

NORTHERN STAGE

Student Matinee Study Guide



Citrus

Written by Celeste Jennings
Directed by JaMeeka Holloway-Burrell
February 26 - March 15, 2020
Northern Stage
www.northernstage.org

Introduction

In an Abstract from her Senior Fellowship at Dartmouth College entitled "*Citrus: A Theatrical Exploration of Black Women*," playwright and costume designer Celeste Jennings describes *Citrus* as "an homage to Black women past, present, and future, and the heart of the play not only gently presents but also sternly highlights the urgency and beauty between Black women across generations"¹ (Jennings, 4).

Jennings further elaborates in her program note writing, "*Citrus* presents trials, tribulations, moments of joy, grief, and resilience present in Black womanhood from the 1840s until today. The choreopoem highlights the unchanging nature of our struggles throughout time and subtly highlights how dress was and still is used as a tool for both rebellion and assimilation."

The non-linear format of the choreopoem demonstrates how the stories of the past are still unfolding in the present and future, and in particular, "address the point that the plight of Black women has not changed much throughout history" (Northern Stage 2020 Winter Newsletter).

On the first day of rehearsal, Director JaMeeka Holloway-Burrell expanded upon this theme saying, "*Citrus* creates visibility around the challenges and struggles that are faced by women of color — the generational connection between daughters, mothers, and grandmothers — and the spirit that Black women have always had to overcome adversity. Black women still experience many of these stories today, the lineage continues."

What is a Choreopoem?

"A choreopoem,
is a combination of all forms of theater
storytelling."

From: New York Times:
What's a choreopoem?

Citrus is a choreopoem, an interdisciplinary format that merges many different styles of storytelling. The form incorporates poetry, spoken word, movement, and imagery to guide the audience on a journey that travels through time in both directions. Choreopoems rarely follow the linear form of a traditional play with a plot that brings characters from a beginning to a middle to an end.

['For Colored Girls' Is a Choreopoem. What's a Choreopoem?](#)

In *Citrus*, characters are fluid, with the same actor weaving in and out of different characters in each section of the choreopoem. Jennings appreciates that this may cause some confusion because some audience members might be "keen to track the characters and acknowledge

¹ Jennings, Celeste. (2018) *Citrus: A Theatrical Exploration of Black Women*. (Senior Fellowship Dartmouth College)

each track as one Black woman, meaning that the play would have nine characters." However, this was not Jennings's original intent. She explains, "For me, a new Black woman is introduced in every poem. However, I very much encourage the audience to interpret the characters however they please. I am satisfied with all interpretations as my goal was to simply present stories of Black women." (Northern Stage 2020 Winter Newsletter)

Jenning's has discovered through writing *Citrus* that not everyone interprets her work in the same way as she intended it. At first she was surprised by this discovery, and attempted to persuade others of her perspective. She would find herself saying, "Hey, that's not what I meant!" During a workshop of *Citrus*, Director JaMeeka Holloway-Burrell offered some sage advice that ultimately allowed her to enjoy the unexpected connections and discoveries made by others. Holloway-Burrell said, "You don't need to tell people what the answers are, you need to let them figure it out on their own."

Discussion Questions:

- Why might a playwright choose the format of a choreopoem over other forms of theatrical writing?
- Why do you think Holloway-Burrell's advice resonated so strongly with Jennings?
- What do you think the role of theater should be in regards to helping audiences to "figure it out on their own"?

A Note from the Playwright: How *Citrus* Came to Life

"For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf"

An honors project by Carene Mekertichyan '16. This choreopoem by Ntozake Shange is about what it meant to be of color and female in the twentieth century. Directed by Deena Selenow



Sunday, May 15, 2016
2:00pm - 3:30pm
Hopkins Center Bentley Theater
Sponsored by: Theater Department
Intended Audience(s): Public
Categories: Arts
Fee required.

Ms. Jennings's involvement in this Dartmouth Honors Project in 2016 inspired her to create *Citrus*.

Set Design by Julie Solomon '17, Costume Design by Celeste Jennings '18, Lighting Design by Ashley Dotson '18, Sara Holston '17 and Stage Management by Liza Couser '17

I owe all of my inspiration to Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. I discovered Shange's incredible piece my sophomore year at Dartmouth College as I designed costumes for a student production. A spoken word poet myself, I was entranced by Shange's prose and poetry. Her idea to create a brand new type of theater — the choreopoem — which not only included poetry, but song and

dance as well, was awe-inspiring. My artistry was thoroughly satiated during the experience; I decided to compile my own spoken word pieces into a play. With an existing arsenal of spoken word poems, writing a choreopoem felt authentic and natural to me. My only objective while writing the first draft was to create a piece of art that my friends would enjoy and hopefully find funny. I have always considered myself an artist, and in college, I considered myself a costume designer and even a poet; never did I imagine or desire to be a playwright.

I found myself continuously developing *Citrus* in college, so when I approached the choreopoem more seriously my senior year, I knew that I wanted to specifically study the dress of Black women throughout U.S. history with my stories and construct the garments that they would wear. I spent the first three months of my senior year consumed by research before I wrote a new draft. My research consisted of analyzing historical photographic records, and sewing patterns; conducting interviews; visiting museums; examining autobiographies, public records and historical documents; reading scholarly articles, texts, and plays; and studying each of the nine addressed times.

Highlighting costumes in *Citrus* was a consistent and important idea throughout my research and writing process since I entered the world of theater as a costume designer. I wanted the audience to be as fascinated by fashion history as I am, so I decided that all changes would occur onstage. I didn't realize how much fashion history and U.S history would inform one another and found myself overwhelmed with information that I wanted to address in the piece; hence a choreopoem with nine characters that spans over 150 years of history.

– Celeste Jennings, Playwright & Costume Designer

Discussion Questions:

- How does fashion and the clothing we wear impact our understanding of the world around us?
- What assumptions do you make about others based upon clothing and appearance?
- What limitations does society place upon self-expression through fashion? Do these limitations vary by race, gender, or age?

What's in a name?

In a January 2020 interview with Northern Stage staff, Jennings explains that the title *Citrus* is “a metaphor I used to connect Black women to citrus fruit. Oranges and grapefruit are my favorite fruit, but I annoyingly choose not to eat them because I don't want to commit to the ‘work’ required to enjoy the fruit. You have to peel them, pick away the membranes, dispose of the peel, have a receptacle nearby to catch the juice, wash then dry your hands, etc. Citrus also aren't as reliable as bananas or apples in terms or taste. Sometimes they're very sour and sometimes they're half sour and half sweet. You really have to commit and work to enjoy citrus.”



She further expands upon this metaphor in her Senior Fellowship Thesis writing, “This description also exemplifies how Black women are often perceived by both themselves and society. A barrier that specifically limits many Black women is the burden of being trapped in our oppressive history. These barriers, which are created by factors such as public policy and institutional racism, make it difficult for many Black women to succeed or financially progress in

life. Much like an emotionally guarded young Black woman, once the skin of citrus is peeled away, the contents are quite beautiful and intricate." (Jennings, 6)

"Black women have layers," Jennings explains in the interview, "We're complicated, and because of our resilience and traumatic history, our lives never begin 'sweet.'" She notes there is only one poem in *Citrus* that reveals the title of the choreopoem. "I choose to do this because Black women don't need to be directly reminded of this circumstance. We are forever and always aware."

A Note of Inspiration From the Playwright

Writing and continuing to work on *Citrus* is the most challenging and rewarding artistic project I've created, and I hope this is just the beginning. Like *for colored girls...*, the sensitive issues addressed in the script transcend time; they happened in the past, are occurring right now, and will continue to transpire in the future. I poured many of my personal experiences into this script because I believe that the best stories you can write are your own.

My experience is shaped by many brave women of the present and past. *Citrus* is an homage to them; the choreopoem is for and about my ancestors, sisters on this Earth today, and our descendants. Without my mother, and her mother, and her mother, and her mother, and her mother, and their decisions, both small and large, and even their choice of dress, I could very well not be here today.

I now consider myself a costume designer and playwright. Within the theater, I've discovered a freedom that I didn't know I was looking for. *Citrus* started as a fun idea, grew into a passion project, and is now an important part of my existence. I hope that if anything, Black women feel safe, uplifted, and loved during the production and that all others feel solidarity, support, and maybe even learn something new from a different perspective.

-- Celeste Jennings, Playwright & Costume Designer

"Not a History Lesson!"

Jennings does not intend *Citrus* to be a history lesson. She explains the process of writing *Citrus* "has not only been creatively fulfilling, but I also have learned so much about the resilience of my ancestors that I never considered before I started my research. *Citrus* reminds me of my family history and of how blessed I am to be able to pursue my passion and work in theater. It also reminds me of how important it is to use my work to uplift my people." (Northern Stage 2020 Winter Newsletter)

She adds, “the contemporary poems in *Citrus* are a mix of personal experiences as well as accounts from my friends and family that allowed me to tell their stories. The period stories are all derived from research. I was determined to base all period poems off true stories from narratives, interviews, and stories about Black women of the past.” Jennings focused on the following time periods: the 1850s; the early 1910s; the 1920s; the 1940s; the 1950s; the 1960s; the early 1970s; the 1990s; and, the present-day. “I chose these specific time periods because they display many historical changes as well as a progression in the United States from slavery, continuing to the Civil Rights Movement, and ending with the unstable position Black women have in today’s society.” (Jennings, 6)

Though *Citrus* is not intended to be “a history lesson,” there are specific incidents and movements from Black history in the United States that are referred to throughout the piece. Having a basic familiarity with these references can deepen your connection to the choreopoem. (For those who would like to take a deeper dive into these topics, websites have been provided to continue your exploration.)

Constitutional Amendments

- The **13th Amendment** abolishing the practice of slavery and involuntary servitude is passed by the US Congress in 1865.
<https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/13th-amendment>
- The **15th Amendment** establishing that the “right to vote is not denied by race” was passed by the US Congress in 1869.
<https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendment/amendment-xv>
- The **19th Amendment**, passed by the US Congress in 1919, establishes the right for women, of all races, to vote.
<https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendment/amendment-xix>

Reconstruction & Jim Crow

The period of time following the Civil War when the nation was rebuilding and power was delegated to individual states to determine the rights of African Americans. Many states adopted restrictive laws, known as Jim Crow laws, that created the standard of segregation and limited African American access to voting.

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/africanamericanheritage/reconstruction.htm>

Black women played a major role in combating the injustice of Jim Crow laws and advocating for education, freedom of speech, equality, safety and human rights.

<https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/02/how-formerly-enslaved-black-women-fought-for-human-dignity-and-sexual-justice.html>

The Legacy of Lynching

In the years between 1865-1950, it has been documented that over 4,000 Black men and women of all ages were subjected to torture and death through lynching.

<https://musemandmemorial.eji.org/memorial>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/25/us/lynching-memorial-alabama.html>

Harlem Renaissance

A literary and artistic period in the 1920s and 30s that marked a cultural shift in African American identity in the United States. The social foundations laid down during this renaissance provided significant inspiration for the Civil Rights Movement decades later.

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/new-african-american-identity-harlem-renaissance>

The Civil Rights Movement

The struggle for social justice and racial equality that is generally considered to have been centered in the 1950s and 1960s -- though many would argue that the movement began in the 1930s and still continues today (See The Long Civil Rights Movement:

<https://sohp.org/research/the-long-civil-rights-movement-initiative/>)

Several specific events from this time period are referenced during *Citrus* and are further described below, but the following website provides an overview of key events.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement>

September 4, 1957: Little Rock Nine, Little Rock, Arkansas

As a test of the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* that declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional, nine Black students attempted to attend classes at Central High School, a segregated school in Little Rock, Arkansas. The governor of Arkansas called in the Arkansas National Guard to block the students from entering. Eisenhower sent in federal troops in order to escort the students into the desegregated school.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/central-high-school-integration>

September 15, 1963: Bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama

Following the federal mandate to integrate schools in Alabama, four young Black teenage girls were killed in this bomb blast that was set by a member of the KKK.

The names of these young women were Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesly, Carole Robertson and Carol Denise McNair.

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/four-black-schoolgirls-killed-in-birmingham>

SNCC: Student NonViolent Coordinating Committee (often pronounced "Snick")

A pioneering organization of the Civil Rights Movement established in the 1960s that played a pivotal role in organizing sit-ins to protest segregation.

<https://www.sncclegacyproject.org/about/legacy>

The Black Panthers

The Black Panther Party was formed in that late 1960s in response to the assassination of Malcolm X and to challenge police brutality against the African American community. The organization

"I am not a racist. I am against every form of racism and segregation, every form of discrimination. I believe in human beings, and that all human beings should be respected as such, regardless of their color."

-Malcolm X, January, 1965

was successful at championing important social initiatives such as the Free Breakfast for Children program, but due to several violent incidents between police and members of the Black Panther leadership, the historical record (written by white people in power) has attached a legacy

of violence to the movement.

<https://www.history.com/topics/civil-rights-movement/black-panthers>

#BlackLivesMatter

This movement was founded by three women (Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi) in the wake of the acquittal of the community watch coordinator who killed Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida in 2012. #BlackLivesMatter is a Black-centered political movement that seeks to draw attention to disparities in state systems and the multitudes of Black men and women who have died at the hands of the police.

Throughout *Citrus* many names are referenced: Tanisha Anderson, Desmond Phillips, Ashanti Billie, Rekia Boyd, Aura Rosser, Sandra Bland, Takira Wilson, Yvette Smith, Michelle Cusseaux, Cornell Lockhart, Stephon Clark, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Natrasha McKenna... We encourage you to read the stories of each of these people.

<https://blacklivesmatter.com>

#SayHerName

This movement was formed in response to the 2015 death of Sandra Bland, a 28-year old Black woman who was arrested by police after an alleged altercation during a traffic stop. She was discovered dead in her jail cell three days later. Say Her Name aims to provide resources for media, policy makers, and others to better understand how policing and the practice of profiling impacts Black women.

<https://aapf.org/sayhernamereport>

Extension Activity: Bake this at Home

“Another Lady”’s Cornbread Recipe

“You need approximately 2 cups of meal and ½ teaspoon of salt. Mix it together in your bowl. Sometimes I add sugar and sometimes I don't - it depend. Put you some cooking oil in a skillet and let it get hot. You know it's time when; well if you get a bit of water on the tip of ya finger and then drop it in the pan - if it sizzle and pop up it's ready, but if it don't keep trying that until it do. Before you can cool the bread you gotta boils you some water on the stove to mix with the meal and it can't be lukewarm - if it is, it won't stick and you will not make good bread. After it's boiled and ya skillet is hot mix it all together and make little palms out round or square and pat 'em in your hands with a little flour and put 'em in the skillet. Watch 'em kind of closely and turn 'em over when they get brown. My Mama always burnt hers a little to make 'em extra crispy so I do that too. Then once both sides cooked you got some delicious hot water cornbread and it can go with turnip greens, pinto beans, lima beans, string beans and potatoes too.”

Further Reading: Exploring Concepts of Race, Racism, & Privilege

Dartmouth Experiential Term Student and *Citrus* actor Stella Asa put together this selection of articles:

- White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack
<https://nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack>
- It's Not About Race!
<https://www.thsppl.com/thsppl-articles/2017/4/20/its-not-about-race-1>
- Nothing to add: A Challenge to White Silence in Racial Discussions
<https://robindiangelo.com/2018site/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Nothing-to-Add-Published.pdf>
- "Why Theater Needs More Stories About Black Women Told by Black Women" -
<http://www.playbill.com/article/why-theatre-needs-more-stories-about-black-women-told-by-black-women>

Celeste Jennings found many books inspiring while doing research for *Citrus*. The list below references a selection of her favorites, with a brief note from Jennings about how each book inspired her:

Gidding, Paula. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: Harper Collins, 1984.

- "A book I really depended on. It covers so many decades and is full of incredibly detailed stories."

Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Random House, 1981.

- "I really loved reading this book."

Ford Tanisha. *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

- "This book is PACKED with information about style and politics pertaining to Black women in the 60's"

Foster, Helen Bradley. *New Raiments of Self: African American Clothing in the Antebellum South*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1997.

- "This is an incredible resource that uses first-hand accounts from slaves talking about what they wore at different ages, times of year, etc. It is fascinating!"