

STUDY GUIDE

Dramaturgy- Dana Kinsey

Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf*, which was nominated for two Tony Awards in 1977, is a journey through the ongoing struggle of women and girls of color to live with dignity and respect in the context of systemic racism, sexism, and oppression.

Though the piece's focus on struggle could seem negative, ultimately, it turns into a celebration of the women and the power they find in their own voices.

This ground-breaking work has been influential to generations of progressive thinkers, including #MeToo architect Tarana Burke and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage.



Ntozake Shange- 10/18/48 – 10/26/18 *(pronounced: n-toe-zaak-kay shong-gay)*

~in tribute

“Where there is a woman there is magic. If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic. She can share or not share her powers. This woman is a consort of the spirits.” Thank you, Ntozake Shange. Rest now, Queen.”
Ava DuVernay, Oct 27, 2018

“Zake was funny, flirtatious, caustic, impertinent and restlessly creative — as people with that kind of talent usually are. She lived like a writer, surrounded by art and books and interesting people and conversations. Ntozake was a vibrant woman and one who liked to look good. “For Colored Girls” was made into a movie in 2010 and in photos of her from the premiere, before illness made her immobile, she looks triumphant and incandescent. In her life, in her work, she was those things and more.” Tonya Pendleton, Nov 1, 2018



~in life

- Born in 1948 as Paulette Linda Williams in Trenton, N.J., she was an influential poet, playwright, and author.
- She graduated from Barnard College and got a master's degree from USC.
- Her father, Dr. Paul T. Williams, was a surgeon. Her mother, Eloise Owens Williams, was a professor of social work.
- Shange renamed herself using the Xhosa language of South Africa: Ntozake means “She who comes with her own things” and Shange means “She who walks like a lion.”
- Her list of published works includes 19 poetry collections, six novels, five children's books and three collections of essays.
- She worked with such black theater companies as the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco; the New Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia; Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, N.J.; St. Louis Black Rep; Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minn.; and The Ensemble Theatre in Houston.
- Shange taught at Brown University, Rice University, Villanova University, DePaul University, Prairie View University and Sonoma State University. She also lectured at Yale, Howard, New York University, among others.



For Colored Girls who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf *ia study*

- *For Colored Girls* opened at the Public Theater in downtown Manhattan, with Shange, then 27, performing as one of the women.
- It played some 750 performances on Broadway — only the second play by an African American woman after “A Raisin in the Sun” — and was turned into a feature film by Tyler Perry starring Thandie Newton, Anika Noni Rose, Kerry Washington and Janet Jackson.
- *For Colored Girls* became a staple of theater productions everywhere. Though Shange wrote many other plays, books and poems, that play was the towering artistic achievement with which she was most closely associated.
- The New York Times reviewer called it “extraordinary and wonderful” and “a very humbling but inspiring thing for a white man to experience.”
- *For Colored Girls* earned Shange an Obie Award, and she won a second such award in 1981 for her adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's “Mother Courage and Her Children” at the Public Theater.
- The work is considered a “choreopoem,” a term coined by the author to describe a dramatic work that is a combination of poetry, dance, music, and song. The structure of the work is non-traditional: twenty poems that interconnect stories told by seven African-American women who are only identified by colors they are given to wear—they include the lady in red, the lady in orange, the lady in yellow, the lady in green, the lady in blue, the lady in brown, and the lady in purple.
- The titles of the choreopoem’s sections are intentionally lowercase, and several of them feature deliberate non-standard spelling of familiar words.
- The piece’s prologue, “dark phrases,” introduces the women, who are all outside their home cities. The women sing and dance to nursery rhymes, representing the movement from childhood to adulthood.
- In “graduation nite,” the lady in yellow takes part in a high school graduation ceremony. She loses her virginity to one of her male friends. The other ladies discuss their sexual preferences.
- The lady in blue describes how dancing has helped her explore her cultural identity in “now i love somebody more than.” She uses salsa and blues to feel connected to the two sides of her cultural heritage.
- The lady in red discusses her passion for a man in “no assistance.” Her passion is so strong, however, that she has lost herself; she decides to end the affair. She leaves the man a note on a plant.

- In “i’m the poet who,” the lady in orange says that she does not want to use words in English or in Spanish. She just wants to dance. One of the main lines of this section is “we gotta dance to keep from cryin and dyin.”
- The section “latent rapists” describes society’s understanding of a rapist as a stranger who attacks a woman. The ladies argue that rapists are more likely men known to their victims. They discuss men with nice smiles, who take them out and treat them well, only to rape them after dinner.
- The lady in blue is alone on the stage for “abortion cycle #1.” She is connected to medical equipment, and she cannot bear to have people see her get her abortion.
- The lady in purple and the lady in green join together in “sechita.” Sechita is the Egyptian goddess of creativity and love—but also filth—as well as the name of a young woman from the bayou. The lady in purple describes Sechita’s life, while the lady in green dances.
- In “toussaint,” the lady in brown describes how she fell in love with Toussaint L’Overture by reading his works. She calls him her “secret lover at age 8.” She meets a boy named Toussaint Jones and decides he is her real life Toussaint. She leaves with him.
- In “one,” the lady in red describes a gorgeous woman who attracts whomever she chooses, but when she goes home and removes her makeup and glamorous clothes, the men are stunned by how average she is.
- The lady in blue takes the stage for “i usedta live in the world,” and she describes the bleakness and isolation of living near Harlem.
- Three women fall in love with the same man in “pyramid.”
- The next four sections are titled “no more love poems,” and numbered one through four. In each, one of the women discusses the nature of love, and what it means to love as an African-American woman.
- All the women dance for “my love is too,” and they chant about all the ways their love is delicate, beautiful, sanctified, magic, saturday nite, complicated and music.
- The lady in green takes the stage for “somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff.” She describes how a former lover took pieces of her self when he left.
- The ladies discuss all the times a man has apologized to them in “sorry.”

- The lady in yellow learns she is HIV-positive in “positive.” The other ladies have seen her lover outside of gay bars. When the lady in yellow confronts him, he denies it and accuses her of cheating on him.
- Originally written with the backdrop of the Vietnam war, Shange updated the piece to reflect an Iraq War veteran with PTSD as the subject of “a nite with beau willie brown.” He wants to marry the mother of his young children, but she refuses, blaming his drug problem. He breaks into her apartment, trying to force her to love him. When she denies him, he drops their children out of a fifth story window.
- In the final section, “a layin on of hands,” the women reveal they have all considered suicide, but through their perseverance, they have each moved on to their own rainbows.
- The piece ends with all the women on stage at once, to represent their shared unity and the sense of sisterhood they all feel.
- Shange’s piece discusses a number of difficult and complex topics, including domestic abuse, abandonment, and rape. Shange depicts the struggles and obstacles that stand in the way of African-American women, as well as the sisterhood that grows from these shared experiences.
- This is a very personal piece for Shange, relying heavily on her personal experience. In a 2014 interview for CNN, Shange described the origin of the title this way: “I was driving the No. 1 Highway in northern California and I was overcome by the appearance of two parallel rainbows. I had a feeling of near death or near catastrophe. Then I drove through the rainbow and I went away. Then I put that together to form the title.”
- Shange used idiosyncratic punctuation and nonstandard spellings in her work, challenging conventions. One of her characters shouts, “i will raise my voice / & scream & holler / & break things & race the engine / & tell all yr secrets bout yrself to yr face.”

~Places & People

Sechita goddess of love/beauty/creativity/filth

Sechita is very different from all the other pieces in the play. In her introduction to the work, Shange herself points out Sechita's difference, "It was the only poem in the series outside contemporary time," but maybe this difference is important because of the way it marks Sechita as transcending space and time in a way – she has always been and she will be in the future. Nor is she a single person, applicable to only one place or experience. Sechita could be anything from a circus performer to a stripper; she could be young or old; she could be anyone or no one.



Sechita embodies performance and objectification. She is up on a stage, and "they were aimin coins tween her thighs." In this way, standing before a (most likely) predominantly white male audience, Sechita stands in as a sort of Jezebel figure – objectified for her sexuality and her body. However, Sechita herself does not embody the stereotype, but rather opposes it violently, nor is she interested at all in letting them see her true feelings, "n made her face immobile/ she made her face like nefertiti/approachin her own tomb."

As she performs, Sechita moves with violence, "sechita's legs slashed furiously," and she "kicked viciously thru the nite" as she moves, "performin the rites/the conjuring of men." All of these things lend a power and a rage to Sechita, who is also consistently described as a goddess. Far from being completely objectified it seems that she has power, that she is conjuring some other power in her dance. The name Sechita seems quite transferable, because rather than seeming like a singular person, anyone could take on the name of Sechita and become the goddess – Sechita could indeed be her stage name or the theme of her performance and not her own name at all, though she takes on that aspect by choice. There is a surreal quality that pervades it.

Toussaint Louverture, Leader of the Haitian independence movement during the French Revolution. He emancipated the slaves and negotiated for the French colony on Hispaniola, Saint-Domingue (later Haiti), to be governed, briefly, by black former slaves as a French protectorate. Toussaint and other black leaders of Saint-Domingue helped to lead the only Atlantic slave society which successfully defeated its oppressors. The former slaves were able to achieve freedom and equality by political and military force, when they defeated the advances of French, British, and Spanish troops. In 1804, they created the second independent Republic in the western hemisphere.





Swamp Culture

It is trite to say that Louisiana is culturally diverse. The truth is that few people realize the degree of complexity and variation in the cultures of the state. Many are aware that New Orleans and French-speaking South Louisiana are juxtaposed against the African-American/British-American culture of North Louisiana, but few are familiar with subtle differences within these regional groups and the cultural complexities resulting from the presence of Native Americans and the waves of immigrations by Irish, Germans, Italians, Czechs, Hungarians, Croatians, Filipinos, Latins (Isleño, Mexican, Cuban, Guatemalan), and East Asians (Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian, Thai). Each group has added to the cultural environment of Louisiana and in varying ways influenced the traditions found here.

Geographers and historians have documented many of the settlement patterns and the waves of immigration into most parts of Louisiana. Malcolm Comeaux (1972) investigated the Atchafalaya Basin settlement patterns and folk occupations, University of Southwestern Louisiana historian Carl Brasseaux focused on French Louisiana settlement patterns (Brasseaux 1987 and 1992), and historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall documented the earliest influx of Africans into Louisiana via slavery from the Senegambian region of West Africa.

Rodan is a fictional Japanese mutated pterosaur introduced in *Rodan*, a 1956 release from Toho Studios, the company responsible for the Godzilla series. Like Godzilla and Anguirus, he is designed after a type of prehistoric reptile (the Japanese name "Radon" is a contraction of "pteranodon").



“Somebody almost ran off with all of my stuff and I was standing there looking at myself the whole time. It wasn't a spirit that ran off with my stuff. It was a man whose ego walked 'round like **Rodan's shadow**. It was a man faster than my innocence. It was a lover I made too much room for. Almost ran off with all my stuff and the one running with it don't know he got it. I'm shouting, "This is mine!" and he don't

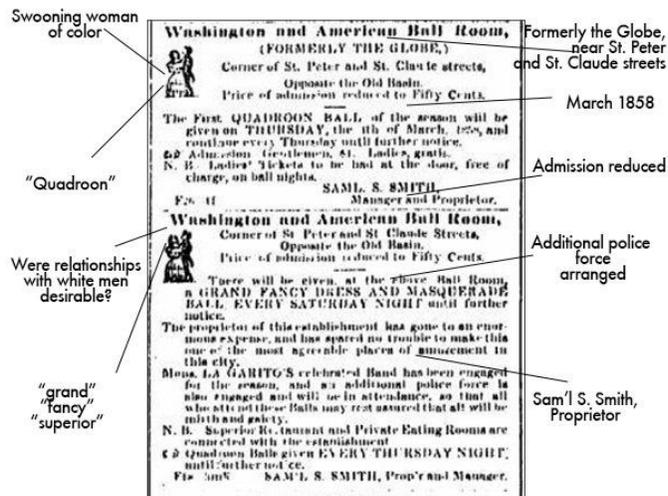
even know he got it. My stuff is the anonymous ripped-off treasure of the year. Did you know somebody almost got away with me? Me, in a plastic bag under his arm. Me, Ntozake Shange. Somebody almost walked off with all my stuff.”

Deconstructing the Quadroon Ball

“The swooning woman of color” This was an advertisement from 1858 New Orleans. I had never come across any proof that these balls actually happened. I fully believed these balls were the creation of Southern white male fantasies about needy, swooning, sexual women of color hoping to have the opportunity to have a relationship with them—i.e., a white male privilege fantasy. But as I looked in wonder at the very first proof I had ever seen of a Quadroon Ball, everything about the advertisement struck me as wrong and contradicted every bit of history I knew about New Orleans and Louisiana society. Then I did something that too few consumers of history do: I began deconstructing the advertisement in the context of the history of Louisiana and New Orleans. When I did this it crushed and destroyed the mythical ideals behind Quadroon balls.

By Nick Douglas*, AFROPUNK Contributor





- **“Quadroon”** referred to women of color whose ancestry was supposedly mixed with only one quarter black blood. The term was popularized by **President Jefferson**, a slaveholder who never arranged to free his own black children, borne by his slave Sally Hemmings, or any of the other 200 slaves he held at his death.
- **“Grand, Fancy, Superior”** In the myth of Quadroon Balls women of color attended lavish dances with the hope of forming a **plaçage** relationships with eligible white men. But the **historic practice of plaçage relationships between white men and free women of color were legally binding contractual agreements**, drawn up in the presence of a notary public.
- In these arrangements for monogamous or extramarital relationships, women were typically set up with a house and income, and any children were financially provided for by the white father.
- Americans had outlawed marriages between races and made it very difficult for children of color to inherit from their colonial fathers. Plaçage agreements were a logical alternative; couples also simply cohabited.
- Free women of color in Louisiana were a powerful group in their own right. They owned land, slaves, property and businesses. They were also beautiful. It only makes sense that any man would be attracted to them. But they did not rise to their level of affluence being stupid.

- Just as today people who have assets take steps to protect their assets when they enter into marriage or relationships, free women of color in Louisiana did the same thing.
- For well-to-do free people of color in New Orleans, plaçage relationships were not necessarily desirable or admirable.
- Because of the culture in Louisiana people mixed and had relationships even though there was slavery. The new Americans did not understand the unique culture that had formed there and tried to destroy it by insisting upon and enforcing strict racial boundaries.
- Even today Louisiana is the state in the U.S. with the highest number of white people with African DNA and its complicated culture continues to be



misunderstood.

- **“Admission Reduced”** In 1860 New Orleans many Creoles and other free people of color were prosperous homeowners and business owners. In 1860 they paid taxes on property valued at \$15 million dollars (415 million the 2014 of dollars).
- Many Creoles and free people of color were highly educated and had degrees from French universities. These prosperous, well educated New Orleans families would not have subjected their daughters to a notoriously unsavory dance hall filled with complete strangers.
- **“An additional police force also arranged”** This reveals the general seediness of this ball and its proprietor. It does not seem logical that a police presence would be needed for such a “grand”, “fancy” and “superior” gathering. It does make sense that an additional police presence would be needed for a dance held at a notorious gambling spot where prostitution was taking place.

- **“Sam’l S. Smith, Proprietor”** He was a well-known scoundrel and interloper from the North. By deconstructing his advertisement, the Quadroon Ball can be understood as a not-so-veiled cover for prostitution for sailors and visiting Northerners.
- In the 1790s New Orleans slaveholders had objected to attempts to prohibit slaves from attending dances frequented by white colonials and free men of color.
- Slaveholders realized that slave women could make more money as prostitutes than in other jobs. Later Louisiana Supreme Court heard cases that suggested slaveholders “sold” or “leased out” slave women for prostitution at these balls.
- Just two years before this ball, Senator Charles Sumner rose before the Senate and gave a speech called the Crime Against Kansas. In the speech he said Senator Butler of South Carolina was introducing the Kansas Nebraska Act not only to make Kansas a slave state, but to expand and continue slavery so that **white slaveholders could continue to force sex on slave women.**
- Two days later, Butler’s cousin, Congressman Preston Brooks, viciously attacked Sumner with a cane, nearly killing him. Sumner’s references to rape enraged Brooks, but it was becoming increasingly common for abolitionists to accuse slavery proponents of using slavery to force sexual relations on slave women.
- **Plaçage and other long-term relationships existed between white men and women of color in New Orleans. But quadroon and octoroon balls were NOT about cultivating these relationships.** Continuing to retell the fanciful myths about the quadroon ball only serve to paper-over another heinous injustice of slavery—the use of slave women for sex and sex trade—with a convenient and white-male-centric fantasy.



Quadroon Women

Tulane historian Dr. Emily Clark writes in her richly-researched and compelling *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (UNC Press):

“As a historian, I knew that mixed race women and interracial families were everywhere in America from its earliest days. And I knew that most of the free women of color in antebellum New Orleans bore no resemblance to the quadroons of myth.”

...Before college, maybe I'd encounter a definition of “miscegenation” - that very special crime of racemixing in segregated America. And maybe an explanation of the “one drop rule” that went on to create the classifications of “mulatto” and “quadroon” and “octoroon”—your label dependent upon which fraction of African was in your genealogy. But that was it. In my high school American History texts, I don't remember any acknowledgement of centuries of rape and consensual relationships between whites and blacks. None of my suburban history teachers lingered on the taboo. Maybe I didn't either. When I think of the mania around racemixing, and of the cultural trope of the “tragic mulatta”—the woman doomed because she is too white for the blacks, too black for the whites—it was easy to assume that the history of mixed-race women in America was simple in its sadness and injustice.

Yet there is nothing simple about the American Quadroon. Once she was the picture of irresistible beauty, the symbol of a city thought of as irredeemably “other”, an earthbound goddess who conjured so much desire that white men made her concubines, and slavetraders scoured the states for enslaved girls that fit her description to fulfill buyer demand. That was the myth, the dominant story. But as, she was also a family-woman, marrying men of color, living the propriety dream in her New Orleans society. If her myth was simple in its power, her reality was rich and complicated—by no means a single story.