuse, demonstrates
the affects of institutionalized racism, emphasizes the importance of black women’s reproductive freedom, incorporates oral culture, examines young women’s lives, and “address an important audience” (116). With Anderson providing the context for a Black feminist theatre aesthetic, I delve within this aesthetic and create a subcategory named womanist restorative drama.

From the evidence presented here, some answers to specific questions have been answered. First, it is evident that there is exigency to discover and use alternative methods of assisting black women in need of healing from intimate partner violence and/or sexual assault. Theatre—more specifically plays written by black feminists—has the ability to operate as an alternative catalyst of healing from intimate partner violence and sexual assault. Additionally, I was able to locate a history of plays about these two topics dating back to the early 20th century. However, since 1974 there have been more and more plays produced and Lynn Nottage’s latest, Pulitzer Prize winning play, Ruined, could suggest that there will be more on the way.

I am not aware of any prior study that focuses on black women’s plays themed on sexual violence and intimate partner violence and I feel that this project is one of the first to come. In the process of gathering research, I consulted quite a few sociologists because they provided quantitative data about the social problem. I did not, however, come across any studies that measured the healing process of survivors who read or saw plays by African American women that encourage restoration. My study could open the door for future studies. I hope that this work
encourages more analysis of and questioning about black women’s drama. For instance, a future study might include data collection gathered from a focus group of black women who have read or staged one of these plays at a local women’s shelter or on a university campus. In fact, these plays coupled with novels written by African American women such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, and Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* would make an interesting undergraduate course on black women’s response to sexual and domestic violence. By adding the theories applied in this study, the course could easily be structured for a graduate student audience.
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