

Perry, Imani. *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2018. 237 pp.

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Looking for Lorraine is a rich book, an inspiring book. Imani Perry offers here a vivid, yet intimate “portrait of the artist” (p. 7), embedded in a multifaceted socio-cultural context and engaging intellectual history – a portrait that builds on established knowledge to open up new vistas on the “radiant and radical life” of a gifted young artist and passionate activist.

To many readers of this review, Lorraine Hansberry is known as the author of the celebrated play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), as the first African American woman to have a play produced on Broadway (at the age of not yet twenty-nine), and as the first black winner of the prestigious New York Drama Critic’s Circle Award. Some might also be familiar with her other major dramatic works, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (1964) and *Les Blancs*, her last play, which premiered only in 1970; or they might know about her political activism, Communist sympathies, and embrace of a queer identity. Yet, regardless of her, by now, canonical status as one of the foremost American playwrights and her active participation in some of the most pressing struggles of the mid-twentieth century (feminism, class struggle, anti-colonialism, and Civil Rights), she remains, as Perry states at the start of her magnificent exploration, “an important writer who had far too

little written about her, about her other work, about her life” (p. 1). For Perry, “there was a great deal of there there” (p. 2); in her two-hundred-page long study, she sets out to unpack and trace several layers of the complex life and times of a vivacious artist.

Looking for Lorraine is not a biography in a classic sense (a comprehensive biography of Hansberry by Margaret B. Wilkerson is forthcoming). It does not attempt to reconstruct from archival material the many small and large steps in the evolution of a person’s life. While Perry draws on some unpublished material from the Hansberry Papers at the Schomburg Center of the New York Public Library, her exploration relies primarily on published material, such as Hansberry’s many newspaper articles and magazine stories as well as the artist’s informal autobiography, the dramatic text *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words* (1968), compiled posthumously by her ex-husband Robert Nemiroff. The appeal of Perry’s biography therefore consists not so much in fresh archival insights but in the ways it weaves known and previously unknown facts into a rich texture to render a multifaceted portrait of an artist-activist, who immersed herself fully in the intellectual challenges and political struggles of her time. The rich socio-cultural context in which Hansberry wrote, fought, lived, and loved and which she engages in various plays, short stories, essays, speeches, and newspaper contributions is as relevant to Perry’s quest as the various dates and events of the artist’s life.

The book traces the major stations of Hansberry’s life: her childhood and high school years in South Side Chicago; her brief stint as a student of art and art history at the University of Wisconsin in Madison; her move to New York City and immersion in the cultural, political, and intellectual life of Harlem and later Greenwich Village; her emergence as a major writer of short stories, dramas, screenplays, and political essays; her fervent commitment to the political struggle against gender-, class- and, above all, race-based oppression at home and abroad; her marriage to and enduring friendship with Robert B. Nemiroff along with the embrace of her homosexuality; as well as, finally, her struggle with terminal illness. Through all of these stations of her life, so Perry writes, “she sparked and sparkled” (p. 2), meaning that Hansberry stood out both for her poise and charm as well as her incisive and fearless critique of the status quo and growing radical commitment to change.

The chapters in which Perry traces Hansberry’s growth as an artist-activist are the most compelling ones. Some of the events on this trajectory are familiar, others less. We learn about Hansberry’s childhood during the Depression period in South Side Chicago, where she was both part of larger community of working class people but also set apart from it due to her family’s middle class status. Her father, Carl Hansberry, was a local real estate developer and known for his

kitchenette apartments – small apartments carved out of larger ones and containing in place of a full kitchen a small cooking area integrated into the main room. This kind of apartment would feature prominently in *Raisin in the Sun* as a symbol of the condition of stasis and despair that the Younger family seeks to leave behind. At the same time, Carl Hansberry sought to integrate neighborhoods, not shying away from putting his family in the frontline of the struggle. When he moved his family into an exclusively white neighborhood, Lorraine Hansberry remembers rocks being thrown through the windows of her new home and her mother keeping a gun at hand to protect the family. Even though her father took the fight for his right to occupy the house all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled in his favor, the case did not change legislation against race-based housing covenants. Lorraine Hansberry would later write about her doubts about the effectiveness of legal battles for change and opt for direct action, such as in her organizational efforts on behalf of the SNCC freedom riders. In a letter, she underlines her readiness for civil disobedience: “I look forward to the day [...] when a centralized Negro organization will direct me not to pay taxes in protest of this segregated society: it will be a privilege to go to jail” (qtd. p. 162).

While Hansberry continued to pay taxes, she did not hesitate to speak up publicly against U. S. intervention in Cuba, nor to criticize the Kennedy administration’s failure to protect Civil Rights activists. In a by now legendary encounter, she took on Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, who in the wake of the Birmingham riots of May 1963 had invited her, along with a number of other distinguished black intellectuals and artists, for a private chat on race relations. At this meeting, Hansberry stood up and demanded that the government listen to the angry voice of the black people in the streets. Building on James Baldwin’s recollections of this moment, Perry describes the encounter as follows:

Small but overtaking a room, hers was a presence much greater than her remarkable attractiveness, stylishness, and poise. It was a presence beyond the expectation of her role, her place, her celebrity. She gave public voice to her belief that the Black working class were at the center of the struggle for liberation, and that she must be an amplifier not a figure-head. (p. 165)

It was not enough, so Hansberry insisted, to invite a handful of exceptional African American artists, intellectuals, scientists, and leaders for tea to the White House; a more thorough, moral commitment to the struggle for equal rights was needed.

Just as she remained a thorn in the side of the American government (for many years she was under FBI surveillance), she would also not hesitate to move beyond the NAACP’s policy of respectability and non-violence. In one of her speeches, she asserts her conviction that

until twenty million black people are completely interwoven into the fabric of our society [...] they are under no obligation to behave as if they were. What I am saying is that whether we like the word or not, the condition of our people dictates what can only be called revolutionary attitudes (qtd. Perry p. 169).

In endorsing “every single means of struggle: legal, illegal, passive, active, violence and non-violent” (qtd. Perry p. 169), Hansberry here anticipates Malcolm X’s 1964 proclamation “We want freedom by any means necessary” by nearly a year.

In tracing Hansberry’s artistic and political activism, Perry sketches out her place in the rich intellectual history of the late 1950s to mid-1960s. Upon moving to Harlem in 1951, Hansberry began work for the black newspaper *Freedom*, founded by Paul Robeson and Louis Burnham. She soon became a mentee and friend to both of them. In March 1952, she represented Robeson, whose passport had been revoked by the government, at the Inter-American Congress for Peace in Montevideo, Uruguay. Also in 1952, when working as a lecturer at the Jefferson School of Social Science (a school founded by the Communist Party USA), she met and took classes with W.E.B. Du Bois, who soon also became an important mentor for her. At Du Bois’s funeral in 1964, she was to deliver one of the most perceptive eulogies for this influential scholar-activist. Also during her time in Harlem, Hansberry met and befriended the actress and playwright Alice Childress, who, in turn, introduced her to a number of other important theater workers of the time – Harry Belafonte, Douglas Turner Ward, Ruby Dee, and Sidney Poitier – as well as to novelist John Oliver Killens. It is illuminating to see how Hansberry, through her various friendships, effectively bridged two generations of black artist/scholar-activists and also, in a way, two distinctive periods of struggle: the 1930s and the 1960s. Just as she was, in Perry’s words, a “political daughter” (p. 57) to Du Bois and Robeson, she became a political sister and intimate friend to James Baldwin and Nina Simone, both key activists in the struggle for Civil Rights. Perry dedicates an entire chapter to the Baldwin-Hansberry-Simone ‘trinity,’ to the strength and depth of their friendship, to the various ways they supported and influenced each other in their personal lives, their art and politics. In 1969 Nina Simone, inspired by a photo of Hansberry, recorded in an homage to her friend the song “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black” – a song that was to be embraced by an entire generation of black artists as an affirmation of black pride. In Perry’s portrait of Hansberry, this artist-activist, despite the brevity of her life, clearly occupies a key position in the cultural, intellectual, and political life of the late 1950s and early 1960s. She stands at the intersection of various movements and thoughts in the long struggle for Civil Rights, marking important transitions in political perspectives and shifts in strategy but also pointing up the persistent continuity of the struggle. As Perry remarks, “The traditional narrative of Black radicalism in the US usually jumps from the 1930s to

the late 1960s but in fact there was a steady thread, a small persistent network across the intervening decades. Lorraine and her people were part of it” (p. 155).

It would have been interesting to find out how Malcolm X fits into this network of relevant artists, intellectuals, and activists. Although Perry references him a few times, she does not spell out his connection to Hansberry. We learn that both worked on Senator John F. Kennedy’s ‘Airlift Africa’ campaign in 1960 and that they subsequently shared a few “lovely moments” (p. 196) together. However, Perry provides us neither with the specifics of these “lovely” moments, nor with dates, places, and contexts. She merely suggests that these two seminal figures meant something to each other – whether intellectually, politically, or personally is left open, even as Perry makes a point of inserting Malcolm X into the “snow-covered crowd” (p. 196) that attended Hansberry’s funeral on January 15, 1965. The author does not provide evidence for this claim. We are unable to tell whether this final encounter did indeed happen or whether it is one of the many imaginative touches that mark Perry’s biography of Hansberry.

This is perhaps the one weakness of *Looking for Lorraine*. While quite imaginative in its exploration, it frequently remains fuzzy with regard to detail. Important moments are quickly passed over – for instance, we never learn what Hansberry actually spoke about at the women’s meeting in Uruguay, when she stepped in for Robeson; or why exactly she divorced “Bobby” Nemiroff only in the final months of her life, when she was already weakened by illness and supported by Bobby as one of her primary caregivers. While Perry skips over such details, she does not shy away from value judgments, such as when she describes the divorce, without further explication, as Hansberry “freeing” herself (p. 180). In other moments, again, Perry deliberately pauses to fill in the blanks of the archive, even as she articulates her sense of the impossibility and unethicalness of such conjectures. When describing Hansberry’s time as a student at the 1949 summer art program in Ajijic, Mexico – a small bohemian community in Jalisco – she speculates, despite her lack of evidence, whether this was the moment that Hansberry opened up to a lesbian identity: “it was her first real taste of that potential” (p. 38). In other places, however, she shies away from such imaginative explorations, such as when she limits her description of Dorothy Secules – Hansberry’s lover in the last phase of her life and, along with Bobby, one of her caregivers during illness – to few, cliché phrases: “a fiercely opinionated and smart blonde who climbed the ladder from working as a receptionist at Loft Candy Company to an executive” (p. 93). Where did this seemingly unlikely couple meet? What was their relationship like? Perry remains silent on these and other questions.

Finally, Perry’s search for this eminent twentieth century woman is clearly also an intimate exploration of her own fascination with the artist. Throughout

the book, Perry refers to her protagonist as simply “Lorraine,” and from the start, she stresses the many parallels and points of identification she sees between Hansberry’s and her own life. They are particularly evident in Perry’s mourning for a dearly beloved father, his admiration for Hansberry, and the ways he built her “into my coming of age” (p. 5). Perry admits, “the portrait here is, then, as much an homage to her as it is gift to myself, and to you. That we might see the stuff of our lives in her” (p. 7). This claim is appealing – in as far as it concerns finding a reflection of our contemporary society in Hansberry’s life and times – for instance, in her insistence on the value of black rage, her demand for systemic change. But it fails, at least for this reader, with regard to Perry’s persistent staging of herself as the author in search of an artist: the photograph of Perry on the flap of the dust jacket shows her mimicking almost exactly Hansberry’s pose on the front cover portrait. In the book’s conclusion, Perry even reenacts Alice Walker’s famous quest for Zora Neal Hurston’s grave, when she drives on Hansberry’s birthday – “it is my father’s birthday, too,” Perry makes sure to inform her readers (p. 202) – for the first time to the cemetery on Croton-on-Hudson, where Hansberry was laid to rest some fifty-two years ago. She even signifies on Walker’s conversation with the cemetery’s caretaker, asking him for the location of the artist’s grave. Similar to his literary predecessor, the Croton caretaker points out that it will be very difficult to locate Hansberry’s grave and that she should tread carefully, “it is easy to fall” (p. 203). But the pathos of this literary homage fails, for not only does Perry locate the grave right away, after only a few steps, she cannot even stay long because her allergies overwhelm her. In these passages, Perry clearly is not “looking for Lorraine” but for herself. In the same vein, the book predictably ends with an image of Perry, and not of Hansberry. One would wish that the author had stuck to her initial objective “to catch a likeness” of Lorraine Hansberry, to find out “what made her smile and raised her ire; what drove her passions and made her love” (p. 8). Instead, we behold a likeness of Perry in her car, driving home from the cemetery, smiling and crying (p. 204).