

This Movement is Not For Us: the Appropriation and Misapplication of Black Feminist Voices

Noor Iqbal

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Professor Izaguirre

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Ntozake Shange, a notable poet, playwright, and contributor to the Black Arts Movement, published the infamously graphic poem “With No Immediate Cause” in her poetry and prose book *Nappy Edges* in 1978. The poem details vengeful acts committed by women against their abusers and criticizes media outlets that cite these acts as having “no immediate cause”. While the poem has since been reproduced many times over, its inclusion in the Newsletter for the Southeast Coalition Against Domestic Violence, now an archival object in the Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women’s Movement Archives, is particularly interesting. Reproductions of “With No Immediate Cause” published prior to the Newsletter have highlighted important historical context and impacts concerning issues of race, class, gender, and sex that have no mention within this artifact; yet, the omission of such issues factoring into the creation of the poem is rhetorically significant in and of itself. Using the lens of intersectionality as the basis of analysis, a close examination of the literary and visual features of the artifact as well as the historical and archival context reveals the changes in meaning throughout various reproductions of the original poem. While the content of the poem has been retained, Ntozake Shange’s voice as a Black woman artist has not, signifying an all-too-common trend in feminist activism and organizing- Black women’s voices and work are continuously misused and appropriated without fruitful credit being given where it is due. As with this poem, their rhetoric is assumed to cater to a larger audience than intended, resulting in Black women’s voices being modified to benefit different causes without any real, beneficial effect for Black women’s issues. An analysis of this artifact, using rhetoric as the perspective and intersectionality as our rhetorical lens, is meant to mitigate similar instances by highlighting the severity of their impact for Black women.

VOICES

With No Immediate Cause

every 3 minutes a woman is beaten
ever five minutes a
woman is raped/every ten minutes
a lil girl is molested
yet i rode the subway today
i sat next to an old man who
may have beaten his old wife
3 minutes ago or 3 days/30 years ago
he might have sodomized his
daughter but i sat there
cuz the young men on the train
might beat some young women
later in the day or tomorrow
i might not shut my door fast
enuff/push hard enuff
every 3 minutes it happens
some women's innocence
rushes to her cheeks/pours from
her mouth
like the betsy wetsy dolls have
been torn apart/their mouths mensis
red & spilt/every three minutes a
shoulder is jammed through plaster
& the oven door/chairs push thru
the rib cage/hot water or boiling
sperm decorate her body
i rode the subway today & brought
a paper from a man who might have
held his old lady onto a hot
pressing iron/i don't know maybe
he catches lil girls in the park
& rips open their behinds with
steel rods/i cdnt decide what he
might have done i only know every
3 minutes every 5 minutes every
10 minutes/so i brought the paper
looking for the announcement
there has to be an announcement of
the women's bodies found
yesterday/the missing little girl
i sat in a restaurant with my
paper looking for the announcement
a yng man served me coffee
i wondered did he pour the boiling
coffee/on the woman cuz she was
stupid/did he put the infant girl/in the
coffee pot/wth the boiling coffee/cuz
she c-ied too much
what exactly did he do with hot coffee
i looked for the announcement the
discovery/or the dismembered woman's body/
the victims have not all been identified/
today they are naked & dead/refuse to
testify/one girl out of 10's not coherent/
i took the coffee & spit it up/i found an

announcement/ not the woman's bloated
body in the river/ floating not the child
bleeding in the 59th street corridor/not
the baby broken on the floor/

"there is some concern that alleged
battered women might start to
murder their husbands & lovers
with no immediate cause"

i spit up i vomit i am screaming we all
have immediate cause

every 3 minutes

every 5 minutes

every 10 minutes

every day women's bodies are found in
alleys & bedrooms/at the top of stairs

before i ride the subway/buy a paper/
drink coffee/ i must know/

have you hurt a woman today

did you beat a woman today

throw a child cross a room

are the lil girl's panties

in your pocket

did you hurt a woman today

i have to ask these obscene questions

the authorities require me to

establish

immediate cause

every three minutes

every five minutes

every ten minutes

every day

(Ntozake Shange is author of the choreopoem
for Colored Girls Who Have Considered
Suicide/When The Rainbow Is Enuff and the
recently published Nappy Edges)
(Lit Martin's Press)

(June 1980 Essence Magazine)



Rhetorical Lens

I will be viewing and analyzing this artifact through the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality, as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is a response to accommodate the ways we need to rethink our views on oppression. In her groundbreaking 1989 essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”, Crenshaw sets up the concept of intersectionality by first describing the way that we usually view oppression with a single-axis framework. During conversations on sex and gender-based violence, the issues of race and class-privileged women (i.e. white and upper/middle class) are centered; on the other hand, during conversations about racial inequality, the issues of class and gender-privileged racialized people (i.e. upper/middle class men) take priority. Crenshaw emphasizes the urgent need for intersectional frameworks for a specific reason: a lack of intersectionality in antiracist and antisexist work does not ignore the need for summative discourse while still including Black women in movements, but *actively marginalizes* Black women and their issues further through that purposeful ignorance and misplaced focus. In other words, acknowledging the intersections of issues affecting multiply-marginalized peoples is entirely possible, so the exclusion of this acknowledgment in any marginalization discourse is calculated and harmful. For this reason, a rhetorical analysis of this artifact through the lens of intersectionality is not just important, but necessary.

As Stacey Sowards says in “Rhetorical Agency as *Haciendo Caras* and Differential Consciousness Through Lens of Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Class: An Examination of Dolores Huerta’s Rhetoric”, many scholars have assumed similarities between women in leadership positions or acting through rhetorical agency historically, citing women leaders of movements as “feminizing” their power by pushing more palatable content forward, such as lived experiences

rather than revolutionary chants. However, Raka Shome writes in “Postcolonial interventions in the rhetorical canon: An “other view” (cited in Sowards 2010) that racialized women, compared to white women, may approach rhetorical situations very differently since their culture, language, and position in society influence their agency, thereby influencing their rhetorical style. Shome’s division of nonwhite women’s vs. white women’s rhetorical perspectives supports the lack of a general feminist rhetorical style. I would go so far as to say that Black women specifically approach rhetorical situations differently than their non-Black counterparts with the added factor of the different stereotypes placed on them from various hierarchical systems (race, class, sex, etc.). Their multiple oppressions lead to the creation of socially debilitating stereotypes specific to Black women only (e.g. the “angry Black woman”, which causes white people, Black men, and even non-Black racialized women to gaslight them when speaking on issues pertaining to them). In response, Black women’s rhetorical approaches must address these specific stereotypes rather than stereotypes directed towards all nonwhite women to make their rhetoric seem worthy of listening to.

Viewing this artifact through the lens of intersectionality emphasizes how, throughout various reproductions of the original poem, the same message about domestic violence changes based on whether the source is from a non-Black or Black woman. However, an examination of the literary features (especially diction) of this poem reveals its original source, regardless of where it is reprinted. This furthers the necessity of an intersectional analytical framework because of the possible dissonance between the original and situational messaging, depending on where it is reproduced. It stands in contrast to the visual features accompanying the poem in this artifact, which can still be modified to fit the desired message. This paper will examine both

types of features, the historical and archival context, and the intended audience and purpose of this reproduction of Shange's poem to determine if her voice has been wrongly appropriated.

Literary and Visual Features

The use of AAVE throughout the poem indicates that a Black woman is the author and that her intended audience is other Black women. Shange's inclusion of the words "enuf", "cdnt", and "cuz" is a nod to her writing style and previous works (such as her renowned choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*). We can then infer the language and word choice is intentional to 1) show how important Shange's race is to her message and 2) convey her point that the gender-based violence she describes in this poem is another layer to the oppression that Black women face. Shange also includes a quote from a newspaper that represents the central message and title of the poem: "there is some concern that alleged battered women might start to murder their husbands & lovers with no immediate cause." This quote shows us the exacerbatory relationship between racial and gender-based stereotypes about Black women. It highlights Shome's idea of the lack of a general feminist rhetoric, which cannot exist because of the long-standing stereotypical image of Black women's anger, disobedience, and masculinity in contrast to white women's docility, geniality, and femininity on such newspaper headlines. While white women can fight gender-based stereotypes of themselves with racial stereotypes that exist to their advantage, they do so at the further expense of Black women, whose oppression exists on multiple levels and serves to box them in.

The most notable visual feature in this artifact is a black-and-white line drawing of two women to the side of the poem, both looking to the right with suspicious and fearful looks. While one could assume they are Black, it is not completely clear and they seem more racially ambiguous- this is important to note because the choice to place this image next to the poem

implies that the poem's message is directed towards non-racialized women of any race, not specifically Black women. Despite Shange's diction and word spelling choices, the image does not align with the deliberate message of the multilayered oppression of Black women. A more in-depth exploration of the historical context of the poem allows us to determine the intention behind this visual choice.

Historical Context

The poem was originally published by Shange herself in her 1978 prose and poetry book *Nappy Edges*. Very soon after, it was republished in a pamphlet protesting the Roxbury murders, a series of murders of eleven Black women and one white woman in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston over the course of a few months in 1979. While the murder tally increased, the Combahee River Collective, a Black lesbian feminist socialist group, created this pamphlet, titled "Six Black Women: Why Did They Die?" (this was when only six black women were killed and the title later changed to reflect the number of murders as they increased). Throughout this time, the CRC distributed the pamphlet to Black and non-Black racialized women in the area to protest the fact that the only victim to receive national media coverage was the white woman, while no news outlet reported on the eleven Black woman victims. This historical context of previous reproductions of the poem sheds new light on the visual features.



The line drawing of two women in this artifact shares many common traits with a line drawing the CRC included in their republication of the poem in “Six Black Women: Why Did They Die?”. The drawing style, positioning and overlap of the two faces, and the facial expressions are eerily similar between the two images- the only difference is that the women in the CRC’s line drawing are unambiguously Black. The CRC’s pamphlet, published and distributed in 1979, was created before this poem’s reproduction in the Newsletter for the Southeast Coalition Against Domestic Violence in 1982. Therefore, the noticeable change of race in this image, which also changes the intended audience and purpose of the poem’s reproduction, was intentional.

Viewing this artifact through the lens of intersectionality shows us exactly what is *not* intersectional about it. While the earlier reproduction of the poem in “Six Black Women: Why Did They Die?” alongside a drawing of two unambiguously Black women clarifies the pamphlet’s rhetoric in emphasizing the high rates of gender-based violence against Black

women, this artifact erases that voice. By including a new drawing of racially ambiguous women, the creators of this artifact chose to ignore both Shange's original message within the poem as well as previous messages and view oppression of women on a single-axis framework. As Crenshaw said, the purposeful ignorance of Black feminism as a summative and multilayered concept is the purposeful marginalization of Black women and their issues. Intersectionality shows us that this artifact, even though it includes a Black woman's poem, does not address multiple oppressions of Black women in a beneficial or productive way since previous reproductions have clearly done a much better job at it.

Despite this, the artifact includes misguided attempts at appearing to be intersectional. The newsletter includes a short biography of Ntozake Shange underneath the poem followed by a citation: "(June 1980 Essence Magazine)". Although the poem was originally published in *Nappy Edges*, this artifact refers to another reproduction of the poem in Essence Magazine, a well-known magazine written for and by Black women. At the time, the editor-in-chief was Marcia Ann Gillespie, a racial and gender activist who spoke on the multidimensional oppression of Black women often; therefore, the poem's reproduction in Essence would convey a similar message to the reproduction in the CRC pamphlet, that gender-based violence and racial oppression do not exist separately for Black women. Based on the modifications to the original line drawings from the CRC pamphlet, this artifact prefers to cater to a wider range of women from various races rather than Black women specifically. At the same time, the reference to Essence shows us that the artifact's creator may have misbelieved that their reproduction of the poem represented intersectionality accurately. When we refer back to Crenshaw's insistence of intersectionality being focused and comprehensive, it becomes apparent that this is an incorrect assumption.

Archival Context

As already noted, the change in visual features from previous reproductions of the poem to the artifact at hand communicates that the original source and intended audience of Shange's poem were not retained. Even though the artifact includes surface-level details to feign intersectionality, it does not have the focus on multilayered oppression that Shange's original poem and CRC's reproduction of it did. However, it is worth inquiring about the source of this artifact's reproduction- specifically the archival collection it is housed under and who benefits from its inclusion in those archives.

The artifact belongs to the Donna Novak Coles Georgia Women's Movement Archives. Coles is a wealthy white woman who the archives' site notes as being involved in various feminist organizations in Georgia and especially involved in efforts to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. Considering this information with an intersectional lens is essential because we are pushed to consider that, at this time, Black feminism was not hyper-focused on ratification of the ERA since it did not address the specific and varied oppression. Updated as recently as February 2021, if ratified, the ERA would amend the Constitution with an additional three sections:

““ Section 1. Women shall have equal rights in the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

‘Section 2. Congress and the several States shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

‘Section 3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.’”

It is clear that the ERA does not address the intersections of race and sex (amongst other intersections) of the oppression of Black women and, therefore, do not have the determined focus necessary to be beneficial to Black women specifically. The ERA does not focus on the *most oppressed* group amongst those who are affected by sex and gender-based violence and discrimination- therefore, it does not accommodate for their specific issues.

Nearly all the other artifacts within this archival collection deal with women's issues at large like abortion, women working outside of the home, and women taking political office. Most of them have no reference to how these issues affect racialized women and especially Black women in America, providing a non-nuanced view of these issues. For example, many of these objects advocate for allowing women to work outside of the home rather than being housewives. These do not address the fact that Black women in America have historically always worked outside of the home since slavery just to avoid poverty, some even being caretakers of white women's children while they did not work. This artifact does not necessarily stand out like a sore thumb- it blends in amongst the other objects speaking out against domestic violence because of the erasure of Black women's voices that we recognize in the historical context of the artifact's visual features.

Calculated Appropriation

Analyzing the literary and visual features and historical and archival context of this artifact using the concept of intersectionality sheds light on how this artifact has appropriated Black women's voices and previous work to push for a cause that is ultimately not intersectional in its focus and, therefore, is not beneficial to Black feminist work. While using Black feminist voices, it actively harms them. The intentional ignorance of the messaging of the original poem

and its previous reproductions is deliberate. It is important to reference Crenshaw's work here again, specifically on how any lack of focus specifically on Black women's issues does not actually help Black women. Additionally, as Shome mentions that white women and non-white women approach rhetorical situations differently, I feel it is essential to understanding the rhetorical features' lack of intersectionality in this artifact to add that Black and non-Black racialized women approach rhetorical situations differently due to existing stereotypes. While non-Black racialized women, especially due to their proximity to white supremacy compared to Black women, may be able to denounce a gender-based stereotype of them committing murders "with no immediate cause" because it exists singularly, Black women do not have the option to escape that stereotype due to its exacerbation by racial stereotypes. The most obvious example of this is the choice to represent racially ambiguous women in the line drawing corresponding with the poem, undermining the intended focus on Black women's issues. Therefore, the lack of explicitly Black features prevents the application of a racial stereotype on top of the existing gender-based stereotype that Shange refers to in the poem. Looking at the historical and archival context of previous reproductions, Shange, the CRC, and Essence Magazine's intentions for the poem to highlight multiple oppressions of Black women are not matched in this artifact. However, it is also clear that this artifact's creator references those reproductions in creating this one, as seen by the line drawing; therefore, the purposeful ignorance of previous focuses and simultaneous appropriation is made clear through the lens of intersectionality.

Rhetoric as a perspective helps us see public forms of communication in terms of their actual material action rather than their intentions. By analyzing the historical background and various contexts of a public form of communication, we can view it on a global scale as part of a social movement or representative of an ideology. In this case, placing this in the context of the

concept of intersectionality allows us to see how it plays into the development and carrying out of the concept in the real world; this artifact, when compared to the other contexts the poem has been in, does not actually benefit efforts to create multidimensional frameworks of oppression, especially for Black women. Without rhetoric, we would be viewing this, much like Crenshaw says, on a singular axis- when viewed in that way, it may seem that this artifact is doing more for Black feminist work and theory than it actually is.

Finally, analyzing the persuasive features of this artifact, such as the visual rhetoric and the actual content of the poem, allows us to see the gap between the intended audience and the actual audience. This artifact's placement in an archival collection named after a white woman alongside objects that cater specifically to white women's issues reveals that Black feminist work and voices have been appropriated to cater to a white audience. The change in visual rhetoric, from Black woman to racially ambiguous women in the line drawings, conveys the same purpose since the representation matches the audience. Being aware of these rhetorical features, placing them into historical context, and analyzing them on a global scale prevents movements from being co-opted, dying down, or shifting their focus. By analyzing artifacts like this with the concept of intersectionality and by approaching it with rhetoric in the first place, important work can be honored rightfully and preserved for generations to come.

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