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"Music and Mensis" or the Deconstruction of the Pregnancy and Childbirth Metaphor in Ntozakae Shange's "oh–i'm 10 months pregnant"

To reimagine the pregnancy and childbirth metaphor, which, in general, perpetuates the mind-body split between creation and procreation, not only must the poet write about her personal experience of procreation but she must metapoetically confront the dichotomy separating this experience from her creativity. By doing so, she implies that procreativity is an experience to be related poetically and that a poem is the product of the mind and body creating and procreating. For the African American woman poet, the reckoning is even more fraught, for the Black woman's body has historically been divided "into two neat categories: Sexed and Unsexed" (Mahurin 330). Ntozake Shange attempts to resist the above binaries in her poem "oh—i'm 10 months pregnant." She insists both on the embodied mind, creating babies and poems, and on the impossibility of dividing women into sexed and unsexed by focusing on the very condition and action proving the existence of both: pregnancy and childbirth.

This article shows how throughout the poem, Shange defies conventional use of punctuation and language, and actually pokes fun at the notion that poetry and babies are analogous. She does so by critiquing medical discourse and playing with the limits of metaphor. Ultimately, because the resolution of the pregnancy and the production of the poem both depend on Shange's likening her baby to language, this paradoxically becomes an admission about the material and metaphorical connection between books and babies.

"A child is not a poem
a poem is not a child."
—Margaret Atwood, "Spelling."

The pregnancy and childbirth metaphor for creativity generally perpetuates the mind-body split between creation and procreation. To negate this binary, not only must the poet creatively represent her personal experience of procreation, she must metapoetically confront the dichotomy separating this experience from her creativity, thereby positing that procreativity is an experience to be related poetically and that a poem is the product of the mind and body creating and procreating. Ntozake Shange reckons with this binary in her poem "oh—i'm 10 months pregnant," but also attaches race to her resistance by playing with language and interrogating sexist ideas about Black women's bodies. Shange defies conventional use of punctuation and language, and actually pokes fun at the notion that poetry and babies are analogous. She does so by critiquing medical discourse and playing with the limits of metaphor. Ultimately, because the resolution of the pregnancy and the production of the poem both depend on Shange's likening her baby to language, this paradoxically becomes an admission about the material and metaphorical connection between books and babies

The Books-Babies Binary

In "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse," Susan Stanford Friedman maps out the different ways in which men and women have used the childbirth metaphor for creativity. She notes that when men use the childbirth metaphor—whether negatively as in the Enlightenment era or positively as in the Romantic era—they overtly or covertly perpetuate the mind-body split between creation and procreation, even while attempting to transcend it (85). If a woman poet is to assert herself as both against the system "that conceives woman and writer, motherhood and authorhood, babies and books, as mutually exclusive" (Stanford Friedman 85), she must deconstruct this binary mode of thought.

To write poetry about pregnancy and birth is to take one step in this direction—the lyric poem about these experiences becomes a refutation of the premise that a woman cannot both create and procreate. In their attempt to recover and celebrate women's bodily experience and write from that experience (*l'ecriture feminine)*, second-wave feminism and French feminism promoted the conjunction between poetry and the body. Both of these movements, though, have been vulnerable to charges of essentialism and biological determinism. And instead of negating the Cartesian binary, this kind of writing can be seen as reducing mind to body.

Thus, a double deconstruction becomes necessary for reimagining this metaphor: not only must the poet write about her personal experience of procreation, but she must metapoetically confront the dichotomy separating this experience from her creativity. On one level, such a deconstruction links

the personal to the greater cultural realm, but on a deeper level, it implies that procreativity is an experience to be related poetically and that a poem is the product of the mind and body creating and procreating. The poet, thus, celebrates a gynocentric poetry written about, through, and by the embodied mind. Of course, not all female poets perform such a sophisticated deconstruction; some may accept the traditional opposition between procreativity and creativity, and others may defy it outright.

For the African American woman poet, the reckoning is even more fraught, for, in general, the whole discussion about the childbirth metaphor and the mind-body split, is about white bodies and white minds. In addition, by embracing body, the African American poet might perpetuate the division between ideas as lofty and bodies as "the debased side of nature" (Oyewumi 3). According to Oyewumi, "all those who qualified for the label of 'different' … have been considered to be the embodied [and] dominated therefore by instinct and affect, reason being beyond them. They are the Other, and the Other is a body" (3). In addition, the Black woman's body has been historically divided "into two neat categories: Sexed and Unsexed. The 'Sexed' is the Jezebel … a body so insistently sexualized that its sole purpose seems to lie in its capacity for producing ecstasy … Its alternative (the 'Unsexed') is the Mammy … a mother-to-all who is nonetheless completely divorced from the crude business by which one becomes a mother in the first place" (Mahurin 330). Neither is a subject; rather, each is a commodity "to be consumed" (330).

Ntozake Shange attempts to resist the above dichotomies in "oh—i'm 10 months pregnant." She insists both on the embodied mind, creating babies and poems, and on the impossibility of dividing women into sexed and unsexed by focusing on the very condition and action proving the existence of both: pregnancy and childbirth.

Race and Language

Ntozake Shange was born Paulette Williams, but in 1971, she shed her "slave name" becoming Ntozake, which translated from Xhosa means "she who brings her own things," Shange, translated from Xhosa as "one who walks with lions." Shange's best known theatrical piece, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*, was very well received, but Shange considers herself "a poet first and a playwright second" (Lester 718). Shange is a self-defined "woman centered person" (Lester 727) and "hard-line" (727) feminist who uses language in unexpected and unconventional ways as an expression of control and liberation She is strident in her feminism, so much so that *for colored girls* was almost universally conceived of, by black men, as an attack on them; however she is as opposed to racism as she is to sexism: "I have a vagina and skin at the same time so I don't have a dilemma…. I couldn't side

with a racist or a sexist…. I would side with whatever would be good for women and children of color" (qtd. in Brown).

Like many African American feminist writers, including Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton and Toni Morrison, Shange defines herself in opposition to white men, white women, and black men. In the poem "oh, i'm 10 months pregnant," however, Shange speaks as a woman writer more than as specifically an African-American woman writer: her words are relevant to all women poets attempting to dislodge the books-babies binary.

Yet even if the content of the poem does not specifically address race, the form and language of the poem, of all Shange's poetry, display her identity as African American. Shange's poetry is discernable in its purposeful defiance of standard English and punctuation. Periods and commas are rare sights in her poems, and capital letters never appear. Gabriele Griffin suggests several reasons for Shange's use of the lowercase: it might reflect a sense of inferior status, and it might be used to erase hierarchy or power structures. Regarding the lower case "I," because it is physically divided in two, as opposed to the "rigid and immobile" uppercase "I" (Griffin 36), lowercase suggests "flexibility and possibilities of movement" (36). Instead of conventional punctuation, Shange uses slashes to punctuate her lines. The spelling in her poems is characterized by the omission of letters ("should" becomes "shd" and "your" becomes "yr") and by uncommon contractions ("between" is "tween" and "for" is "4"). Griffin suggests that "contractions" is "a word resonating strongly with women, as part of a menstrual/reproductive/creative cycle," and, thus, reflects "the way in which the body is used in speech" (35).

Shange has explained her motivations for this play with form and language in two ways. The first is formal and emanates from a desire to engage her readers in a struggle: "I need some visual stimulation, so that reading becomes not just a passive act and more than an intellectual activity, but demands rigorous participation" (qtd. in Tate 163). As Ania Spyra notes, "Since she sees standardization as limiting the creativity of language, Shange insists on linguistic experimentation in her poetry" (91).

Her spellings, Shange says, "reflect language as I hear it…. The structure is connected to the music I hear beneath the words" (qtd. Tate 163). This seems akin to "glossalalia" and "heteroglossia" described by Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, who, drawing on Bahktin's theories of discourse, characterizes black women's writing as "speaking in tongues." Glossolalia refers to the ability to "utter the mysteries of the spirit" (353) in an inspired mode of intimate communication, whereas heteroglossia refers to "polyphony, multivocality, and plurality of voices" (353). According to Henderson, since African American women "speak from a multiple and complex social, historical and cultural positionality" (351), their speech takes on an "interlocutory, or dialogic character, reflecting not only a relationship with the

'other(s),' but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity"(349). Mary O' Connor also uses Bahktin's dialogism to point out that "the more voices that are ferreted out, the more discourses that a woman can find herself an intersection of, the freer she is from one stereotypical and sexist position"(35).

There are, however, deeper political and psychological reasons for Shange's defiance of language and form. Shange aims, as a Black poet, "to attack deform n maim the language that i was taught to hate myself in. I have to take it apart to the bone" (Shange 1981). Shange refers to "the King's English" as "the enemy" and her subversive use of it as "a weapon" (Lester 728). By making the language "say what we want it to say" (Lester 727), Shange aims to "preserve the elements of our culture that need to be remembered and absolutely revered" (qtd. in "Shange, Ntozake"). Shange's use of language is not only a rebellion against the fiction that European art is the standard, but against her own upbringing in a Black, middle-class, conservative home. In 1976, Shange admitted that the inanity of that class perspective prompted her adoption of the idioms and dialect of the live-in maids who had cared for her as a child. A trace of that way of speaking remains in all her poetry, including "oh, i'm 10 months pregnant."

Interrogation of Medical Discourse

The title of the poem reveals much about what is inside. The "oh" hints at the poet's weariness and exasperation at being exceedingly pregnant. Her exclamation that she is "10 months pregnant" seemingly uses hyperbole to emphasize just how pregnant she is. This use of "10 months," however, is not only a foretaste of the joking tone of the poem, but the poet's first critical examination of medical discourse. Most people think of pregnancy as being nine months long, divided into three trimesters. But since we count pregnancy from the beginning of the woman's last menstrual period, pregnancy is really forty full weeks, or ten months. Shange's title then not only highlights the discrepancy between the true length of gestation and the popular view, but also marks her refusal to participate in any misleading discourse perpetuated by the medical community.

The poem opens with a dichotomy between the medical, observable aspects of pregnancy, and the realm of literary creation. The speaker speaks to her doctor, "tween the urine test & the internal exam/ when her fingers were circling my swollen cervix," attempting to proffer an explanation for her baby's late arrival:

i tried
to tell her the baby was confused
the baby doesn't know
she's not another poem.

The verb "tried" is repeated three times to emphasize the futility of convincing her empirically minded doctor that there is a non-medical reason for the delay of the birth. This emphasis draws attention to the distance between the mother and her physician. In her dated but seminal article "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," Iris Marion Young discusses this distance, seeing it as a part of the alienation that a pregnant women feels vis-à-vis the medical community. Young explains some of the phenomena that seem to cause Shange's frustration: "Her [the pregnant woman's] condition tends to be defined as a disorder, because medical instruments objectify internal process in such a way that they devalue a women's experience of those processes, and because the social relations and instrumentation of the medical setting reduce her control of her experience from her" (55). Besides drawing attention to this alienation, Shange is also playing a humorous rhetorical trick; the speaker does not really believe that the "baby was confused," but is rather trying to establish the link between writing poems and having babies in a most material, tangible way. Shange plays with the childbirth metaphor; she simultaneously affirms and questions the link between these realms.

The Playful Deconstruction of the Childbirth Metaphor

Stanford Freidman, quoting Paul Ricoeur, discusses how contradiction is inherent in metaphor in that it presents "'an insight into likeness' seen "in spite of and through, the different'" (77). In metaphor, the reader must "complete the process of reconciliation" (77) by discerning the "figurative truth" through the "literal falsehood" (77). According to Stanford Freidman, readers of the childbirth metaphor know that babies are not books but can reconcile the contradictory elements of the metaphor because they recognize "that the author's analogy defies cultural prescription of separated creativities" (80). If we use the "blend" model of metaphor, reconciling contradictory elements becomes even easier, since the metaphor with its own "emergent structure" (Turner and Fauconnier 113) does not have to fit perfectly with any of its inputs. Stanford Freidman seems to move toward this understanding in her own terms by claiming that in the female use of the childbirth metaphor "the intensification of collusion and congruity … allows the tenor and vehicle to mingle and fuse" (80).

In this poem, however, Shange challenges the reader in the reconciliation

process. Both because she uses a joking tone throughout and because she pushes the metaphor to an absurd point, her use of the childbirth metaphor becomes similar to the male use of the metaphor in that "collision drowns out collusion" (78). If, according to Stanford Freidman, the woman's birth metaphor "suggests that her procreative powers make her specially [sic] suited to her creative labors," then Shange's poking fun at that metaphor seems to undermine her commitment to the deconstruction of the books-babies binary. A close examination of the poem, however, reveals the poem's wit in setting up two extreme binaries and then exposing the silliness of each.

Shange's use of the childbirth metaphor is actually very different from the generic male poet's application. Whereas the male "gives birth" to poems from his "womblike mind" (Friedman 79), Shange's "i" has a very visible pregnant body. She wants to investigate whether the reverse of the male metaphor is true, whether one can give birth to poems from the body. The mention of urine tests, internal examinations, and swollen cervixes foregrounds this physicality, and emphasizes the less aesthetic aspects of the reproductive body to protest the idealization of reproduction and the ensuing metaphorical appropriation of this blooming, fertile, and ideal state. In "wow yr just like a man," Shange sets out the paradox of the lived female reproductive body: "bodies & blood & kids" or the "gooey gaw/female stuff" needs to be repressed for a woman to be considered a poet ("well & that ain't poetry"); yet "as a woman & a poet," these messy parts of the female body cannot be repressed. When Shange decides "to wear my ovaries on my sleeve" and "raise my poems on milk" she knows that she is entering "an arena of her own," where the "unclean" becomes poetry and "music and mensis" are inextricably connected aspects of her life and her poetry.

In stanza two of "oh, i'm 10 months pregnant," Shange explains to the doctor the reason for her baby's confusion. The baby's mother, the poet, was so absorbed in literary creation—"i was working on a major piece of fiction at the time of conception…had just sent 4 poems off to the *new yorker* & was copy-editing a collection of plays"—that it "altered the poor baby's amniotic bliss." The stanza closes with Shange exclaiming: "doctor/ the baby doesn't think she shd come out that way!" Shange indicates here that she was so engrossed in the creative processes and energy of literary creation that it affected the baby's conception and her "formative first twelve weeks," leading the baby to believe she is a poem. Through the glaring absurdity of this assertion, Shange questions the idea that a woman can only be a poet or a mother. How, she seems mockingly to ask, can the poet's preoccupation with literary matters cause her to damage her child?

Shange also subtly criticizes medical discourse. Indeed, the words "formative first twelve weeks" appear in inverted commas so that medical language is purposely differentiated from poetic language. Prevailing medical discourse

elevates the status of the fetus and demands that the mother, as a fetal container, maintain extremely high levels of vigilance and precaution while pregnant. Shange takes this tenet to its ridiculous limit: if the mother is occupied in the literary world—for example attending "numerous opening parties all of which involved *me*" (my emphasis)—she adversely affects the baby's wellbeing.

The third stanza expands on the differences between scientific and creative discourse through the poet's conception of how her baby regards this dichotomy. This is a clearly imaginary viewpoint emphasizing the rhetorical nature of the poem. The mother has a wholly detached relationship to her baby, who is always referred to as simply "the baby" or "this baby." The poem is not about the mother-daughter relationship; rather, the baby and the doctor represent perspectives that the poet wants to deconstruct. In stanza three, the poet explains her baby's rationale:

> i mean / she thinks she shd come up / not down
> into the ground / she thinks her mother makes up things
> nice things ugly things but made up things nonetheless
> unprovable irrational subjective fantastic things
> not subject to objective or clinical investigation

The baby has co-opted the Cartesian view that the cerebral is superior to the physical. She associates the mental faculty of creation with ascendancy—"she thinks she shd come up"—and the corporeal with the lower realm—"not down / into the ground."

This baby seems to anticipate George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's observation in *Metaphors We Live By* that most orientation metaphors in Western culture use up-down spatialization in a way that "up" has a positive connotation in contrast to the negative "down." In arguing that "most of our fundamental concepts are organized in terms of one or more spatialization metaphors (17), Lakoff and Johnson offer many examples: happy is up, sad is down; more is up, less is down; high status is up, low status is down; good is up, bad is down; virtue is up, depravity is down; rational is up, emotional is down; and having control or force is up while being subject to control or force is down (15-17). This baby who takes metaphors quite literally not surprisingly prefers up to down. Even if the made-up things are "ugly," they preside over a physicality that is "subject to objective or clinical investigation." The baby would rather be "subjective" than "subject to."

On one hand, the baby is a literalist; to be "made up" means to ascend from the mother—"to jump out of my mouth/ at a reading someplace"—and not descend in the way natural to babies. On the other, the baby thinks figuratively: "she believes the uterine cave is a metaphor." Both her literalism and her paradoxically metaphorical approach emanate from her denial of her mother's

(and thus her own) embodiment. The notion that her mother has a body, creates poems, and, moreover, creates "music and mensis" is foreign to this baby.

The mother poet then finds herself wedged between binaries. She is caught between her baby's imagined perception, according to which everything valuable is subjective or "made up," and the doctor's clinical and empirical mindset, according to which everything is objective and can be examined with a medical instrument. Neither the baby nor the doctor can deconstruct the creation-procreation bind or can accept that a woman can produce both babies and books. The mother cannot connect with the baby—"I have no way to reach her"—or with the doctor—"doctor/ are you listening?" Yet she yearns to explain to the baby, who "wants to come out a spoken word," that she is not a poem. Conversely, the poet wants the doctor to understand that poetry and the body are not unrelated.

The mother does not simply wish to inform her baby that she is not a poem, but rather that "she is no mere choice of words." The books-babies bind is not resolved with a simplistic platitude by which procreation and creation are made equivalent. By using the adjective "mere" to describe language and poetry, she clearly constructs a hierarchy in which a baby is a superior creation to a poem, which reverses the baby's denigration of physical birth and her elevation of poetry. That a baby, a human being, is more significant than a poem seems obvious; however, the Cartesian mindset privileging the mind, and even the mind's product, over corporeal production or reproduction leads to confusion. The imagined baby embodies this confusion.

The final stanza—in which the mother comes up with a way to convince the baby, "this literary die-hard of a child of mine," to "drop her head & take on the world like the rest of us"— is as witty as the rest of the poem. Having established that the baby precedes language in importance, Shange now equates the two in order to convince the baby to emerge. Thus, she addresses her baby, "you are an imperative my dear," and relies on the double use of the word. The baby is both a necessity, and she is compared to the part of speech that commands. Both connotations are empowering. Therefore, the baby responds: "& i felt her startle toward my left ovary." Only by acquiescing to the baby's belief that she is a figure of speech does the mother manage to persuade her daughter to present herself. This compliance, on a broader scale, indicates the poet's ambivalent agreement to use the childbirth metaphor. Throughout the poem, Shange pokes fun at the notion that poetry and babies are analogous. But the fact that the resolution of the pregnancy and the production of the poem both depend on her likening her baby to language is an admission about the material and metaphorical connection between books and babies.

This deceptively simple poem records, in oscillating viewpoints, the mother-poet's rather complex struggle with the different realms. She clearly disagrees

with her empirical doctor, who gives credence only to the physically observable aspects of the body. We feel the poet's frustration with her doctor in the refrain where, presenting the baby's point of view, she exhorts the doctor to understand. Her baby's perspective, however, is also unacceptable. By drawing attention to her material "swollen cervix" and "left ovary," Shange negates the baby's view that "the uterine cave is a metaphor."

The poet's bewilderment at both these perspectives pulls her in two directions. Shange's manifesto in "wow, yr just like a man" insists that a woman poet cannot repress her reproductive body; indeed, the very subject matter of the poem and the presence of the physical reproductive body seem to affirm this. Yet the exaggeration of the conceit to the point of ridiculousness reveals the poet's skepticism regarding the connection between literary production and reproduction. The tone of the poem indicates the wish to somewhat separate these realms: having babies and writing poems can be done at the same time, but should not be conflated.

The epigraph above, from Margaret Atwood's poem "Spelling," seems to agree: "a child is not a poem / a poem is not a child." And it continues "There is no either/or. However." Yet later in her poem, Atwood proclaims: "the body / itself becomes a mouth." The birthing body opens up like the mouth expressing language, and the mother expresses the baby. The baby is the language, the poetry, of the body, and in Shange, the poetry is the language of the embodied mind.

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