

# Lorraine Hansberry's Legacy of Radical Activism Beyond Broadway

By

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B.A., Austin Peay State University, 2018

Submitted to the graduate degree program in English and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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### Abstract

This thesis utilizes two of Lorraine Hansberry's plays, *Les Blancs* (1970) and *Flowers for the General* (1955), to interrogate the larger misconceptions and myths that surround Hansberry and her most famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). In *Les Blancs*, Hansberry intentionally positions Eric Matoseh, a mixed-race character who is suggested to be in a homosexual relationship, as possessing an identity which melds seemingly dissonant aspects of race, gender, and sexuality; this identity allows Eric to reach a truly revolutionary consciousness. In *Flowers for the General*, an unpublished play from her archived papers, Hansberry positions lesbian identity similarly in the character Marcia. In these two plays, Hansberry includes themes of anti-colonialism, feminism, anti-militarism, and others which are also evident in the radical, though largely misinterpreted as accommodationist, *A Raisin in the Sun*. When read alongside each other, *Les Blancs* and *Flowers for the General* posit, through Eric and Marcia, that their homosexual and lesbian identities are the most cohesive and fulfilling. Various cultural, social, and political obstacles prevented Hansberry's unpublished writing on sexuality—which anticipates modern critical feminist and race theories—from being published or staged. However, examination of Hansberry's archival materials, like *Flowers*, is a necessary step in expanding the view of her complex and contradictory life and work outside of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

## Acknowledgements

Neither school nor life would be possible without my mother and greatest inspiration: Dr. Delia Pass. My sister, Ashley Pass, is the hardest worker I've ever known, and she inspires me every day. My late grandparents, Dorothy and Victor Raymos, are always with me. Memaw, you always said you got four kids through college, and I know you'll get me through the PhD.

I am indebted to my friends for so many things I cannot possibly repay, but mostly for listening to me talk endlessly about Lorraine Hansberry and Limp Bizkit. Demetra McBrayer – I would not have gotten through this without you and I will miss you and Nick so much. Ashley Kohel (and Benny), you keep me mostly sane and always laughing. Abby Schouten, you are my oldest friend and I cherish our friendship as well as our letter correspondence. Danny Jalilpoor, a.k.a. Agent J, how could I possibly summarize? You are my best friend and my biggest supporter. Once, you promised to proofread my writing through my PhD and beyond, and I'll hold you to that. Let's go get ice cream, please.

My professors are wonderful teachers, mentors, and friends: Dr. Dwonna Goldstone—this is all your fault, and maybe one day I'll realize who you think you are. Dr. Jon Lamb—you are the best. Our get-togethers made me feel like part of a family in Lawrence. Dr. Phil Drake—you are an amazing and thoughtful DGS, advisor, friend, and fellow bird-person. Dr. Maryemma Graham—I am so thankful I got to know you in my time at KU. I learn so much from you each time we talk. Dr. Ayesha Hardison—everyone in the department pushed me to ask you to join my committee, and I am so happy I did. Your feedback, intellectual conversation, and expertise helped me shape my fantastical ideas into a thesis I am so proud of. Dr. Nicole Hodges Persley—thank you for serving on my committee, for your theatrical insight, and for the valuable opportunity to see one of Lorraine Hansberry's plays onstage for the very first time.

This project would not have been possible without the reproductions of several unpublished plays from the Lorraine Hansberry papers, including *Flowers for the General*, provided by the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. My access to these materials was generously facilitated by the University of Kansas Libraries through an interlibrary loan.

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## Introduction

From her incipient activism in her time as an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to her work at Paul Robeson's leftist newspaper *Freedom* (later *Freedomways* magazine), Lorraine Hansberry's activist lifestyle primed her with the ability to connect her writing to the major social movements of the time. Hansberry, born May 19, 1930, lived in a tumultuous period: The Red Scare of the 1950s leading to the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg; the Greensboro sit-ins in 1960 catalyzing youth civil rights activism in the United States; and the African independence movement gaining traction, with Ghana declaring independence in 1957. Hansberry was an active participant in the social movements of her time and supported domestic and international civil rights causes. In an infamous meeting with Bobby Kennedy in 1963, Hansberry took a strong stand against the inaction of the federal government in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and expressed her belief that youth activists should be at the forefront of the civil rights movement.

In recent years, items in Hansberry's archived papers—diary entries, anonymous letters to the lesbian periodical *The Ladder*, and short stories published under the pseudonym “Emily Jones”—reveal and give dimension to Hansberry's identification as a lesbian. Along with her discursive and literary interaction with the gay and lesbian community, these elements evidence Hansberry's nascent attention to gay and lesbian civil rights. My thesis modifies the prevalent accommodationist reading of her most famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), which is often applied to Hansberry herself, through an analysis of her depiction of homosexual and lesbian identities in two of her lesser known plays, respectively *Les Blancs* (1970) and *Flowers for the General* (1955). These plays expand on radical ideas about anti-colonialism, race, gender, and sexuality, which Hansberry introduced in *A Raisin in the Sun* although they are obscured in the

present-day image of her. While not a prevalent theme in *A Raisin in the Sun*, an examination of the portrayal of sexuality in *Les Blancs* and *Flowers* highlights Hansberry's prescient and evolving ideas on the intersections between race, gender, and sexuality.

As Hansberry's role in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s is often neglected in histories of the period, I see parallels between the "myth" that permeates the historical memory of the civil rights movement and a reductionist approach to Hansberry's artistic legacy. In *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (2018), Jeanne Theoharis warns against romanticizing and memorializing the civil rights movement for political purposes, as it is often portrayed "as an almost inevitable aspect of American democracy rather than as the outcome of Black organization and intrepid witness" (x-xi). I argue Hansberry has been caught up in the same breed of "myth," one that romanticizes and memorializes the writer for political purposes, in order to further the illusion of "American exceptionalism" (Theoharis 138). Specifically, dramatic and literary critics, historians, and prominent figures in the Black Power movement consistently misconstrued *A Raisin in the Sun* as a "universal play" with a conservative, assimilationist agenda, simplifying Hansberry's complete oeuvre and effectively reducing it to a single play. Her other works include *Les Blancs*, *The Drinking Gourd*, *What Use Are Flowers?*, unpublished plays, short stories, musicals, and an opera as well as speeches, essays, and letters to the editor on a range of issues. Such misrepresentation of Hansberry's cultural production and social engagement does an injustice to her political activism as well as her other work.

Lorraine Hansberry's death at age thirty-four of pancreatic cancer in 1965, with only two published plays—*A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964)—resulted in a legacy almost entirely based on the notoriety of her first play. After she was



propelled to celebrity status, Hansberry continued her public activism, participating in town hall debates, fundraising efforts, and events utilizing her celebrity, such as the 1963 meeting with Attorney General Robert Kennedy, organized by James Baldwin. After Kennedy repeatedly refused to listen to Jerome Smith, a young activist, Hansberry walked out of the room, effectively ending the meeting (Baldwin, “Lorraine Hansberry at the Summit”). Despite her historical significance, the period between Hansberry’s death in 1965 and the late 1970s is marked by an absence of biographical information about her.<sup>1</sup> However, New Historicist scholarship emphasized that knowledge of the social context in which authors wrote is necessary to comprehensively analyze their writing. This approach combined with second-wave feminism’s focus on recovering “lost” women writers—specifically the black feminist recovery of black female writers<sup>2</sup>—resulted in a major shift in Hansberry scholarship. This shift began with editor Jean Carey Bond’s foundational, critical collection of essays on Hansberry, a special issue of *Freedomways* titled “Lorraine Hansberry: Art of Thunder, Vision of Light” (1979), which also provided an extensive bibliography on the playwright.

This recovery of Hansberry was focused on just that: a re-acknowledgement of her import to American culture and theatre. The *Freedomways* issue renewed interest in Hansberry and her work, prompting scholars to examine her lesser-known works and to approach *Raisin* differently. In her introduction, Bond partially attributes the “unaware[ness] of the range of [Hansberry’s] work” to the “major media’s failure to review *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry* or the autobiography *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*” (183).

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<sup>1</sup> Aside from the semi-autobiographical play *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1969), the sole Hansberry biography during this period was Anne Cheney’s 1984 book, followed by Steven R. Carter’s 1991 semi-biographical treatment of Hansberry’s drama.

<sup>2</sup> Examples include Alice Walker’s work on Zora Neale Hurston and the work of scholars such as Mary Helen Washington, Cheryl Wall, Hazel Carby, and Ann Allen Shockley.

Essays such as Adrienne Rich's "The Problem with Lorraine Hansberry" broach the discussion of Hansberry's sexuality; Margaret B. Wilkerson's "Lorraine Hansberry: The Complete Feminist" highlights Hansberry's sophisticated thoughts on gender inequality. This issue marks the origins of the recent Hansberry "renaissance." Margaret B. Wilkerson's feminist and biographical scholarship on Hansberry is foundational to the field, as her forthcoming literary biography will also undoubtedly be; Imani Perry's *Looking For Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (2018) is the first biography of Hansberry in decades; and filmmaker Tracy Heather Strain's documentary *Sighted Eyes / Feeling Heart* (2017) offers a moving visual biography of Hansberry.

While Hansberry clearly experiences sustained notoriety, her persistent reemergence evidences that there is more to be done. *A Raisin in the Sun* looms as Hansberry's magnum opus; however, it is equally as harmful to dismiss the play's significance and its place in Hansberry's literary development. Rather, this recovery work calls to mind Brittany C. Cooper's warning about second-wave feminism and its lack of "...engage[ment] with the content of what Black women intellectuals actually *said*, even as we celebrate all they *did*" (10, emphasis original). The aforementioned excavation of Hansberry began her initial recovery, but it is not yet a complete one; celebrating what Hansberry produced is part of this, but there must also be scholarship engaging her as an individual. What Hansberry "did" is represented typically in the oft-quoted introductory fact: with *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry was the first African American woman to have a play produced on Broadway. This is a major accomplishment. However, to stop there does an injustice to her multi-faceted canon: her editorials, essays, letters, speeches, and non-dramatic work—what she "said"—must be combined with what she "did." Along with Cooper's caution, I also heed the advice of Maria K. Mootry, whose work on Hansberry, sadly unfinished

before her death, remains a perceptive, relevant piece of feminist scholarship. Instead of “condemning Lorraine for not being this, that or, the other” scholars should engage with her work “as part of an organic, ongoing development which often included conflicting, even contradictory elements” (Mootry 3, emphasis original). Drawing on both Cooper and Mootry, I use Hansberry’s published work as a starting point to further explore her “organic, ongoing development” as a writer in her understudied works. In these works, Hansberry negotiates not only race and gender, but also sexuality, in order to explore the interconnected nature of these identities, significantly contributing to the development of critical feminist and race theories.

Despite my contentions about mainstream perceptions of Hansberry, her legacy is a powerful one. *A Raisin in the Sun*, published and staged in 1959, became the first play written by a black female playwright to be produced on Broadway, and both the play and 1961 film starring Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee remain staples of high school and college curricula. Among other major moments in the American civil rights movement and the African independence movement, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Greensboro sit-ins, Ghana’s election of Kwame Nkrumah, and Kenya’s election of Jomo Kenyatta, all occurred during Hansberry’s most prolific writing period from roughly 1954 to her death in 1965. These events influenced *A Raisin in the Sun*, and precipitated her involvement with organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)<sup>3</sup> and the American Committee on Africa (ACOA).<sup>4</sup> Drawing on an experience closer to home, *A Raisin in the Sun* is partially based on her father Carl Hansberry’s decision to move his family into a white neighborhood in Chicago. After the family moved in,

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<sup>3</sup> Steven R. Carter documents Hansberry’s SNCC involvement: in 1962, she “mobilized support,” and in 1963, she chaired a SNCC fundraising meeting at her home. The proceeds bought the station wagon “from which Cheney, Schwerner and Goodman were kidnapped.” She also wrote the text for *The Movement*, a photo-documentary book benefitting SNCC (“Commitment and Complexity” 42).

<sup>4</sup> James Meriweather writes that “The ACOA appealed for money to aid the victims of South African repressions, listing Hansberry as one of many “sponsors of ACOA’s Africa Defense and Aid” (191).

white mobs surrounded the house at all hours and even threw a brick through the front window, which narrowly missed eight-year-old Lorraine. When they were eventually forced out of the home, her father appealed his case to the supreme court in *Hansberry v. Lee* (1940). Although the court ruled in his favor, the case did not strike down restrictive housing covenants. However, the ruling did open 500 homes in Chicago to black families, and it served as an important legal precedent, as it was cited in the case that eventually abolished restrictive covenants. The trauma of this event clearly stayed with Hansberry, as did her father's subsequent disillusionment with the legal battle for civil rights in the U.S.<sup>5</sup>

Living during the onset of the Cold War led to Hansberry's awareness of nuclear proliferation and dedication to the peace movement. She was also involved with the Communist Party and the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian organization in the United States. The ensuing "Red Scare" and McCarthyism resulted in Hansberry's tendency to underplay her Leftist/Communist ties after the success of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Indeed, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) subjected Hansberry to covert surveillance from her *Freedom* days in 1952 until her death in 1965. Although the FBI had amassed quite a large file on Hansberry by 1959, an agent sent to a performance of *A Raisin in the Sun* (prior to its Broadway premiere) did not find anything amiss. The agent writes in a memo, "The play contains no comments of any nature about Communism as such but deals essentially with negro aspirations" (FBI 1). The agent does describe Beneatha's character in particular as espousing "propaganda messages" (2).

Summarizing the plot with surprising detail, including the discussions of anti-colonialism and

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<sup>5</sup> In an letter to the editor of *The New York Times* deemed "too personal" to publish ("The Black Revolution" 446), Hansberry writes: "The fact that my father and the NAACP 'won' a Supreme Court decision, in a now famous case which bears his name in the lawbooks, is—ironically—the sort of "progress" our satisfied friends refer to when they presume to deride the more radical means of struggle. The cost, in emotional turmoil, time and money, which led to my father's early death as a permanently embittered exile in a foreign country when he saw that after such sacrificial efforts the Negroes of Chicago were as ghetto-locked as ever, does not seem to figure into their calculations" (*To Be Young, Gifted and Black* 51). Carl Hansberry died in 1946 in Mexico, with plans to move his family there.

African independence, the agent concludes that “relatively few [audience members] appeared to dwell on the propaganda messages” (4). This evaluation ironically demonstrates what is so often misconstrued in the play: Asagai’s anti-colonialism and Beneatha’s fiery resistance to religion and gender roles are neutralized by the overall assessment that the play “deals essentially with negro [sic] aspirations.”

*A Raisin in the Sun* centers on the Youngers, a black family living in a cramped apartment on the Southside of Chicago. The impetus of the play is a check for \$10,000—a life insurance policy payout from Walter Sr.’s death. While her son and daughter, Walter Jr. and Beneatha, debate over the best use of the money, the matriarch of the family, Lena Younger (Mama), uses a portion to put a down payment on a house in a predominately white neighborhood. Through many mishaps and unfortunate events, the Younger family comes to a consensus and decides to move into the white neighborhood, despite the best attempts to dissuade them by a white representative from the homeowners’ association. The oft read “happy ending” of *A Raisin in the Sun* concludes with the family in their new home. However, this ending is also ominous: the Younger family faces racial harassment and mob violence as the sole black family in a white Chicago neighborhood during the 1950s.

Broadly, *A Raisin in the Sun* critiques the myth of the “American dream,” specifically its inaccessibility to African Americans, and it depicts racial discrimination and segregation as a prominent issue in the U.S. North rather than the South. Nonetheless, Hansberry’s “larger critique of American exceptionalism and Northern apartheid is often missed” in the play (Theoharis 138). While *A Raisin in the Sun* deals with topics that place Hansberry ahead of her time—integrating a formerly white neighborhood, gender discrimination, abortion, African independence, black beauty standards—the dominant interpretation of the play initially led

critics to overlook these themes when assessing its lasting significance. Mootry chronicles the varied reactions: “Blacks accused her of denying her race,”<sup>6</sup> “Whites accused her of exploiting melodramatic aspects of ‘the race problem’ in simplistic art form,” and “some feminist critics have implied evasion of her ‘closet’ sexual orientation,” citing Rich’s *Freedomways* article (3). White audiences interpreted it as “a celebration of the family’s triumphant achievement of upward mobility, masculine authority, and postwar affluence”; in contrast, black audiences generally “recognized the play’s racial and social protest,” but later on, “black nationalism...popularize[d] measures of ‘authentic’ blackness... to which *Raisin* would no longer qualify” (Smith 283).

*A Raisin in the Sun* was published and staged in a year Mary Helen Washington describes as “a crossroads moment for black leftist writers,” in which the “black left squared off against the conservative integrationists” (242-3). The convergence of these movements is illustrated through the 1959 American Society of African Culture’s (AMSAC) Conference of Negro Writers. Hansberry’s attendance and the later exclusion of her keynote address from its published proceedings<sup>7</sup> is a clear demonstration that her ideologies did not align with the “conservative integrationist” sect represented at the conference (Washington 246). This divergence helps frame the complications that exist in the modern interpretation of Hansberry and her writing: Despite the prominence it enjoys in the theatrical canon, there is a tendency to dismiss *A Raisin in the Sun* as “assimilationist” along with its author, as the plot is sometimes understood to champion a

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<sup>6</sup> This reaction stems from an interview in which Hansberry “declared herself ‘a writer who happened to be a Negro’” (Mootry 3). Robert Nemiroff tracks this quote’s origin to a 1959 *New York Times* interview with Hansberry, in which she is misquoted in purporting that *Raisin* “wasn’t a ‘Negro play,’” but rather about “people who happened to be Negroes.” In her papers, next to a clipping of the interview, Hansberry wrote: “Never said *NO* such thing. Miss Robertson goofed—letter sent posthaste. Tune in next week...” This quote later morphed into the fabricated quote Mootry references. Despite the fact that it “expressed the very opposite of the artists’ philosophy,” it nonetheless “became *the single most-quoted statement on Lorraine Hansberry in use*” (Nemiroff 286, emphasis original).

<sup>7</sup> Hansberry’s keynote address was published for the first time in 1971 as “The Negro Writer and His Roots: Toward a New Romanticism” (*The Black Scholar*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1981, pp. 2-12).

conservative, integrationist view. While Hansberry's invitation to the conference suggests this possibility, the exclusion of her keynote address, which Washington describes as "arguably the most radical speech of the conference" (246), signifies a stark sociopolitical difference.

Although the initial critical misinterpretation of the play was created by dominant white society's interpretation of the play, it was subsequently dismissed by black critics as the Black Power and Black Arts movements aimed to create black spaces and aesthetics separate from the white-dominated mainstream society. Contemporaneous critic Harold Cruse espouses that Hansberry "follow[ed] the developmental route that all leftwing Negro intellectuals eventually take—she became a full, unadulterated integrationist" (277). Cruse goes so far as to coin Hansberry, the only woman he dedicates an entire chapter to in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), as the "Joan of Arc of People's Integration" (410). In a striking reevaluation of *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1987, Amiri Baraka reconsidered this dismissal, explaining that while "we thought Hansberry's play was 'middle class,'" she "created a family engaged in the same class struggle and ideological struggle as existed in the [civil rights] movement itself and among the people" ("A Wiser Play..." 1). Cruse and Baraka's initial views of *A Raisin in the Sun* reflect the impression many early critics had, leading to a later dearth in critical analyses of the play that move beyond the "middle-class" problem of housing integration. This reductive reading subsequently leads to a misrepresentation of the playwright herself.

I argue the radical themes Hansberry introduces in *A Raisin in the Sun* are significantly expanded in her other works, specifically *Les Blancs* and *Flowers for the General*. Both the Broadway and film versions of *A Raisin in the Sun* were hindered by censorship. The 30<sup>th</sup> edition of the play "restores...a number of scenes, lines and passages cut from the original production which [Hansberry] later felt were important to the play" (5). These cuts were made due to the

“the exigencies and realities (both commercial and racial) of Broadway” (6). Hansberry’s original screenplay for the film also speaks to this censorship—rather than an expansion of the play or slightly differing from the 1961 film, “at least forty percent of the text [in the original screenplay] is brand new” (xvii). Although the themes in *A Raisin in the Sun* expanded upon in *Les Blancs* and *Flowers for the General* do not correlate exactly, both plays were unpublished before her death, and, thus, explore sexuality in a manner that was not likely to reach Broadway in Hansberry’s time. Further, I argue a more complex understanding of Hansberry is accessible by giving greater attention to how her portrayal of homosexual and lesbian identity is complicated when comparing *Les Blancs* and *Flowers for the General*.

The critical oversimplification of *A Raisin in the Sun* is indicative of a large-scale problem: the gaps in the American historical memory of the civil rights movement and its activists, particularly black women and gay and lesbian activists, as well as its connections to international black diasporic freedom struggles. Exploring Hansberry’s gay and lesbian representations and writing connects these gaps: she was a black woman involved in domestic and international freedom struggles, was in an interracial marriage with a white, Jewish man, and she also had relationships with other women. To praise *A Raisin in the Sun* as the entirety of her legacy perpetuates the erasure of these aspects of Hansberry’s identity which are reflected in her writing. It denotes Hansberry’s success with the play as an extraordinary exception to the rule, not as an introduction to themes expanded in her later work. *A Raisin in the Sun* introduced the idea of African independence on Broadway, which is expanded in *Les Blancs*; *Beneath* chronicles the complexities of being a young, college-educated black woman, something explored, albeit quite differently, in *Flowers for the General*.



### Revolutionary Homosexuality in *Les Blancs*

*Les Blancs* (1970) was “the first major work by a black American playwright to focus on Africa and the struggle for black liberation” (“Critical Introduction,” *Les Blancs* 31). Written in response to the “widespread misinterpretation of *Raisin*,” Hansberry saw *Les Blancs* as its “successor” (Abell 468). In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Joseph Asagai, an international student from Nigeria, is the vessel through which Hansberry introduces African independence as well as African heritage and its significance (or lack thereof) to African Americans. The theme of African independence is expanded in *Les Blancs*, as Hansberry believed that “the ultimate destiny and aspirations of the African people and twenty million American Negroes are inextricably and magnificently bound up together forever” (“The Negro Writer...” 6). While *Les Blancs* is the subject of a significant amount of scholarship, it is not regarded as the “successor” Hansberry envisioned. The play is discussed amongst literary and theatre scholars, but its 1970 Broadway debut was short-lived and received mixed reviews. However, the play is experiencing a revival in the present “Hansberry renaissance,” as it has been staged in several theatres in recent years.<sup>8</sup> Generally, scholarship on *Les Blancs* focuses on its connection to postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, its synthesis of African and European culture, and its connections to the American civil rights movement. Consequently, several unexplored avenues, especially those cohering around men’s same-sex and homosocial bonds, remain in the play Hansberry saw as her magnum opus.

The main character, Tshembe Matoseh, returns from Europe to his homeland, a fictional African country colonized by white settlers, to attend the funeral of his father, the former leader

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<sup>8</sup> Recent productions of *Les Blancs* include: Yaël Farber’s 2016 production at the Royal National Theatre in England; Gregg T. Daniel’s 2017 production at the Rogue Machine Theatre in Los Angeles; and Melinda Wilson Ramey and Lisa Thew’s 2018 co-production at the Sacramento State’s Playwrights’ Theatre in California.

of the Kwi people. Despite his Western education, white wife, and mixed-race child, Tshembe is involuntarily swept into the revolutionary tide fomenting amongst his native people. Tshembe's brother, Abosieh, converts and becomes a Roman Catholic priest. Their half-brother, Eric, was fathered by Major Rice, a white colonial administrator. Half-white and half-black, Eric oscillates between each community, neither of which fully accepts him, before allying himself with the Kwi revolutionaries. At the end of the play, Eric—and not the play's main protagonist Tshembe—throws a grenade and begins the armed battle for independence. Collectively, the Matoseh brothers are between communities—African and European, indigenous religion and Christianity, black and white—but unlike his brothers, Eric's conflicted identity transforms into a sophisticated revolutionary consciousness. Not only is Eric mixed race, but Hansberry also implies his sexual relationship with the white missionary doctor, Dr. Willy DeKoven.

While *Les Blancs* was posthumously published in 1970, Robert Nemiroff's critical introduction to the play dates Hansberry's initial drafts to the "late spring or summer of 1960" (*Les Blancs*, 31). She continued working on it until her death in 1965, "carr[ying] the manuscript with her into and out of hospitals" (34). Although Hansberry titled it as an "immediate visceral response" to Jean Genet's *Les Nègres* (1958), an absurdist play that implements a play within a play to explore racial prejudice and black identity, the plot and characters are not reminiscent of Genet's play. Rather, the title reflects Hansberry's concern that *Les Nègres* is "a conversation between white men about themselves" (32).<sup>9</sup> Hansberry proposed that this one-sided conversation "would be nullified by a drama wherein we were all forced to confrontation and awareness." As a result, interrogating the difficulties and effectiveness of interracial communication is a major theme in *Les Blancs* (32). Tshembe manifests these fault lines. In

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<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, *Les Nègres* is a significant play in African American theatrical history: it calls for an all-black cast, making it a rare opportunity for black actors to play main roles that were not stereotyped caricatures.

earlier drafts of the play, Hansberry describes Tshembe as “a committed revolutionary,” a stark difference from his later characterization (11).<sup>10</sup> In the published play, Tshembe is torn between two poles. Europe educated him and possesses his wife and child, but Africa pulls on his increasingly tenuous ties of brotherhood and ancestral responsibility.

Hansberry’s studies in African history root the play in a particular moment of history. Her uncle, Dr. William Leo Hansberry, was “one of the world’s foremost scholars of African antiquity” (“Critical Introduction,” *Les Blancs* 28). Hansberry herself was well-read in African history, “complet[ing] a seminar on African history under Dr. [W.E.B.] DuBois” (28). She completed a research paper on the Belgian Congo in this course, and *Les Blancs* references information covered in the historical texts Hansberry consulted for this paper (29). Additionally, she avidly read and re-read Jomo Kenyatta’s *Facing Mt. Kenya* (1938). *Les Blancs* draws directly on the Kenyan fight for independence from Britain, particularly the Mau Mau period from 1952-1960 (28). Specific elements of the Mau Mau period which are evident in *Les Blancs* include: the Kipande system, wherein the colonial administration forced Kenyan Africans to carry identification papers; the Kikuyu practice of oathing, which was modified and used by the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army to enlist fighters during this period; and the conflict between the use of non-violent vs. violent resistance between the Kenya Africa Union and the Kenya Central Association. The high number and subsequent influence of European, Roman Catholic missionaries in Kenya, who regularly established schools as part of their mission, is also reflected in *Les Blancs* (Gatheru).

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<sup>10</sup> Hansberry’s protagonist was initially female: her original “jottings” outlined “the return of Candace for her mother’s funeral” and the confrontation between her brother Shembe...and Abioseh...” (31). In this earlier draft, the play closed with “Eric, the youngest brother, “choos[ing] Shembe and with sister blows up Mission—and the past” (32).

Even as scholars interpret *Les Blancs* as a well-researched dramatization of the intricacies within the African independence movement of the 1950s and 1960s, it is also an allusion to ideological conflicts within the American civil rights movement—or a marriage of the two. Steven R. Carter reads *Les Blancs* as a deliberate synthesis of African and European culture by exploring the play’s comparisons between Tshembe and Hamlet, the traditional Kwi religion and Catholicism, and the very genre as a play (a European format) combined with oral storytelling (an African format). Philip Uko Effiong explores Hansberry’s depiction of Africa in *Les Blancs*. Although the play is rooted in historical references, he writes that it “is largely an abstract innovation from a Western perspective” with “genuine portrayals of Africa [...] alongside mythic modifications” (282). Joy A. Abell positions the play as an allusion to the American civil rights movement of the 1960s as well as advocating for African independence against colonial powers, but she cautions that, “despite the play’s inherent Africanness, readers must remember that it was written by an African *American* for an *American* audience” (459, emphasis original). Fanon Che Wilkins reads the revolutionary struggle within the play alongside Frantz Fanon’s theories outlined in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) in order to “resituate Hansberry as a postcolonial theorist,” emphasizing the sophistication of her thoughts on the colonizer and the colonized (202).

While scholars acknowledge Hansberry’s references to analogous African and African American movements in *Les Blancs*, I argue that Hansberry’s portrayal of homosexuality, specifically the relationship between Eric Matoseh and Dr. Willy DeKoven, is an important element with which to rethink Hansberry, as it reflects her radical racial and sexual politics that are often overlooked due to the intentionally innocuous manner in which Hansberry presents the relationship. I find Imani Perry’s exploration of Eric in her discussion of *Les Blancs* particularly

helpful to my analysis. Perry locates several aspects of Eric's characterization in James Baldwin, Hansberry's close friend. She also positions Eric as an illustration of the way in which Hansberry "believed in troubling gender," as "valor, courage, and truth...[are] not limited to the idealized masculine man" in *Les Blancs* (143-44). Perry writes that "all three brothers are called to question their intimate connection to whiteness," which "is also part of the inheritance of colonialism, of slavery, of what it meant to be Black in the modern world" (143). Furthermore, Cheryl Higashida argues that Eric and DeKoven's relationship articulates that Hansberry's "critique of heteropatriarchal racial and national identities and...interrogation of traditional gender norms" is "integral to the play's anti-colonial nationalism" (*Black Internationalist Feminism* 75, 79).

Although he is not the protagonist, Eric's presence is significant in many critical moments in the play. The first person Tshembe meets upon his return, Eric is associated with Africa before any dialogue occurs. The stage directions note Eric is "a *sodden, fairskinned youth in the late teens, in shorts, filthy undershirt and sneakers, and—incongruously—a clean white pith helmet*" (*Les Blancs* 52). Additionally, he is whistling "an African tune" and Tshembe, "hearing the whistle...sneaks up on the hut and joins in the tune." He then "throws his arms together straight out over his head and claps three times in the Kwi "sign" of greeting" (53). Tshembe greets Eric traditionally, in the manner of their mother's people. Though initially correlated with Africa, Eric is also knowledgeable of white European customs. While washing himself, Tshembe dries off with raffia (palm leaves):

ERIC. Wouldn't you like a towel?

TSHEMBE. Raffia works up the blood better! (56)

Eric assumes that Tshembe has adopted European customs despite Tshembe's excitement to return to his native customs. This introduces a persistent theme throughout the play of Eric's fascination with imported items—he is delighted at American cigarettes, whiskey, and a mirror imported from Holland. This scene also reveals that Eric wrote Tshembe with news of his father's death; the patriarch was the leader of the Kwi independence movement. Eric's letter to Tshembe is the impetus of the plot, an early indication of Eric's importance in the Kwi effort for independence.

Eric functions as a provocative character in the text due to his politics and his sexuality; both are heightened by the origins of his birth, which is initially set up as a mystery in the text. While the audience is led to suspect the local missionary assaulted Eric's mother, the truth is not revealed until a white journalist interviews Dr. DeKoven, late in the play:

CHARLIE. Yes. Eric. Well...he is the father, isn't he? Reverend Neilsen—with Abioseh's wife?

DEKOVEN. Yes...It was Abioseh's wife. She died in childbirth: the Kwi say from shame. But, Morris, it wasn't the Reverend...it was George Rice. (*Les Blancs* 116)

This conversation reveals that the Reverend intentionally let their mother, Aquah, die while birthing Eric: “to him it was clear: the child was the product of an evil act, a sin against God's order, the natural separation of the races.” While embodying the threat of miscegenation, Eric also functions as a “testament to three centuries of rape and self-acquittal” (125). In positioning Eric, one inherently divided due to his heritage, as the eventual harbinger of armed resistance against colonial power, Hansberry imbues his character with heightened significance: or, “the bastard child might be the one best suited to avenge the disinherited” (Perry 144). As the

youngest, Eric represents the future generation who must live with the aftereffects of colonialism, even if independence is achieved.

While both African and European characters express concern or derision towards Eric's relationship with Dr. Willy DeKoven, the relationship is not characterized simply as complicity with colonial forces. DeKoven is aware of the negative effects of his position as a white missionary doctor as well as the larger colonial structure his presence in Africa sustains. In the opening scene, DeKoven refuses to identify a Kwi revolutionary suspected of theft to the Major Rice and stresses to Charlie that "there is a *war* going on here" (*Les Blancs* 49, emphasis original). DeKoven regularly expresses dissent and disillusion with whites' presence in Africa. When the revolutionaries mount attacks on white missionaries in close proximity to the Mission, DeKoven argues against being ordered to carry a firearm, questioning: "Who will order me to *fire* it, Major?" before storming out of the room (70, emphasis original). DeKoven's understanding of the Mission's purpose is also markedly dissonant:

DEKOVEN. I came here twelve years ago believing that I could—it seems so incredible now—help alleviate suffering by participating actively in the very institutions that help sustain it. Oh, I have saved hundreds of lives; all of us here have. I have arrested gangrene, removed tumors, pulled forth babies—and, in doing so, if you will please try to understand, I have helped provide the rationale for genocide. (114)

The depth of DeKoven's disillusionment has remarkable prescience towards Africa's bleak future if the white colonizers remain. He also espouses that "the struggle here has not been to push the African into the Twentieth Century—but at all costs to keep him *away* from it" (113, emphasis original). Deftly engaging in ongoing debates on the manner in which Western countries aid developing countries, DeKoven's position has made him starkly aware that his

presence in Africa is part of a bigger picture. The Mission is a gear in the machine of Western imperialism, and DeKoven's medical practice is an even smaller cog. Both work together to arrest the post-colonial development of Africans, ensuring that they remain uneducated and dependent on white missionaries. Thus, DeKoven and Eric's relationship is complicated when considered within this hierarchy of colonial power that intentionally cultivates dependence among the colonized. The play explores whether or not the two men can truly be equals in a romantic relationship.

Hansberry does not explicitly identify either DeKoven or Eric as homosexual; the play's treatment of DeKoven's relationship with Eric is mostly conveyed in character innuendo. For example, when the revolutionaries lead an attack on a Mission site across the river, DeKoven reprimands Rice for demanding identification papers from Tshembe:

DEKOVEN. Well, it would appear that you may now go protect civilization someplace else, Major! This particular "terrorist" has turned out to be a son in mourning!

RICE. I will hope, Doctor, that had you seen those little children lying in their own blood tonight, you might finally be able to get your sympathies in order. Whatever the nature of your attachments—*elsewhere!* (*Les Blancs* 69, emphasis original)

Rice alludes to DeKoven's relationship with Eric and implies that their relationship inherently divides DeKoven's loyalties. Admittedly, this may be why DeKoven's understanding of the Kwi perspective is much more sophisticated than the other white characters. While not making any revolutionary pronouncements, DeKoven's articulation of the conflict demonstrates the effect of communication between the races, something Hansberry sought to emphasize in this play ("Critical Introduction," *Les Blancs*, 32). DeKoven's own sexuality is pointedly referenced when Dr. Marta Gotterling dismisses any possibility of a romantic partner at the Mission: Charlie



comments, “I take it that Dr. DeKoven isn’t...” to which Gotterling replies, “Dr. DeKoven *isn’t*” (84, emphasis original). This moment, and the fact that Eric and DeKoven “almost never share the stage,” is another marker of what Higashida terms “the play’s ambivalence toward homosexuality” (*Black Internationalist Feminism* 79).

References to the nature of their relationship begin early in the play as does the special attention DeKoven gives Eric, such as supplying him with alcohol. Eric is clearly an alcoholic enabled by DeKoven’s gifts. This dependency is shared, however, as Eric “can’t help it any more than” the “tortured” DeKoven “can help giving it to him” (*Les Blancs* 50). When Charlie inquires into DeKoven’s alcoholic gifts to “the natives,” he receives another oblique response: DeKoven doesn’t “give it to the natives—he gives it to Eric, which is something of a different matter,” and the stage directions indicate that Charlie “*is, of course, confused by this*” (50-51). Eric’s alcoholism, read within the colonial power structure, may be a metaphor for the dependence of the colonized on the colonizer: Eric is dependent on DeKoven, a white European, for his alcohol supply. This dependency is also an innuendo for their sexual attraction; both men’s inability to curb their impulses also refers to their romantic/sexual relationship. While the others seem to accept the existence of the relationship (or at the very least are not openly hostile), an interracial, homosexual relationship between a missionary doctor and a Kwi man would likely be unacceptable to either the missionaries or the Kwi.

Eric, along with many other elements of home, has changed in Tshembe’s absence. The changes in Eric, which Tshembe finds particularly disdainful, are consistently related to DeKoven. When Tshembe and Eric reunite, Tshembe offers Eric cigarettes:

ERIC. American cigarettes! Willy almost never has American cigarettes.

TSHEMBE: Willy—? Dr. DeKoven? He gives you things—

ERIC. Yes.

TSHEMBE. Cigarettes? Whiskey even? (*Les Blancs* 54).

The brothers' discussion is rife with an underlying tension about Eric and DeKoven's relationship. Tshembe does not pursue this line of questioning further in this scene, but it becomes evident that Tshembe finds DeKoven's gifts to Eric particularly egregious. Like Eric's alcoholism, to Tshembe, the gifts represent another form of dependency on the colonizer. As Higashida writes, from Tshembe's "heteropatriarchal perspective," the "sexual violence of colonialism... appears to take a new form" in Eric and DeKoven's relationship (77). This tension is further evidenced in the scene when Eric asks Tshembe if Kumalo, the leader of the non-violent effort for independence, will "support the terrorists":

TSHEMBE. When did you become interested in politics, Little Toy? Does your doctor whisper politics in your ear when he pours your whiskey?

ERIC. *He* discusses many things with me. (*Les Blancs* 57, emphasis original).

Tshembe's suggestive questioning gets at another issue he has with Eric and DeKoven: as DeKoven is older than Eric, there is undoubtedly an issue of power and influence in their relationship. Tshembe also implies that Eric is not mature enough to form his own opinion on the political situation in the country in which he lives, a country Tshembe has not inhabited recently. Responding to Tshembe's infantilization, Eric emphasizes that, as opposed to others seeing him as a baby brother or a drunk, he and DeKoven discuss politics and current events as equals. The conversations about their relationship evidence that others are also concerned that the relationship between the two men is exploitative and manipulative; however, Eric's responses emphasize that their relationship contains intellectual discussions and that the gifts are things Eric genuinely desires.

As the tension between the colonial powers and the Kwi revolutionaries heightens, Tshembe's exchanges with Eric become more intense and gesture toward Hansberry's synthesis of the complexities inherent in Eric's intersectional race, gender, and sexual identity. Eric's affinity for European items, which encompasses DeKoven and their homosexual relationship, does not equate to erasure of his African identity. Tshembe's anxiety about his own conflicted identity cause him to lash out over what he perceives as Eric's loyalty to his problematic white paternity, culminating in this exchange:

TSHEMBE. (*Picking up the mirror again and turning it about*) "Made in Holland." Also from Dr. DeKoven?

ERIC. Willy.

TSHEMBE. Willy! (*Grabs ERIC's bag and angrily empties it*) ...A woman's cosmetics! So, Eric, if you cannot quite be a white man you have decided to become a white woman? (*Cruelly knocking the pith helmet from the boy's head*) And toys like this! What else does he give you to make you his playtime little white hunter?

ERIC. He is kind. No one else is kind. You and Abioseh were gone. (*Les Blancs* 88)

While clearly implementing stereotypical associations of male homosexuality with behavior culturally encoded as female, this is the most open acknowledgement of the homosexual relationship between Eric and DeKoven within the play. It also reveals Eric's situation after Tshembe's flight to Europe, the younger Abioseh's conversion to Roman Catholicism, and the death of the older Abioseh: he was lonely, isolated in both communities due to his problematic paternity. Tshembe repeated references to the West when deriding Eric's belongings—the mirror from Holland, "little white hunter," and Eric's pith helmet—call to mind the pastimes of European colonizers in Africa. Tshembe attaches sexual innuendoes to the items when cruelly

hypothesizing about how they are used, but he also connects them to the West, demonstrating a link between homosexuality and whiteness in order to, in his eyes, invalidate Eric's African identity.

While others perceive a divided loyalty in Eric, he is not conflicted when his people need him. He unequivocally chooses to fight for independence. In contrast, Tshembe's internal conflict between his loyalties—Africa or Europe—is not explicitly resolved by the end of the play. When summoned to the council of elders in order to assume leadership of the independence movement after his father's passing, Tshembe refuses to answer the summons (*Les Blancs* 94). Hansberry suggests neither neutrality nor non-violent tactics will succeed in the fight for independence. As “*several AFRICANS rush across stage and off. ERIC is among them. He enters hurriedly and reaches for the shield of old Abioseh.*” His brothers skeptically question his actions, but the council of elders summons Eric to fight. He reveals that “they have asked me to take the oath” to join the revolutionary forces (109). While Tshembe and Abioseh refuse to believe Eric's dedication to the fight for independence, the Kwi elders on the council clearly do not associate Eric with the colonial powers.

In Eric, Hansberry crafts a character who, despite others' accusations, ultimately possesses the most cohesive identity. Others assume his identity crisis due to his mixed race, but Eric does not need an internal battle, akin to Tshembe's, to fight for the Kwi. Furthermore, Eric's homosexuality is vital to my overall assertion that Hansberry's understanding of the complex intersections between race, gender, and sexual identity is represented throughout her writing. Other characters equate his homosexuality with whiteness and, thus, a negation of his African identity; however, Eric's actions and dialogue do not support this. Of the three brothers, Eric is the one to don old Abioseh's spear and shield, even though he is not Eric's biological father.

With his immediate dedication to the independence movement, Eric becomes the most authentic son:

ERIC. I know it is time to drive the invaders into the sea. And that I shall carry the spear and shield of our father.

TSHEMBE. You are half European. Which part of yourself will you drive into the sea?

ERIC. I am African enough not to mock when my people call!

TSHEMBE. And what will you do when your doctor calls, Eric? It takes more than a spear to make a man.

ERIC. What does it take, Tshembe? [...] A white wife and son? (*Les Blancs* 108)

Tshembe goads Eric with a double entendre with what it takes to “make a man.” This implies Eric’s lack of manhood; while this references his age, it is also directed at his relationship with DeKoven. Upon finding the makeup DeKoven gave Eric earlier in the play, Tshembe ridicules him for wanting to become a “white woman” (88). Tshembe’s inclusion of DeKoven in this barb about manhood further establishes a link between homosexuality and emasculation. Perry reads this as Tshembe “[implying] that Eric’s intimacy with Willy is a sign of his debasement at white hands” (143). However, Eric then questions the source of Tshembe’s conflicted identity: his wife and child in Europe. While Eric’s relationship with a white man “debases” him in Tshembe’s eyes, Tshembe’s marriage to a white woman does not represent African “manhood” to Eric.

In the final scene, Tshembe shoots and kills his brother Abioseh with a pistol, and Eric tosses a grenade into the Mission, effectively launching the Kwi into an armed resistance (*Les Blancs* 128). Eric throwing the grenade that demolishes the Mission is a powerful image: the destruction of the Mission signifies the Kwi’s destruction of the vestiges of colonialism and paves the way towards independence. Barraged throughout the play about the impact DeKoven

and his white parentage have on the formation of his intellect and knowledge, in the final scenes, Eric demonstrates that he has cultivated arguably the strongest revolutionary consciousness in the final scenes. This is a fairly radical move by Hansberry.

Asagai's vision of independence and self-determination for his people and all African nations in *A Raisin in the Sun* is realized at the end of *Les Blancs*. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, when interrogating Asagai on the possibility that black leadership may be just as corrupt as white, Beneatha asks, "Independence *and then what?*" He retorts, "Don't you see that there will be young men and women—not British soldiers then, but my own black countrymen—to step out of the shadows some evening and slit my then useless throat? [...] And that such a thing as my own death will be an advance?" (*Raisin* 135-36, emphasis original). Through Asagai, Hansberry presents a revolutionary intellectual who aspires to lead his people into freedom, whatever the cost. Asagai's vision of African independence is put into motion in *Les Blancs*. When Charlie questions the difference between white and black rule, Tshembe replies, "I don't know, Mr. Morris, we haven't had much chance to find out" (*Les Blancs* 76). In *Les Blancs*, Hansberry chooses Eric, a mixed-race character who is coded as homosexual, to initiate the first proverbial punch in a battle for African independence. This move "challeng[es] homophobic ideologies of Black nationalism" (Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 77). Hansberry's characterization of Eric illustrates that the complex interaction between his racial identity, gender, and sexuality unite to play inevitable, and possibly the most important, roles within the revolutionary movements. Hansberry makes these themes more explicit in her unpublished play *Flowers for the General*.

### Lesbian Identity and “Personal Dishonesty” in *Flowers for the General*

Hansberry’s sexuality influenced her unpublished (and largely inaccessible) writing, leading to a dearth of analyses of their themes alongside her published writing. Privately, Hansberry identified as a lesbian and had relationships with other women.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, her short stories published in homophile magazines under the pseudonym “Emily Jones,” her unpublished stories and plays, as well as her interest in placing lesbian identity at the forefront of her writing, all demonstrate her deeply intellectual interest in lesbian desire. These works’ importance for Hansberry’s legacy is most interesting to me as a literary studies scholar. When “donating Hansberry’s personal and professional effects to the New York Public Library, [Robert] Nemiroff separated out the lesbian-themed correspondence, diaries, unpublished manuscripts, and full runs of the homophile magazines and restricted them from access to researchers” (Mumford 19). This censure contributes to what Kevin J. Mumford describes as “fifty years of...official closeting” (21). In 2013, Nemiroff’s daughter Joi Gresham, now executor of Hansberry’s literary estate, released these papers to Mumford for his research. While it is impossible to determine why Nemiroff withheld these documents, as Hansberry’s ex-husband and executor of her literary estate, we might assume that as guardian of her legacy, he removed anything that might cast a shadow on what one considers an exceptional career. Just as the understudied *Les Blancs* expands on ideas introduced in *A Raisin in the Sun*, I argue the homosexual, interracial relationship in *Les Blancs* is complicated further when one compares it to *Flowers for the General* (1955), one of Hansberry’s unpublished plays.

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<sup>11</sup> Imani Perry’s biography explores Hansberry’s sexuality: “Lorraine wrote in her diaries of [women’s] beauty, her desires, time spent together on dates and in the most intimate, sweet moments” (94). Perry also reproduces one of Hansberry’s “I like” and “I hate” lists, which “were two of the first publicly circulated artifacts asserting Lorraine’s sexuality.” Hansberry lists “My homosexuality” under both the “I like” and “I hate” columns (95).

Despite the “fifty years of...official[ly] closeting” Hansberry, lesbian archivists and scholars worked to highlight Hansberry’s feminist activism as well as her support of the lesbian community (Mumford 21). In the early 1970s, the editors and contributors from *The Ladder*, while not explicitly outing Hansberry, acknowledged her as part of the lesbian community and historical record; feminist scholar Adrienne Rich’s essay in the 1979 special issue of *Freedomways* speaks to her knowledge of Hansberry’s lesbian identity. Both the women from *The Ladder* and Rich published documents suggesting Hansberry’s identification as a lesbian decades before the release of documents that confirmed this. Mumford locates the hesitancy to publicly acknowledge this facet of Hansberry’s identity as partially residing in “anxieties over disclosure in African American history and the tension between respectability and personal sexuality [which] peaked at the height of the civil rights movement,” and, thus, he insists that no “civil rights scholarship or African American historiography has seriously considered Hansberry’s lesbian desire” (19).

This facet of Hansberry’s identity was initially hinted at in *The Ladder*’s book review column, “Lesbiana,” written by Gene Damon (Barbara Grier), an early contributor and editor of *The Ladder*. In a 1970 review of *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1969), Grier anticipates readers questioning the inclusion of the “informal autobiography” (compiled and edited by Robert Nemiroff) within a column reviewing lesbian literature: she names Hansberry as “an early N.Y. [Daughter of Bilitis] member,” who “contributed to this magazine in its very earliest years.” Grier also writes: “When Nemiroff, Hansberry’s caucasian husband, asked help of readers everywhere in the NEW YORK TIMES ‘capsule ads’ for material about and by Miss Hansberry, I wrote to him and offered her LADDER material. I did not receive, nor did I expect to receive, a reply” (3). While not explicitly outing Hansberry, Grier includes *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*



in a review of lesbian fiction intentionally, placing Hansberry within a cadre of lesbian authors. Grier's reflection points out Nemiroff's filter on Hansberry's biography and lesser known works. His omission of Hansberry's lesbian identity might not have been castigating but it was intentional and resulted in a significant absence in Hansberry's oeuvre and, thus, in scholarship.

When considering the "possible censorship, self-imposed and external" that may have plagued Hansberry, in her 1979 essay "The Problem with Lorraine Hansberry," Adrienne Rich quotes Daughters of Bilitis founders, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, in their book *Lesbian/Woman* (1972). They observe that "many Black women who had been involved in the homophile movement found themselves forced to make a choice between two 'Causes' that touched their lives so intimately. One of them wrote a play that was a hit on Broadway" (Martin 252). Rich includes this quote to allude, like Mumford, to anxieties among African Americans over the politics of respectability in the wake of the civil rights movement. The campaigns of the 1950s and 60s played no small part in Nemiroff's decision to omit Hansberry's interest in homophile organizations and publications. Martin and Lyon's veiled reference, and the efforts of other lesbian archivists and scholars, aim "not only to acknowledge [Hansberry] as a pioneer but also to reconstruct a more diverse genealogy of lesbian identity" (Mumford 21). To that end, for the remainder of my thesis I explore the connections between the portrayal of homosexuality in *Les Blancs* to that of *Flowers for the General*, a one act play which deals primarily with lesbian identity. While Hansberry did not publish any plays centered on lesbian identity, her unpublished work, including *Flowers*, demonstrates her complex, and at times contradictory, views on sexuality.

There are four total drafts of *Flowers*. The first is attributed to Lorraine Hansberry and contains mostly character exposition and a short scene; its skeletal nature suggests that it is the

play in its earliest stages. I refer to this draft as “Hansberry draft, 1955.” The second 1955 draft is attributed to Emily Jones (the pseudonym under which Hansberry published short stories in homophile magazines) and it ends at the “final curtain.” I refer to this draft as “Jones draft, 1955.” The third and longest draft appears after a cover page titled “From Notes to Atthis,” attributed to Emily Jones, 1956. This cover page is followed by a quote attributed to Sappho, the ancient Greek poet, widely associated with lesbian desire: “I loved thee, Atthis / Once, long, long ago [sic].” The cover appears to be a table of contents of sorts: it lists two one act plays, *Flowers* and *Andromeda, The Thief*, another lesbian-themed play, set in Ancient Greece; five short stories; and a list titled “(Published),” that includes the four Emily Jones stories published in *The Ladder* and *ONE Magazine*. The fourth draft is undated and unattributed; it is only labelled “Act I – Scene 2” in handwriting. It does not have a title page, but the typed text is identical to the Jones draft, 1956. I refer to this draft as “draft, u.d.” My analysis is based on the third version: the 1956 version of *Flowers* attributed to Jones; I refer to it as “Jones draft, 1956.” I occasionally refer to other drafts to discuss minor differences.

Whereas there is a plethora of scholarship on *Les Blancs*, scholarship on *Flowers* remains scarce, largely due to its inclusion as part of the unpublished materials in Hansberry’s papers and the absence of much criticism. What little exists presents *Flowers* as a fairly frivolous play that explores anti-militarism, lesbian identity, and homophobia. The play is set in a large, Midwestern university, and it takes place within a girl’s dormitory. The major contention rests on the girls’ participation in a parade in honor of a general visiting campus. While the house prepares for the parade, Marcia, a shy, quiet girl in the house who does not get along with the rest of the girls, and Maxine, the only girl in the house who befriends Marcia, discover and discuss each other’s desire for other women, albeit with vastly different outcomes.

While not dealing directly with *Flowers*, Soyica Colbert deftly situates Hansberry as a “freedom writer,” using her “short form writing” from the 1950s to outline Hansberry’s “black freedom ‘practice,’” which includes Hansberry’s lesbian-themed short stories published in *The Ladder* and *ONE Magazine* (157). Colbert’s deconstruction of Hansberry’s stories assists my reading of *Flowers*, as two drafts of the play are attributed to Emily Jones. In her analysis of *Flowers* and *The Apples of Autumn* (1955) (another unpublished play by Hansberry centered around lesbian identity), Cheryl Higashida suggests that Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (pub. 1949, trans. 1953) “helped Hansberry interrogate dominant views of tragic lesbians, represent lesbianism as an existential choice, and critique heteropatriarchal norms” (*Black Internationalist Feminism* 65). Higashida describes *Flowers* as a critique of “the intertwining of marriage with militarization, masculinity, homophobia, and Cold War nationalism,” and she outlines how the play draws on de Beauvoir’s theories of lesbian existentialism (68). Additionally, Imani Perry describes *Flowers* as “a melodramatically composed and yet realistic story,” adding that “it could easily have been true” (79).

Drawing on the work of Colbert, Higashida, and Perry, I am interested in positioning *Flowers* as a reflection and extension of themes in Hansberry’s published dramatic work. While the play undoubtedly has melodramatic elements, to discount *Flowers* on these qualities alone is a slippery slope that, potentially, re-enacts the simplification of Hansberry’s oeuvre that Nemiroff’s elision of her works on lesbian identity began. Working with Colbert’s analysis of the broad trajectory of Hansberry’s early short form writing as constituting a “freedom practice,” I would include *Flowers* within that category. Hansberry’s exploration of the importance of a person’s commitment to their social, moral, and political beliefs reflects her dedication to and belief in her activist lifestyle, amid the pressure of the Cold War militarism and heteropatriarchal

norms prevalent in the United States during her lifetime. Additionally, I contend that, in *Flowers*, Hansberry depicts lesbianism as a viable lifestyle that can be sustained, a contentious assertion in her time. Furthermore, Hansberry's dramatization of solidarity between the play's Jewish, African American, working-class, and lesbian characters further speaks to her understanding of the intersections between race, gender, sexuality, and class.

*Flowers*, much like *A Raisin in the Sun*, takes place entirely within a single setting—a girls' residence hall. The hall is on “the campus of a large mid-western university; three years after the close of World War II” (Jones draft, 1956). Both the year and location align with Hansberry's time at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She enrolled at the university in February 1948, studying art, geology, stage design, and English; she left in February 1950 for New York City seeking “an education of a different kind” (Carter, *Hansberry's Drama*, “Chronology”). Likely a reference to General Omar Bradley (Perry 32), the commencement speaker at UW the year Hansberry enrolled, the impetus of *Flowers* is an ROTC pageant in honor of that visit to the campus. A female student, either independent or a member of a sorority, is elected as queen by her peers and presents the general with a bouquet of flowers. As their residence hall houses solely independent girls, the majority of the girls decide to nominate Eleanor Haines (Elly) as queen to demonstrate that independent girls are equivalent to sorority girls. Maxine, “a brisk, confident, easy-mannered young woman of 21,” is staunchly anti-military and disagrees with this plan, but she eventually acquiesces to her peers.

Maxine's concession bothers Marcia, “a pretty, intense, 19 year old [sic] second term freshman,” who is disliked due to her affinity for poetry and classical music as well as her lack of sociability (Jones draft, 1956; 1). Marcia is also in love with Maxine, her only friend in the residence hall. Tina, another girl in the house, maliciously bullies Marcia about her desire for

other women, leading Marcia to attempt suicide. This plot device in particular lends to the general description of the play as “melodramatic” and employing the trope of the “tragic lesbian.” After this, Maxine and Marcia frankly discuss the realities of life as a young, lesbian woman in the late 1940s, and it is revealed that Maxine is in love with Elly (the ROTC queen). Marcia ultimately decides to leave the university and return home, realizing that she will never fit in with the other girls.

Early in the play, Maxine is highly critical of the ROTC pageant, describing “giv[ing] flowers to a general” as “obscene” (Jones draft, 1956; 6). She argues with the other girls vehemently when they demonstrate their lack of concern with the larger implication of supporting the pageant, but they are more concerned with the prestige for the hall:

TINA. Oh, Maxine, if there is another war everyone will be blown up any how [sic].

There aren't going to be any more old fashioned [sic] wars they say. So it doesn't matter about the rest – whether or not the boys sign up to be soldiers.

MAXINE. It isn't real to you, is it?

JULIE. What?

MAXINE. War. I mean we're just trading words back and forth aren't we? Dear God, to think the world may have to depend on us. (8-9)

The historical period during which *Flowers* is set is identifiable through Maxine's anti-militarism: the Cold War led to increased nuclear proliferation and precipitated concerns about humanity's prospects post-major nuclear warfare.<sup>12</sup> Despite Maxine's repeated denouncement of the military, war, and the ROTC pageant, the girls nominate Elly for queen. Maxine voices her disapproval: “We should all be out there with picket signs telling Kickmeyer or Hickmeyer to go

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<sup>12</sup> Hansberry explores these themes in more depth in *What Use Are Flowers?* (1961), included in *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays* (1970).

away – that we don't want him here! What's the matter with you kids-" (22). Maxine feels that she and the others have a responsibility to protest the general, who represents the military.

Maxine's dedication to anti-militarism reflects Hansberry's involvement with and interest in the peace movement. Hansberry's lecture written for Brandeis in 1961 evidences the peace movement's impact on her artistry and politics as well as complements the anti-militaristic theme in *Flowers*. Hansberry argues: "He who writes a play about soldiers or wars where there is no indictment of either wars or militarism, and by it implies their naturalness in the affairs of man is simply called a writer. He who writes a play which...indicts war or militarism is called—yes, of course, a 'social dramatist'" (Lorraine Hansberry papers; quoted in Lieberman 222). In an early draft of *Flowers*, Maxine's boyfriend Peter is a G.I., who is still serving abroad (Hansberry draft, 1955; 15). This change in detail between drafts reflects the amount to which Maxine's characterization revolves around her anti-military convictions, given that in the 1956 draft, Peter is a struggling actor in New York. In this version, it seems highly unlikely Maxine would date a soldier, considering she expected Elly to refuse the pageant nomination in protest of the military presence on campus.

Throughout the play, Marcia expresses her annoyance and frustration at what she sees as Maxine's inability to uphold her beliefs under pressure. Specifically, Marcia's critique of Maxine's halfhearted anti-militarism emphasizes the conviction Hansberry expresses in *Flowers*: that a person's morals and beliefs encompass every part of life—including sexuality.<sup>13</sup> After Maxine initially refuses to help with the campaign, Elly and the other girls beg her to abandon her professed anti-militarism; Maxine gives in and agrees. She justifies her decision to Marcia, remarking that "people like militarism" and that "sometimes you just have to go along with

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<sup>13</sup> Hansberry also explores the issue of commitment at length in *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964), whose protagonist is a white, Jewish man living in New York City's Greenwich Village in the mid-1960s.

things in life” (Jones draft, 1956; 23). While she articulates anti-Cold War sentiments here, as she argues against the implementation of Universal Military Training and the general concept of war, Maxine is simultaneously addressing her suppressed lesbian identity. This conversation occurs before the girls explicitly acknowledge their sexuality, but with that in mind, this discussion hints towards a different issue: the fact that Maxine intends to hide her sexuality and marry a man. When Marcia does not accept her rationalization, Maxine claims that she does not “really care or even think about the big issues,” and that she minds her “own business when the time comes and go along with the program – just like you better learn to do” (24).

Maxine indirectly alludes to the real reason why the others dislike Marcia: her sexuality. However, this still does not satiate Marcia:

MARCIA. [...] You’ve got a whole damned routine going. You really know how to be on the “in” in this world. How to fit and all that. [...]

MAXINE. [...] You make me seem pretty damn shallow.

MARCIA. Oh now – I shouldn’t do that. You don’t have a shallow bone in your body. You’ve got something much worse than shallowness – You’ve got what my mother tells me that they used to call personal dishonesty in the old days – whenever they were.

(Jones draft 1956; 26)

What Marcia terms as “personal dishonesty” is Maxine’s inability to uphold her beliefs when pressured by her peers. Her desire to live a “normal” life by marrying Peter, despite the fact that she is not attracted to men, compromises her ideals. To Marcia, this is repugnant. Although her peers’ dislike of her results in her isolation, Marcia is not willing to sacrifice her identity and interests in order to fit in with the heteropatriarchal norms the rest of the girls adhere to, or their disdain for intellectual pursuits like poetry and art. A byproduct of repressing her lesbian

identity, Maxine's "personal dishonesty" reemerges late in the play during her and Marcia's discussion about lesbian identity.

The household's perception of Marcia is apparent from her initial appearance in the play. Marcia listens to classical records loudly, disturbing her neighbor Mary, who is an African American student studying to become a doctor. Mary declares, "One of these days I am just going to walk in there and squeeze that artsy crafty little neck of hers!" (Jones draft, 1956; 5). Because of Marcia's association with poetry and literature, she is an easy target for the other girls, who are in college to have a good time or to study a more "valuable" subject, such as Julie's future in social work or Mary's medical ambitions. The majority of the girls in the hall view poetry as a "joke," something to be "memorize[d] for English exams then forgot," reinforcing Marcia's belief that they are vapid and uninteresting (17). Throughout the four drafts of the play, the others cycle through various nicknames for Marcia: The Creep; Edna St. Vincent; John Keats; Emily Dickinson; Sappho.

The three female poets Hansberry utilizes are all connected to lesbian desire. Sappho is a name now inextricably associated with the desire for other women. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that "many of Sappho's love poems are addressed to women," but that the "general association of her name with same-sex desire" stems from 18<sup>th</sup>-century English texts. Many historians and scholars alike now view American poet Emily Dickinson's lifelong correspondence with her sister-in-law as documentation of a romantic relationship between the two women.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, there is a striking parallel to the manner in which Hansberry's

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<sup>14</sup> Janet Mason quotes Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith's introduction to *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson* (1998): "Though Emily's feelings of love, desire, and longing for Susan have often dismissed as a 'school-girl crush,' the letters resonate with intelligence, humor, and intimacy that cannot be reduced to adolescent flurry." Additionally, "after [Dickinson's] death, any mention of Susan was carefully removed from her poetry and this essential body of correspondence was neglected" (98). Although Thomas H. Johnson published the most complete and unedited volume of Dickinson's poetry up to that



sexuality and work addressing lesbian desire were disclosed after her death. Variations on the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay's name are probably the most prevalent nickname used to refer to Marcia. Described as the "quintessential romantic American poet of the 1910s and 1920s," Edna St. Vincent Millay had overflowing audiences of women at her poetry readings and embodied a "heroine to...girls who grew up dreaming of becoming modern women writers." Millay also had relationships with both men and women, which are reflected in her poetry (Price 567).<sup>15</sup> As a burgeoning writer, I argue that Hansberry utilizes these female poets intentionally, as their poetry, like Marcia's, is intertwined with their love for other women.

Throughout the play, Hansberry oscillates between portraying lesbian desire as a viable lifestyle versus a fleeting phase. While the other girls tease Marcia, Tina's bullying is particularly malicious. As she is studying one evening, Tina grabs Marcia's notebook of lesbian-themed poems about "Miriam," who is clearly a stand-in for Maxine. After loudly reading and ridiculing the poems, she exclaims:

TINA. [...] Do you think that anybody has to read your silly, artsy craftsy little poems to know about your crush! "Miriam" indeed! You're a little too old for that, my dear. Nineteen is far too old for those crushes. Freshman or no! And I can tell you this...Maxine would slap your slimy little face if she knew you were thinking about her like that! (Jones draft, 1956, 27, emphasis original)

This altercation leads to Marcia slapping Tina, who exclaims "You queer little bitch! Who are you to do that to me!" (27). After Marcia rushes past everyone, crying, Tina snidely remarks, "That's not St. Vincent – that's Sappho," explicitly revealing Marcia's desire for other women to

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point, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, in 1955, it is unlikely that Hansberry had knowledge of Emily and Susan's correspondence in 1955-56.

<sup>15</sup> "Renaissance," a short story attributed to Emily Jones, was published in *ONE Magazine* in Dec. 1958, and shares its title with the 1912 Millay poem, which launched her career and remains one of her most well-known poems.

the others (28). In earlier drafts, the root of Tina's hateful regard for Marcia is more apparent. Blackmailing Tina into telling her what made Marcia so upset, Maxine threatens to tell the household that Tina was once in love with an older girl and distraught when she moved out (Jones draft, 1955, 28).

Tina's treatment of Marcia illustrates the belief, widely held amongst the other girls, that lesbian desire ends after adolescence. However, Tina's backstory in the prior draft reveals both her hypocrisy and the flimsiness of this tenet. Tina and Maxine's emphasis on lesbian desire as something of girlhood exemplifies what Kellie Sanders describes as the way in which homosocial bonds among women "have traditionally been...understood through one of two lenses: ...the 'friendship' discourse" or the 'lesbian' discourse" (888). The two generally do not overlap; heteropatriarchal norms operate under the assumption that female friendships "are presumed to be asexual," while lesbian relationships between women "speak to sexual interactions" (Sanders 891). However, Sanders points out that this binary is flawed. In reality, as Hansberry demonstrates in *Flowers*, these categories overlap; the distinction becomes blurred.

In her August 1957 letter to *The Ladder*, Hansberry candidly shares her revulsion for the animosity that often accompanies female friendships, along with the hopeful comment that it would be "very nice if...lesbian women in general might lend themselves...to showing that all relationships between women need not be those of 'cats' tearing at one another" (L.N. 28). Concurrent with Hansberry's advocacy for a new dynamic in female friendships, Marcia's discussions with Maxine present a promising possibility for the future. For Marcia, it is possible to envision living as a lesbian woman (albeit as openly as one could in the late 1940s and 50s). Marcia's certainty in her lesbian identity allows Hansberry to complicate the cultural distinction between female "friendship" and lesbian desire.

After Tina publicly ridicules Marcia, she attempts suicide by slitting her wrists. Maxine and Marcia discuss her romantic feelings in the wake of this emotional event:

MARCIA. Should I be ashamed? [...] Is it dirty? [...] Do you think it's dirty?

MAXINE. I honestly don't know. I wish I did. For the moment I cannot say.

MARCIA. Is it sick?

MAXINE. Not at 19 I guess [sic].

MARCIA. It won't go away with me, you know it. (Jones draft, 1956; 32)

While Marcia is concerned at the idea of Maxine judging her, she is also aware that her love for other women will not disappear with age. Although Tina insists throughout their discussion that Marcia is “too old” to have feelings for other women, this exchange demonstrates that Marcia has not internalized this assumption. Soon after this, Marcia reveals that she intuited that Maxine is in love with Elly, and Maxine fears her feelings are transparent:

MARCIA. You mean – Eleanor. No. Not if you went to her and said it – would she understand it. She would go and read all the ridiculous novels ever written about it and think in terms of names to call you and how to pity you and all that and she wouldn't understand it in the least. They don't. They always equate it with the crushes they had when they were fourteen and it isn't the same at all. I had those too. On boys too. Those on boys went away. (33)

Even though she is the youngest in the house, Marcia shows remarkable insight into the interactions of others and is able to distinguish between childhood crushes and what she feels for women at nineteen.

Further demonstrating the viability of lesbian desire at any age, Marcia reveals to Maxine that she saw two female administrators—Mrs. Snowden, their hall's matron, and Dean Pikes—

“kissing like lovers” in a parking garage on campus (Jones draft, 1956; 34). This inclusion highlights a lesbian relationship between two adults, further disproving Tina’s claims that lesbian desire is associated with girlhood. After giggling about this revelation, Marcia mentions that she thinks a male dean could be gay, and Maxine soberly warns her: “Don’t get in that habit. This thing of looking for the others...Its [sic] a crummy habit. It’s every where [sic] – so never be surprised and never make trouble for anyone” (35). It is a rare moment in the play, one in which Maxine’s age and experience, compared to Marcia’s, imbue her with a sense of authority; throughout the play, Marcia is characterized as wiser than her years. Maxine’s sober warning also foreshadows the reality of living a gay or lesbian lifestyle in the late 1940s. She acknowledges that they are “everywhere,” and the implication of “not making trouble” for these people is that their sexuality is automatically a secret that must be kept—as a matter of survival.

Relating Maxine’s flimsy ideals to the trajectory of her life, she and Marcia discuss the future, including heterosexual marriage. They discuss whether Maxine will truly “change” – in other words, whether or not she can subdue her lesbian desire and live a fully heterosexual lifestyle. Marcia asks, “But you are still going to marry him? Well isn’t that sort of – immoral. I mean the rest of the world will celebrate but won’t you be – disgusted with yourself for the rest of your life?” (Jones draft, 1956; 36). Marcia cannot fathom living a lie the way Maxine intends to—in fact, she sees it as morally wrong. While alienated and ridiculed by the other girls, Marcia leaves the university on her own terms rather than due to shame at her inability to assimilate.

Maxine’s insistence on her decision to marry a man is largely due to the effect of “compulsory heterosexuality.” This sacrifice of her desire for other women is a necessity:

MARCIA. And you plan to go through life without ever touching any one you really love?

MAXINE. It is necessary.

MARCIA. There must be millions who live like that; most people in fact. How very ugly.

I don't know that I care very much for such a world. (Jones draft, 1956; 37)

Hansberry's August 1957 letter to *The Ladder* explores the idea of "heterosexually married lesbians" and admits she is "speaking personally as well as abstractly here" (L.N. 27). Utilizing Hansberry's letter in her exposition of the concept, Rich describes compulsory heterosexuality as a "man-made institution...as if, despite profound emotional impulses and complementarities drawing women toward women, there is a mystical/biological heterosexual inclination, a 'preference' or 'choice' which draws women toward men" ("Compulsory Heterosexuality..." 637). This discussion is also reflective, as Higashida points out, of de Beauvoir's emphasis in *The Second Sex* that lesbianism is a "choice, arrived at in a complex total situation and based upon a free decision" (de Beauvoir, 417; quoted in Higashida 66).<sup>16</sup>

Hansberry's reference to "heterosexually married lesbians" is likely self-directed, given her marriage to Robert Nemiroff, a white, Jewish man. The two met in a picket line protesting racial discrimination; Nemiroff was still married when they initially met, but he and Hansberry married in 1953. They spent the night before their marriage on June 19, 1953 picketing the federal courthouse in Chicago in protest of the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (Perry 63-64). Nemiroff's success co-writing the 1956 song "Cindy, Oh, Cindy" allowed Hansberry to dedicate her time entirely to writing, calling to mind her connection between the social and economic pressures on women to enter into a heterosexual marriage (L.N. 28). Perry's chapter "Sappho's Poetry" charts Hansberry's romantic experiences with women, most of which

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<sup>16</sup> In an unpublished essay on *The Second Sex*, Hansberry writes that she considers it to "be the most important work of this century" and that, "after months of study," she put the book "in the most available spot on her 'reference' shelf" ("Simone de Beauvoir" 130).

occurred after she and Nemiroff married. While the couple separated sometime around 1957 (Mumford 17), they were not divorced until 1964, in Mexico (“Miss Hansberry”). It is clear that the two remained close friends despite this, and that they also sustained their working relationship. In the same 1957 letter, Hansberry emphasizes her distaste for the assertion that “heterosexually married lesbians” can liberally commit adultery when “the violations involve women rather than men” (L.N., 28). Hansberry’s emphasis on this point suggests that she and Nemiroff reached a consensus on this aspect of their marriage.

Despite the other girls’ disdain for Marcia, Hansberry cultivates solidarity between four of the girls: Marcia is a lesbian; Maxine is Jewish; Mary is the only African American student in the hall; Julie is from a working-class family and, thus, must finance her own education. When Julie laments the privilege demonstrated by wealthy students, Mary agrees:

JULIE. But anyhow, I didn’t get a scholarship. I don’t have a damn thing in this world but my own two hands to carry trays and the notion, for some reason or other, that I want a college degree so that I can be a social worker and go back to that broken down neighborhood [sic] of mind [sic] or some other like it, and try to [...] push and pull a few other kids the hell out of there so that maybe they can make it through this rotten life-

MARY. You know what, Julie? You overdramatise everything when you get to feeling like you are proletarian polly or some damn thing – But, to tell the truth, you’re right.

TINA. Well, you would think so.

MARY. You go to cheerful hell for me, darling! (Jones draft, 1956; 11-12)

While Mary thinks Julie overzealous in her lamentation of the middle- and upper-class students at their university, she voices her support for Julie’s overall sentiments. However, Mary does not appreciate Tina, a wealthy, upper-class white student, pointing out this kinship.

In her discussion of Hansberry's lesbian-themed short stories published as Emily Jones, Perry acknowledges that the majority of these stories do not "feature Black characters or focus upon race at all." Perry speculates that race might have "complicated matters" for Hansberry, or that "she was simply trying to prove what her largely white audience was seeking" (88).<sup>17</sup> New York City's Greenwich Village, where Hansberry lived as an adult, was an epicenter of gay and lesbian life in the 1950s and 60s, but that life was overwhelmingly white. However, close analysis of these stories reveals that Hansberry did not completely "whitewash" her lesbian-themed writing. Given Perry's analysis of the short stories, I believe it is useful to compare the milieu of Hansberry's writing published under her pseudonym to that of *Flowers*, as two drafts of the play are attributed to Jones. While Mary is the sole African American student in the residence hall (much like Hansberry's own experience desegregating her dorm at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1948) her racial isolation is not explored through her dialogue in the play, except for one reference in an earlier draft to her "neighborhood back home," implying it would demonstrate to the (white) girls "what misery is...and learn how people ~~ind~~ [sic] endure it" (Jones draft, 1955; 29).

Making this solidarity increasingly apparent, Elly, who is elected pageant queen and also the object of Maxine's affections, does not express the same understanding of differences in race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Concerned about offending Maxine by commenting on her Jewish heritage, Elly remarks, "I never think of you as being Jewish or anything like that" (Jones draft, 1956; 39). Elly elaborates, conjecturing as to why Maxine switched rooms with her:

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<sup>17</sup> Perry writes of two Jones pieces which deal most directly with race: one unpublished story and "Chanson du Konallis," a short story published in *The Ladder* in 1958 (88).

ELLY. [...] You were the first Jew that I had ever known and I used to worry about saying the wrong thing all the time. We didn't have any at home, Jews I mean. [...] Are you afraid with Mary like that sometimes?

MAXINE. You mean about race? No. Oh – we've both pulled goofoffs – but we straighten it out and go on from there. It doesn't get very complicated if you don't make it so.

ELLY. I should think it would be hard to live with a Negro – because of that. Even Mary is sensitive. Do – do you know what I used to think when you first stopped living with me to go in with Mary? [...] I thought that it was because she was a Negro and that you would feel more at ease or something. (39)

Although the truth behind Maxine switching rooms is that she is in love with Elly and desperately trying to live a heterosexual life, Elly reveals her suspicion that Maxine and Mary share a bond that she and Maxine cannot. This creates a complication in their discussion: while Elly believes she and Maxine grew apart due to ethnic differences, in reality, Maxine's sexuality caused the separation. Elly feels that she is discussing a sort of "open secret" by discussing racial/ethnic differences, but their conversation works to stifle another secret—Maxine's sexual difference.

Hansberry's intersectional racial and ethnic awareness as well as class-consciousness is apparent in *Flowers*. Hansberry explicitly draws this connection in a 1955 draft of the play. In this version, it is revealed that Tina, who bullies Marcia because of her desire for other women, was once in love with another girl, and was distraught when the girl moved out:

MAXINE. No...neither did I...but if you want to understand it- ask Mary...Maybe she can explain it to you...maybe she can tell you whether it is the same among her people as



mine...That the worst among the anti-semites in the eye of the Jew...is the Jewish anti-semite. That is why I hate you in this moment, Tina. (Jones draft, 1955; 28)

Maxine implies that Tina hates the very thing she is: a lesbian. Indeed, Tina exclaims that Maxine is “practically calling [her] a Lesbian-” (Jones draft, 1955; 28). In drawing this comparison between herself, Tina, and Mary, Maxine expresses the solidarity possible between African Americans, Jewish people, and lesbians. While I am not equating these identities or their experiences with subjugation, Hansberry purposely and repeatedly draws this connection between historically oppressed peoples.<sup>18</sup> It is notable that this theme of solidarity is present in Hansberry’s early work, especially when compared to the lack of racial diversity in the majority of her Emily Jones fiction.

The concept that African Americans and gay and lesbian people were similarly affected by discrimination was fairly novel at this time. Hansberry deftly draws this connection in her May 1957 letter to *The Ladder* discussing a recent call for lesbians to behave and dress according to acceptable societal standards. She writes, “As one raised in a cultural experience (I am a Negro) where those within were and are forever lecturing to their fellows about how to appear acceptable to the dominant social group, I know something about the shallowness of such a view as an end in itself” (L.H.N., 27). While the term is anachronous in the time this letter was written, Hansberry explores the “politics of respectability,” a term Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham originally used in the context of the women’s movement in the Black Baptist Church between 1880 and 1920. The women “adhered to a politics of respectability that equated public behavior with individual self-respect and with the advancement of Americans as a group,” behavior which would “earn their people a measure of esteem from white America [...]” (Higginbotham 14).

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<sup>18</sup> Hansberry also explores this connection in *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (1964), which features a Jewish protagonist, an African American character in an interracial relationship, and a gay male character.

Hansberry's staunchly middle-class upbringing meant she was familiar with the behavioral expectations for "respectable" black women, regardless of whether or not she obeyed them.<sup>19</sup> This correlation between the mode of behavior and dress required from both black and LGBT communities in order to be deemed "respectable" shows Hansberry connected these ideas at an early stage in her writing career, while likely wrestling with these expectations herself, as the youngest daughter of a prominent, middle-class black Chicago family, two years into a marriage with a white, Jewish man. These conflicts manifest themselves in *Flowers*.

Though Mary and Julie are not kind to her throughout the play, Marcia feels enough affinity towards them to separate them from her general dislike for most of the girls. It is no coincidence that the openly lesbian character in the play finds some relation with a character who is Jewish, one who is African American, and one who is staunchly working-class. This element illustrates Hansberry's keen observations of social behaviors at a remarkably early stage in her career. At the end of the play, Maxine and Marcia have a final conversation before Marcia leaves the university and returns home, unwilling to hide her sexuality to fit in. Maxine asks if she wants to tell the other girls goodbye:

MARCIA. You could tell Mary good bye [sic] for me, I guess. Mary's all right – just too God-damned "in" like the rest of them. And Julie. Say goodbye to Julie for me. For some nutty reason – I like Julie.

MAXINE. Julie is good.

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<sup>19</sup> Hansberry writes: "But we are all shaped, are we not, by that particular rim of the soup-bowl where we swim, and I have remained throughout the balance of my life a creature formed in a community atmosphere where I was known as—a 'rich girl.'" In the midst of the Great Depression, Hansberry's mother sent her to public school in a white fur coat, resulting in a beating from her classmates, and this incident affected her immensely: "I think it was from that moment I became—a rebel..." and "antagonistic to the symbols of affluence" (*To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, 63-4).

MARCIA. She knows how to get along in the world – like you. I guess those are the ones I'll be stuck on. (Jones draft, 1956; 41)

Despite the fact that Mary and Julie give Marcia a hard time along with the rest of the girls, Marcia identifies them as the only two to whom she wishes to say goodbye. The gesture signifies the commonalities between various modes of oppression. This, paired with Hansberry's examination of commitment and lesbian identity, illustrates themes so vital to her life and published writing, even in a play directed at a white audience.

*Flowers* is a play which, on the surface, seems fairly melodramatic and frivolous. However, Hansberry's depiction of the importance in upholding sociopolitical beliefs; the possibility of a sustainable lesbian identity; and the commonalities between the lesbian, Jewish, African American, and working-class characters all unite to create a complex play. Hansberry's interest in lesbian issues is evidenced in *Flowers* and explored in her two letters to *The Ladder*. The play's discussion of lesbian identity anticipates current theoretical conceptions of female sexuality, same-sex relationships, and homosocial bonds. Additionally, when compared to the layered portrayal of homosexuality in *Les Blancs*, *Flowers*'s place in Hansberry's complete oeuvre becomes more defined. In *Les Blancs*, Hansberry establishes Eric as a gay, revolutionary figure, ultimately positioning his sexual identity, despite its contradictions, as enabling Eric's true revolutionary consciousness. In *Flowers*, despite her isolation due to her sexuality and affinity for poetry, Marcia has a clear sense of her identity as a lesbian and critiques Maxine for her weak sense of self. At an early stage in her writing career, Hansberry directly opposes Maxine's acquiescence to heteropatriarchal norms, locating the firmest sense of identity and commitment to moral principles in the play's youngest character: Marcia, a lesbian woman.

## Conclusion

The connection between *Flowers for the General* and *A Raisin in the Sun* became evident to me at the Kansas City Melting Pot Theater's 2020 spring production of the latter play in February 2020, directed by Nicole Hodges Persley. This year marks the 60th anniversary of its Broadway premiere. In the opening of Act III, Beneatha and Asagai discuss her ambitions to become a doctor. I immediately thought of Mary, the African American student studying to become a doctor in *Flowers*. Hansberry saw Beneatha as "just me at that age, during my two years at the University of Wisconsin" (quoted in Mumford 16). While I do not read Mary as Hansberry's semi-autobiographical figure in *Flowers*, Hodges Persley's production allowed me to connect Hansberry's characterization of Beneatha to *Flowers*. Throughout the play, Beneatha's interests are derided as fleeting hobbies—horse riding, playing guitar, her interest in Africa. The family's dismissal of Beneatha, a passionate, young college-aged woman in search of her identity, always strikes me as stemming from her age and gender. Hansberry imbues the college-aged women in *Flowers* with a confidence and passion similar to that of Beneatha.

Comparably in *Les Blancs*, Hansberry creates Eric, a homosexual character whose complicated racial and sexual identity results in a powerful, anti-colonial revolutionary consciousness. Despite the fact that the council asks Tshembe to lead, and that Abioseh shares a name with their father, it is Old Abioseh's illegitimate son, Eric, who assumes their father's shield and spear, literally and figuratively. Hansberry's depiction of homosexuality in *Les Blancs* is expanded in her portrayal of lesbian identity in *Flowers for the General*.

In the unpublished *Flowers for the General*, Hansberry explores lesbian identity in a manner that would have been impossible on Broadway at that time. This is especially clear when considering the internal and external censorship of Hansberry's published writing due to its

radical racial politics, as well as her use of a pseudonym in her lesbian-themed work. In *Marcia*, Hansberry depicts a character whose identity has evolved as compared to the other girls, especially Maxine. Maxine's inability to uphold her own morals, or her "personal dishonesty," stems from the pressure from a heteropatriarchal society for women to enter into a heterosexual marriage, despite the fact that Maxine is a lesbian. In their respective plays, Eric and Marcia function as the characters with the most defined sense of "personal honesty." They do not mask or suppress their sexuality, but rather integrate it as part of their identity despite facing constant judgement and the threat of homophobic violence.

While *A Raisin in the Sun* is clearly the best-known example of Hansberry's talent, I contend it is just one brilliant example among many in Hansberry's oeuvre. She did not leave behind the themes in *A Raisin in the Sun*, but rather, her short life did not allow her expansion of these themes to see production and publication. I aim to lessen the shadow Hansberry's most famous play casts over her other work while at the same time recognizing its importance to Hansberry and American theatre. Hansberry's legacy merits further exploration. Her papers contain stories, plays, letters, poems, and other documents which illustrate a remarkably prescient intersectional negotiation of race, gender, sexuality, and class. In 1979, Adrienne Rich noted her "frustrat[ion] that the Hansberry papers are not simply accessible in an archive open to the public" ("The Problem..." 248). In 2004, Kimberly Springer noted that the lack of "access to [Hansberry's] archives" restricts material that "would add entirely new dimensions to women's history" (30). Hansberry's papers, housed at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, were made available to the public in 2010. In 2020, the next step is the complete digitization of Hansberry's papers so that scholars, graduate students, and those outside academia can engage the full extent of her identity, activism, and written work.

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