

To Be a Man: A Re-Assessment of Black Masculinity in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Les Blancs*

Julie M. Burrell

Abstract

The first Black woman to pen a Broadway play, Lorraine Hansberry scripted a majority of male protagonists. Critics tend to see Hansberry's depiction of Black men as either an unfortunate departure from her feminist concerns, or as damaging representations of Black masculinity. In contrast to such views, this essay maps the trajectory of Hansberry's career-long project of scripting positive visions of Black masculinity, from the politically progressive, while still patriarchal, structures of masculinity in *A Raisin in the Sun*, to the heterogeneous performances of revolutionary masculinity in *Les Blancs*. Further, in her role as public intellectual, Hansberry questioned prevailing assumptions about masculinity during her time. In the pages of *The Village Voice*, Hansberry challenged a group of white writers she termed the "new paternalists," including Jean Genet and Norman Mailer, in order to dismantle stereotypes of Black men as violent and hypersexual.

At the close of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Mama Younger makes this observation about her son, Walter Lee Younger: "He finally come into his manhood today, didn't he? Kind of like a rainbow after the rain."^[1] This positive evaluation of Walter's masculinity marks a sea change in the female characters' perceptions of Walter, who previously had been viewed as irresponsible, immature, and as not living up to the precedent set by his father, Big Walter. By the end of the play, however, Walter's position as head of the Younger household is substantiated by his decision to move the family out of their Chicago tenement and into the white suburban enclave, Clybourne Park. Walter thus averts what could have been the play's potentially tragic denouement—the dissolution of the Younger family in the deadly Southside ghetto—with action the women in his family find nobly masculine. That Walter chooses the more difficult road here, the path of becoming a leader on the Northern civil rights front, specifically for de-segregated housing, and that he does so with the help and not the hindrance of Mama, are often overlooked in examinations of *Raisin*.

George C. Wolfe, who famously satirized *A Raisin in the Sun* in "The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play" sketch in his play *The Colored Museum*,^[2] summarizes the drama of *Raisin* as a set of

contestations between Walter and Mama: “will the overbearing Mama allow her children to come into their own, will the son assert himself and claim his manhood, will they move into the white neighborhood.”^[3] The belief that Mama Younger’s authority comes at the price of Walter’s emasculation is a common one. The prevalent view of masculinity in *Raisin* casts Mama as emasculator and Walter as a man-child who must seize his masculinity by surmounting his mother’s stifling influence; however, this essay will show that such analyses are based on a common misperception of Hansberry’s representation of Black masculinity.^[4] When examined at all, critics tend to view Hansberry’s portrayals of Black masculinity either as an unfortunate departure from her feminist concerns, or as indicative of her damaging representation of Black men.^[5] In contrast to such views, I will demonstrate that Hansberry’s representations of Black men and masculinity are not only positive but progressive, in that the male characters she creates eventually contest oppressive capitalist and colonial systems. This essay maps the trajectory of Hansberry’s career-long concern with scripting progressive Black masculinity, from the politically progressive structures of masculinity in *A Raisin in the Sun*, to her debates over modernist cultural appropriations of Black masculinity in the pages of *The Village Voice*, to the heterogeneous representations of revolutionary masculinity in *Les Blancs*. Fundamental to Hansberry’s progressive masculinity is her creation of male characters who contest the linked oppressions of race, class, and gender.

Hansberry’s choice to underscore the struggle over masculinity in *Raisin*, her first professionally produced play, is one that continued to resonate throughout her entire career as a playwright and public intellectual. By the end of *Raisin*, Walter has not conquered Mama by becoming a man, but rather, with her help, he has forged a progressive Black masculinity that supports, and in turn is bolstered by, the women in the Younger family. Walter positions himself as a leader in the Northern civil rights movement on the front lines of the battle for de-segregated neighborhoods and affordable, safe housing for African Americans. Likewise, in Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*, the protagonist Tshembe Matoseh’s shifting definitions of manhood lead him to take action based on the revolutionary masculinity modeled for him by his gay half-brother. Hansberry’s commitment to reframing masculinity was also evident in her role as public intellectual. Upon the success of *Raisin*, Hansberry became a sought-after authority on matters of “the Negro question.” Hansberry used this spotlight to articulate a leftist, progressive view of race relations, essential to which was her defense of Black men against tendencies to fetishize and exoticize them.

The most incisive of recent scholarship on Hansberry has re-situated her as an important member of the mid-century Black left and the feminist vanguard. Hansberry is probably the most well known of a group of largely overlooked Communist women artists and activists, including Alice Childress, Claudia Jones, and Louise Thompson Patterson, who argued Black women were in a unique position to contest the intersection of racist, sexist, and classist oppressions. Recent formulations of Hansberry as a “Black left feminist” and a “Black international feminist” have demonstrated the ways in which she grounds her writing—a wide array of political speeches, journalism, and drama—in a critique of racism, imperialism, and capitalism.^[6] Hansberry was

unique among the Black left feminists of the 1950s-60s, however, in her concern for the specific oppression of Black men. This essay will establish the ways in which Hansberry challenges prevailing assumptions about masculinity during her time and, further, depicts progressive Black male characters. Hansberry's "progressive Black masculinity" confronts what Patricia Hill Collins terms "hegemonic masculinity," which is constituted by the implementation of patriarchal power in a white supremacist society.^[7] In Hansberry's work, progressive Black masculinity is substantiated by action taken by men, action that confronts white supremacist capitalism and imperialism, as well as intersectional oppressions of race, gender, and class. In her plays, Hansberry attempts to find common ground for progressive Black masculinity and Black feminism to work to defeat patriarchal, white supremacist regimes detrimental to Black men and women. By taking into consideration Hansberry's Black left feminism, we can expand our understanding of her representations of the global, Black male experience, in both the civil rights era United States and the time of widespread anticolonial resistance in Africa.

A Raisin in the Sun's Masculinities

Rather than perceiving the central conflict in *A Raisin in the Sun* as Walter asserting his masculinity against his mother's dominance, I argue that the core crisis in *Raisin* comes from Mama's and Walter's competing versions of masculinity: Mama's, a masculinity that stems from a life-affirming Black tradition; Walter's, a capitalist masculinity that depends upon being the family's sole provider and a wealthy power player. When Mama receives a \$10,000 life insurance payment upon the death of her husband, these opposing conceptions of masculinity come to a head. Mama takes part of the money and makes a down payment on a home in a white neighborhood, Clybourne Park, though Walter wanted to invest in a liquor store. Mama finally capitulates, and hands over the remaining money to Walter, which he promptly loses in his investment scheme. Walter plans to recoup the lost funds by accepting money from the head of the white "welcoming committee," Karl Lindner, who offers to sell the Youngers back the Clybourne Park home at a financial advantage, and so keep the Black family from his neighborhood. Walter, however, eventually comes to see masculinity as his mother does—pride in his heritage—and so finds he must reject Lindner's money.

The introduction of the money into the family exacerbates Walter's crisis of masculinity, but does not produce it. Rather, Walter's subscription to hegemonic masculinity has caused him immense psychological damage. The liquor store investment will be, Walter believes, a springboard for his transformation into a wealthy businessman. When he describes his vision of the future to his son, Travis, Walter's fantasies of being a high-powered executive and suburban patriarch play out like any number of 1950's sitcoms and films:

I'll come home and I'll be pretty tired, you know what I mean, after a day of conferences and secretaries getting things wrong the way they do... 'cause an executive's life is hell, man—(*The more he talks the farther away he gets*) And I'll pull the car up on the driveway... And I'll come

up the steps to the house and the gardener will [...] say, "Good evening, Mr. Younger." [...] And I'll go inside and Ruth will come downstairs and meet me at the door and we'll kiss each other.^[8]

Walter's feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness stem from his perceived lack of masculinity, which access to wealth, he believes, will resolve.

Walter's desire to be part of the rising middle class has inspired negative assessments of Hansberry's representation of Black men. Keith Clark argues, "*A Raisin in the Sun* is rooted in a tradition of African American writings which equate *Black* masculinity with a pathological desire to appropriate debilitating Western notions of *white* masculinity."^[9] Michael P. Moreno asserts that Walter must "conform to the domestication of his own masculinity by becoming a suburbanite," and, in so doing, will necessarily dominate the women of his family by assuming patriarchal privilege.^[10] In a similar vein, critics have decried Mama's supposedly overbearing character, or have argued that she inhibits the growth of her children.^[11] These twinned arguments, of Walter's damaging masculine ideology and Mama's imperiousness, fail to recognize that by the end of *Raisin*, Walter has rejected capital-driven, hegemonic masculinity and forged a profeminist, politically progressive masculine identity.

While Hansberry's feminism has been duly noted, her Black leftist, feminist politics as they apply to masculinity and her male characters has been less fully limned, despite a majority of male protagonists in her plays. Illuminating Black left feminists' concept of "triple jeopardy," which preceded Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, Hansberry shows how the tripled oppressions of race, gender, and class intersect in the lives of the Younger family, and she situates her male characters within a complex of these triple oppressions.^[12] Thus, Walter's eventual rejection of hegemonic masculinity rests upon his denial of a white supremacist capitalism that structures masculinity in terms of monetary worth. While the character of Walter can indeed, as Clark argues, be seen to "appropriate debilitating Western notions of *white* masculinity" initially, Walter undergoes a transformation that spurs him to re-define masculinity as an identity that is both profeminist and rooted in a tradition of African American radicalism.^[13]

The opening scene of Act II, which depicts a drunken Walter's pan-Africanist reverie, is a critical step in his transformation into progressive Black masculinity. It is in this scene that we first see Walter, briefly, accessing an alternative masculinity, one that breaks from hegemonic masculinity structured by capitalism. Having come home intoxicated—alcohol is, at first, the only refuge he can find from his frustrated dreams—Walter finds his sister, Beneatha, listening to Nigerian music and modeling the Nigerian garments her suitor Asagai has brought to her. Transported by this *mise en scène*, Walter imagines an alternative to a bourgeois notion of masculinity, fantasizing about who he might have become in Africa: "In my heart of hearts—(*He thumps his chest*)—I am much warrior!"^[14] By contrast to his fantasies of acquisitive wealth, in Walter's pan-Africanist daydream, he envisions himself as heir to Jomo Kenyatta, the leader of

the Kenyan anticolonial movement: “That’s my man, Kenyatta. (*Shouting and thumping his chest.*) FLAMING SPEAR! HOT DAMN!”^[15]

Further linking Walter to African anticolonial revolution, Hansberry’s stage directions note, “*He sees what we cannot, that he is a leader of his people, a great chief, a descendant of Chaka, and that the hour to march has come,*” as Walter spears imaginary opponents in the living room.^[16] Indeed, Walter will be a leader of his people by eventually moving into Clybourne Park. Walter’s final choice to de-segregate Northern housing is both significant and potentially hazardous, as affordable housing in white urban neighborhoods was guarded from Black entry by white supremacist law, discriminatory real estate and lending practices, and white terrorist violence. Hansberry was well aware of the fortitude needed to be the sole Black family living in a white neighborhood, an experience she gained when her parents moved the family to a white neighborhood to challenge restrictive covenants. Hansberry recalled her mother “patrolling our house all night with a loaded German luger.”^[17] Though the move eventually wore down the spirit of Hansberry’s father, Carl, he nevertheless won a landmark Supreme Court case against restrictive covenants in 1940.

Just as Hansberry and her family did, the Youngers will likely face racist violence in Clybourne Park;^[18] however, by eventually deciding to move into the home, Walter has indeed established his credentials as a descendent of African warriors. That Walter’s brief interlude of revolutionary masculinity comes through his pan-Africanist fantasies highlights how inextricable U.S. civil rights and global Black freedom were for Hansberry. Like other Black leftists, Hansberry “linked the struggles of African Americans in the United States to struggles for national self-determination in the Caribbean, the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia.”^[19] Many critics have viewed the character of Asagai as Hansberry’s attempt to educate Americans about “real” Africans, and thus destroy the stereotype of the savage or cannibal.^[20] Though surely Asagai’s character functioned as a corrective to stereotypes, read through Hansberry’s commitment to the global Black left, Asagai emerges as a revolutionary himself (he plans to return to Nigeria and fight for independence) as well as a model of revolutionary Black masculinity for Walter.

It is no coincidence that the shattering of this shared fantasy comes with the arrival of George Murchison, Beneatha’s other beau. George, the embodiment of the Black bourgeoisie, also serves as a possible role model for Walter. Indeed, Walter desperately tries, and fails, to connect with George through masculine fraternity. Walter, still engulfed in his daydream, calls George his “Black Brother!” and “*extends his hand for the fraternal clasp,*” to which George roughly retorts, “Black Brother, hell!”^[21] After George denigrates the African ancestral pride the Younger siblings have demonstrated—“your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts!”^[22]—Walter takes a different tack with George. Trying to draw out George with abstract talk of business, Walter prattles on: “Invest big, gamble big, hell, lose *big* if you have to, you know what I mean.”^[23] In this scene, we see Walter stuck between debilitating capitalism and mere dreams of pan-Africanism—that is, between George and Asagai, the two male models that the play offers—with no direction of his own.

For most of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter's definition of masculinity has been ordered within the same heteropatriarchal, capitalist ideology that elevates the Murchisons. Yet, Hansberry clearly sets up the values of *Raisin* against the Murchisonian worldview, whose bourgeois values, in addition to requiring African Americans break from their heritage, necessitates the subjugation of women. George, for instance, patronizes Beneatha: "You're a nice-looking girl... all over. That's all you need, honey."^[24] Walter initially belittles Beneatha's extraordinary dream of becoming a doctor, and commands her to "go be a nurse like other women—or just get married and be quiet."^[25] Walter demands that Ruth support him blindly, condemning all Black women for not understanding "about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody," while implicitly asking Ruth to stifle her own ambitions of having a safe and clean home away from the Southside.^[26] Further, he expects women in his life to play the part of mere status symbols: "Hell, yes, I want me some yachts someday! Yes, I want to hang some real pearls around my wife's neck... I tell you I am a *man*—and I think my wife should wear some pearls."^[27] In this scenario, Ruth functions as an object like the yachts, to show off Walter's wealth and therefore his manhood, while Ruth's desires are ignored.

Mama Younger, however, acts as *Raisin*'s stalwart defense against Murchisonian ideology by insisting Walter honor the life-sustaining values inherited from their ancestors. In the scene that most fully illustrates Walter and Mama's competing versions of masculinity, it becomes clear that, in *A Raisin in the Sun*, the manner in which Walter achieves masculinity has stakes as high as life and death:

WALTER [...] sometimes when I'm downtown and I pass them cool, quiet-looking restaurants where them white boys are sitting back and talking 'bout things... sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars... sometimes I see guys don't look much older than me—

MAMA Son—how come you talk so much 'bout money?

WALTER (*with immense passion*) Because it is life, Mama!

MAMA (*quietly*) Oh— (*very quietly*) So now it's life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it's money. I guess the world really do change.^[28]

This scene comes on the heels of Mama rejecting Walter's liquor store plan, which Walter was hoping would propel him into the role of the family provider, and save him from Travis having to sleep on the couch, from Ruth having to "look after someone else's kids," and from having to "watch [Mama] go out and work in somebody's kitchen."^[29] Walter's frustration underlines how in the capitalist, white supremacist system of the U.S., masculine pride and agency are yoked to the ability to be a breadwinner, a role consistently denied to African American men.

Mama's belief that "the world really do change" marks a turning point in her understanding of Black ways of being. Walter's break with African American tradition baffles her, because, in her day, money was less important than freedom, while attempting to retain "a

pinch of dignity.”^[30] Walter, having lost the \$6,500 that Mama had given him with the hopes of encouraging her son, plans to abase himself to Lindner for the money the Clybourne Park residents are willing to pay to keep the Youngers out. Finally believing he “see[s] life like it is,” Walter plans to put on a performance for Lindner.^[31] Kneeling, Walter demonstrates to the Youngers what he will say:

“Captain, Mistuh, Bossman—(*Groveling and grinning and wringing his hands in profoundly anguished imitation of the slow-witted movie stereotype*) A-hee-hee-hee! Oh, yassuh boss! [...] just gi’ ussen de money, fo’ God’s sake, and we’s—we’s ain’t gwine come out deh and dirty up yo’ white folks neighborhood.”

To this minstrel performance, Mama remarks, “death done come in this here house [...] Done come walking in my house on the lips of my children.”^[32]

Mama’s assertion that a symbolic death has entered the Younger house demonstrates what is at stake in Mama and Walter’s contradictory conceptions of the masculine. All along, Mama has been urging Walter Younger Jr. to become like his father, Big Walter (“I’m waiting to hear how you be your father’s son. Be the man he was”).^[33] Rather than interpreting such instances as Mama either stifling Walter or replicating a patriarchal conception of masculinity, as many critics have, I read this scene as Mama encouraging Walter not to sever the unbroken tradition of Younger, and African American, pride and dignity. Mama construes Walter’s performance of an abased, abjected masculine as a symbolic death because he is rejecting life-sustaining African American traditions. She chastises his performance:

“I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers—but ain’t nobody in my family never let nobody pay ‘em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn’t fit to walk the earth. We ain’t never been that poor. (*Raising her eyes and looking at him.*) We ain’t never been that—dead inside.”^[34]

In addition to Walter’s embrace of capitalism—the importance of money above all—bringing a symbolic death to the family, Walter’s single-mindedness shuts him off from seeing the physical death that the Younger’s segregated tenement living is bringing to the family. In its most concentrated form, death enters the household in the form of Ruth’s planned abortion; she would rather terminate her pregnancy than raise another child in the Younger’s current situation. The roaches and rats that populate the Younger’s tenement building further demonstrate the small ways the ghetto endangers the lives of all those who are forced to live there. What Walter cannot bring himself to see through his fog of selfishness is that the Southside is slowly killing his family. Mama, therefore, urges Walter to be like his father, “and say we a people who give children life, not who destroys them.”^[35]

Walter’s ultimate accomplishment in *Raisin* is, then, to redefine masculinity in line with the African American tradition for which Mama has been the spokesperson. Walter is poised to become a leader of his people, not just by drawing on the strength of African American

ancestors, and African revolutionary peers like Kenyatta, but by forging a progressive Black masculinity that rejects white supremacist capitalism. In the play's last scene, though Walter rages that he is "a man" in his defense of the abased show he will put on to Lindner, Hansberry's stage directions note, "*The word 'Man' has penetrated his consciousness; he mumbles it to himself repeatedly.*"^[36] When manhood based on African American tradition finally seeps into Walter's consciousness, he finds he must reject Lindner's money.

Walter's newfound manhood, founded upon pride in his lineage, also allows him to support the dreams of the women in the household against the obstacles of racist and sexist oppression—Beneatha's dream of being a doctor and Ruth and his mother's of having a home—rather than his own desires for what the women in his life should become. When Lindner arrives at the Younger's apartment for the last time, hoping to finally dissuade the family from moving to Clybourne Park, Walter says, in a halting speech: "we come from people who had a lot of *pride*. I mean—we are very proud people. And that's my sister over there and she's going to be a doctor—and we are very proud." Walter further calls a confused Lindner's attention to Travis, saying, "This is my son, and he makes the sixth generation our family in this country."^[37] Though Lindner is baffled by this speech, the audience recognizes it as an echo of Mama's earlier admonition to Walter of his duty to the Younger family. Finally, Walter denies the empty capitalist values he has absorbed (money is life), in order to affirm the core values inherited from the African American tradition (freedom and dignity), values which will spur him on to lead the charge for housing de-segregation.

Les Blancs and the New Paternalism

Like *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Les Blancs* explores one man's commitment to daunting political struggle. As the climactic events of *Les Blancs* unfold, the protagonist, Tshembe Matoseh, is asked the play's central question: "What does it take to be a man?"^[38] As with Walter, Tshembe faces a decisive crisis of conscience surrounding masculinity, and his choices will define not only the outcome of the drama, but the model of masculinity Hansberry sketches in *Les Blancs*. Will Tshembe return to England and become a businessman, or will he become a leader of the revolution against the colonial powers in his native African country, as his father before him? As she did in *Raisin*, Hansberry dramatizes a Black masculinity that is fully realized only through revolutionary action. Further, in *Les Blancs*, Hansberry positions women as fomenters of the anticolonial revolution, while also de-centering heterosexuality by casting interracial, gay lovers as the play's moral core.

The Broadway premiere of *Les Blancs* in 1970 came amidst national disillusion with the efficacy of the civil rights movement, growing urban unrest, and the increased visibility of the Black power movement. Just as Walter Lee's struggles mirrored those of Black men during the civil rights movement, *Les Blancs* spoke to the increasing radicalization of the Black freedom movement, in a prescient manner typical of Hansberry, who died in 1965. *Les Blancs* is both a commentary on U.S. race relations and a searing indictment of colonialism. Inspired by

Ghanaian and Kenyan independence movements, Hansberry used *Les Blancs* to highlight the complexities, and absolute necessity, of African independence. When Tshembe arrives home for his father's funeral to the unnamed African country of his birth, he finds his village in the grip of the so-called "terror": the revolutionary action of native villagers against the colonizers, and the colonial state's increasing crackdown on natives. A visiting American journalist, Charlie Morris, attempts to fathom the racial politics of the country, while his own American racial perspective hampers a nascent friendship with Tshembe. Tshembe's political commitment is complicated by his love for the whites who run the Mission hospital, at which the play's action takes place, especially the Reverend Neilsen and his wife, who founded the hospital. Finally, however, Tshembe refuses to return to his new home in England, recognizing his obligatory role in the village's fight for independence.

Reading Hansberry's essays from the time she was writing *Les Blancs* makes it clear that the play is in part a response to cultural discourses surrounding Black masculinity. With *Les Blancs*, Hansberry challenged some of her contemporaries' fetishization of revolutionary violence in emerging African nations and in the increasingly radical American civil rights movement. Hansberry specifically targeted Jean Genet's play *The Blacks* and two essays by Norman Mailer: the infamous "The White Negro," and his review of Genet's play in *The Village Voice*. Hansberry protested the strand of racism she found in these works, a trend she termed "new paternalism."^[39] To Hansberry, Genet's and Mailer's work differed from earlier manifestations of racism in that the new paternalists extolled rather than condemned Black men for their supposedly essential, natural state of violent hypersexuality, which Mailer hoped would strike fear into the heart of bourgeois whites. Though Hansberry did not shy away from portraying revolutionary violence, she countered the new paternalists' essentialism by portraying the material oppression of African Americans and Africans, and thus the need for revolution. In *Les Blancs*, Hansberry divests revolutionary violence from any essential nature of Blacks.

As the title indicates, *Les Blancs* takes Genet's play head on. First performed in Paris in 1959 as *Les Nègres*, the translated version of the play, *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, premiered in New York in 1961.^[40] Though it was embraced by leading leftist intellectuals across racial lines, Hansberry and other notable African Americans argued that Genet's play merely rehashed stereotypes of Blacks as primitive.^[41] *The Blacks* is a lyrical, ritualistic play that centers on two groups of Black characters: one, a royal colonial court made up of such types as a Queen, Missionary, and General, who wear whiteface masks throughout; and the other, a group of unmasked "Negroes," who represent colonized natives in an unspecified African village. The Negroes ritualistically re-enact the murder of an unseen white woman, whose coffin is center stage. Genet suggests that this woman was either raped by, or engaged in consensual sex with, a Negro who then murdered her. As the mazelike central plot, centering on the re-enactment of the murder, circles and doubles back on itself, the Queen and her court preside as judges over the Negroes' actions. *The Blacks* is an absurdist condensation of colonization, with a final coup

staged by the Negroes, who kill the members of the court. In Genet's colonial vision, violence is rendered absurd, rather than necessary.

Hansberry's *Les Blancs* is as much a rejoinder to the celebration of *The Blacks* as it is to the Genet play itself, and more specifically, to Mailer's admiration of Genet. In a sprawling two-part *Village Voice* essay on the American production of *The Blacks*, Mailer repeats many of the same claims about Black men as appear in his 1957 essay, "The White Negro," in which he makes a fetish of violence committed by the Black men that populate his imagination. In both essays, Mailer unites Black men's hypersexuality with violence, writing with anticipation that American Negroes "may erupt as a psychically armed rebellion whose sexual impetus may rebound against the anti-sexual foundation of every organized power in America."^[42] Linking the hypersexual with the militaristic is one of the many ways that Mailer codes Blackness as masculine and violent, while fantasizing about and appropriating Black male sexuality. A friend of Mailer, James Baldwin nevertheless took issue with "The White Negro" by observing, "to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol."^[43] Much more so than Genet, Mailer focuses on the Black man as violent phallus. Mailer's most exuberant praise for *The Blacks* is reserved for the play's most violent moments, whether literal weapons are used on stage or in the sense of Artaud's "theatre of cruelty"; conversely, Mailer's main critique of Genet is for being "an unconscionable faggot, drenched in chi-chi."^[44] Despite passing reference to homosexuality in *The Blacks*, Genet chooses as his play's core the murder, and possible rape, of a white woman by a Black man. Traditionally, Blacks males' perceived hypersexuality has been punished through lynching, but the new paternalists overturn this by celebrating Black males' sexuality; however, in either formulation, Black male sexuality is rendered as excessive, and racism remains intact.

Before *Les Blancs* was completed, Hansberry penned a response to Mailer and Genet in *The Village Voice* in which she defined the "new paternalism" as a form of racism new only in breadth, while drawing on "the oldest racial clichés."^[45] Hansberry argues the new paternalists celebrate a "racial mystique" that embraces Black males' supposed predilection for violence, as well as their excessive sexuality.^[46] Hansberry counters such presuppositions through an anti-essentialist critique: "Of course oppression makes people better than their oppressors, but that is not a condition sealed in the loins by genetic mysteries. The new paternalists have mistaken that oppression for the Negro."^[47] In *Les Blancs*, her ultimate response to Genet and Mailer, Hansberry explores revolutionary violence, but unlinks it from the hypersexual masculine. Further, *Les Blancs* carefully historicizes the material oppressions that lead to revolutionary violence, demonstrating that such action is neither intrinsically Black nor without cause.

While the new paternalists find violence inherent in Black men, Hansberry positions women as the catalysts of the revolution in *Les Blancs*. A non-speaking character, The Woman, embodies the spirit of war in *Les Blancs*, performing "the dance of the warriors," donning war paint, and grasping a spear, the play's central symbol of the anticolonial revolution.^[48] The Woman, a personification of war and the spirit of Tshembe's heritage, appears to Tshembe in

moments of crisis, goading him into following his father's path as village leader. Tshembe cannot escape her, he admits: "I have known her to gaze up at me from puddles in the streets of London; from vending machines in the New York subway."^[49] Though it is problematic that the major Black female character has no speaking lines, Hansberry scripts a vocal white female revolutionary in Madame Neilsen, the Reverend's wife. Her love of her adopted country and its people demands she break from her husband's imperialist ideology. Tshembe, desperate to return to his British wife and son, but expected to remain and join the revolution, comes to Madame Neilsen with this quandary. Madame Neilsen reminds him, "Our country needs *warriors*, Tshembe Matoseh. Africa needs warriors. Like your father."^[50] Sounding very much like Mama Younger, Madame Neilsen asks Tshembe to be like his father. In addition to female extras who swell the ranks of the African revolutionaries, these women in *Les Blancs* are, like Mama, critical revolutionary figures.

Furthermore, the gay lovers in *Les Blancs*, Eric and Dr. Willy DeKoven, work to sever heterosexuality from progressive Black masculinity. Eric, half-brother of Tshembe, is the product of their mother's rape by the local military leader, Major Rice. While Eric initially seems to be caught between two worlds, between familial obligation and love for Willy, he is the first of his brothers to join the revolution. Rejecting his Anglicized name, Eric insists on being called Ngedi, and informs Tshembe, "I shall carry the spear and shield of our father."^[51] When Tshembe derides his younger brother's resolution with an anti-gay taunt, "What will you do when your doctor calls, Eric? It takes more than a spear to make a man," Eric responds, "What does it take Tshembe? [...] What does it take to be a man? A white wife and son?"^[52] In Higashida's words, Eric "interrogates the centering of heterosexuality within the yoked constructions of Black manhood and national identity."^[53] By creating Eric and Willy as the play's visionary and trailblazing characters, Hansberry questions homophobic constructions by both new paternalists and Black nationalists that equate revolutionary action with heterosexuality. Indeed, it is Eric who commits the play's final action, bombing the Mission hospital, fulfilling the warning from Langston Hughes that a dream deferred does not "dry up like a raisin in the sun," but explodes.

Of all the play's white characters, Willy is both the most insightful and the most opposed to colonial control of his adopted country. His enlightened views on the colonial situation are likely thanks to his affair with Eric.^[54] It is Willy who unmasks the "old paternalist" ideology that is deeply entrenched in the colonial system of church and state, a complexity that Genet avoids. The colonizers must maintain the pretense that the "great gashes" in the hills from mineral mining have nothing to do with the Mission hospital.^[55] Willy, however, explicitly makes the connection between his work at the Mission hospital and colonial control. Charlie defends the quaint mission hospital for its good works, despite the Reverend's adherence to atavistic methods that do not allow for basic technology like refrigeration of medicine. Willy rebuts the technique of the Reverend and points out, "One of the first things that the new African nations have done is to set up modern hospitals." Willy argues, "the struggle here has not been to

push the African into the Twentieth Century—but at all costs to keep him *away* from it!”^[56] Willy also tells the naïve Charlie—“Mister Charlie,” who symbolically represents white America—the truth about the play’s old paternalist, Reverend Neilsen. When the natives asked Neilsen to aid them in securing political independence, the Reverend replied, “Children [...] go home to your huts! Go home to your huts before you make me angry. *Independence indeed!*”^[57] The Blacks are, to the Reverend, children who need guidance. The more sinister version of old paternalism is embodied by the military and Major Rice, who view the Blacks as cannibals with whom one does not negotiate while “being seasoned for the pot.”^[58]

Willy’s insights disclose the material necessity for revolution in *Les Blancs*, which echoes the Youngers’ absolute necessity for escaping the ghetto. In her refutation of Genet’s play, Hansberry delineates a political context for the independence movement in *Les Blancs*. The revolutionaries of *Les Blancs* are spurred onto their actions not because of their inherent capacity for violence, but rather, because negotiations with the colonial government have failed. The revolution’s exiled leader, Amos Kumalo, a Patrice Lumumba/Jomo Kenyatta figure, is jailed upon re-entrance to his country, signaling the death knell of any peaceful resolution between natives and colonizers. While the Blacks of Genet’s play adopt their colonizers’ attitudes and postures, the revolutionaries in *Les Blancs* attempt to destroy the oppression grounded in colonial attitudes about childish/dangerous natives. While the natives in *The Blacks* seem to desire nothing more than to stage a violent coup for the purposes of assuming power, a power that is inflected with whiteness, Hansberry’s revolutionaries demonstrate the need for self-determination. Hansberry disagreed with what she found to be the central idea in Genet’s play: that power, no matter who has it, will corrupt. As *Les Blancs* demonstrates, she placed her hope in a successful post-colonial Africa, while the new paternalists, Hansberry felt, might “be disappointed if the Blacks really do give more attention to building steel mills and hydroelectric plants throughout Africa than to slitting a few hundred thousand criminal throats.”^[59]

Though Eric’s bi-racial queerness helps to deconstruct the new paternalists’ coupling of virile/violent Black masculinity, it is the character of Tshembe Matoseh who becomes *Les Blancs*’ most searing condemnation of new paternalism. In particular, Hansberry uses Tshembe to critique the new paternalists’ version of existentialism, especially Mailer’s, foundational to which was racist assumptions about the hypersexuality and violence of Black men. The primary objective of “The White Negro” is to formulate a theory of “American existentialism”—revised by feminist critic Kate Millett into “sexistentialism”^[60]—which finds its purest expression in the Black American male.^[61] Mailer praises Black men as exemplary existentialists because they live so near death in the violent ghetto that they “could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization.”^[62] The Black man, Mailer avers, is therefore in tune with his biological needs, especially for the purgation of violence and for the orgasm.

Tshembe, however, is far from inherently violent, and, further, at the start of the play, we see that he has adopted an existentialist philosophy, chic but dangerous, since it leads to cynicism that precludes his belief in political causes. Before committing himself to revolution, Tshembe quotes

Camus and mocks “the liberation! The Movement! ‘AH-FREE-KA!’—and all the rest of it,” concluding “what does it matter!”^[63] However, by grounding himself in African tradition, as Walter Lee did in African American pride, Tshembe eventually realizes that he must dedicate himself to the revolution he has formerly ridiculed. By scripting Tshembe’s eventual commitment to the revolution, Hansberry critiques Mailer’s existentialism for failing to take direct action against capitalist and imperialist regimes. Through Tshembe, *Les Blancs* illustrates how Mailer’s world-weary despair is detrimental to political change, despite the new paternalists’ avowed radical political beliefs. (The playwright did not live to see Jean Genet’s two-month tour across the U.S. in support of the Black Panther Party, during which Genet espoused Marxist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial politics.^[64]) In *Les Blancs*, as throughout her career, Hansberry attacked the hopelessness and political apathy she found in modernist theatre, art, and philosophy.^[65] She opposed the idea that, as Mailer writes, “death being causeless, life was causeless as well.”^[66] Tshembe comes to realize, spurred on by Eric’s question—“What does it take to be a man?”—that political apathy is unsustainable in the face of injustice. Tshembe answers Eric’s question much in the way that Walter Younger comes to face his own crisis of masculinity: by becoming a leader of his people. In Hansberry’s work, masculinity is achieved not through the new paternalists’ sexualized, causeless violence, but by Black men assuming the responsibility of politically revolutionary leadership.

If Walter is tempted by an American capitalist ideology that severs his connection to African American heritage, Tshembe initially demonstrates a European existentialism that divorces him from his duty to his native country. Tshembe and Walter eventually find strength by re-discovering their heritage, and by their mutual affirmation that “freedom is life.” Spurred onto revolutionary action by the women in *Raisin* and *Les Blancs*, these Black men reject white supremacist structures by carrying on African American and African traditions of resistance.

Black masculinity is, in Hansberry’s drama, achieved by action confronting the intersectional oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism. In an essay comparing Walter Younger to Willy Loman, Hansberry wonders why it is possible that Walter would make the choice to fight rather than, as Willy Loman does, give in to “the ever-present (and ever-so-popular) vogue of despair.” The reason, Hansberry writes, is that Walter comes from a people who “have dismissed the ostrich and still sing, ‘Went to the rock to hide my face, but the rock cried out: No hidin’ place down here!’”^[67]

[1] Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 151.

[2] George C. Wolfe, *The Colored Museum* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 24.

[3] George C. Wolfe, “Afterword,” in *Reimagining A Raisin in the Sun: Four New Plays*, ed. Rebecca Ann Rugg and Harvey Young (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 416.

[4] For assessments similar to Wolfe's, see Ben Brantley, "A Breakthrough 50's Drama Revived in a Suspenseful Mood," *New York Times* Apr 27, 2004.; Keith Clark, "Black Male Subjectivity Deferred? The Quest for Voice and Authority in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*," in *Black Women Playwrights*, ed. Carol P. Marsh-Lockett. (New York: Garland, 1999): 87-111.; Michael P. Moreno, "Reifying Cold War (Sub)urban Systems: The Spatial Anatomy of Black Masculinity in *A Raisin in the Sun*." *Reel Histories: Studies in American Film*. Ed. Melissa Croteau. (Hollywood and Los Angeles, CA: Press Americana, 2008). 87-109.; and many of the essays excerpted in Gary Weiner, ed. *Social Issues in Literature: Gender in Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun*. (Farmington Mills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2011). Harry J. Elam, by contrast, offers a positive evaluation of Hansberry's "liberatory definition of Black masculinity," in "The Dialectics of August Wilson's Piano Lesson." *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 3 (2000): 366.

[5] Adrienne Rich criticized Hansberry for changing initial drafts with female protagonists to male ones in her completed plays. Rich, "The Problem with Lorraine Hansberry." *Freedomways* 19, no. 4 (1979).

[6] Respectively, Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011).; and Cheryl Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945-*

1995 (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2011). For more on Hansberry's radicalism, see Michael Anderson, "Lorraine Hansberry's Freedom Family," in *Red Activists and Black Freedom: James and Esther Jackson and the Long Civil Rights Revolution*, ed. David Levering Lewis, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2010).; Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York UP, 2011).; Ben Keppel, *The Work of Democracy: Ralph Bunche, Kenneth B. Clark, Lorraine Hansberry, and the Cultural Politics of Race*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995).; Robbie Lieberman, "'Measure Them Right': Lorraine Hansberry and the Struggle for Peace." *Science & Society*, 75.2 (2011).; and Fanon Che Wilkins, "Beyond Bandung: The Critical Nationalism of Lorraine Hansberry, 1950-1965." *Radical History Review* 95 (spring 2006).

[7] Collins defines "hegemonic masculinity" as a "fundamentally a relational construct with boundaries defined through a series of oppositional relationship whereby normal masculinity becomes defined in opposition to women, gay men, poor and working-class men, boys, and Black men." See Collins, "A Telling Difference: Dominance, Strength, and Black Masculinities," in *Progressive Black Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 81.

[8] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 109.

[9] Clark, "Black Male Subjectivity Deferred?," 89.

[10] Moreno, "Reifying Cold War (Sub)urban Systems," 90.

[11] Trudier Harris. *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

[12] McDuffie argues, “Black left feminists’ key historical significance rested in their formulation of a theory of ‘triple oppression.’” He demonstrates that “Black Communist women were the first to explicitly articulate this theoretical paradigm,” *Sojourning for Freedom*, 4.

[13] Clark, “Black Male Subjectivity Deferred?,” 89.

[14] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 78.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (New York: Signet Classics, 2011), 51.

[18] In editions of *Raisin* published after 1987, Hansberry’s former husband and literary executor, Robert Nemiroff, restored a scene in which the Younger’s neighbor relates the bombing of a Black family’s home in a white neighborhood, emphasizing the dangers the Youngers would face.

[19] Cheryl Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 3.

[20] Alex Haley, for example, noted that Asagai’s appearance “helped to dispel the myth of the ‘cannibal’ with a bone in his hair.” See Robin Bernstein, “Inventing a Fishbowl: White Supremacy and the Critical Reception of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*.” *Modern Drama* 42 (1999): 20.

[21] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 79.

[22] Ibid., 81.

[23] Ibid., 84-85.

[24] Ibid., 96.

[25] Ibid., 38.

[26] Ibid., 34.

[27] Ibid., 143.

[28] Ibid., 73.

[29] Ibid., 70.

- [30] Ibid., 73.
- [31] Ibid., 141-143.
- [32] Ibid., 144.
- [33] Ibid., 74.
- [34] Ibid., 143.
- [35] Ibid., 75.
- [36] Ibid., 143.
- [37] Ibid., 148.
- [38] Lorraine Hansberry, *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 108.
- [39] Lorraine Hansberry, "Thoughts on: Genet, Mailer and the New Paternalism," *The Village Voice*, June 1, 1961.
- [40] Jean Genet, *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1960).
- [41] Maya Angelou, who starred in the Broadway production, and Ossie Davis both noted that the play did little to transform race relations. See Cheryl Higashida, "To Be(come) Young, Gay, and Black: Lorraine Hansberry's Existentialist Routes to Anticolonialism." *American Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2008): 902.
- [42] Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Dissent* (20 June 2007).
http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-white-negro-fall-1957.
- [43] James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998), 269-70.
- [44] Norman Mailer, "Theatre: The Blacks (Cont.)," *The Village Voice* May 18, 1961, 11-15. The first part of his review appeared a week earlier.
- [45] Hansberry, "Thoughts," 14.
- [46] Ibid., 10.
- [47] Ibid., 14.
- [48] Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 41.
- [49] Ibid., 80.

[50] Ibid., 126.

[51] Ibid., 107.

[52] Ibid., 108.

[53] Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 77.

[54] As is noted by Steven R. Carter, *Hansberry's Drama: Commitment amid Complexity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 118, and Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 77.

[55] Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 78.

[56] Ibid., 113.

[57] Ibid., 115.

[58] Ibid., 70.

[59] Hansberry, "Thoughts," 14.

[60] Kate Millett. *Sexual Politics*. (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 326. See also Justin Shaw, "Destabilizing Sexistentialism and Hegemonic Masculinity in Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 44.1 (2014): 44-64.

[61] Mailer, "The White Negro," under "II."

[62] Ibid.

[63] Hansberry, *Les Blancs*, 60.

[64] Robert Sandarg, "Jean Genet and the Black Panther Party." *Journal of Black Studies* 16.3 (1986): 269-282. Arguably, of course, Genet had already espoused anti-racist and anti-colonial politics in both *The Blacks* and *The Screens*. Hansberry's ungenerous reading of *The Blacks* might have much to do with her objection that Genet's play was, "more than anything else a conversation between white men about *themselves*." See Hansberry, "Thoughts," 10.

[65] Hansberry's *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964) is, in large part, a critique of existentialism. Higashida, however, argues that Hansberry was influenced by the existential feminism of Simone de Beauvoir. See "To Be(come) Young, Gay, and Black," 899-924.

[66] Mailer, "The White Negro."

[67] Lorraine Hansberry, "An Author's Reflections: Willy Loman, Walter Younger, and He Who

Must Live,” in *Women in Theatre: Compassion and Hope*, ed. Karen Malpede (New York: Limelight Editions, 1985), 170.

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Julie M. Burrell is an assistant professor of English at Cleveland State University, where she teaches courses in American literature. She is working on a book examining the Black left feminist theatre of the civil rights and Black arts movements.