

Silencing Lorraine Hansberry

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A LOT OF ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP starts with a footnote. “Where did that come from?” you ask, and then chase down the chain of evidence and start to form your own conclusions. That’s what annotation is for. But this investigation starts with a footnote that was intended to keep people from forming their own conclusions. This year I was preparing to teach *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, from a very standard textbook, *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, Seventh Edition. Sadly, even after forty years of effort in civil rights, not much in the play really needed explaining. However, towards the end of act 1 in the Norton edition, there is a footnote. The section and the note are quoted below.

Mama is talking to her son Walter, with his wife Ruth nearby, but, as usual, Ruth is not saying much.

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....

Walter: No—it was always money, mama. We just didn’t know about it.

Mama: No...something has changed. (She looks at him.) You something new, boy. In my time we was worried about not getting lynched and getting to the North if we could and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too.... Now here come you and Beneatha—talking “bout things we ain’t never even thought about hardly, me and your daddy. You ain’t satisfied or proud of nothing we done. I mean that you had a home; that we kept you out of trouble till you was grown; that you didn’t have to ride to work on the back of nobody’s streetcar—You my children—but how different we done become.

Walter: you just don’t understand, Mama, you just don’t understand.

Mama: Son—do you know your wife is expecting another baby? (WALTER STANDS, STUNNED, AND ABSORBS WHAT HIS MOTHER HAS SAID) That’s what she wanted to talk to you about. (WALTER SINKS DOWN INTO A CHAIR) This ain’t for me to be telling—but you ought to know. (SHE WAITS) I think Ruth is thinking ’bout getting rid of that child.

Walter: (SLOWLY UNDERSTANDING) No—no—Ruth wouldn't do that.
 Mama: When the world gets ugly enough—a woman will do anything for her family. *The part that's already living.*
 Walter: You don't know Ruth, Mama, if you think she would do that. RUTH OPENS THE BEDROOM DOOR AND STANDS THERE A LITTLE LIMP)
 Ruth: (BEATEN) Yes I would too, Walter. (PAUSE) I gave her a five-dollar down payment. (THERE IS TOTAL SILENCE AS THE MAN STARES AT HIS WIFE AND THE MOTHER STARES AT HER SON)
 Mama: (PRESENTLY) Well-(TIGHTLY) Well—son, I'm waiting to hear you say something.... I'm waiting to hear how you be your father's son. Be the man he was.... (PAUSE) Your wife say she going to destroy your child. And I'm waiting to hear you talk like him and say we a people who give children life, not who destroys them—(She rises) I'm waiting to see you stand up and look like your daddy and say we done give up one baby to poverty and we ain't going to give up nary another one....I'm waiting.
 Walter: Ruth—
 Mama: If you a son of mine, tell her! (WALTER TURNS, LOOKS AT HER, AND CAN SAY NOTHING. SHE CONTINUES, BITTERLY) You...you are a disgrace to your father's memory. Somebody get me my hat.

This is the turning point of the play. This is when mama goes out and buys a house. The footnote to this scene reads, "Abortions were illegal and dangerous at that time."ⁱ

One of the principles of good scholarly editing is that you don't muscle in between the author and the reader. If something speaks for itself, let it speak. On that principle alone, you can imagine how appalled I was at reading this footnote. One can sometimes excuse an intrusive note on the grounds that social sentiments have undergone such a drastic change that it is necessary to explain them in terms contemporary students will understand; indeed, some noises of that sort come into the editorial head that matter to the play. But this assumes that the disapproval of abortion is something so foreign that it cannot be explained in anything like the terms in which the playwright explains it; moral opposition is presented as a simply incomprehensible relic of the past. For contrast, take another selection in the same book, "Song: To Lucasta, Going to the Wars" by Richard Lovelace:

True, a new mistress now I chase,
 The first foe in the field;
 And with a stronger faith embrace
 A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such
 As you too shall adore;
 I could not love, thee, dear, so much,
 Loved I not honor more.ⁱⁱ

Now there's a bit of cultural sentiment that's undergone some change. The Norton editors didn't touch it.

The policy of letting things explain themselves is generally followed even in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The editors leave Walter unchallenged when he says to his sister, who wants to be a doctor, "Go be a nurse like other women-or just get married and be quiet" (I. i., p.1813). Neither do they challenge Mama when she tells Walter: "I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be" (II.ii, p.1846) or saying of him, when he has taken charge of their financial affairs on a moral basis, "He finally come into his manhood today" (III, p. 1869). Now, a definition of manhood that depends on making the women's financial decisions is mightily offensive to women under today's cultural conditions,ⁱⁱⁱ yet the editors present nothing to explain it away.

And so I asked my students, just to ascertain that Hansberry's meaning was clear. "Is Mama is horrified about abortion because she's afraid Ruth is going to damage her health? Or because she'd break a law?" Of course, even when there were laws against abortion, the criminal was the doctor—the woman was a witness—but until I told them, my students didn't know that. Still, they could all tell that these were not the sources of mama's horror or Walter's dumbfoundedness. No, thematically it was all clear. Hansberry mercilessly denigrates Walter's manhood throughout the first two acts. She shows his subordination to his mother, intellectual inferiority to his sister, financial dependence on his wife, and irresponsibility to his employers. Here he is belittled again: he is incapable of protecting his child. When Walter's mother says, "We a people who give children life, not destroys them," my students understood her not as a caricature of a conservative fanatic but as the

great moral authority in the play. Opening night critics understood her the same way: “the old lady achieves real stature,” said one, and “nobility of spirit,” said another; she “teaches self-respect to her willful offspring,” said a third and, as another concluded, she is the “solid rock on which a Chicago Negro family is founded.”^{iv} The play was originally titled “The Crystal Stair,” after Langson Hughes’s poem “Mother to Son,” in which a woman who has worked as a housemaid all her life—like Mama—rises to become a figure of heroic nobility as she gives her advice to her discouraged son.^v My students didn’t know that poem, but they knew that the mother in this play wants only, as Brooks Atkinson said, “that her children adhere to the code of honor and self-respect that she inherited.”^{vi} Hansberry herself identified Mama with one of the patron saints of the Civil Rights movement: Mama is “the Rosa Parks sitting in the front of the bus in Montgomery.”^{vii} Mama embodies integrity and self-respect; when abortion appalls her, that moral horror is central.

I asked my students why Hansberry chose to put a pregnancy in the play, and immediately they came up with the most important literary reason: a pregnancy always symbolizes new life and involves the audience’s emotions in hopes for that new life (as John Conley has demonstrated).^{viii} Of course everyone wants the baby to live; of course abortion means a complete social and personal collapse. The visceral power of the symbolism was so obvious as to make my questions seem almost trivial. Mercilessly Hansberry shows us that Ruth acts not out of self-directed desire to improve her life, but for the reasons Frederica Mathewes-Greene heard over and over, from women who procured abortions: because she thinks other people want her to.^{ix} Ruth is shown from the beginning as a woman running on automatic. She has learned to disregard her husband, as all the other women in the family do, even when he desperately needs to tell her that he loves her and wants a better life for her. Everyone else has plans for how the \$10,000 in insurance money ought to be spent; but Ruth’s concept of community is so broken that she thinks Mama would leave them behind and serve her own pleasure. Ruth asks and expects nothing; her rights and will do not matter; that’s why Hansberry calls her “limp” and “beaten” in the stage directions to the scene where Walter hears of her abortion plans. She

simply feels that the world is a conspiracy of death for herself and all who belong to her.

American apartheid was not so unlike South Africa's; there, abortion was a deliberate tool of genocide.^x Hansberry's African political concerns—very evident in the person of Asagai in the play—indicate a political as well as a thematic reason why Hansberry made Ruth pregnant. It was clear why the family had been driven to think of “killing babies” and “wishing each other dead,” as Mama puts it. According to some black scholars, racism is still the driving force behind the promotion of abortion among African Americans.^{xi}

The Norton footnote made me wonder about blind spots among Hansberry's other critics. They shifted over time. Opening night criticism touched gingerly, if at all, on the racial oppression on which the whole drama turns. One thought that Hansberry began to touch on racial problems when the Younger family buys a house in a white neighborhood halfway through the play, when in fact race is always the main source of the characters' tension.^{xii} The next wave of critics saw Hansberry as very racially conscious and lauded Hansberry's prophetic stance on housing integration. Early critics found Walter's pan-Africanist sister Beneatha frivolous in her enthusiasm for the politics of the African college student Joseph Asagai. Later, Hansberry was praised for her remarkably clear-eyed look at the realities of newly independent African nations finding their way out from under colonial oppression.^{xiii} First-night critics had kind words for Walter's “patient little wife.” Later critics saw the play as fundamentally an ironic feminist manifesto, the forerunner of a number of feminist and lesbian plays by Black women. Yet later critics marveled at her insightful and, again, prophetic interest in the identity crisis of the African American male in the face of matriarchy.^{xiv}

Obviously, early critics had some substantial blind spots, and the play's political implications flowered more fully as the culture's consciousness evolved. Only one matter to which the earlier critics were not altogether blind have later critics conscientiously ignored. Several opening night critics mentioned Ruth's pregnancy, and others hinted at it, speaking of the “worried wife,” or the “young wife burdened with

problems.” One dropped a hint in describing how Mama “bewailed the loss of a new life for her brood.” The Jesuit publication *America* noted both the racial dimension of the play and how Ruth is “contemplating desperate measures.”^{xv} In 1965, Arthur France wrote in *Freedomways* of the terror in the play, including the “terror of abortion” and the “pity for an expectant mother with no place to lay her babe.”^{xvi} However, once the movement in favor of abortion came to be established in the American intellectual left, no one noticed Ruth’s pregnancy anymore, though it plays a more vital role in the plot than Beneatha’s feminism and Asagai’s African nationalism.

Behind this selective blindness is the mythic stature of Hansberry as social prophet. Born into a prosperous African American family, with educated parents, she was from her childhood acquainted with some of the greatest people in African American cultural history. Paul Robeson had her represent him at an international conference that he was forbidden to attend by the State Department.^{xvii} Her parents successfully challenged the constitutionality of “restrictive covenants” in real estate, by moving into a legally all-white neighborhood. Eight-year-old Lorraine narrowly missed being brained by a brick through the window, and her mother had to pack a gun inside the house. The playwright met her husband at a civil rights protest; the night before they married they demonstrated against the execution of the Rosenbergs. Her second play became a sort of cause célèbre of the New York theatre-going intelligentsia, who raised funds to keep it open until she died at thirty-four in January 1965.^{xviii} Remarkably prescient about politics, Hansberry had opinions that bellwhithered political trends for the next thirty years. Besides racial equality, African liberation, and feminism, she espoused cooperation between Jews and Blacks, anti-nuclear and anti-war causes, and, now coming to the fore in Hansberry studies, gay rights.^{xix}

But it is not merely that she could find the corner from which the bandwagon was about to set out. Hansberry had a consistent ethic. Racism, for instance, warps everyone in *Raisin*. Hansberry casts a withering eye on the faults of—well, every character except Mama, and even Mama comes off as a bit overbearing with Beneatha. Of course we hate the villains: Bobo and Willie are smalltime crooks; George

Murchison is a blind-hearted materialist; and the white man, Lindner, is a hypocrite and coward beneath contempt. But Hansberry gives us something to repel us in even the good guys. Ruth is a doormat and a liar; Beneatha is an unrealistic, frivolous egotist; Asagai is a sweet-talking sexist; even ten-year-old Travis is manipulative. And the hero of the drama, Walter, is an irresponsible drunkard and a selfish fool.

Rather than reverence, we are asked for understanding and compassion. We don't have to accept it when Walter plays hooky from work for three days for aimless drives and time in a jazz bar. Yet Hansberry demands that we see its context, too. It is the self-destructive rebellion of a stunted man hemmed in by an oppressive life. No one applauds his selfish gullibility when he wastes the family fortune; but we understand him well enough to rejoice in his courage and his sense of honor when they emerge at the end of the play. Hansberry promoted a sort of tough compassion that desires to see that another person should flourish, shed faults, gain in real human stature. Such a love must include everyone who can be brought to greater flourishing. Her reluctance to leave anyone out got her into trouble professionally. In last stage play (other performances were cobbled together from her works posthumously), there are yet more unlovable characters: a lying prostitute; the man who loves her and rejects her when she tells the truth; a politically apathetic Jew; a self-pitying playwright so focused on his homosexuality that he antagonizes nearly everyone. Hansberry demanded sympathies too various for her audiences to exercise in one night. But her consistency is telling; she really does want to include everybody. Her characters struggle to free themselves of the selfishness which grew from living under crushing injustice. Her recognition that abortion is a manifestation and instrument of oppression follows logically from her well-respected positions on all sorts of other issues. It is her impeccable credentials as a prophet of the American left that make Hansberry's pro-life sentiments so dangerous that they must be sanitized for freshmen. She is dangerous because of the grand consistency of her vision.

It is true that she did not live to see the abortion bandwagon get rolling. Martin Luther King, Jr. could confidently talk about the Civil Rights movement as modeled after the Christian subversion of the evils

of Roman infanticide.^{xx} Given that civil rights has become the excuse for practices that come within seconds of legally being infanticide—and sometimes slip over the line—his innocence seems amazing; and he died years after Hansberry, though she was younger. Abortion proponents could perhaps make something of Mama's line about the "ones that are already living" for whom the unborn might be sacrificed, though Mama clearly considers Ruth's plan a sign of desperation from which the family and community should defend the woman. King's companion Jesse Jackson gave himself over to the proponents of abortion, and who knows if Hansberry would have been among those who also bowed the knee to Moloch?

The fact is, no one knows what she would have been—and, unlike the frightened editors of the Norton Introduction, we must take her for what she was. She was a woman of courage and conscience, passionate for a moral vision of human integrity and compassion. The fact is that she put onto the American stage a play that not only opposes abortion in the strongest terms but shapes those terms as the Feminists for Life would also articulate them ten years after her death. She too understands that abortion is a tool of oppression and an act of desperation; she too understands that the woman should be considered a victim more than a perpetrator; she too recognizes that an inclusive vision of human flourishing cannot banish the unborn. In a culture whose pressures cost a third of the lives of African American children before they even see the light of day, it is good to have a figure of such political, intellectual, and moral stature call upon that community to consider how to be true to itself: "We a people who give children life, not who destroys them." Let us hope that the people of whom Mama speaks will re-awaken to her vision and their own history and make Mama's grand declaration the proud and undeniable truth.

NOTES

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- i. Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter, *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 7th ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998) p. 1832.
- ii. Norton, p. 1172.
- iii. See the comments from Anthony Bethelmy, p. 92, and Steven R. Carter, p. 94, in *African American Women Playwrights: A Research Guide* (New York and London: Garland, 1999).
- iv. Richard Watts, Jr., "Honest Drama of a Negro Family," *New York Post*, March 12, 1959; Brooks Atkinson, "Negro Drama Given at Ethel Barrymore," *New York Times*, March 12, 1959; Robert Coleman, "Raisin in the Sun a Superior Play," *Daily Mirror*, March 12, 1959; Walter Kerr, "A Raisin in the Sun," *New York Herald*, March 12, 1959. All are reprinted in *New York Theater Critics' Reviews*, 1959, vol. 20, ed. Rachel W. Coffin.
- v. Cheney, p. 65. Cf. Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son," Paul Molloy, ed., *100 Plus American Poems* (New York: Scholastic, 1970) p. 24.
- vi. Atkinson, p. 345 in Coffin, ed.
- vii. Cheney, Ann. *Lorraine Hansberry* (New York: Twayne, 1994) p. 60.
- viii. John J. Conley, S.J., "Abortion as a Metaphor," *Life and Learning VIII: Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Conference of the University Faculty for Life Conference, June 1998, at the University of Toronto*, ed. Joseph Koterski, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: University Faculty for Life, 1999) .
- ix. Frederica Mathewes-Green, *Real Choices—Listening to Women; Looking for Alternatives to Abortion* (Ben Lomond: Conciliar Press, 1997) p. 14.
- x. Sally Guttmacher, et. al. "Abortion Reform in South Africa: A Case Study of the 1996 Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act," *International Family Planning Perspectives* 24:4, Dec. 1998. Accessed at <http://www.agi-usa.org/pubs/journals/2419198.html>.
- xi. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction And the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1997).
- xii. Watts, op. cit.
- xiii. Jewelle Gomez, "Lorraine Hansberry: Uncommon Warrior," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Penguin, 1990) p. 311.

xiv. Frank Aston, "Raisin in the Sun is Moving Tale," *New York World-Telegram*, March 12, 1959, p. 345 in Coffin. See Jeanne-Marie Miller in *Black American Women Playwrights*, p. 74.

xv. Theophilus Lewis, "Raisin in the Sun," *America* 51/5 (2605) 286-87.

xvi. Q. in the article "Hansberry" in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 17, Sharon Gunton, ed. (Detroit: Gale, 1981).

xvii. Cheney, p. 19.

xviii. Steven Carter, Lorraine Hansberry, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 38: *Afro-American Writers after 1955: Dramatists and Prose Writers* (Detroit: Gale, 1985) pp. 120-26.

xix. Gomez, p. 315.

xx. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter From The Birmingham Jail," *The Borzoi College Reader*, 6th ed., ed. Charles Muscatine and Marlene Griffith (New York: Knopf, 1988) p. 664.