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Challenging the Traditional Narrative: A Discussion on Ntzi Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* and Beyoncé's *Lemonade*

When I hear the word narrative, I think of storytelling. A vision or event or piece of art that takes us, the reader or the listener or the viewer, on a journey, only to end up somewhere different than we started. To me, narrative remains a somewhat broad term. I like to think of it as malleable - it forms based on its writer and audience. But I also like to think of it as a process, the way a story progresses through its narration and the art that comes with that. I didn't always think of it this way, though. I used to believe the art of literature and narrative and storytelling could only be done one way - through narrated words in a book. Take, for example, J.K. Rowling's infamous third person narrator in the Harry Potter series. The narrator unfolds the stories in a clean, timely, and structured manner. No sudden breaks, no cues, no interruptions, no *discomfort*. I used the word discomfort because it's true. A break or interruption in the narration is uncomfortable - you, as the reader or viewer, might be taken aback, shocked, disturbed. We're so often taught that there's a right and a wrong way to do things - to write, to produce, to choreograph, to direct - but what if that doesn't really ring true anymore? What if,

instead, we begin to hold space for that discomfort, and instead of shunning it, we embrace it?

I used to think that J.K. Rowling's third person narrator was it for me. But that was before I became an English major, before I learned that stories don't have to be linear or neat or timely or even written. In fact, stories and narration can be more powerful when they aren't all of those things - when they break rules and boundaries and instead seek to bridge a divide between their word and someone else's. Sometimes, the ambiguity and free flowingness of a story, the form of media it takes, the sort of language (or lack thereof) it enables, the structure itself, can change us, and can change the way we perceive the account entirely.

One of my most prominent encounters with these sorts of narratives was the first time I watched Beyonce's *Lemonade* film. I, just like every other person on the planet, watched in complete awe. And when it was over, I remember thinking to myself,

What an incredible story.

I also remember thinking,

I've never seen anything like that before.

We aren't used to seeing musical artists do that - putting out a visual album as well as a lyrical one. But combining sight and sound together like that was revolutionary in my mind. I became fixated on her narrative - the visual and written components. I was, quite honestly, shook. Another important encounter was when I read Ntzi Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf*. This was different. I remember going to class that day - my boyfriend had just broken up with me and I was a mess - and I didn't have the book. All of a sudden, everyone in my class stood up and started reciting the first few lines of the choreopoem. By the fourth line, I was in tears. This work was not written for me and it was not written about me - but it broke my heart anyways, and made me feel things I didn't know that I had in me. Upon my first time interacting with both stories, I can recall weeping. Ferociously. I remember thinking in one of those moments - this story was not written for me. But right now, soaking all of this in, I feel like it knows me, as it tugs at my heartstrings and pulls me closer and closer to the page until I'm fully submerged in its world, until its narrative becomes me and I become it.

Here are two examples of narratives that not only changed me, but changed how I view the word itself - to me, *FCG* and *Lemonade* transcend narrative, redefine it. They challenge it and provoke it with their choreography and production and visual effects. The fact that neither one submits to just one genre is a starting point - these works are intersectional in so many ways. And although not typically in conversation with each

other, I think they really should be. Both artists have crafted a detailed and rich narrative about suffering, loss, reconciliation, black womanhood, feminism, and healing. My point is - there's so many ways to tell a story. But to tell an intersectional story - a story that breaks genre, doesn't fit the canon, and refuses to subscribe to just one form of narrative - that's another thing.

Lemonade is, in and of itself, one of the most important pieces of artwork I have ever seen. Not only is it a story, but it's a poem, a video, a choreography of pieces and moments in an album of music that come alive to represent a story of Black womanhood. Starting with the way the song titles tell a story in and of themselves, ones that start out hurt and full of pain and anger (Pray You Catch Me, Hold Up, Don't Hurt Yourself, 6 Inch, Love Drought) to songs of reconciliation and womanhood (Forward, Freedom, All Night, Sandcastles, Formation). Beyonce's ideas for this film were monumental - a league of their own, as nobody has ever done anything like this before, especially not somebody as mainstream as herself. The symbolism she creates and the thought and detail that surround it are unique and especially important to understanding the way that she redefines and transcends the idea of a narrative.

I think it's important to briefly touch on the symbolism of the film, because there's an abundance of it. Beyonce's family were Louisiana Creoles, and because of that, we see in the film a lot of scenes that are in Louisiana, specifically New Orleans. It's a careful choice to represent her ancestors and family. The imagery of the plantation on

which she stands upon with the men behind her represents the turning of tables, as she is seen as the Master of the House. The mothers of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown are highlighted as well, and their trauma is shown as Beyonce makes a point about police brutality and the murders of innocent Black lives. Beyonce in the Superdome, as well, represents when Hurricane Katrina hit and people resorted there for safety, but it ended up going horribly wrong. Finally, Beyonce pays homage to Malcolm X during “Don’t Hurt Yourself”, when she makes the choice to insert his famous quote about Black women in America: “The most disrespected woman in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.”

Beyonce’s choice to create this visual album as an aid to her music was an extremely intentional one. The fact that she incorporates all kinds of artistic forms into her music, with so much symbolism and motif and meaning behind it, shows just how dedicated she is to redefining narrative and genre with points of intersectionality. All of her stories that she tells throughout *Lemonade* highlight Black womanhood, violence, suffering, betrayal, reconciliation, and self-love in a way that transcends the genre of music and video.

Ntazake Shange does a very similar thing in *FCG*. Although written 40 years prior to *Lemonade*, the two share undeniable similarities. The genre-breaking approach that *FCG* tackles is revolutionary - mixing poetry with prose with lyricism and with theater,

and then managing to coin a term: choreopoem. A combination of choreography and poetics. Instead of sitting with the stiffness that can come with theater, Shange embraces the musicality of words, performance, and dance to create an intersectional approach to genre.

Although FCG might not have directly inspired *Lemonade*, it was the first of its kind to incorporate all different types of art forms into one insightful play, thanks to its playwright, Ntzi Shange. Shange, born Paulette Williams, was a prominent Black poet and playwright. She attended Barnard and USC, where she studied American Studies, and then went on to create her own work. Shange eventually changed her name from Paulette Williams to Ntzi Shange, taking her African name, which means “she who comes with her own things” and she “who walks like a lion.”

Shange, like Beyoncé, subscribed to the fact that storytelling could be more powerful if it was unconventional and shocked an audience. Why conform when you could break boundaries and build bridges? Shange does this in more ways than one. For one, the idea of creating an entirely new genre as a way to make a story even more thought provoking. And along with that, the actual premise and story of the choreopoem itself - what it’s trying to tell and expose, is something that not many writers wrote about - especially in such a complex and compelling manner. Shange knew it best when she decided that the ambiguity and free flowingness of a narrative can change us, and can change the way we perceive the account entirely.

FCG is essentially about the same thing Lemonade is - the many lives of Black women in America. In Shange's case, she has written poems and stories about these women, and on stage, they each get their own monologue and dance to accompany it. Poems range from topics like abortion, AIDS, unfaithful spouses, Black womanhood, sexuality, anger, and reconciliation and healing. In essence, it's actually quite a lot like Lemonade in that sense, which is what makes the two so special. They not only share similar structures and genre-breaking elements, but the themes discussed in both are so similar.

To come back to my original thesis, the reason these two texts are so important is just that. They reform our idea of the "narrative" and what we consider to be "storytelling"...they make us, in a way, slightly uncomfortable. But in this discomfort, we find that Shange and Beyonce are making what some perceive to be a difficult topic to understand (Black womanhood) into something that is accessible in so many different art forms - dance, video, lyrics, poetry, and theater. Because of this, their words have a different effect. Like I mentioned in my opening statement, sometimes, the ambiguity and free flowingness of a story, the form of media it takes, the sort of language (or lack thereof) it enables, the structure itself, can change us, and can change the way we perceive the account entirely. In the case of Shange and Beyonce, I can assure you, it does.