

Between the “Magical” Legacy and a Model Household: Establishing Alternative Modes of Speaking in Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*

Nayoung Kim

Introduction

“Speaking” as a gesture of self-expression and eventual liberation has been one of the major issues in black women’s writing. In her novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), Ntozake Shange draws attention to this still prominent concern with colorful portrayals of the lives of three sisters who are unique in each way but share a collective spirit. What merits particular emphasis in Shange’s work is that the sensitive matter of reclaiming black women’s artistic and further, political subjectivity is interwoven with unresolved domestic tensions. The novel does acknowledge the value of excavating the material, historical legacy of the Black Diaspora, about which many critics including hooks and Spillers have been emphatic, and channeling it to black women’s liberating creativity: the process that has been supported by other black women writers, for instance Paule Marshall in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983).

Alternatives for “speaking/writing/recording” are intensely interrogated in whose cores lie the Southern black women’s historical experience around domestic sphere. Grappling with the language flooded with sexism and racism, the sisters seek other ways of articulation that genuinely embody their artistic creativity and political agency. The girls’ mother, Hilda’s following remark is worth quoting at this point: “Whatever ideas you have that’re important to you, write them down . . . but write them so your enemies can’t

understand them right off" (110). This quote draws attention to the significance of artistic subjectivity, and its potential for a radical political agency is further explored through the struggle of the three sisters. They discard the grammar imposed by the dominant sexist-racist society and adopt other modes of self-expression. The liberating creativity endowed in the process resides in the rich tradition of their predecessors. It is to this tradition that the two elders eventually awaken. The youngest one, Indigo, serves as a medium of this heritage for her sisters, or even its incarnation. Indigo actively revives the underappreciated legacy and rescues it from the stigma of domestic superstition. Such restored legacy is given material power that later promotes unmitigated artistic creativity.

With her eyes focused on this potent legacy, Shange delves into another issue which is interrelated yet given less attention: the conventional domesticity figured as a desire for domestic stability. Since sexism and racism feed into this notion, it is more often than not at odds with the black women's artistic and political liberation. Presumptions of black male supremacy over female and white dominance undervalue the radical potential, which lies within the Southern black heritage that has been preserved especially through maternal line in a typical household. Shange focuses on the incompatible gap of black female agency inspired by such legacy and the domestic convention that has been passed down along with it. This hindrance arises not only from the sexist black males and the equivalent tendency of the Black Arts Movement, but also from the female protagonists themselves who are conflicted in the apparently clashing desires. Juxtaposing Sassafrass and Cypress' courses of conventional heterosexual relationship with Indigo's life within black women's community, Shange raises awareness of this complicated route, opens up a prospect of retrieving black female subjectivity and the ever-lurking danger of being silenced again. Through close observations on Sassafrass' conflict with Mitch and herself *and* Cypress' relationship with Leroy and their subsequently romanticized, conservative ending, Shange offers an insight on the precarious process of regaining subjectivity as a black female within heterosexual relationship that is prone to conform to oppressive patriarchy.

1. Rediscovering “Magic”

Indigo, the youngest of the sisters, stands apart from the two elders who leave for cities to exercise their artistic passions. Indigo remains in South Carolina and serves as a successor of the historical black heritage, “[t]he South in her (4).” She appreciates her matrilineal legacy as a black woman, revising it and promoting a possibility to redirect it as artistic creativity and political subjectivity. It is such possibility that will later serve as a ground for her sisters to speak as “colored girls.” Furthermore, instead of entering a heterosexual relationship like her mother or sisters, she chooses to be a midwife, “curing women folks & their loved ones” (222). Indigo’s resoluteness and devotion for the profession reflect her strong refusal to be domesticized. Also, it is carefully suggested by Shange as a probable option to pursue a rich life as a black female.

To the surprise of her mother Hilda, Indigo materializes the black “folklore” by becoming “the folks” herself. She fervently reacts to her heritage even to the degree of utilizing the experience that is passed-down as “magic,” and “speaks” with its power. The process involves a refashioning of the “meaning” of domesticity that has been adulterated by sexism/racism. To borrow the words of Spillers, it is a major “*insurgen[ce]*” of the existing grammar (“Mama’s” 229; emphasis original). Thus, collisional noise necessarily arises. It is frequently heard when Hilda and Indigo are together, mostly Hilda’s internalized grammar being the instigator. During the conflict, the attitude toward the historical legacy undergoes a dramatic revision. The legacy has often gone unappreciated and neglected mainly due to the domination/internalization of white-bourgeois norms. Yet Indigo passionately adopts the historical experience and local religious practices of Southern blacks that have been stigmatized by the very norms as superstition or “some far-fetched story” as Avey Johnson complained in *Praisesong* (42). Hilda’s concern that “[Indigo’s] got too *much* South in her” shows how the objectifying norms filter through to the black women themselves (*SC&I* 4; emphasis added). Hilda mostly conforms to a life pursued by the white middle-class,

“interested in family life, children, keeping house, and good company” (117). She unconsciously reproduces the ideological structure that clashes with Indigo’s ardent craving for “the South.” For instance, Hilda scolds Indigo for keeping dolls unfit for her age. The oppressive language that denies Indigo’s “magic” power speaks through Hilda, condemning her dolls as mere childish play-things. “You’re too big for this nonsense (21).” Indigo’s “anx[iety]” that no living black folks would talk to her the way her dolls . . . did” alludes to the pressure imposed on her by such language (6). In a similar fashion, Hilda repeats the stereotype of a victimized black woman, robbing Indigo’s power over herself:

“Sister Mary Louise needs to get herself married ‘fore she’s lost what little of her mind she’s got left. . . . Go to the store and buy yourself some Kotex. . . . I’m going to tell you the truth of what you should be worrying about now you sucha grown woman.” (20-21)

“This is Charlseton, South Carolina. Stars don’t fall from little colored girls’ legs. . . . White men roam these parts with evil in their blood, and every single thought they have about colored woman is dangerous.” (22)

Hilda forces on Indigo the distorted identity of black women that is “filled up with white folks’ ways” (7). The speech intimidates and silences Indigo from “speaking” as an incarnation of black history or as a “moon child.” It imprisons her in a desirable domain of conventional domesticity, namely “marri[age],” which resonates the white-bourgeois norms that maneuvers black women to perceive themselves as easy targets of sexual violence and confines them in the boundary of a household.

Yet Indigo resists such a threat and ultimately topples down the forged meaning of domesticity itself:

“Well, they[the boys] dance. & I guess eventually you marry ‘em. But I like my fiddle so much more. I even like my dolls better than boys. They’re fun, but they can’t talk about important things.” . . . Hilda Effania giggled. . . . There’d be not one more boy-crazy, obsessed-with-

romance child in her house. . . . Alfred would have liked that. He liked independence. (64)

By denying the previously accepted notion of sexual maturation and marriage, Indigo overturns the language of domesticity. She is indeed “independen[t],” but not in the way that Hilda presumes. For not only is Indigo free from her mother’s language and notion of good life that still revolves around conventional domesticity but she is also capable of inscribing a whole new meaning to it. Dependence on male’s economic support and mental stability along with sexual victimization are substituted for fiddle-playing and engaging with “dolls,” both of which allude to the rejuvenated legacy of black women who resided in household. Such powerful revision on the concept of domestic life reminds of bell hooks’s insightful comment on “the importance of homeplace [. . .] as a site of resistance and liberation struggle” (*Yearning* 43). Conventional “homeplace” transforms into a “site of resistance” via Indigo’s rejecting and reconceiving the notion of household life.

The subversion on “homeplace” is further backed up by re-evaluating the historical experiences. They cease to be “some far-fetched story” and are instead made tangible through Indigo’s “[womanly] magic” (1). The magic here is far from being insubstantial or a mere fantasy, for its historical root is actively evoked:

“Them whites what owned slaves took everythin’ was ourselves & didn’t even keep it fo’ they own selves. Just threw it on away, ya heah . . . Took them language what we speak. Took off wit our spirits & left us wit they Son. *But the fiddle was the talkin’ one.* The fiddle be callin’ our gods what left us . . . Why white folks so dumb, they was thinkin’ that if we didn’t have nothin’ of our own, they could come controlin’, meddlin’, whippin’ our sense on outta us. But the Colored smart, ya see. The Colored got some wits to em, you & me, we ain’t the onliest one to be talkin’ wit the unreal. . . . but talkin’ wit the unreal what’s mo’ real than most folks ever gonna know.” (27; emphasis added)

The fiddle is assumed to have spoken for the black slaves who were deprived of their own voices. Indigo plays this very *fiddle* instead of a violin for “the

orchestra at school” that echoes the white middle-class culture (27). She consciously prefers a fiddle for a violin and discards the pre-given mode of speaking and narrative conceived with it, both of which are evidently not her own. Her fiddle-playing then, reads as a process of reclaiming the “real” experience as opposed to the one forged by racism. The fiddle-playing evokes “talkin’ wit the unreal,” and it attests to the very “real” and concrete history of slavery. The historicized “magic” is manifested through her fiddle which fruitfully serves as “many tongues” (28).¹⁾

The resuscitated magic and black history are conducted as driving forces for retrieving and sharing blacks’ collective experience, which would eventually lead to political agency. Indigo creates a ground for reviving “concrete relational love that bonded black folks together in communities of hope and struggle” by “sharing” her unique articulation of black experience (*Yearning* 36). According to hooks, the acknowledged and shared experience would provide a “visionary model of black liberation” (39). Conducive power of the newly-gained history and its meaning to a course of reclaiming political agency is visible in these words. Indigo plays a key role in re-establishing such common experience by bridging the gap between the once-lost history and her people. She actively “look[s] at,” and thereby “speak[s]” to the others (45). She “look[s] at a brown-skinned man with a scar on his cheek, leathery hands, and a tiredness in his eyes” and with “her soul” she “ferret[s] out the most lovely moment in that man’s life. & she play[s] that[the fiddle],” leaving him full of energy (45). The man’s exhausted and coarse appearance reflects the black life, which formerly has been devastated with “tiredness” and “a deep collective sense of loss” (*Yearning* 36). Yet Indigo’s magical fiddle-playing replaces this “sense of loss” with vibrant shared experience and “connect[s] soul & song, experience & unremembered rhythms” (45). The fact that she refuses money for her musical demonstration further supports

1) Though not dealt with in detail within this paper, Indigo’s colorful recipes for magic spells further strengthen and revitalize her/their history. Her specific “methods” allude to the actual religious practices of the slaves from the Black Diaspora. Indigo reestablishes this buried history, adapting the “[t]raditional method” “for Modern Times” (30).

that the fiddle-playing is not simply an artistic representation, but “Indigo’s mission” to address the history of “[t]he slaves who were ourselves” (45). She literally exhibits the “[r]emembering” of the “unremembered” experience and creates an arena for a collective bond (45).

By reconstructing and thereby reconstructing the significance of black history, Indigo provides rich soil upon which Sassafrass and Cypress construct their artistries. The energy and vitality rooted in the black tradition within homeplace are redirected as autonomous expressions of black womanhood. The enlivened heritage becomes both physical and emotional bedrock in reclaiming black female subjectivity. To this end, Sassafrass and Cypress struggle in their artistic paths. Their pain during the process is indeed acute, as much as the wide gap between radical creativity residing within the reconceptualized homeplace and the suffocating norms.

In the domain of doubly-marginalized black women, artistic independence is seldom found. The Black Arts Movement and Black Nationalism have purported the urgent political agenda in which blacks were assumed as a homogenous racial group. In the name of single black community, the Movement enjoined the black women to comply with its apparently sexist perspective (*Yearning* 107-08). As many black female critics have reproached, it oftentimes acted as an authoritative filter to dismiss art forms mostly by black women that were accused of being not contributive to its ends. Hence black women artists who yearned for artistic independence found themselves trapped in intertwined sexism/racism that exerts its sole authority over them. Sassafrass and Cypress face a challenge to direct their magical creativity to abolish such barrier.

Sassafrass grapples with the tainted language concerning her artistic passions, mainly weaving and poetry-writing. Weaving in particular, has been flooded with the distorted pre-notions that have undervalued it as a mere domestic craft. However, like Indigo’s fiddle, Sassafrass re-inscribes it as a form of self-expression. She thereby *elevates* weaving from “something the family did for Miz Fitzhugh” to a form of divine art (70). Miz Fitzhugh, a white woman who engages “her Negroes” for their service of weaving, deems it as an “honorable trade [proper for ‘Negroes’]” (71). Weaving is figured as

a “trade,” a commercialized, domestic slave labor for Miz Fitzhugh. By so doing she imposes a racist meaning, which is exemplified in the following quote:

Miz Fitzhugh liked Sassafrass the best of the girls. That’s why she sponsored her at the Callahan School. The other two, . . . they didn’t even wanted to be weavers. What was becoming of the Negro, refusing to ply an honorable trade. (71)

Besides objectifying weaving as a domestic slave craft, Miz Fitzhugh erases individualities of the three sisters and puts them into a monolithic group of “weavers.” It is a language that Spillers would have commented as a reflection of “equations of political power” (“Interstices” 168). To borrow Spillers’ coinages, the “dominative mode” of white supremacy accumulates the “locus of confounded identities,” among which “an honorable trade” would fall (“Mama’s” 203). Miz Fitzhugh solidifies the dominative mode derived from the ideology of slavery by strictly limiting weaving as a slave trade and violently grouping the sisters as “Negro weavers.”

Hilda also echoes Miz Fitzhugh’s perspective. Though she faintly acknowledges its artistic value, Hilda still regards it merely as a “fine craft,” unable to perceive it otherwise than as breadwinning labor (94). The overt racism now shifts as subtly internalized white- bourgeois norms. Hilda’s preoccupation with an exemplary bourgeois life is surfaced again with her dealings with Sassafrass. She urges her daughter to attend the Callahan School “*with all those rich [white] children*” (94). hooks has lamented the lack of appreciation for the political value of black female labor and pointed out that “the paradigm for domesticity in black life,” of which Hilda demonstrates, “mirror[s] white bourgeois norms” (*Yearning* 47). In this regard, Miz Fitzhugh’s and Hilda’s notions of weaving are analogous in reinforcing such norms, for both of them define it as manual labor to sustain a living. Thus, weaving cannot escape the boundary of a domestic craft when more promising means of living become available. It is suggested in Hilda’s light reproach on Sassafrass for her adherence to the supposedly laborious process

of weaving:

I can't understand why you hated that place[the Callahan School] so . . . not going to your graduation, refusing to go on to college. Oh, Sassafrass, weaving is a fine craft, but with the opportunities open to Negroes your age, I just don't know why you insist on doing everything the hard way.
(94)

Weaving is an economically unpromising and thus a “hard way” to sustain living, as opposed to a prosperous and easy life expected from attending the Callahan School. Weaving is condemned as hardly a contribution to a good life while being uncomfortably arduous.

Sassafrass strives to abandon such inherited “symbolic value” (“Interstices” 168; emphasis original). While acknowledging weaving as her inheritance from her foremothers, she dismantles the white-dominative mode. Under Sassafrass, weaving becomes an art form “that [gives] her a sense of womanhood that was rich and sensuous, not tired and stingy”, tired and stingy being the typical characteristics of exhausting and meaningless slave labor (92). By conceiving it as a magical illumination of black female tradition, Sassafrass takes a step in “gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject” (“Mama’s” 229; emphasis original). She presents her mother Hilda with “a woven hanging of twined ikat . . . called ‘You Know Where We Came From, Mama’; & six amethysts with holes drilled thru, for her mother’s *creative weaving*” (70; emphasis added). With the “ikat²⁾” summoning the black history, weaving overcomes the limiting border of trade or craft and is elevated as a form of creation.

Cypress’s dancing serves a similar expressive function as weaving does for Sassafrass. After going through both inspirational and disheartening moments with *The Kushites Returned* and *Azure Bosom*, Cypress “gr[ows] deep into her difference” as a black woman (136). Unlike Sassafrass and Indigo who are strongly self-conscious of their blackness, Cypress at first tries

2) Ikat is a traditional technique of weaving and dyeing that is used to pattern fabrics. Its variations are found across the world, namely India, Central and South-east Asia, Africa and Latin America.

to conform to the mode of dominant white society both with her verbalization and body movement. She tries to sever herself from her heritage, and from this she undergoes alienation and difficulty fitting herself in what is virtually not hers. Hilda strengthens and hands down the racist language to Cypress: "*Ballet is for white girls; now, can't you understand? Your ass is too big and your legs are too short*" (134). Unfortunately, Cypress likewise contributes to the process by being determined "to dance as good as white folks and find out about the truth about colored people's movements" (135). She conforms herself to the white-bourgeois culture, upon which "colored people's movements" are judged. For the criteria is alien to Cypress, there is "always more to learn" and it fatigues her (135). Her fatigue faintly calls back the aforesaid "tiredness" of black people, in that it mirrors a loss of the legacy and the subsequent weariness. Cypress' initiation for subjectivity starts out by banishing this very alien-ness.

2. Between Artist and Wife

Though empowered by their revived heritage, both Sassafrass and Cypress face subtler yet tougher challenges that step into the void of racist language. They are objectifications within the respective black and female artistic communities. The former is witnessed in both of the sisters' artistic trajectories, while the latter is prominently explored through Cypress's. Still, *Shange* allots more attention to the aspects of conflict found within the black community she interrogates in terms of Black Arts Movement and conventional heterosexual relationship of black male and female. The latter especially reminds of Indigo's contrasting stance. The radical possibility of black female tradition that Indigo represents and the elders try to embrace, collides with this discouraging conventionality.

Sassafrass's relationship with Mitch, who is a fervent follower of the Black Arts Movement, reveals where racism and patriarchal sexism cross. The seed of conflict is insinuated in her L.A. house she shares with Mitch. "The long walls of the [. . .] house [are] totally covered with murals of African exploits," which are made by Sassafrass, and are given as emblems for

the figures from the Black Nationalism and Arts Movement, i. e. Malcolm X (77). Although Mitch shares Sassafrass’ passion for creating blackness as their house motto—“CREATION IS / EVERYTHING YOU DO / MAKE SOMETHING” (83)—suggests, he undermines the significance of weaving as an emblematic art form. For Mitch, weaving equals “making things with [one’s] hands,” which does not require any creative effort (79). Hence he overlays it with conventional domesticity. Mitch’s disparaging remarks reflect the fact that “racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination which uphold and sustain one another” (*Yearning* 59). For creation conceptualized by black aesthetic is a restricted notion, it excludes art forms grown in homeplace as “not conform[ing] to movement’s criteria” (*Yearning* 107). In this sense, Mitch incarcerates weaving in “stingy” domesticity, ironically rendering the propaganda of creation superficial.

The domesticized weaving is forcibly replaced with what is considered *high art* as hooks critically puts as (*Yearning* 106). The separation between writings on political matters and domestic craft becomes unfordable, depriving the expressive ability of the latter. Sassafrass’s already slim chance of speaking exacerbates. The language of so-called high writing under black aesthetic equates “beautiful blackness” with black nationhood and subdues any distinctive womanhood (107). The core image of black nationhood is a “mythic nation [. . .] born in exile” flourishing with undifferentiated “black folks” (107). Such mythic aspect reminds of the Black Nationalist poet Nikki Giovanni, whose writing Michelle Wallace criticized as to have marginalized black women by enforcing the unified image of blacks (168). The forceful unification has been often achieved by subordinating black women’s agency to that of black men’s. This process instantly echoes the language of Mitch and subtly that of Giovanni’s. Her near eulogy of black male “beauty” poses a sharp contrast to Sassafrass’s recognition of womanhood with *her* writing:

I wanta say just gotta say something
 bout those beautiful beautiful beautiful outasight
 black men
 with they afros

walking down the street . . .

("Beautiful Black Men," *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni*, 54)

The typical image of "beautiful black men" is reified here, for instance as an "afros"-headed man in an urban setting. Mitch adopts a similar image, pictured as "a Watusi with Ethiopian eyes" with "presence [. . .] that of one of those Olmec gods" and plays "avant-garde free-music" (78-80). Under the dominance of the authoritative masculine voice, weaving's articulacy is banished from the political domain. Sassafrass's voice is downgraded to "one of God's[Mitch's] stars" whose writing faithfully needs to serve the cause of "God" (78). Moreover, weaving is disparaged as a relic of slavery that recalls white-male supremacy over black domestic space, robbing the black men's right over it:

"I don't wanna come and see you like this anymore, listening to some white man make it easy for you to stop thinking, telling you all the white folks' news, . . . And you better take care of it or you'll end up some kind of wino or slut, trying to fuck it away with some punk-assed schoolteacher who can't see you a jived-assed little bitch." (79)

According to Mitch, Sassafrass's weaving equates to "listening to white man make it easy for [her] to stop thinking" eventually leaving her ineffectual to the cause of the B. A. Mov't. Yet underneath the seemingly righteous propaganda of blackness lies male discomfort against women's art, for women's art is not compliant with the establishment of "*black macho*" (Wallace). Mitch's threat concerning Sassafrass' vulnerability to sexual humiliation reflects the sexism pervading in the black aesthetic. It heralds the sexual right of black men over black women as opposed to racist white men.

The sexist notion of creation that Mitch clings to brings about severe frustration in Sassafrass. "[I]t [is] ridiculous for some men to come to tell her she had to create," since she has been engaged in the process of creation all along (80). The conflict is highlighted in "THE REVUE," where the forged image of black women clashes with the material presence of Sassafrass (87). It robs her of a voice to name herself. Her individuality is erased and

she is emblematically objectified as “ebony cunt” (87). Despite the premise of Mitch’s group that the words should evoke mythic black nationhood, illustrated by their calling Sassafrass an “[African] queen,” they are blank and immaterial (87). It once again calls attention to the locus of confounded identities, in that Sassafrass’s identity is dis-historicized. Not only that, she is forcibly sat in the middle, helplessly exposed to their objectifying gaze. As Alice Walker’s heroine Meridian was repulsed by a male artist’s exhibition of “black[female]ness,” Sassafrass likewise tries to verbalize her repugnance (*Meridian* 120).³⁾ Her verbal protest echoes the words of Fran Sanders, when she admonishes such forging as thus: “[t]alk to me like the woman that I am and not to me as that woman who is the inanimate creation of someone’s overactive imagination” (94). However, Sassafrass’s verbal protest to the men’s words/art that “celebrate [her] inherited right to be raped” is curbed by their seemingly impenetrable language (89). “I don’t care *what* you say, Sassafrass . . . I *know* you got good pussy!” (90; emphasis original) Her verbal defeat reads as a “rape” of her creativity and such state would prevail unless the distorted language/art ceases to exist.

Cypress goes through similar frustration with Sassafrass. She at first awakens to her racial difference, redefining the meaning of culture by being a member of The Kushites Returned, a troupe that follows the political agenda of the B. A. Mov’t. Though it functions as a catalyst for Cypress to develop a sense of racial solidarity, her devotion soon dies out due to its sexist tendency. Like Mitch, the Kushites cherish African culture, visualizing its mythic quality. Following “the brazen mystical motions of black Nile dance,” Cypress does get inspired to speak out her blackness through the “freestyle Southern improvisations” and abandons ballet along with her previous determination to copy white people’s movement (161). Now awakened to her racial identity, “[h]er dance took on the essence of the struggle of

3) Like Sassafrass, Meridian is also made a symbol, the African beauty, by the B. A. Mov’t artist Truman. He proclaims to be infatuated with supposedly “heaving, pulsating, fecund body” of black women and broadcasts himself an admirer of W. B. Dubois (184). Real-life Meridian is absorbed as a part of his art, in which the vacant symbols of black women are repeatedly fabricated.

colored Americans to survive their enslavement” (136). Still, it is not enough to compensate for her frustration and feelings of alienation from this sexist group. In the Kushites, Cypress becomes “the Milky Way” (112) and is molded into an ever fecund maternal figure, much like an “African queen” assumed for Sassafrass. Unique experiences of black women Indigo previously evoked are extricated in these ahistorical symbols and the symbols in turn render them as “inanimate creation[s]” as Sanders put it. Furthermore, during the mythic performance of the Kushites, distinction between the dancers and the audience is blurred. “The audience doesn’t exist; everybody is moving” (114). The unifying image of “rhythm[ic] [. . .] niggahs” is pushed to the extreme, with an atmosphere which hooks would have criticized as *too mythic* (114). Black women’s magical art faces a demand to assimilate itself to the too-mythic magic of black nationhood. The performance exposes itself to be literally a performance deprived of substantiality, as did “THE REVUE.”

Besides, the male dancers are “prized in dance” for simply being men, even when they are not proficient as a dancer (137). Surrounded by men who “talk a lot, being prized and sought after, being badder than thunder in the mountains,” Cypress “d[oesn’t] say much” and literally falls into silence:

Cypress listened and listened. What could she say? Men talking to men about being men who like men and occasionally take a woman. . . . Cypress didn’t say much cross-country. She remembered and nestled in the back seat. With her journal, she talked to herself. (137)

Cypress is again alienated among the group of men. The situation overlaps with her former struggle with “white girls” ballet. She fails in verbal protest with the language exploited by the “men,” as did Sassafrass in “THE REVUE.”

Once the sisters are afflicted by the language of sexist oppression within the black community, they seek ways of insurgence utilizing their own modes of speaking. Sassafrass fashions her own language and patches up the enforced gap between weaving and writing upon the collective ground of black women’s artistic creativity. Formerly deemed as apolitical, homeplace

becomes a radically political space, in which the magic of black women employed as a material impetus. Sassafrass’s following poem merges weaving and writing within the sphere of women’s art:

*i am Sassafrass/ a weaver’s daughter/ from
Charleston/ i’m a woman makin cloth like all good
women do/ the moon’s daughter made cloth/
.....
i have inherited fingers that change
fleece to tender garments/ i am maker of warmth
& emblem of good spirit/ (91)*

In the above poem, Sassafrass retrieves her power to name. She formally pronounces herself as “*Sassafrass/ a weaver’s daughter.*” Under the reclaimed agency, weaving is consciously identified as an “*emblem*” of black women’s artistic inheritance. Like the moon-child Indigo, she also becomes “*the moon’s daughter,*” embracing the magic of the legacy. The historical root of Sassafrass’s artistry is closely interrogated, and a substantial ground for insurgence is thus established. She reshapes the magic into artistic subjectivity, which can be channeled into a subversive political power. Sassafrass coincides the process of “*chang[ing]/ fleece to tender garments*” with that of “thinking,” believing that “because when women make cloth, they have time to think, and Theban women stopped thinking, and the town fell” (92). Black women’s artistic creativity is made politically powerful enough even to sustain “[a] town,” symbolically toppling down Mitch’s repressive language, which argues that weaving would “stop [black women] from thinking” (79).

On the other hand, Cypress does not execute the face-to-face battle with the language of the Kushites. Instead she chooses to experiment with another troupe, which appears to be the polar-opposite to the Kushites. A feminist troupe named Azure Bosom seems to quench Cypress’s thirst at first. Within Azure Bosom, Cypress tries to replace the sexist language of black aesthetic, epitomized in “ebony cunt” or “Milky Way,” with that of erotic and sensual womanhood. However, this attractive alternative fails her again with the fundamentally same shortcoming as the Kushites. It also reproduces the

violent binary relations of the abuser and the victim. Cypress who has been appalled by the very trait of the Kushites, realizes that the stimulus for authentic artistic expression resides in her own heritage, her own magic. In the beginning, Cypress's marginalized disposition as a woman draws an immediate solidarity with the women of Azure Bosom. In the "house of the collective," Cypress "see[s] herself everywhere she looked" and "[n]othing different from her in essence; no thing not woman" (139). Azure Bosom's dance, "Vulva Dreams," is an expressive manifesto of woman's identity and Cypress fit[s] right in" to it at first (145). The cruel objectification of black women within black aesthetic is drastically reversed to liberating female sexuality, figured in the "erotic [. . .] coquette" (144). Azure Bosom's agenda alludes to a feminist axis of the sixties, from which black women feminists expected liberation of *their* sexuality along with their white sisters.

Still, the female subjects unified as "She," if not intentionally, again pushes Cypress away since it connotes the violence analogous to that of racism (144). Azure Bosom's marked agenda to "discover a lost sisterhood and reestablish feminist solidarity" would be nothing but an empty slogan when there is "the problem of color-line" (Carby 5-6). The postulated sisterhood that Carby points out, underlies the essentialist words such as "She" or "Vulva," whose hollowness are not very different from words as black nationhood. Their emptiness and latent violence are highlighted when Cypress is taken aback by the "cruelty" she witnesses in Azure Bosom's parties where the women "put [themselves] up for auction to run off with" strangers (145). The parties remind her of a slave market and this fact insinuates that the only thing changed could simply be the nature of the imposer of cruel violence. The violence sanctioned by the white supremacy over black female body repeats itself, the abuser now being women. It becomes even more mis-directed when black women too, willingly objectify their sexuality as "Vulva" thereby internalizing the systematic violence of racism/sexism. That a black woman Cypress is keenly aware of this "cruelty" suggests that "the problem of color-line" is still unresolved. The scene adds yet another ahistorical identity of the "Vulva," which can be consumed without recognizing the horrifying history written all over it.

It is when Cypress is truly inspired with the “music from home” that her dance finally comes to term with her sense of self as a black woman (156). The magic of the Southern music becomes a vehicle for her genuine self-expression:

[S]he had leaped to the front of the musicians and was speaking of beauty and love in her body. Cypress danced her ass off, . . . Cypress moved as Yanvallou. Curved and low to the ground, her back undulated like Damballa’s child must. . . . Cypress was a dance of a new thing, her own spirit loose, fecund, and deep. (156)

Cypress incarnates the black women’s heritage with her body movement, as Sassafrass does with her re-conceptualized writing/weaving. Her physical invocation of the history being “Yanvallou” and “Damballa’s child” echoes Indigo’s Southern magic practices. It implies that Cypress comes to terms with her legacy that she previously disregarded and directs it to reclaim her artistic selfhood. She now renounces her former silence and speaks with her dance as a black woman. The black ancestral power exerting influence on Cypress celebrates black womanhood and brings her rich spirit to the fore. She becomes “sechita,” the “Egyptian” “goddess of creativity,” who “record[s] [black women’s] history” with her body movement (“for colored girls” 24). “[N]ew Afrik Woman” and “She” give way to the “new thing,” the historically empowered black woman, who has broken free from the prison of un-being, as Spillers put it. Cypress’s dance moves on from an expression of supposed blackness to femaleness, and eventually to a black woman selfhood.

Yet the task of reclaiming herself is constantly put to a test in the face of the conventional male/female relationship. Even an effort to reconcile these colliding needs with solidarity between them appears to have failed. For instance, Sassafrass is tormented with her desire for domestic stability with Mitch whose macho disposition endangers her artistic independence. The friction is uncomfortably sedated, when Cypress’s commitment to dancing seems to wither or crowd out by her relationship with Leroy, the relationship that happens to end in a typical white-bourgeois marriage. There is still an unresolved dilemma for creative black women placed upon a crossroad of

a traditional married life dominated by patriarchy and an independent life of artistic vivacity.

Though Sassafrass possesses artistic subjectivity, which is indeed revolutionary, it is reluctantly put aside when Mitch is home (92). Her love for him is what keeps stalling her artistic pursuit and in turn solidifies the insurgent ground. Her agony suggests any coupled relationship could be precarious for her independence when male dominance pervades. Mitch exerts ultimate patriarchal power by literally battering Sassafrass with the “accordion-shaped tube,” which exudes phallic and violent masculinity of black aesthetic (96). Since it is the material and direct threat toward her artistic passion, she is deeply tormented. Pursuing her own path would mean leaving Mitch, for her love for him would entail her subjugation. Though she eventually decides to leave, her love for him constantly tries to deter her resolution (98). The threat to Sassafrass’s long-awaited independence lurks within none other than herself, and hence can be surfaced at any time.

Cypress’s nearly sentimentalized relationship with Leroy also needs to be elucidated in this light. Reaching a consensus on the nature of solidarity between black women and men certainly has been a problematic issue in black feminism, as Barbara Smith has candidly admitted in “Some Home Truths.” Shange seems to explore the chance of reconciling black women’s subjectivity with what she perceived as an ideal heterosexual relationship. It is portrayed as a relative success in Cypress’s case vis-à-vis Sassafrass’s. What is problematic is that Cypress’ artistic devotion seems to wane with her marriage with Leroy. It leaves a suspicion that black women always can be subdued as long as they stay in the frame of conventional marriage, whether in a subtle or an overt way. Cypress’s manifestative journal that boldly announces her unique dance is immediately followed by the description of a sexual intercourse with Leroy, which is highly romanticized as a “Paradise” (169). What is noteworthy is that her own dance coincides with “*a dance she would do with Leroy*” (169; emphasis added). Their “dance” seems to denote mutual attachment and solidarity as to “beg[i]n without a word of explanation, no questions, nothing hard” (168). Since there is no explicit hint of gendered antagonism in either party unlike in the case of Sassafrass and

Mitch, Cypress’ relationship insinuates a possibility of heterosexual harmony. Yet even for the surface hope for a genuine solidarity, her relationship with Leroy is unquestionably a hindrance to her artistic autonomy. Leroy’s discomfort for Cypress’s acquaintance from Azure Bosom, namely Idrina, reflects the antagonism between heteronormative and women’s homosexual relationship. Her love for Leroy makes “her body” “linger for him like a gazelle’s,” all the while she should be fiercely enjoying her “womanhood” like a “she-wolf” (171). Unfortunately, as opposed to Sassafrass, Cypress succumbs to her desire and this results in a symbolic “dea[th]” of her she-wolf (174). What is left in its void is, unfortunately, a seemingly voluntary heterosexual union.

Though not as blatantly as Mitch, Leroy still exerts patriarchal dominance in a more deliberate way, by successfully winning Cypress “into loving [him]” and not allowing her to “leave [him] for that bitch [Idrina]” (174). It is in a sense, a victory of a conventional relationship that seeks to suffocate what are supposed as aggressive expressions of womanhood. The predominance of an idealized heterosexual marriage and a consequent discouragement of black women’s creativity are additionally made explicit via the juxtaposition of Cypress’s dream of a feminist dystopia and Leroy’s proposal. Her dream of a white female-governed world marks her ultimate severance from the cause of womanhood in which lies the unsettled racism. Cypress’s disappointment on the cause immediately leads to black “kin[ship],” which is exemplified in a domestic union of black male and female (208). To borrow hooks’s brief comment, it is not entirely groundless to argue that the instantaneous solidarity is a gesture to “overcome the tensions and antagonisms between black females and males that is generated by internalized racism” (*From Margin* 70). Nonetheless, it is insufficient to safely conclude that there grew a genuine solidarity which would equally protect both parties’ subjectivities. The tension is still there, as it is notably glimpsed in Leroy’s proposal:

“Cypress, will you listen to me? What you’re talking about is politics; that’s not what you’re trained to do, is it?”

.....
 “Cypress, I’m coming home so I can marry you.”
 “Oh, Leroy, that’s perfect.”
 “Aren’t you supposed to say ‘yes’? What do you mean ‘Oh, that’s perfect’?”
 “Leroy, are you serious? You want to marry me?”
 “I will, if you say yes & stop talking ‘bout going to get yourself killed.”

 “Jesus, Cypress, what do think I come from? First, I haveta ask for your hand, Then we get the preacher.”
 “Oh, Leroy. . .”
 “Don’t ‘Oh, Leroy’ me, ‘less you gonna give me some.”
 “You know, I been savin’ it for ya.”
 “Really, is that the truth, now?”
 “Darlin’, you know how an ol’ fashioned girl I am.” (211-12)

Leroy successfully “kiss[es] her[Cypress] into senses,” persuading her to drop the agenda of developing artistic agency to a “politic[al]” one (212). This latent danger for Leroy is safely locked within the boundary of marriage and “ol’ fashioned” domesticity without much chance of escape. Cypress willingly enters the traditional domestic sphere and renounces her subjectivity for emotional stability. The scene almost reads as a typical fairy-tale ending for Leroy is portrayed as “too much of a gentleman” while Cypress is noticeably infantilized as to become speechless in front of him (172). Added to that, considering it is the initiation of a conventional bourgeois marriage—a stable income, “gentleman” husband and “treasure[d]” wife (212)—, the taming of the she-wolf would most likely continue, even intensify the patriarchal norms of wedlock. Cypress’s potentially subversive engagement with artistic creativity is both voluntarily and involuntarily dampened by Leroy’s appeasement. Her eventual accommodation reads as a serious regression, especially when she was on the verge of channeling artistic passion into political agency.

The alarming awareness on the precarious relationship between black women’s artistic and political agency and heteronormative domesticity seems to haunt the novel till the end. Instead of delving into Cypress’ married life, the novel ends with an epilogue that portrays the three sisters

within a mutually caring homeplace that is sustained by magical tradition. It is neither of black nation’s nor sisters’ but entirely of the autonomous black women’s. Hilda, being “a little embarrassed,” mutters that she does not “think they [her daughters] want what they [Hilda and Alfred] wanted” (225). She admits the life of conventional domestic happiness she wanted for her daughters has been erroneous. *Sassafrass* abstains from her domestic desire and chooses to create a life in the all-black women community invigorated by the healer Indigo. Likewise, Shange is reluctant to mention Cypress’ heterosexual marriage in detail, rendering doubts on its outwardly affectionate prospect. Hence a skepticism, if not a flat denial concerning this seem-to-be happy relationship still lingers.

Conclusion

In the face of the contaminated language, Shange fashions other ways of self-expression for black women, the ones that genuinely speak for the experience of “colored girls.” The previously undervalued Southern matrilineal, domestic legacy is restored and functions as a fertile ground for artistic agency and further, political resistance. Yet, Shange does not gloss over the problem of patriarchal domesticity and the subsequent issue of heterosexual relationship. They lie in and out of the black female subjects and seem to be incompatible with their agency inspired by the historical/magical heritage. The long-awaited gender solidarity based on “the self” is hardly translated into reality (“On the Issue” 133). Likewise, Shange’s fervent exploration on such solidarity in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* is stalled by the unabridged domesticity drenched in sexist/racist norms.

Work Cited

- Bambara, Toni Cade, ed. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2005.
- _____. “On the Issue of Roles.” Bambara 123-36.
- Carby, Hazel. “Woman’s Era: Rethinking Black Feminist Theory.” *Recon-*

- structing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987. 3-19.
- Giovanni, Nikki. "Beautiful Black Men." *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni*. New York: Morrow and Company, 1996. 54.
- hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990.
- _____. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.
- Marshall, Paule, *Praisesong for the Widow*. New York: Plume, 1983.
- Sanders, Fran. "Dear Black Men." *Bambara* 87-94.
- Shange, Ntozake. *for the colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. New York: Macmillan, 1975.
- _____. *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. New York: Picador, 1982.
- Smith, Barbara. "Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement." Ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. New York: The New Press, 1995. 254-67.
- Spillers, Hortense. "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words." *Spillers* 152-75.
- _____. *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984.
- _____. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Spillers* 203-29.
- Walker, Alice. *Meridian*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.
- Wallace, Michelle. "The Myth of the Superwoman." *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York: Verso, 1990. 88-177.

ABSTRACT

Between the “Magical” Legacy and
a Model Household:
Establishing Alternative Modes of Speaking in
Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*

Nayoung Kim

Within the grammar distorted by racism and sexism, black women often face a fabricated narrative about them. Black women critics, namely Spillers and hooks, have criticized that the existing language and the various forms of articulation utilizing such language have been objectifying black women either as an un-being or as an ahistorical symbol. Such phenomenon is witnessed not only within blatant racism but in black community as well. For instance, the Black Arts Movement, which raised a slogan of resistance against racism, heralded a near mythic, monolithic body of blacks. This grand political agenda to promote black solidarity marginalized black women by condoning and appropriating male superiority. Upon such a hostile ground for a black woman to stand autonomous, establishing an alternative form of language or ways of self articulation becomes ever more crucial for black women writers.

In *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Ntozake Shange explores the artistically creative/political power that can be summoned from the black’s historical heritage passed down in the region of South Carolina. This paper focuses on the process of rejuvenating such heritage and channeling it as a form of radical, creative power through the three sisters. Along the path, this paper also traces the friction between black women’s artistic/political subjectivity and conventional heteronormative domesticity. Indigo, the youngest, rejects the language contaminated by the superficial symbols and instead adopts the “magic” of black female tradition to be her mode of speaking. Via

Indigo, the “homeplace” is elevated from a place of slave labor or patriarchal oppression to an arena of vivacious self expression. It is this vitality that Sassafrass and Cypress realize to be the genuine source of their artistic representations, although the danger to be silenced again always lurks in the process. Such dilemma that Shange delicately elaborates is the very reality of a black woman subject who stands before a crossroad between the vibrating legacy and conventional stability.

Key Words Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass*, *Cypress & Indigo*, black women, racism, sexism, alternative speaking, subjectivity