

Lorraine Hansberry and the African Image

(Slightly revised version published in the *Encyclopedia of Africa and the Americas: Culture Politics, and History*, Vol. 2, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008, 549-552)

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry's was the byproduct of a protest tradition that took root in the 1940s. She was born in Chicago on May 19, 1930, to Nannie Perry, a former schoolteacher and Republican Ward Committeewoman; and Carl Hansberry, an inventor and former U.S. Deputy Marshal who later ran for Congress. She was the youngest of four children. Owners of the Hansberry Real Estate Syndicate founded in 1929 and valued at \$250,000.00, the Hansberry family was upper middle-class at a time when belonging to that class was the exception, not the rule, for Black families. In 1941, its business was one of the largest Black-owned real estate enterprises in the Midwest.

Since she was born into relative affluence, Hansberry's growing up was set apart by such luxuries as riding chauffeur-driven cars and wearing fur coats. But her status did not obscure her awareness of and sensitivity to African-American hardships, and neither did it estrange her from the ordeals shared by most Blacks. After all, she was an occasional victim of American racial hatred herself and came to understand that economic privileges did not guarantee social privileges. Her family lived in a segregated ghetto-section of Chicago – the setting of *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) – since rigid housing segregation confined all Blacks to the same neighborhood regardless of economic status. The reality of American racism also hit Hansberry in the Jim Crow grade schools she attended, and, in 1948, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where she fell victim to restrictive housing policies. So, rather than

find shelter and comfort within personal luxuries, Hansberry developed a dramatic vision that dealt with African-American themes, even though but she did not restrict her focus to this subject.

Hansberry was deeply influenced by her parents' promotion of race pride, commitment to Civil Rights programs, and involvement with the NAACP and the Urban League. She observed as they boldly challenged Jim Crow laws and segregation, a task for which her mother founded the Hansberry Foundation in 1936. In 1938, Carl Hansberry and NAACP lawyers risked jail and other racist attacks by contesting Chicago's real estate "restrictive covenants" which would otherwise prevent the Hansberrys from occupying property in an all-White neighborhood. The Hansberry home also welcomed many visitors, including noted celebrities, scholars, and leaders, who had a lasting impact on Hansberry's political consciousness and theatrical choices. Although she was acquainted with political movements at her family home, Hansberry's personal political life began in 1948 when she was a student at the University of Wisconsin. She came in contact with political groups, one of which was the Young Progressives of America (YPA), and joined the campus chapter of YPA in 1949. Dissatisfied with the educational prospects offered by the University of Wisconsin, she left the campus in her sophomore year (1949-50), hoping to gain improved educational insights elsewhere. Her quest brought her to New York where, between 1950 and 1963, Harlem offered a huge intellectual and cultural attraction. The cultural and artistic consciousness promoted by the Harlem Renaissance, about 30 years earlier, still seemed to have a powerful pull on the community.

During her Harlem years, especially 1961 through 1964, Hansberry spoke at anti-racist street corner rallies and marched in picket lines. In 1964, while hospitalized in failing

health, she completed the text for a photographic document on the Civil Rights Movement titled *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality* (1964).

The successful publication and performance of *A Raisin* brought greater political responsibilities to Hansberry who was invited to address social and political forums on a wide scale. This job of articulate spokeswoman led to another identity for Hansberry, that of political activist. It was a position she held until her premature death in 1965.

In 1951, Hansberry joined the staff of *Freedom*; a monthly newspaper founded the same year in New York by renowned Black actor, Paul Robeson. The paper became a voice of, and political weapon for the masses of Blacks and all progressive Americans. Hansberry remained on the staff of the magazine for nearly five years.

Aside from encouraging Hansberry's commitment to desegregation and equal opportunity, Robeson aroused her interest in African affairs and, between 1951 and 1953, she wrote a number of articles that focused on reconciling Africa and Black America. A student of African linguistics and languages himself, Robeson wrote numerous articles on African culture. While in England, he met Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah (later to become the first presidents of Kenya and Ghana in 1963 and 1958 respectively) and learnt from them about African independence struggles. Robeson also co-founded The Council on African Affairs in 1937, an organization devoted to African liberation.

Through the offices of *Freedom* Hansberry met with and had lengthy discussions with students and politicians from Southern Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. In the early 1950s when the offices of The Council on African Affairs were located in the same building as *Freedom*, Hansberry remained in close contact with Robeson, W.E.B DuBois, and distinguished Africans, all of whom had a powerful political, intellectual, and

philosophical impact on her dramatic vision.

Hansberry's fascination with Africa also received a boost from her Uncle William Leo Hansberry who was committed to the education of Black people. A world-renowned scholar of African antiquity and a professor at Howard University, Leo Hansberry was one of DuBois' mentors and a prominent visitor to the Hansberry home. Some of his African students were to become future leaders in their independent countries. They include, Kwame Nkrumah and Nnamdi Azikiwe who became the first Presidents of Ghana and Nigeria in 1957 and 1960.

When, therefore, we encounter Africa in Hansberry's drama, the reference is supported by genuine interest and profound research on the arts, histories, politics, and traditions of a number of its major ethnic groups. Rejecting the notion of Africa as an obscure region, Hansberry became more emotionally attached to the continent in the 1950s when, because of its independence struggles, it had become more visible in Black American literature and politics.

In two of her works – *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Les Blancs* (1970) – Africa materializes as a direct aesthetic and sociopolitical symbol, while in a third play, *The Drinking Gourd* (1960), Africa emerges indirectly through oral traditions. In spite of the angle through which it is presented, Africa is either conjured as a distant myth or as a tangible socio-geographic setting in relation to a number of related subjects. These include: the essence of the region to Hansberry, its political and cultural relevance, relations between Africans and African-Americans, and the adaptation of African values that serve key theatrical and cultural roles.

A Raisin in the Sun marked the beginning of a more confrontational era in the Black theatre. In the play, Hansberry calls on Africans and diasporic Blacks to develop the sense of

belonging to a cohesive family. Set on the South Side slums of Chicago, the play is about the economic and social effects of racism on members of the Younger family who strive to attain fulfillment through singular aspirations. Against this background, the play is structured on African images and family values that recapture this influence.

A direct reference to Africa is reached through the Nigerian character, Asagai, who represents the first appearance of an intellectual African as a major character in Black American drama. Asagai introduces a relatively new insight on Africa. Through him Hansberry creates a particularized African whom she uses to dissipate the myth that Africa does not accept its descendants in America.

Asagai is Hansberry's medium for demonstrating a periodic nostalgia for Africa, even if it is sometimes more emotional than real. As modern African activist, he is a revolutionary model for Beneatha, her brother, Walter, and Black America. Operating in an African-American setting, he strengthens, but does not resolve, the destabilized ancestral connection between Africans and Black Americans.

For Beneatha, Asagai is able to evolve into a cultural conduit, informing her about African history, belief systems, practices, and ongoing battles against imperialism. Her cultural awareness is broadened by his instructions on African clothing, music, song, and dance, and by his gifts of a Nigerian name, *Alaiyo*, and a Nigerian robe.

Beneatha's personal odyssey toward cultural rebirth is crowned in her version of an African folk dance that she performs in her Nigerian robe with Walter. The entire Yoruba song and dance scenario invokes racial pride and dignity, but, in the end, turns out to be more fantasy than reality. Their reactions play out the truth that Black Americans recapture their history largely from the standpoint of the Western culture in which they exist. While Africa

offers a vital historical and cultural frame of reference, it remains a distant land, largely unknown and often inaccessible.

At the other extreme is George Murchison, the African-American who spurns Africa and emerges as foil to Beneatha. He personifies those conventional and uninformed facts about Africa that are still largely predictable, and is the classic victim of cultural rape.

Irrespective of how laudable some of the images of Africa are in *A Raisin*, Hansberry does not romanticize the yearning for a culturally rich, viable and spiritual homeland. In the end, Africa also surfaces as a background afflicted by political and neocolonial weaknesses that have existed for generations, many of which continue to exist.

Hansberry began drafting *Les Blancs (The Whites)* as early as 1960. But it was not until 1970 that Robert Nemiroff, her ex-husband, put together the published version of the play. In *Les Blancs* Hansberry expands on the attention given to Africa in *A Raisin*. The play is the first major play by an African-American to translate into dramatic form the European exploitation of the lands and peoples of Africa, and the ensuing rebellion against European rule. When *Les Blancs* was drafted in 1960, African nationalist movements had assumed vast and powerful proportions.

In recreating an African colonial scene in the play, Hansberry advances the need for dialogue between the oppressed and the oppressor, yet insists on action and commitment, and advocates the attainment of sovereignty at any cost. The play does not resolve any issue but raises thought-provoking questions about history, Africa, America, anger, and confrontation.

Hansberry finally argues for humanism even as she visualizes the genesis of a new Black world and directs her themes through a predominantly African historical and socio-artistic experience.

African-based folklore, customary practices, chanting, drumming, and dancing in *Les Blancs* energize the action and tempo of the plot, heighten the tone and moods disseminated through dialogue, and celebrate indigenous African practices. Herein lies the peculiarity of Hansberry's dramatic vision: her success at re-evoking and reenacting history through an essentially Western model, yet ritualizing and mythologizing history through the use of certain African cultural and folkloric paradigms.

The play is set in a mythic, White-ruled African nation, Zatembe, which closely resembles Kenya, East Africa, of the mid-1950s, when natives took up arms against White settlers. When the principal character, Tshembe Matoseh, returns from England to attend the funeral of his father (Abioseh), he encounters the ongoing rebellion but refuses to be a part of it, even though his father was a premier nationalist.

Contrasting the European influence in Zatembe, the rustic East African scene of the Prologue is a simple metaphorical African setting with a layout briefly removed from realism. It is conveyed in natural surroundings, music, a dancing African Woman, a spear, and a hyena, all of which are integrated into the development of the plot. These contrasting presences set the stage for African and European conflicts within the play, which culminate in the violent revolt by the natives.

Like *A Raisin*, *Les Blancs* expands thematically, finally addressing global concerns along with Black issues within and beyond Africa.

Without making direct references to Africa In *The Drinking Gourd*, Hansberry exploits African-based aesthetic and indigenous forms by using folk material for contemporary dramatic creativity. Whereas characterization and setting sustain a tangible African presence in *A Raisin* and *Les Blancs*, the crux of *Drinking Gourd* lies in Hansberry's

ability to recapture African sensibilities within an ancestral oral experience.

Published a year after *A Raisin*, *Drinking Gourd* shifts from issues of the family, integration, and colonialism to the relevance of communal art and slave freedom. The recreation of a slave world in *Drinking Gourd* is anchored to a folk background and group consciousness that are fortified by the components of folk art. This folk idiom is realized in music, song, and dance-drama. As she keeps slave history alive, Hansberry also highlights the rich musical tradition arising out of this history.

Movement, music, folksongs, spirituals, and folklore are thus used to reinvigorate the overall tone of *Drinking Gourd*. Although African-American, like African drama has steered from its rudimentary source, the innovative importance of folk material has not been lost. In *Drinking Gourd* this truth is apparent in a musical tradition where song, music, and dance are tools for the type of group participation that strengthens communal bonding, especially in the face of a crisis. Action and rhythm are direct results of dance and music in the play, and unfold not only as key elements of folk drama, but as factors that intensify the themes and overall theatricality of the play.

The plot unfolds around plans made by Hannibal – a slave youth – to escape slavery. The quest for and attainment of liberation is captured in a simple folksong that recalls the escape of slaves by midnight trains of the Underground Railroad. It brings to life the activities of a renowned “conductor,” the legendary Peg Leg Joe, said to have worn a wooden peg in place of his right foot. The Underground Railroad was a loosely knit secret organization devoted to helping fugitive slaves to freedom. Peg Leg Joe’s schemes were achieved by uniting slaves through the song, “Drinking Gourd.” Much like talking drums in certain African societies, the song was coded and communicated freedom in a “language”

understood only by its Black creators and users.

The Peg Leg Joe story corroborates the dramatic and creative ingenuity of slaves, while Hansberry adopts and celebrates this creative skill. Together, therefore, the Peg Leg Joe legend and the “Drinking Gourd” song inspire Hansberry’s choice of theme and content, so that she unifies various forms of artistic expression in a self-conscious way. As in African folklore, therefore, her reliance on the Peg Leg Joe story is inseparable from song, dance, and drama.

Because she invokes Africa from different perspectives, Hansberry has succeeded in opening up a channel through which several themes affecting Africans and African-Americans are inquired into. Beyond her appreciation of the region, she is able to tap aesthetically from it, and exploit thematic and stylistic elements commonly absent from White plays.

In the end, and in spite of her initial and precise attention to African-American life, Hansberry’s drama is not restricted to this motif. True, Africa is artistically and culturally symbolic. But while nurturing the sociopolitical well being of Blacks, Hansberry’s plays also serves as a metaphor for surveying broad-based human issues.

-- Philip U. Effiong

Sources

Brown-Guillory, Elizabeth. *Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America*.

New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.

Carter, Steven R. *Hansberry’s Drama: Commitment Amid Complexity*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Cheney, Anne. *Lorraine Hansberry*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984.

Hansberry, Lorraine. Interview. "Make New Sounds." *American Theatre* (November 1984): 5-8, 41.

_____. *To be Young, Gifted, and Black; a Portrait of Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words*. Adapt. Robert Nemiroff. New York: S. French, 1971.

Nemiroff, Robert. "A Critical Background." *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*. Ed. Robert Nemiroff. New York: Random House, 1972.

Wilkerson, Margaret B. "The Sighted Eyes and Feeling Heart of Lorraine Hansberry." *Black American Literature Forum* 17.1 (Spring 1983): 8-13.

Wood, Deborah. "The Plays of Lorraine Hansberry: Studies in Dramatic Form." Diss. U of Wisconsin, 1985.