INTERVIEW WITH NTOZAKE SHANGE

Brenda Lyons

BRENDA LYONS: *Colored Girls* raised a furor in the 70s. In addition to much acclaim and many awards, you were attacked as a traitor to your race and put down as a writer and a black woman. Reflecting on that reaction now, ten years later, how do you feel about having been positioned as an angry young black feminist?

NTOZAKE SHANGE: I think it's O.K. to have been what I was. I'm not sure that I'm still not.

BL: Has it affected your writing?

NS: I think on a couple of things I got very pointedly satirical about people, for example in "Just Like a Man," at about that time. There are some things in *Sassafras* that are about that, too, where I can make fun of sexism, misogynists.... It's like creating a world of women that's woman-centered, so aberrant male forms really look aberrant.

BL: Some women have criticized *Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo* as homophobic.

NS: I'm not absolutely certain, but I'm pretty sure that's not true. There used to be a phalanx of feminists who were as difficult to deal with as some misogynists. I used to think twice about whether I was going to see a man. I lost a job because I was heterosexual. It wasn't that I lost it; I wasn't ever given it, and that was the primary reason. So I wanted to point out that when you're seeking love and companionship, you can't just say, well, this is a sexist society and men are the enemy, therefore I'm gonna seek women. Because

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Ntozake Shange has written two novels, *Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo* and *Betsey Brown*; a choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, collections of poetry, performance pieces, and essays, and numerous plays and short stories. She has been the recipient of the Outer Critics Circle Award, an Obie (1977), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1981), and in 1981 was appointed to the New York Council of the Arts Program. This interview took place on the telephone on December 22, 1986.

that's not going to save you. I think I was trying to be honest about the gay community. There are a lot of people who are not honest in their relationships with people. I think the relationship between Idrina and her girlfriend is perfectly fine. They don't have a problem. I figured that was gonna happen and I didn't really care because I was saying what I had to say. It's the same as black people who didn't want to hear about things that didn't look absolutely perfect. The characters in *Sassafras* did say awful things and trash one another, but there are people who do. In the time of the *Sassafras* narrative certain women's collectives existed that were very dramatic and people had a lot of lovers. We didn't even call it promiscuity. It was very different from the environment today. People today sit down and think about how they really want to be monogamous. It was not anybody's goal fifteen years ago.

BL: Is there a link between the title *Colored Girls* and the change in language to "people of color"?

NS: I know that fifteen years ago when I said "colored girls" I meant "people of color." The first group I worked with was black, white, Asian, and native American. And in San Francisco that's what we meant. It was our own little tongue-in-cheek thing. When I moved back East, they couldn't deal with that. It was too difficult. "Color" meant "black people," so that's what it became, but syntactically and in terms of what's in the piece itself that's not true. I think now when you say "people of color" that's another way of saying "colored girls" but getting away from the trap I fell into. I don't think we did anything to stir it on, but I think that's what we meant.

BL: Between *Colored Girls* and *Betsey Brown* I read a movement away from radical feminist politics—although I don't like the word "feminist"—toward what seems a return to family-centered values.

NS: Well, I don't know how to get outta there. I have to create a world that a feminist can come from. You see, I didn't have any books I could read where I could see a child who was actually trying to come in from—a book of different women's perspectives of the world AND different politics—so I thought it was important to create a person who could do that and say, yes, these things are possible. Feminists don't start up at twenty-one and know the

correct way. It's something that all of us can reach toward, and it's something that's available to any little girl or little boy. It's something you have to come to, and you have to come from someplace to get it. That's one of the problems I have with family. You're right. When I was writing *Betsey Brown* I thought I was gonna go crazy, because I had to see the world from a thirteen-year-old girl's point of view. It was absolutely crazy. I thought it was horrible. And it was just so good and clean and asexual, I couldn't stand it. Several months after I finished it I started the next novel, which is incredibly sexual. I guess Liliane, the protagonist, is an existential feminist. I don't know, she's one of these full-sided ones, like what I was talkin' about—the feminist who sprung up at twenty-one from Zeus's head, from her father's head. I had to have a change from Betsey. A friend said, "You finally got tired of all that menarche," and I said, "You're right, I couldn't stand it." So yeah, it's almost—I was reading some of it the other day and I said, "Oh, my god, you must have been terribly, terribly horny," because it's not quite explicitly sexual, but it's loose and wild, that's for sure. So I am coming back to what I feel more comfortable in. But *Betsey Brown* was something I just had to do, because it was too pretty a story to let go. . . . Liliane is, yes, related to the *Bible* and to Minerva.

BL: What's the relationship between Betsey and Indigo from *Sassafras?*

NS: I've thought about that, because the only other time I wrote about children I wrote about Indigo. Indigo has a history and spiritual forces that support her and that she's in touch with without having to be told she has the right. Except for her contact with Uncle John and the women from the church, she doesn't really have a whole lot of conflict going on in her immediate family the way Betsey does. So they're different in that sense. Indigo has a knowing sense of what's possible and who she can be. We discover with Betsey what her possibilities are, which is different, I think, from Indigo giving us permission to share what she already knows.

BL: Indigo seems more magical.

NS: Yeah, that's what I mean. I didn't want to use that word, because I didn't want to make her like an other-worldly person.

But she is in contact with spiritual forces that have been disrupted in Betsey's life. For instance, Indigo thinks she hears and sees the slaves in the bottom of the cock-fighting place, and Betsey has to be told about these things. She only hears the drums in something that's very abstract, very different from coming in contact with ghost slaves.

BL: Do you think of your audience as you write?

NS: I think I always see a young child or an adolescent of color, but not necessarily right this minute. I started writing because there's an absence of things I was familiar with or that I dreamed about. One of my senses of anger is related to this vacancy—a yearning I had as a teenager. I hate that word. But as an adolescent—to have done something that I didn't have and I didn't know what it was 'cause I had never heard about it. I knew some of the Harlem Renaissance people, and Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright and Leroi Jones and Margaret Walker, and that was about it. And I thought there was a searching and yearning going on in me, as a teenager, and when I get ready to write I think I'm trying to fill that and I can't quite give you a name and place and date of birth of this child I'm writing to. There was a collection of poetry to do with refugee children called *Children of the Sun* a decade or so ago or longer. A lot of those children will never get a chance to tell how our life was. And I want to have something here for the next batch of kids who come along. I don't want them to come into a world unannounced, with no past, with nothing to hold onto. I can't stand children's books. I want something ready for when they hit eighteen or twenty or when they're forty-five and they still haven't ever heard about themselves. I want to recreate and save what our being alive has been so their being will stay alive, won't be such a surprise.

BL: Does sexism operate differently in the black and white literary communities?

NS: Yeah, I think so. I think unless black women are writing the pieces, we're being left out the same way we used to be left out of literature. We don't appear in things unless we write them ourselves. In the white male literary establishment women attain what looks like positions of power or influence or economic stability, but they're structured in such a way that they become unthreatening.

BL: Do you know the piece by Calvin Hernton called "The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers"?

NS: No. I know Calvin.

BL: Well, in this article he identifies a black feminist perspective in contemporary Afro-American literature, and consistent with that perspective, an aesthetic. As he puts it, "form, language, syntax, sequence, and metaphoric rendering of experience that's different and expansive compared to male-authored literature." Do you agree?

NS: Yeah, I do.

BL: What does that mean in terms of your literary work?

NS: As far as we know, in my fiction the plot is not going forward. It undulates, I hope. And I hope it has more to do with the flow of rivers and streams and tides and lakes, because I relate to life more completely in that way and it feels more real to me. If I'm dealing with somebody who is having daydreams or whose life takes place in sequences that are arranged in terms of importance to her, she recreates history only insofar as she tells us what she experienced, given where she was and who she was at that time, to the best of her ability, and that makes her life valid to me. So I think there are certain risks that I've been taking in terms of the way I choose to present and develop my pieces. If they're juxtaposed to traditional expectations of novels.... I keep telling people that the meaning of the word "novel" is "new," but for some reason people still seem to think that they should know how to read this or they should feel at ease immediately with this. That's crazy, because when you meet new people you can't do that. You can't just fall into somebody's life and be done with them in a few days or three hours of reading. It just doesn't make sense. Because you can't learn somebody's personal imagery and their personal iconography that quickly. I think Calvin is probably right. If I was gonna give a physical metaphor, I think that women's novels for me are more like breathing and men's novels are more like running.

BL: Do you think black women's writing is different?

NS: I've been reading a lot of books by women this year. Not all novels so much, but a lot of J. California Cooper and June Jordan

and Toni Morrison and others. J. is a storyteller and short story writer and playwright in Oakland; June is a political poet from Stonybrook, and she wrote an incredible essay that's been the spark of life to me. I find ours to be more colloquial and rooted in folklore and embedded in the politics of the family in a way almost as mythology, a more readily approachable mythology than white feminist books are to me. I don't know if it's because our lives are incredible and when we see it on paper we're astonished and so raise the characters themselves to a mythological level, or if it's in the writing. I have a feeling it's a little of both. Because a lot of white feminists—I hate that word, too—are from working-class backgrounds and their novels seem to take on the whole town and the company. In most black novels—I don't know if it's because we're left out of the industrial, technological process or because it's the way we choose to see the world—our personalities and our interpersonal reactions and relationships and our relations as solitary figures with the universe seem paramount to me in a way they don't seem when I read novels by people who are not of color.

BL: You've produced work in several, and sometimes overlapping, genres—dramatic performance pieces, poetry, short stories, and the novel. Do you feel closest to or strongest in any one of them?

NS: It really has a lot to do with my own psychological path. Each piece has tended to give me what I emotionally needed at that point in time in terms of how I was going to deal with my work and what my work would give back to me. When I need to be by myself and not talk to a lot of other people about what I'm doing, I write novels. I left here [Houston] to write novels on purpose because I simply could not stand talkin' to other people. I could not stand it—and then—writing novels is terribly terribly lonely—and so I had to go back—so I could be interacting with other people. I used to think that theater—by which I mean institutionalized theater, not performance pieces—was terribly alien to me. It was something that fell upon me as opposed to me falling upon it . . . because I had been quite happy with my pieces when they were on East 3rd Street, and having to deal with people who were looking to go The Great White Way had never occurred to me. But it HAD occurred to me to write novels and poems. So I have created a distance between myself as a theatrical writer and myself as a poet.

BL: I just read and really like "Aw baby you so pretty" . . .

NS: Yeah, I liked that one, too, and I like being in the pieces that I like. I like being on stage, so that's why this year I'm doing a lot more acting in other people's work than I have before. This year I'm gonna do *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in New Orleans and I'm gonna do a piece of my own in San Francisco, a stage version of a short story I wrote called "Melissa & Smith."

BL: I'd been trying to find "Melissa & Smith" . . .

NS: It was a chapbook from Bookslinger Press in Minneapolis. It was really pretty—all handmade paper. Those are the things I wanted when I dreamed about being a writer. I wanted beautiful chapbooks. I just wanted books, I never ever thought about anything but having books, and so I think I'm much more, well, now it's changed a little because I get fuller gratification from actual performance. I did that as a poet, too. But I'm getting it from being an actress now. I really feel a great sense of accomplishment and pride and satisfaction after a piece in a show, which I didn't used to have.

BL: Can you talk about what you're working on now? Plans for forthcoming writing?

NS: Yeah, I'm working on the novel about Liliane, and she's very exciting to me because she IS a grown woman and she's worldly and politically committed and she's very sensually alive and she encounters people and events who make history. For that reason she's very, very sacred in a different way, say, that's for me not depressive. 'Cause Sassafras in a sense IS history and Liliane is in a process of making it, but in a very unselfconscious way. I hope. Because she's so vitally committed to experiencing herself and having those experiences impact on the world around her that she doesn't really leave us thinking that she is wanting for too much or that she's unable to fend for herself. She's a real challenge to write about and, on the other hand, real gratifying, because more often than not she gets what she wants. And if it's not what she wants she figures out in some kinda way that that was enough. [Laughter] And she moves on to the next thing. She's a person who uses the information she has within her power as a woman to make her life and the lives of those people around her better. But she's not a holy roller, and she's not Mother Teresa. She's a very worldly, sophisticated person.

BL: To what extent are your characters autobiographical? That's an age-old question, and not a very popular one now either, but. . . .

NS: Six o' one, half a dozen o' the other. Some people, some characters just come out of the clear blue sky—the unknown, the unconscious—the other six are modelled on people I've known in life. There are some things that are facsimiles of reality—either hearsay or direct experience that has been reformed—in the psyches of my characters. And then there's some information that just comes out of the clear blue sky. A lot of it is what I call "terror thinking"—which would be transcription of nightmares or day-dreams that are fiendish—and/or "wish thinking," which would be a transcription of events that I wish would happen instead of what did happen. And so I make it real for myself by writing. But when I write it I know it's not for me; it's for this character in there. So that distances it, and it becomes non-autobiographical for me. Once I've adjusted something so that it fits a character it's no longer autobiographical, because its . . . hell, because if it's auto-biographical, I couldn't have fixed it [laughing].

BL: Do you have childhood memories of Miles or Dizzy or DuBois or. . . ?

NS: Yeah, I do. I remember when Dizzy Gillespie came to our house in St. Louis. He used to come visit us a lot, whenever he came through town. And at that point in time, St. Louis and Nashville and Chicago had a real strong rhythm and blues and jazz circuit. He gave me my first horn—my first cornet that was designed like his. I'll never forget that. And one time my father took us to see where Miles Davis was staying. It was in a black hotel in town, and I saw him in the lobby and I heard him whisper that horny whisper. . . .

BL: Very sexy. . . .

NS: Yeah, really . . . and DuBois, I remember. I was too young to remember Paul Robeson coming to dinner, except that he had this incredible sense of humor about him. I remember this big brown man that looked sort of like my dad, who was with us in the dining room at dinner time. Vague things like that. I remember when Walter White came and they had a cocktail party. I used to sit up on the stairway in the front of the house and watch the people come in

and I could listen to the talk going on in the back. I remember the night Walter White came because the people from the NAACP had a raffle. He was one of the very important civil rights leaders of the 40s and early 50s, and he was very, very light-skinned, so he could get into tense situations with the Klan or where there were riots going on or where there was discrimination, and see for himself and the NAACP exactly what was going on.

BL: When passing was a necessity. . . .

NS: Uh huh. He was a very, very brilliant man and a lot of his articles are in *The Crisis* magazine.

BL: What about DuBois?

NS: I remember him because my mother used to talk to me about him all the time. And he apparently was a very crotchety man. Really. He didn't like children. That's what my mother said. He didn't like children. And for some reason he liked me. The way the story goes, Dr. DuBois took me upstairs and put me to sleep one night, which everybody thought was amazing, because he wasn't supposed to like babies. So I heard about him forever after that. And then, of course, Cesar Chavez used to be at our house. My father—we used to raise money for the grape strike. And Muhammad Ali and Sugar Ray Robinson . . .

BL: How did your father know all these people?

NS: My father was a ring physician and rodeo physician or any other kind of sports physician. He also worked in a huge public hospital. If there were fights or knifings in night clubs—black night clubs—the black people got sent to the black hospitals. And so when anybody got shot or knifed, whether they were famous or not, they would go to this black hospital, and that's where he was doing his residency. So we met a lot of people that way.

BL: Do you remember Robeson's voice?

NS: Yeah, I remember his laugh. What I remember is conversation at dinner that seemed to be very vital, and a big . . . just an incredible presence.

BL: Is there anything you'd like to tell your contemporary readers?

NS: Oh, I know. One of the things that's been bothering me most is the homogenizing of language. Of contemporary English. And I've been feeling that the power of the language that black and Latin and women writers, who are exploring and unleashing in the last decade, is being encroached upon in a very serious way. For instance, on the news last night there was a fire and eight people died and one pregnant woman. But instead of saying "one pregnant woman" the newscaster said "one pregnant woman and one unborn child." That's a very dangerous use of language. And an obsessive use of language. It's something that we are exposed to in a steady, innocuous drone and it then will become part of someone's psyche in a way that multiplies in terrifying leaps and bounds. Another thing, for instance, is that every major soap opera right now, in *Dallas* and *Dynasty*—as soon as the word "abortion" is mentioned the female characters spend weeks having guilt and terror about having an abortion. See, this gives the wrong idea that you can take weeks to do this. And you can't. Also, we don't have to spend weeks being terrorized about it. Those are two things. And the other is this murder that went on at Howard Beach when the crowd of white people went running around. What happened is—in one newscast they said that white *youths* of sixteen and seventeen did something. Right. And the following local news report about a local 7-11 robbery—a black *man* of sixteen did something. So I think we not only have to begin to take very seriously what's presented to us, but we have to take very seriously how our written language—the word on the page—has alerted the powers that be that these ideas—that these people have been suggesting—must be stopped. Therefore, we will not discuss it the way they discuss it.

BL: Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

NS: That no matter what—and I have to give this to myself, too, every once in a while I have real problems, a really severe writer's block—that no matter what happens, never think it's not worthwhile. And never be afraid, whatever it is, that it's too beautiful or too terrible to tell.