

Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enough*: the generic malleability and accessibility of an ever-evolving multi-semiotic play¹

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Abstract

This essay will explore the ways in which the generic fluidity of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enough* (1975) can be conceived of as a vehicle for accessibility within the creative industry. Mostly deriving from the choreopoem's inherent multimodality as well as its intralingual and intersemiotic translations, the work's transformative malleability will be analysed on the basis of an interdisciplinary theoretical model founded mainly on a semiotic approach. Simultaneously, the peculiar linguistic aspects of the work resulting in its innovative orality, on the one hand, and the distinctive forms of creativity entailed in all the different transpositions of the work – that is, its stage, television and film adaptations – will be underlined. The corpus that will constitute the focus of the present interpretative analysis consists of the recent stage transposition by the Public Theatre (2019) in New York, the 1982 PBS's television adaptation directed by Oz Scott and the 2010 feature film written, produced and directed by Tyler Perry.

¹ Some of my interpretative positions as regards the formal aspect and thematic motifs in Shange's work have also appeared in my article "Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* and Bernardine Evaristo's *Lara*: Genre Contamination and the Tradition of Black Women's Writing" (2020), published In: *InVerbis*, X (2): pp. 65-78.

1. Introduction

When Afro-American writer Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enough* started to be performed in New York in the mid-1970s it soon became self-evident that the work was breaking new ground due to a variety of factors. Firstly, it introduced in the North American cultural panorama of the time a new, innovative literary genre and, secondly, it was to subvert the stereotyped representations of Black groups – and Black women in particular – living in the United States. Moreover, in the decades to come, its multiple adaptations for the stage as well as for the television and big screen would testify to its enduring cultural influence.

From a formal point of view, the transformative nature of *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enough* (hereafter *for color girls*) surfaced immediately from its constitutive orality and faithfulness to informal linguistic registers, substantial generic indeterminacy, and polyvocal complexity. *For colored girls* is indeed a choreopoem in which seven different women, each identified exclusively by a different colour of the rainbow (except for the Lady in Brown), relate the most significant experiences of their lives and share their innermost secrets having recourse to every-day Afro-American English.

As for the work's representational strategies, the seven women's personal narratives, which are partly interwoven, end up coalescing along the diegetic development. Epitomised by the significant final scene when the Ladies enter into a tight circle, this narrative process, in turn, represented a groundbreaking cultural representation since it implied that the women's identity formation, often marked by moments of extreme emotional hardship and physical pain, came to its completion thanks to forms of non-biological sisterhood and female alliance.

Against this backdrop, on the basis of an interdisciplinary theoretical model founded mainly on a semiotic approach, this essay will explore the ways in which the peculiar formal aspects of the work, with its innovative orality, and its generic fluidity – mostly deriving from its inherent multimodality as well as its intralingual and intersemiotic translations – can be conceived of as a vehicle for accessibility within the creative industry in itself.² Simultaneously, the distinctive forms of creativity

² For an in-depth analysis of the inextricable connections between media accessibility and the multiple translational modalities, see the up-to-date

entailed in the different transpositions taken into consideration will be underlined. Indeed, as Linda Hutcheon has remarked, adaptations and transpositions, albeit deriving from pre-existent source texts, are, in turn, forms of re-creations. In her words, “[w]hen we adapt, we create, using all the tools that creators have always used: we actualize or concretize ideas; we make simplifying selections but we also amplify and extrapolate; we make analogies; we critique or show our respect” (Hutcheon 2003, 40).

2. Data and methodology

The corpus that will constitute the focus of the present interpretative analysis consists of the recent stage transposition by the Public Theatre in New York (2019), the 1982 PBS’s television adaptation directed by Oz Scott and the 2010 feature film written, produced and directed by Tyler Perry. I shall begin illustrating the peculiar formal aspect as well as the innovative thematic motifs introduced by Shange’s work. Then I shall explore the specific multimodality of its stage adaptations and in particular that of the Public one. Eventually, the narrative structure and the linguistic specificities of Scott’s television adaptation will be analysed and compared with the source text. Finally, Perry’s production, which just like Scott’s one is accessible on YouTube, will be taken into consideration for the cultural significance of its representational manipulations of Shange’s original play script.

The generic complexity of the work is epitomised by the term ‘choreopoem’ itself, which, in Neal A. Lester’s words, indicates a “theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance, and music” (Lester 1995, 3). That it was coined by Shange herself in 1975, as emerges from the writer’s phone interview to Jill Cox-Cordova (2019), is a particularly noteworthy aspect: it reveals the writer’s intentional multi-

collection of critical essays in Łukasz Bogucki and Mikołaj Deckert (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility* (2020). Within the volume, Gian Maria Greco and Anna Jankowska’s contribution titled “Media Accessibility Within and Beyond Audiovisual Translation” is particularly interesting as it explores the intersections between the theoretical notion of media accessibility and human rights in such a way as to eschew potential ghetto effects.

layered intervention within the contemporaneous Black Arts movement.³ In other words, this demonstrates that her artistic sensitivity was not limited to issues pertaining to the thematic dimension of her output, within which, as will be stressed later on, questions of race and the stigmatization of gender subordination play a pivotal role. On the contrary, she also aimed to undermine the Western tradition of conventional generic labellings.

The literary "fabric" of the original text is the result of the mutual hybridization of its constitutive literary genres, which mainly originates from its poetic prose being interspersed with stage directions from the very inception of the work:

The stage is in darkness. Harsh music is heard as dim blue lights come up. One after another, seven women run onto the stage from each of the exits. They all freeze in postures of distress. The follow spot picks up the lady in brown. She comes to life and looks around at the other ladies. All of the others are still. She walks over the lady in red and calls to her (Shange 2010b: 17).

If the specificity of the directions makes the text verge on an innovative libretto from which references to the female characters' emotional sphere emerge, in turn, the generic porosity reinforces the work's oppositional nature with respect to the fixity of the Western literary canon. Thus, just as the text's generic permeability is the result of the interweaving of poetry, prose and stage directions, its transformative nature becomes one its major defining features. To this add the multiple processes of transcodification over the decades, from the mid-1970s onwards: from the substantially oral code of Shange's poetic performances to the written one of the play script; from the stage adaptation to the television one and, finally, to the theatrical one. This has inevitably determined a cross-fertilization of the work's genres and,

³ The Black Arts Movement was an artistic as well as aesthetic movement led by Afro-Americans from the 1960s to the 1970s.

together with it, a re-definition of traditional hierarchies between “high” and “low” literary genres typical of the Western canon, which is also made possible thanks to the vibrant incorporation of Afro-American English within the poetic text.

This peculiar effect was due to one of the formal strengths of the play script undoubtedly residing in its specific syntactical structures and orthographic solutions: indeed, in departing from standard Mainstream American English, they imitate the syntax as well as the morphological and phonological specificities of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This is evident from the very title of the work, the second part of which reads “when the rainbow is *enuf* (my emphasis)”. Further instances can be found, among others, in the following lines taken from the coral passage of the poem “dark phrases”. Here the text adheres to the AAVE pronunciation of standard velar nasal /ŋ/ as /n/:

little sally walker, *sittin* in a saucer
rise, sally, rise, wipe your *weepin* eyes
an put your hands on your hips
an let your backbone slip
o, shake it to the east
o, shake it to the west
shake it to the one
that you like the best. (Shange 2010b: 20, my emphasis)

In the session titled “graduation nite”, in which the Lady in Yellow tells about her first sexual intercourse, the rendering of orality is even more evident:

We danced *doin* nasty old tricks [...]
doin nasty old tricks i’d been thinking since may
cuz graduation *nite* had to be hot
& i *waz* the only virgin
so i *hadda* make like my hips *waz inta* some business
that way everybody *thot* whoever was *gettin* it
was a older man *cdnt* run the streets *wit* youngsters
martin slipped his leg round my thigh
the dells bumped “stay”
up & down – up & down the new carver homes

WE WAZ GROWN / WE WAZ FINALLY GROWN (Shange 2010b: 23, my emphasis).

Here the text offers, among other peculiarities, a spelling that reproduces the pronunciation of the standard unvoiced dental fricative /θ/ as the alveolar-dental /t/, which recurs throughout the text together with the reproduction of the AAVE pronunciation of the standard voiced dental fricative /ð/ as the voiced alveolar-dental /d/. Multiple examples can be found in the poem "toussaint":

de library was right down from *de* trolly tracks
cross from *de* laundry-mat
through *de* big shinin floors & granite pillars (Shange 2010b: 39, my emphasis).

As Shange herself revealed in an interview by Claudia Tate, her constant linguistic emphasis on the African American Vernacular English of every-day conversations both in her original play and in its 1982 television adaptation is a deliberately sought-after effect: "The spellings result from the way I talk or the characters talk, or the way I heard something said. Basically, the spelling reflects the language as I hear it. I don't write because words come out of my brain. I write this because I hear the words" (Tate 1984, 163). It is worth underlining here that, far from being a significant characteristic pertaining solely to the formal dimension and the mechanisms of artistic creation, the stress on the linguistic verisimilitude of both versions of the work reveals the extent to which Shange's poetry is sensitive to Black women's day-to-day life. El-Shayal has eloquently cast light on the multiple connections between Shange's powerful use of language and its being one of the major vehicles for an authentic representation of Afro-American women's life experience: «Among her techniques, Shange provides the densest illustration of the power of the word. Her profane rhetoric is provocative, creative and tantalizing; her use of African-American vernacular and symbols focus attention on themes of women's experience and also express forceful messages» (El-Shayal 2003-2004, 363).

Moreover, Shange's poetry is highly symbolic. Notably, the rainbow in *for colored girls* indicates the seven Black women's rebirth through emotional connections and final union, achieved at the end of their own "rainbows", that is, their complex process of personal identity formation

as Afro-American women. What triggers female self-awareness is, in particular, their capability of creating interconnections through forms of personal narrative sharing. In this sense, *for colored girls* can be said to be composed of poems through which cathartic processes are accomplished. The symbol of the rainbow is also connected to issues of representativeness as Dalia El-Shayal suggests. She provides a sound interpretation of the reasons why the “ladies” in the play are all unnamed. In her words, “[b]y not giving them names or defining their characteristics, other than color, each character becomes representative of any and all women, thus emphasizing the universality of women’s experience” (El-Shayal 2003-2004, 365).

The delineation of a renewed image of Black women is not to be interpreted as an acritical celebration of the Black group. Indeed in Shange’s work forms of gender subordination internal to the Black communities are openly foregrounded and stigmatized. Undoubtedly men’s failure to encourage women’s personal sense of self or to promote their agency is a robust thematic thread in *for colored girls*. Here some of the Black male characters are portrayed as rapists or violent patriarchs who are incapable of establishing authentic egalitarian bonds with their partners and, in extreme situations, end up killing their own children. That the representational dynamics in *for colored girls* were breaking new ground as far as the portrayal of the Afro-American community is concerned is indicated by the fact that this issue created disquiet when the choreopoem started being performed. Some of the positions were so fierce – sociologist Robert Staples’s controversial one being a case in point (see Staples 1979) – that in her introduction to the 2010 paperback issue of the choreopoem Shange herself felt the urgency to counteract them:

Not everybody found solace in my work. [...] The uproar about how I portrayed black men was insidious and venal. I was said to hate men, especially black men. Apparently my choreopoem hit several nerves. [...] Methinks the gentlemen didst protest too much. [...] The show was literally for colored girls, which to me meant women-centered. Still nothing prepared me for the hateful response from African-American English-speaking males (Shange 2010a, 10).

As for the formal specificity of *for colored girls*, it needs to be highlighted that, besides buttressing the innovative nature of its

representational formulas, it has paved the way to the multiple adaptations of the work in the context of an almost never-ending diachronic hybridisation of its literary genre(s). In this respect, the history of the work's generic evolution is worth being looked at since it reveals the existence of a corpus both in terms of stage adaptations and in terms of audiovisual ones. Originally, *for colored girls* was conceived of as a collection of poems each corresponding to a black woman's monologue to be delivered by Shange herself in her performance poetry sessions as a "solo-word spoken artist" (Shange 2010a, 2). In this initial formula, it was first performed in women's bars in San Francisco in 1974 and, across the States, at the alternative Newport Jazz Festival at Studio Rivbea in Lower Manhattan. The following year, thanks to the artistic influence of Shange's sister, playwright Ifa Bayeza, Shange completely revisited her work: it thus evolved into the theatrical script of a play – now involving seven actresses – in which, under Oz Scott's direction, poetry, dance, music and songs would combine. In its new robust multi-semiotic generic formula, it was staged at the Public Theatre in 1976 and soon afterwards on Broadway. Since then *for colored girls* has been staged hundreds of times with thematic emphasis being cast not necessarily on "race" but also, for instance, on issues of class. Shange herself relates that "[a] white theatre company in Lexington, Kentucky, presented an all-white Appalachian version, doing a great job, basing the drama on class instead of race" (Shange 2010a, 13). In contrast, "[i]n the first London production, the white director sat back and let the black women in the company tell him what needed to happen" (Shange 2010a, 13). The generic nature of the work has kept on evolving considerably especially due to the subsequent adaptations that have turned it into an audiovisual product. In 1982 Scott himself directed the Public Broadcasting Service's production released on 23rd February of that year; it was a television adaptation starring, among the other members of its cast, Shange herself and her little daughter Savannah. More recently, in 2010, the work was also adapted into a feature film written, produced and directed by Tyler Perry. Its ensemble cast starred, among other actresses, Whoopi Goldberg, Janet Jackson and Phylicia Rashad.⁴

⁴ It should be noted here that, interestingly enough, the 2010 paperback edition of *for colored girls* includes a paratextual section consisting of pictures and screenshots taken from a selection of significant stage and

That its evolving into an audiovisual product would have ensured the work a future continuing accessibility mainly due to its endless reproducibility was soon underlined by Jacqueline Trescott who, on 23rd February 1982 (the very same day of the broadcasting of Scott's adaption), in her article in *The Washing Post* wrote: "With the teleplay's solid adaptation of the theater piece, the art is now an accessible legacy, even if its historical context is not" (Trescott 1982).

3. Analysis

With respect to the written text, when *for colored girls* is performed on stage, the music-and-dance sequences – recurrently alluded to in the minimalist stage directions – contribute to enhancing references to the materiality of Black women's life. In her article, El-Shayal also casts light on the transformative function of nonverbal communicative elements – including kinetic ones – in Shange's play, such as «the use of color, lighting, music, dance and "freezing" the action temporarily» (El-Shayal 2003-2004, 364), which make it possible to emphasize the expression of the characters' identity and emotional sphere.

In the intersemiotic translation process from the written code to the performative one, the insertion of kinetic elements has a two-fold representational effect:⁵ on the one hand, it reveals the multiple forms of cross-cultural belongings of Afro-American women's experience and, on the other, it also contributes to redefining the physicality of the Black female body in terms which prove to be oppositional with respect to dominant discourses. Drawing on the theoretical positions of literary theorist Cheryl Wall and her elaboration of 'Africa Reconnection', Jean Young argues that Shange's specific recourse to dance, in particular, is to be viewed as part of a comparatively recent literary tradition interconnecting women writers who share an African cultural background

audiovisual adaptations of the choreopoem. The incorporation of these elements further testifies to its continuing generic "contamination".

⁵ A detailed taxonomy of the major types of translational phenomena analysed in semiotic terms has been provided by Henrik Gottlieb in his essay "Semiotics and Translation" (2017). In particular, in the case of intersemiotic translation, in Gottlieb's words, "the channel(s) of communication used in the translated text will differ from the channel(s) used in the original text" (50).

and links to the Diaspora.⁶ In Young's words, as the character of the Lady in Purple helps to reveal with her description of Sechita's concomitant evocative dance performance,

[s]piritual traditions of the New World such as Santería and Voudoun derive from Yoruba-based spiritual practices that incorporate the dynamic interplay of music and movement. These two elements are particularly powerful forces because of their ability to amplify, contradict, or emphasize the spoken word. Acting as forces or channels, music, movement, and word together assist the storyteller in providing the imagery that projects the participants into a full range of emotional experiences (Young 2002, 299-300).

The work's peculiar emphasis on movement and dance that emerges, in particular, in its stage adaptations reveals the extent to which the female body is one of the major thematic preoccupations in *for colored girls*. Be it debased, humiliated or, on the contrary, exalted, the Black female body is simultaneously liberated from the constraints of the hegemonic practices of discursive pathologization and animalization affecting the traditional representation of Black people and Black women

⁶ It should be noted that Young's interpretative positions as far as the gender power relations informing the choreopoem are concerned are not always convincing. In fact, she does not acknowledge the thematic motifs related to the Man/Woman binary couple as crucial and, accordingly, she seems to privilege, in her analysis, the processes of female awareness rising, irrespective of the forms of gender discrimination they may reverse. In my view, the emphasis on gender relations is, on the contrary, a pivotal thematic nucleus of Shange's work as the subordination of women within the Black community allows *for colored girls* to eschew pacificatory or self-celebratory tones. Shange, then, provides a depiction of Black men which is far from being simplistic. As Lamia Khalil Hammad explains, Shange's Afro-American male characters are both victims of a racialized social system and villains in the context of their heterosexual relationships: «While rightfully acknowledging the black male's victimization by a system of racial, social, economic, and political inequality, one cannot fail to make the men responsible for their own abusive behavior» (Hammad 2011, 261-262).

in particular. That this kind of overtly racist representational strategies were – and still are – highly pervasive in contemporary Western culture is demonstrated, among others, by Stuart Hall, notably one of the founding fathers of British Cultural Studies, in his essay “The Spectacle of the Other”. Here, drawing on at least three different debates about the construction of difference, that is the linguistic, the anthropological and the psychoanalytic one, his thorough analysis of the ways in which the Black athletes – both American and British – who participated in the 1988 and 1992 Olympic games were represented in the British press of the time allows the cultural theorist to explain the symbolic processes whereby, since the colonial era, the Black body has been racialized and the Culture/Nature distinction fixed in naturalized terms. In his words,

[t]ypical of [any] racialized regime of representation was the practice of reducing the cultures of black people to Nature, or naturalizing ‘difference’. The logic behind naturalization is simple. If the differences between black and white people are ‘cultural’, then they are open to modification and change. But if they are ‘natural’ – as the slave-holders believed – then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed. ‘Naturalization’ is therefore a representational strategy designed to fix ‘difference’ and thus secure it forever. It is an attempt to halt the inevitable ‘slide’ of meaning, to secure discursive or ideological ‘closure’ (Hall 2013, 234, emphasis in the original).

It is worth remembering that the symbolic projection of Black people – and of Black women in particular – on the axis of Otherness is still a highly “thriving” process, made easier by the pervasiveness of digitalization in the media. In a recent reflection based on a careful examination of Michelle Obama’s memes circulating within Google Images from 2008 to 2017, Kiedra Taylor has highlighted the ways in which “Black woman stereotypes [...] have been used to appropriate her image in order to communicate a racist ideology” (Taylor 2019, 169). On the contrary, in Shange’s work and especially in its stage adaptations, the representation of Black womanhood, far from being simplistic, is associated with vitality. On the formal level, this is mainly obtained through word contractions and the predominant use of short lines linked through rhyme as well as internal assonance and alliteration:

Sing a black girl's song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
but 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
her infinite beauty (Shange 2010b: 18).

In the target text of the intersemiotic translations such an effect is obviously amplified due to its intersection with elements pertaining to the kinetic code. These latter insertions thus play an important symbolic role in terms of accessibility: in the context of the stage adaptations they help the audience further visualize and perceive the process leading to the female protagonists' self-recovery. For instance, in the 2019 stage adaptation produced by the Public Theatre and directed by Obie-winner Leah C. Gardiner, when the Lady in Brown delivers the initial poem "sing a black girl's song", the other actresses' dancing in small concentric circles within the circular stage emphasizes their emotional interconnections and their simultaneous handclapping is instrumental in setting the scene's rhythm in choral terms so as to stress the idea of sororal assistance and mutual partaking in one another's life.⁷ That music, in the light of a broad notion of translation, can have a significant function in terms of accessibility also for deaf or hard of hearing people has been emphasised, among others, by Lucile Desblache in particular. Indeed, the theorist, who

⁷ In passing, it is worth underlining that the multimodal nature of the choreopoem makes this literary genre particularly accessible in itself, since it offers stimuli that are able to solicit multiple intelligences, that is to say different cognitive styles. Notably, the theory of multiple intelligences, according to which individuals perceive and understand reality in ways which are distinctive, was elaborated by Howard Gardner in his seminal *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983).

has stressed the urgency of a multimodal approach to translation (2020),⁸ maintains that “translation [can] be considered more broadly as a transformational tool used in music to convey meaning across boundaries: music can therefore be meaningful to the deaf for instance, or facilitate the manifestation of emotion” (Desblache 2019, 4).

Interestingly enough, in terms of visual impact, the seven characters’ dresses in the Public production have been designed in such a way as to show multiple reproductions of the actresses’ own female ancestors, thus becoming vehicles for questions of cultural belonging and Black female legacy. In this specific production the visual channel plays an overdetermined role. Indeed, as Ben Brantley underlined in his review of the play (Brantley 2019), a member of the cast, deaf actress Alexandria Wailes, signs some of the passages, which represents a further step along the evolution of the text’s malleability and towards its implemented accessibility. In her conversation with Gia Kourlas, Wailes, who is a talented, committed actress,⁹ has cast light on the ways in which dance and sign language combine together as ways of communicating (with) the world: “It is in the body when you learn to listen. And you learn to listen differently as a dancer. Being deaf, we always use our eyes; it’s so critical for us to survive and to take in the world. So to bring in dancing is just an automatic extension of my way of life as a deaf person” (Kourlas 2019). Moreover, in the context of this production, The Public also offered six American Sign Language interpreted performances, an open captioning

⁸ In her contribution to the above-mentioned *Palgrave Handbook of Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility*, Desblache writes that “[m]edia accessibility aims primarily to make content available for the deaf or hearing impaired, and the blind and visually impaired. This requires translating meaning across different modes, so that sound can be described verbally, or so that images are mediated verbally. For translators working in this field, it is key to be aware of different users’ needs and to find a balance between different modes of expression” (Desblache 2020, 715).

⁹ Recently Wailes, as the guest curator of the Brave New Shakespeare Challenge together with Danaya Esperanza, has been engaged in a Shakespeare initiative promoted by the Public Theatre in the context of which Wailes has asked deaf and hearing artists to perform passages taken from some of the Bard’s plays so as to bring them to new life by having recourse to innovative communicative vehicles.

performance and an audiodescribed one.

In the work's audiovisual transcodifications further semiotic as well as linguistic changes were introduced, which inevitably implied representational manipulations with respect to the source text. For instance, as far as Scott's television adaptation is concerned, Trescott, in her above-mentioned article, perceptively noted that "[t]o transfer 'For Colored Girls . . .' to PBS' American Playhouse series, the original director, Oz Scott, and Shange have added numerous sets, including nightclubs, street scenes, picnics and pajama parties. This has a strange effect. On stage, the women in their identical costumes with seven colors but without any props or much makeup signaled universality. The additional elements take away the rawness and anonymity and, at times, are distracting" (Trescott 1982).

From a strictly linguistic point of view, Scott's television adaptation – whose screenplay was written by Shange herself – is substantially faithful to the poetical fabric of the source text, marked as it is by a constitutive orality. The screenplay presents nonetheless some minimal but significant interventions. These are, for instance, the insertions of possessive adjectives in sentences in which the original text did have none and the insertion of some new phrases that contribute to better defining some characters from the very first time they are evoked, as illustrated in the following table:

Poem/ scene	Source text	1982 television adaptation
abortion cycle #1	i cdnt have people looking at me pregnant (Shange 2010b: 36)	i cdnt have my people looking at me pregnant
toussaint	de library was right down from de trolly tracks / cross from de laundry-mat through de big shinin floors & granite pillars ol st. louis is famous for i found toussaint	de library was right down from de trolly tracks / cross from de laundry-mat through de big shinin floors & granite pillars ol st. louis is famous for i found toussaint

	but not til after months uv cajun katie/ pippi longstocking (Shange 2010b: 39)	my first black man but not til after months uv cajun katie/ pippi longstocking
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Both the above-mentioned variations are culturally significant since they help further underline the complex connections in terms of belonging between each single woman and the Black community. In the first example, the Lady in Blue of the 1982 television adaptation, by saying 'my people' reveals that what she really fears is her own community's judgement rather than the reaction of unspecified people to her being pregnant. This linguistic choice is particularly revealing as it demonstrates that Shange's attitude towards the Afro-American community is neither apologetic nor celebratory: indeed, the Lady in Blue is now portrayed as fearing forms of social stigmatization originating within her own socio-cultural circles.

In the second example from the table, the insertion of the phrase "my first black man" at the beginning of Shange's own cue in the frame level of the television adaptation helps define from the very first mentioning of "toussaint" the characterization of the historical figure the proper noun refers to. In immediately connecting "toussaint" to the black community, Shange delineates a Black cultural genealogy even before the audience is informed that "toussaint" stands for Toussaint Louverture (1743-1803), the most prominent leader of the Haitian independence movement. Soon afterwards, on the hypodiegetic level, the Lady in Brown will reveal that she came to know about his heroic deeds in the context of a reading contest for young black girls, which underlines that her need for role models dates back to her school days.

In the 1982 PBS production, the vertically embedded narrative – in which the frame level "contains" the Ladies' stories – is one of the most outstanding novelties with respect to the source text. The frame level, mainly corresponding to Shange's acting, assumes a metanarrative significance: here, issues of cultural legacy are introduced since Shange reflects on how to hand down the work's message specifically to young Black women. Indeed, in addressing little Savannah who lies on a bed surrounded by black cloth dolls, Shange, after abruptly stopping typing, wonders, "How am I gonna tell you about all of this?". The response lies in the film adaptation itself, with its substantial adherence to the original interweaving of poetic prose, music, songs and dance.

However, in terms of accessibility, it should be noted here that this version, albeit entirely accessible on YouTube within the TheeAdultSymphony Channel, is not endowed with original subtitles, but only with auto-generated ones. Moreover, the theme song sung by Patti Labelle is not subtitled, which inevitably creates a fissure in terms of accessibility: hard of hearing or deaf users are thus deprived of the possibility of appreciating the oppositional cultural significance of its lyrics. Desblache has also remarked the existence of a similar distortion as for the provision of the translation, or even the mere intralingual transcription, of lyrics on television and in cinema. In her words, “[o]n television, if songs are part of a film or programme, they are often left untranslated, as is the case in cinema [...]. On mainstream television channels, a verbatim transcription is generally provided as part of an accessibility service for the deaf and hard of hearing. In dubbed films, songs are mostly ignored, although they may be crucial to the narrative” (Desblache 2018, 321). As the case of Scott’s adaptation illustrates, the same can also be said in the case of the transcription of the lyrics of songs being part of a film on video-sharing services, such as YouTube, especially when the audiovisual item does not fall within “mainstream” products.

In 2010 Tyler Perry wrote, directed and produced an adaptation of Shange’s work for the big screen. This audiovisual version falls within a media corpus – Perry’s – that is both appreciated and highly controversial. While being undoubtedly successful, as Perry’s collaboration with Oprah Winfrey Network further demonstrates, his activity as a filmmaker has also been ambiguously received. Thus, if up to now he has always delved into Afro-American women’s lives, to the point that Wesley Morris wrote that “[a]fter Pedro Almodóvar, no working movie director has committed himself so completely to the emotional lives of women” (Morris 2011, 60), it is also true that Black feminist theorists have been pointing at the (unintentionally) contradictory representational weaknesses of his production. In this respect, the editors of *Womanist and Black Feminist Response to Tyler Perry’s Productions* (2014) maintain that “a critical engagement with Perry’s representational practices with regard to black womanhood reveals a vulnerability to, whether intentional or not, long-standing racist, sexist, and other harmful ideas” (Manigault-Bryant, Lomax, Duncan 2014, 3).

In his complex intersemiotic transposition to the visual medium many a variation has been made with respect to the source text, both on the thematic level and on the formal one. The original seven main

characters have become ten due to the purposeful creation of the extra characters of the Lady in White/Alice (Whoopi Goldberg), the Lady in Black/Gilda (Phylicia Rashad) and the Lady in Pink/Rose (Macy Gray). Also, they are now identified by their own first names and surnames. Unlike the narrative strategy adopted by Shange, this choice allows for a more detailed, historically contextualised characterization of the protagonists, but, on the other, this limits their “universal” representativeness as Black women. Consequently, in the process of stage-to-screen adaptation, what may happen is that in Perry’s re-interpretation historically specific facts and social actors anachronistically coalesce: thus, Rose, a drunken back-alley abortionist, shares the scene (read: imaginatively interferes) with Joanna, the hyper-assertive director of a fashion magazine company. Moreover, the recourse to the term ‘colored’ to indicate black people, instead of ‘black’ or ‘of color’, inevitably sounds old-fashioned. From a linguistic point of view, Shange’s poetry, albeit absorbed in selected scenes, has now mainly given way to prose and her monologues have melted into dialogues. Also, in Perry’s intersemiotic translation, the role played by the original kinetic elements has been greatly reduced, being limited to the characterization of the Lady in Purple/Nyla Adrose, a dance student, and her dance instructor, the Lady in Yellow/Yasmine.

However, when it comes to its specific representational strategies of female bonds, Perry’s adaptation, despite being interspersed with undeniably melodramatic undertones, has more than one merit. Besides reviving interest in Shange’s work, his transposition casts a renewed light on the social value of Black sisterhood and (non-biological) motherhood. This is particularly evident in the final scene where the physical as well as emotional (re-)union of the eight leading female characters has taken place and the last poem in Shange’s original work, “a laying on of hands”, is almost literally reproduced. Here the presence of the character of Gilda/the Lady in Black (played by Rashad), who is the apartment manager of the building where most scenes are filmed, acts significantly as the symbol of non-biological motherhood. If in the previous scene the Lady in White (played by Goldberg) pops in during a party just to reconcile with her daughters and leaves soon afterwards because she is unable to connect authentically with them, Gilda, on the contrary, keeps staying with the girls, thus suggesting the extent to which non-biological relationships can be emotionally healing just like – or even more than – biological ones.

Perry's film, just like Scott's production, is now freely accessible on YouTube within the Dark Vision channel. Although in the public comments by YouTube users left in the comment box under the video there is no mention of Shange's source text, Perry's production has inevitably contributed to making her work even more accessible. However, for the purposes of this essay, it needs to be underlined that up to now the settings for this video do not allow YouTube users to select any of the subtitle options (not even the one allowing the auto-generated subtitles to play), which necessarily limits sight-impaired users' accessibility to the content of the video. This also invites reflection on the visibility and accessibility of the productions by/on Black people within the contemporary creative industry.

4. Concluding remarks

As I have attempted to demonstrate, in the different adaptations of Shange's original work the thematic motifs are sustained by coherent formal strategies. Also, in each of them, the formal level programmatically contributes to enhancing the liberating force and progressive self-awareness of the female leading characters originally portrayed *in for colored girls*. In reality, Shange herself, in the foreword to the second edition, seemed to have foreseen this possibility when alluding to the porosity between the formal and the thematic level of her work: «My girls in varied colors in all of my works, from Betsey Brown to Liliane, live in the journey of this work, were born in the journey of this work, for colored girls. From solo voice to theatre, from poetry to play, from random order to the rainbow, for colored girls has always encompassed them all» (Shange 2010a: 1).

The work's original generic "undecidability" and the multiplicity of the narrating personae have provided the fertile conditions for its endless adaptations. This is not to be interpreted as a post-modern dilution of forms or a dispersal of meanings. On the contrary, their polivocality and formal multimodality make them particularly accessible artistic products as they succeed in soliciting multiple channels of meaning production. Each time, the audience is thus urged to actively relate to both the formal features and the thematic motifs of the artistic space in order to create their own signification amid countless possibilities.

This is not to say, however, that all the transpositions of Shange's work are equally accessible, as the case of their subtitling in the video-

sharing platforms suggests. This leads me to argue that future research in this field will inevitably need to tackle issues of media accessibility in their connection with the representation of social groups (and Black groups, in particular) and their political agency.

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