

# Grasping Lightning's Arm: On African American Literature Breaking Forced Identity in Black Communities

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## Abstract

*Grasping Lightning's Arm* draws inspiration from Ntozake Shange's seminal choreopoem, "for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf," published in 1976. Shange's innovative blend of poetry, dance, and music illuminates the experiences of Black women, exploring themes of oppression and resilience. My work attempts the same, depicting the struggle for equity and representation in contemporary society, urging viewers to confront the complexities of racial injustice and sensationalizing trauma.

## Introduction

Ntozake Shange's play, "for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf," was published in 1976 and is a prominent piece of this contemporary, artistic era. Through her play, Shange coins the term "choreopoem," which can be described as a dramatic, theatrical expression that combines poetry, dance, and music to convey a narrative, theme and/or emotion. In this original format, Shange's play addressed societal pressures faced by Black women like oppression, identity, spirituality, and coming-of-age. To counter oppression, many writers craft narratives that compel readers to confront and acknowledge the complexity of trauma. *Grasping Lightning's Arm* is my original play written in Shange's choreopoem style and explores the consequences of white society misinterpreting a Black individual's identity and trauma. It focuses on our

protagonist Adrienne Koekemoer, a Black actress who survived a lightning strike while lost in the woods and has the scar to prove it. She is enduring the sudden swell of sensationalizing and misinterpreting done to her and her trauma by the white showrunners leading up to her interview. The Narrator, who speaks cues and actions before they happen is, technically, another primary character. The Narrator symbolizes white society's need to control what they cannot comprehend, while Adrienne's interactions with white characters underscore how Black American identities, voices, lives, and art are often silenced or manipulated.

## Grasping Lightning's Arm: Excerpt

The Narrator, a disembodied voice over speakers, controls the story. The cues and actions happen as Narrator speaks:

Soft, blue spotlight lands on a SINGLE CHAIR, CENTER STAGE, facing away from the AUDIENCE. The sounds of coiled wire thudding on the ground mixes with heavy, low buzzing of electricity and lights. INDISTINGUISHABLE figures fuss over the setup, there is too much for such a small INTERVIEW SPACE. Adrienne Koekemoer enters STAGE LEFT. She is a tall Black woman, uneasy as she watches the team mess with the equipment, running around the place. Adrienne stops short of the seat, the one she will sit in for the INTERVIEW. The buzzing from the lights makes her tense but she takes a grounding breath. Adrienne turns to face the AUDIENCE; the soft blue light brightens to a spotlight on her. The pale, jagged scar from the lightning strike shines under the harsh lights.

**Adrienne, to herself:** Why'd we need so many damn lights. God, I already hate this. All these microphones and still none of them are gonna listen to a word I say.

**The Narrator:** Colton Horne, the interviewer, enters STAGE RIGHT. Adrienne panics and tries to leave unnoticed.

**Colton Horne (spotting her):** Adrienne, there you are! I've been looking everywhere for you! I've been looking over the pre-approved questions your team sent in. I know this is last minute, but I was wondering if you want to consider some of my questions instead. It's only that I wanted to expand on it some more because I think the viewers—

**Adrienne (pausing, her frustration evident):** Look, Colton, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but can we please focus on what's important here?

**Colton (ignoring Adrienne's tone):** Of course, of course, but I really think if we delve deeper into—

**Adrienne (interrupting, her patience wearing thin):** No. We're not delving into anything until you understand this isn't about what you think they want to hear. It's about my story, about how a night shoot went to shit, and how I'm dealing with it. **(Gesturing to the harsh lighting)** Can we tone these down, please?

**The Narrator:** The lighting goes down. Adrienne visibly relaxes, the harsh glare no longer overwhelming her.

**Colton (hands up in surrender):** I'm getting that you want to stick to the script, we can do that, but whole "opening yourself to the world and what happened" was for you to reconcile with it and I want to do that in the best way we can, and people get bored fast. Think about that till we start rolling in ten.

**The Narrator:** Colton exits STAGE RIGHT, leaving Adrienne alone while the CREW still erratically sets up the space and equipment. She runs her hands through her hair, tangling it from the stress. She paces around the stage; the lights flicker from a power surge.

The bell rings, Colton Horne gets in his seat across from the SINGLE CHAIR. Adrienne lets out the breath she was holding, and more CREW MEMBERS walk around her, in their own world. She looks STAGE RIGHT— she might make a break for the door and never come back. Forget the TV personalities and Tinseltown studio-heads. She doesn't need this. Adrienne stays in her spot and soothes the pad of her thumb over the scar of lighting on her inner wrist. The sound of her heartbeat evening out picks up on the speaker, and Adrienne takes her seat for the INTERVIEW.