

THE INTELLECTUAL SPEAR:
LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *LES BLANCS*

Olga Barrios
University of Salamanca

Lorraine Hansberry's work shows a clear concern with the human being beyond any barriers of color, race or culture. Her objectivity distinguishes her from her men colleagues of the Black Theater Movement in the United States. Whereas African American men playwrights of her time tried to move completely away from Western culture and reconstruct the African American tradition, she often confronted Blacks and Whites and let them speak and present their strengths and weaknesses. Hansberry made the audience the protagonist of their plays, since she immersed her audience in a continuous questioning about different ideologies. By the end of her life, though, Hansberry had come to the conclusion that dialogue was not enough and Blacks as well as Whites needed to take sides. *Les Blancs* was her final statement about her position and an answer to Jean Genet's play *The Blacks*. *Les Blancs* is her only play taking place in Africa, thus, using symbolism and signifying, dance and music as dramatic elements characteristic of both African American and African cultures. Like Bertolt Brecht's epic theater, Hansberry uses another country to achieve the alienation effect in her audience, who must question their reality in order to stop being passive and take an action by taking sides--not also Blacks, but also Whites.

[I am] a fool who believes that death is waste and love is sweet and that the earth turns and men change every day and that flowers smell good and that I hurt terribly today, and that hurt is desperation and desperation is energy and energy can move things. (Sidney in *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, 142)

Lorraine Hansberry's statement is distinctive of a historical moment: the Civil Rights Movement. Her concern with the human being went beyond any barriers of color, race or culture. The objective subjectivity exposed in her writings is not so definitely observed in the works by the men playwrights of the Black Theater Movement. The latter were mainly preoccupied with moving completely away from Western culture and the reconstruction of the African American tradition. Hansberry, on the contrary, often confronts Blacks and Whites and let them speak and present their strengths and weaknesses. She takes the audience into questioning not one but several ideologies--some times integrated within the same family; i.e., *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Hansberry's work lacks the violence and anger against Whites overtly expressed by playwrights such as Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins. She preferred to remain an observer and let her characters freely express and confront each other. The active dialogue maintained by her characters generates an incessant questioning of their actions and words, similar to Bertolt Brecht's epic theater. But, if all throughout her work Hansberry preserved her deep belief in dialogue between wo/men, by the end of her life she had come to the conclusion that talk was not enough. She foresaw a need to take action. In regard to Martin Luther King's leadership and the Civil Rights Movement, she confessed:

I support them and applaud them. ... At the same time I have no illusion that it is enough. We believe that the world is political and that political power, in one form or another, will be the ultimate key to the liberation of American [Blacks], and, indeed, black folk throughout the world. ... I think that Dr. King increasingly will have to face a forthcoming generation of [Blacks] who question even the restraints of his militant and, currently, progressive ideas and concepts (1970, 121).

Hansberry anticipated the forthcoming generation of Black Power, Black Panthers and the Black Theater Movement, of which she can be considered a forerunner. She understood the need for the White liberal to become radical: "The problem is we have to find some way, with these dialogues, to encourage the white liberal to stop being a liberal--and become an American radical" (197, 247). She took her idea into practice by writing *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* and by creating the North American White liberal and journalist, Charlie Morris, in *Les Blancs*.

Baraka reaches Hansberry's same conclusion, which he exposed in *The Slave*--in which Vessels, tired of talking, opts for a language of action and kills Easley. Hansberry herself became more radical in the last years of her life and left *Les Blancs* as her last testimony and legacy. She stated: "I think it's very simple that the whole idea of debating whether or not [Blacks] should defend themselves is an insult. If anybody comes and does ill in your home or your community--obviously, you try your best to kill [her/]him" (1970, 249). Tshembe Matoseh, in *Les Blancs*, finally decides to take sides and kills his brother, Abioseh, who has betrayed their people.

Hansberry's last statement demonstrates her affinities with the ideology of Black Power and Black Consciousness defended by Malcolm X:

"I think ... that [Blacks] must concern themselves with every single means of struggle: legal, illegal, passive, active, violent and non-violent. That they must harass, debate, petition, ... boycott, sing hymns, ... and shoot from their windows when the racist come cruising their communities" (1970, 222).

She could not admit the acceptance of the African American's present condition that she considered to be "the only form of extremism which [discredited them] before [their] children" (Ibid.). This is the struggle that Lena begins in *A Raisin in the Sun* when she decides to move with her family to a White neighborhood--or Rosa Parks, when she refused to get up from her seat in a segregated bus in Alabama.

Baraka insists that Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* has been continually misunderstood and categorized as a soap opera, because people read the play very superficially. He affirms that African American people could identify with the characters, as the play unfolds different ideologies within the family. (Barrios). In addition, Baraka claims that Hansberry is a *critical realist*

in a way that Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Margaret Walker are. That is, she *analyzes* and *assesses* reality and shapes her statement as work of art. Her statement cannot be separated from the character she creates to embody, in their totality, the life she observes: it becomes, in short, the living material of the work, part of its breathing body, integral and alive (10).

Particularly, Lena is an interesting character which encloses a reality rooted in the African American tradition.

Lena is a much more complex character than a simple embodiment of the Black matriarchy myth, as has narrowly been viewed by most critics. Gerda Lerner claims that

it was hard for colored children to be proud of fathers who were treated like [boys or called that way or any other name in the South] and it was usually the ... mother who had to keep a certain dignity in the family to offset the inferiority the white man inflicted on her husband. ... [When she hears] people talking about communists being behind the colored students, [she has] to laugh. It's no Communists--it's [Black] mothers who believe it's time for their children to fight for their rights and good education (585).

Lerner seems to be giving a definition of Lena's character, who is certainly a militant, as stated by Margaret Wilkerson:

Lena Younger is not the accommodating Mammy who chooses the passive, safe path, but rather the folk figure, the courageous spirit that lends credence and power to the militant struggle. In her own determined way, she gives birth to revolutionaries and is herself a progressive force (1990, 129).

Hansberry, thus, had already begun to disrupt stereotypes by depicting complex characters, each of whom, represents a different ideology--reflection of African Americans' reality. Furthermore, in her play she already states another fundamental principle in the African American struggle for liberation: self-determination--an element maintained as the foundation of the Black Arts Movement.

It is important to underline the fact that in Hansberry's play it is a woman who is a militant and takes that step into the struggle, offering a fuller depiction of a gender so simplified by male playwrights of the subsequent Movement. Adrienne Rich proclaims that

obviously the most oppressed of any oppressed group will be its women. ... Obviously, since women, period are oppressed in society and if you've got an oppressed group, they're twice oppressed. ... As oppression makes people more militant ... then twice militant because they're twice oppressed. (251)

Furthermore, Lena, the human rights militant, exemplifies Hansberry's belief that the ghetto leaves marks and scars which the "ghettoized child carries through life." Hansberry insisted in the need for African Americans to leave the ghettos for they are killing their dreams and their bodies: "It is not an abstraction to us that the average American [Black] has a life expectancy of five to ten years less than the average white" (1970, 63, 131-132).

The same scars the ghetto leaves on African American children are equally left in Africa's landscape by colonialism and imperialism, as Matoseh tells Morris in Act I, Scene 3 of *Les Blancs*:

TSHEMBE

Did you just happen to see the hills there [through Zatembe] and the scars in them? ... The great gashes from whence came the silver, gold, diamonds, cobalt, tungsten?¹

And in this play a woman plays a fundamental role. It is a woman warrior who first appears on an open stage, clutching a spear from the earth and holding it high. This woman warrior symbolizes the African continent and she is the one who haunts Matoseh's mind (like the ghost haunts Hamlet) for he is afraid to take an action that might require violence. Matoseh asserts he has renounced all spears (*Blancs*, Act I, Scene 3, 81). Like Lena encouraging her children to take a step, the woman warrior encourages Matoseh to take the spear and be a leader to his people to fight against the Western invader.

¹ Lorraine Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 77-78. Subsequent references to this text will be indicated by (*Blancs*, Act, Scene, page number).

What is significant about Hansberry's *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* and *Les Blancs* is the fact that they present two male characters as protagonists--Sidney Brustein and Tshembe Matoseh, respectively--who were originally written to be female characters according to Hansberry's notebooks. Karen Malpede raises a few questions regarding this switch of character gender: "Did [Hansberry] censor herself, knowing she would be censured? Or did the forms of a woman-centered drama still elude her because the feminist community was not yet strong enough to provide the actual examples required?" (164). Both questions could be answered affirmatively or they could be interpreted as Hansberry's concern with human beings, beyond gender, race and/or culture.

Hansberry attempts to be as objective as possible in the creation of her characters and presentation of their problems, exhibiting their contradictions and dilemmas--which automatically excludes the possibility of stereotyping them. She creates an authentic picture taken from the reality that surrounded her and/or, at times, the reality she actually wanted to exist. As Wilkerson observes: "Hansberry defined realism as 'not what *is* but what is *possible*'" (1972, 21) Wilkerson also defines Hansberry as a "womanist, in her outlook ... [who often] would curse supremacist males for their ignorance" (1987, 645). In *Les Blancs* it is Mme. Nielsen, an old English woman, who, like the woman warrior, reminds Matoseh that "Africa needs warriors. Like [his] father." (*Blancs*, Act II, Scene 8, 126). Thus, Lena, the woman warrior and Mme. Nielsen play an indelible part in the lives of the ones who live close to them and in their society. These women seem to be Hansberry's own symbols to express the need to take action in the struggle, instead of remaining behind the shield of intellectualism.

It has been previously pointed out that *A Raisin in the Sun* presents a family who is comprised by members symbolizing different ideologies. With her play, Hansberry establishes a basis that remained rooted in the subsequent Black Arts Movement, such as Black militancy/Women's militancy; consciousness raising about African American political and social situation; the creation of more complex African American characters that offered a new and positive image, consequently disrupting old stereotypes; the confrontation of the problems of racism and separation between Blacks and Whites; the need of self-determination and commitment; and a new awareness of Africa which would develop and mature in subsequent years during the time period of the Movement. On the one hand, Hansberry presents Lena's and George's image of Africa which shows how they have been bombarded with *Tarzan-inspired images*. While, on the other hand, Beneatha Younger and Joseph Asagai (as Lena's and George's opposites) are presented as characters with enough maturity "to actually carry out an intellectual marriage" (Benian, 154, 157).

Close to her premature death, Hansberry was finally able to delineate in *Les Blancs* a deeper study of the African continent and its condition. Like Brecht's epic theater, Hansberry introduces a problem that exists in her own country and distances it, placing the action in the African continent and posing the similarities between Africans and African Americans under imperialism and racism. This distancing device creates the alienating effect necessary for the audience to question the characters' actions and, by doing so, the members of the audience can question themselves.

The implications of Western colonialism and North American imperialism upon Africans parallels African Americans as a nation also colonized and oppressed under the *device* of racism, as Matoseh tells Morris in Act II, Scene 2. Racism is a device for a few to remain on power and rule upon others:

TSHEMBE

So, in one century, men invoke the device of religion to cloak their conquests. In another, race. Now, in both cases you and I may recognize the fraudulence of the device, but the fact remains that a man who has a sword run through him because he refuses to become a Moslem or a Christian--or who is shot in Zatembe or Mississippi because he is black--is suffering the utter *reality* of the device. (*Blancs*, 92).

By discussing the issue of racism in a different continent, Hansberry is able to engage a North American audience in a problem that concern themselves.

The play presents constant allusions to the parallel situation experienced by Africans and African Americans, ironically contrasted when in Act I, Scene 3 Matoseh tells Morris:

TSHEMBE

Yes, I was in the South! [of the United States] (*With deliberate impatience*). And yes. I did find your American apartheid absolutely enraging. (*Blancs*, 74).

Yet Hansberry does not punish Morris, the North American White liberal, the way Baraka does in *The Slave*. She still believes a solution must be found which she gears towards the need for the the North American White liberal to become radical--as Morris seems to have done by the end of the play. It is actually Morris and Mme. Nielsen who totally support the African struggle and poke Matoseh to be part of it instead of trying to fly away to his family and television set in Europe.

Hansberry does not envision an African or African American struggle against oppression, but a struggle that must be exerted by anyone (no matter what color and/or culture) who is against oppression and in favor of freedom. Baraka who, considered himself so revolutionary and rejected White participation in the Movement, years later has recognized his mistake. Hansberry did not commit that mistake. She criticized either Blacks or Whites, African Americans or Africans who were not involved in the same struggle for freedom, without ever glorifying ones or the others.

Hansberry presents the different ideologies and attitudes that exist among the West em characters included in the play. Dr. Dekoven and Mme. Nielsen are aware of the damage that the Reverend has caused them and realize the need for them to fight back; Dr. Gotterling (Marta) is almost blind to the real situation; and Reverend Nielsen has been the paternalist evil who, led by his paternalistic attitude, has kept Africans locked in time--away from progress. Similar to slavery in North America, Reverend Nielsen has kept Africans away from education so that they could be more easily manipulated.

Hansberry also depicts the differences existing among the members of Matoseh's family. Matoseh's father was an admirable warrior; Matoseh's brother, Abioseh—who becomes a Christian priest—betrays his people's struggle; and his little brother Eric—half European, because his mother was raped by Major Rice—is the most militant when time to take the spear comes; and Matoseh, himself, who does not want to get involved in the struggle but subsequently does by the end of the play.

In presenting a complex variety of ideologies and personalities among Africans, Hansberry responds to Jean Genet's *The Blacks*--response already given by entitling her play *Les Blancs/The Whites*, and demonstrates that within the Black community, there are individuals who hold various and different perspectives of life. Blacks are not a *monolith*, as Matoseh recriminates Morris:

CHARLIE

... You really can't get rid of it, can you? The bitterness. No matter how you try, we've done it to you: *you do hate white men!*

TSHEMBE

... Mr. Morris, have it your way! No matter what delusions of individuality infect *my* mind, to *you* I am not an individual but a tide, a flood, a monolith: 'the Bla-a-acks! (*Blancs*, 91).

With *Les Blancs*, Hansberry disrupts Genet's abstraction and his conversation "haunted by guilt [for 200 years of rape of Africa and] ... too steeped in the romance of racial exoticism to shed much light on the real confrontation that was coming" (Wilkerson 1990, 32).

In spite of Hansberry's response to Genet's play, she does not create a monolith to enclose Whites. It is rather the opposite, as pointed out above. Through the characters of Morris, the North American White liberal, and Matoseh, the African intellectual, Hansberry reproaches both their attitudes and their lack of social commitment, which she believes indispensable to achieve social changes. By the end of the play, Morris and Matoseh realize that both need to take an action on the same side against oppression and colonialism. As Wilkerson states, "the brilliant inspired efforts to communicate that characterize this play dissolve in the pain and *necessity of human action--the liberating act--that must be violent because words alone are inadequate*" (1987, 648, emphasis added). Hansberry masters the presentation of the inseparable link between dialogue and action.

Dialogue becomes a process that can energize and help clarify ideas and lead to action. People, however, must not sit and think too much and wait for ever, as Peter tells Matoseh through the story of the wise hyena, Mondingo (which means *the one who thinks carefully before he acts*). (*Blancs*, Act II, Scene 2, 95). Social awareness and artistic individualism is carefully exposed by Hansberry (Grant, n.p.). She does not allow her criticism of Western institution to trap her into fanaticism, nor does she romanticize the image of Africans or African Americans.

If Hansberry enjoys the presentation of long and intense dialogues exchanged between her characters, she equally adopts a theatrical language that conveys elements taken from the African and African American tradition. Like the men playwrights of the Movement, Hansberry does not forget music, dance, gesture, story-telling and the element of signifying--or double entendre. She carefully provides a combination of Western--mainly Brechtian technique--and African theater tradition. Morris and Matoseh parallel this combination.

Regarding the element of music, Linda Hart observes that both *Les Blancs* and *Toussaint* (a short play also by Hansberry) reflect the playwright's approach to music as a form to show the multiple dimensions of reality (64). For example, African drums are present at the very beginning of the play, with stage directions carefully noting that "*these are not at all the traditional 'movie drums,' but distinct, erratic and varied statements of mood and intent.*" (*Blancs*, 41). The drum serves as a powerful assertion of an African culture colonialists attempt to erode. Throughout the play, it is not classical music, but African music that is heard. Drums speak a language and send messages. Hence, music is presented with its social as well as its entertainment function--a double function of music that differs from the Western concept. The drum is a fundamental presence throughout the performance for it constantly reaffirms Africa's existence and Africans' self-determination of Africans not to die in the ashes. Drums bear the rhythm of life throughout the play, a life that refuses the defeat of being killed without having fought first.

Les Blancs commences with the drums announcing Matoseh's father's death and end announcing the beginning of a revolution; that is to say, a father and great warrior dies, and a leader is born, Matoseh. This circular structure has the ritualistic effect of life, of nature. Furthermore, it might symbolize the death of the uncommitted and detached Matoseh and the birth of Matoseh as a committed African leader. The opening of the play consists of distinctive elements which reassert African culture, and which are despised by Western *civilization*: the sounds of nature coming out from the jungle. The music of drums increases

“as the houselights go to black” (*Blancs*, 4) and moves to the speakers on the stage to introduce the third element: the African woman dancer. Drums, then, fuse with the woman’s movement into a dance.

The presentation of sounds such as crickets, birds and frogs, stresses the importance of nature in African tradition--something that is supplied by reasoning and talk in *civilized* Western countries. To the sounds of nature gather the drums and the drums finally join the woman dancer, until nature, music and dance become body and spirit inextricably linked and in harmony with the earth. The African principle of wo/man in harmony with her/his cosmos is, then, established. The cry of a hyena, though, disrupts this harmony and, when the woman dancer hears it, she walks towards the spear that is planted in the earth, downstage, pulls it out and raises it high. The hyena’s cry foreshadows Matoseh’s return from Europe to his African village, which is heard by the African woman dancer. Then, the woman dancer prepares herself to go to Matoseh and give him the spear. At the end of Act I, Matoseh feels the presence of the African woman coming towards him, but he wants to escape and forsake the struggle. Nevertheless, the African woman dancer mimes the years of slavery and slaughter, and, finally, she throws him the spear which he, instinctively, takes.

The African woman dancer symbolizes the spirit and land of Africa. The woman is Africa’s outcry to be defended from rape, exploitation and scars caused by colonialism. Hansberry’s symbolism of the woman warrior, the drums and the hyena folk tale, is rooted in the African American tradition of signifying. The repetition of these symbols throughout the play emphasize self-assertiveness and self-affirmation against the danger of a possible annihilation: the arrival of the *wise* hyena who thinks and waits for too long instead of taking an action on time--i.e., Matoseh.

The hyena’s *terrible laughter* encloses a double meaning; an ironic one originating from the “bitter joke that was played [on the hyenas] while [Mondingo, the hyena] reasoned,” and the elephants took their land (*Blancs*, Act II, Scene 2, 95). Signifying emerges out of the reversal of the hyena’s reaction: instead of tears, the hyena emitted laughter, a *terrible* laughter. Humor¹ in African and African American tradition, has been a form of survival; and the hyena’s laughter originates out of pain not out of joy. The tale of Mondingo, the wise hyena, is narrated by Peter, an African (thus named by Europeans), to warn Matoseh of the dangers they are in if he does not lead his people into action to prevent the invader from robbing their African land. The tale, then, parallels the theme and action of the play.

Presence and repetition of symbols contrast the absence and consequent death of the Reverend Nielsen. If the presence of nature, drums, and dance reaffirm and serves as premonition of Africa’s rebirth, absence might mean as well the death of another force. Reverend Nielsen is absent throughout the duration of the play--like God--and when he appears on stage he is already a corpse. Nevertheless, his name and the destruction he has perpetrated in the village is mentioned by the other characters. The final appearance of his dead body foreshadows the African revolution that has already begun.

By moving beyond the North American border with *Les Blancs*, Hansberry enlarges the picture of the world, disclosing North American imperialism and Western colonialism beyond their boundaries, implemented on African and on other Third World countries. This world view is the analogy to the African Americans’ situation as prisoners, oppressed and colonized in their own country. In addition, Hansberry’s concern for Africa and Third

¹ For further information on humor within the African American community, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*.

World countries predicted the same concern shared by the playwrights of the Black Theater Movement. Nobody can deny that Hansberry was the forerunner of the Movement of the 1960s. It is unfortunate, though, that she did not live long enough to continue offering a complexity of characters--especially women's--that would have disrupted the simplified depictions and chauvinistic views by the male writers of the Movement.

Hansberry's work and vision were certainly the engine that propelled the Black Theater Movement. She not only inspired the men playwrights but also became the presence needed by other African American women to identify with it. Her work provided a positive image which contributed to break women's silence and helped them speak of their own experiences in their writings. Lena, Beneatha, the African woman dancer/warrior and Mme. Nielsen have already torn to pieces the stereotypicals of passive, uncommitted and empty-brained Black and White women, as portrayed by male writers. These women characters would become the bulwark of power and strength in the process towards Self-affirmation and determination goals. Like the woman warrior in *Les Blancs*, Hansberry's spirit became the spear taken by subsequent North American women playwrights in their works.

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