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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

To All Sisters:
Defending Lorraine Hansberry's Integral Role in the Black Arts Movement
in Juxtaposition with the Works of Sonia Sanchez & Adrienne Kennedy

submitted by

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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INTRODUCTION

A Black World...A Black Art

Considered the artistic component of the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s and 1970s featured many black writers and artists who explored the “essence” of black identity in their creative work. Their values were reflected in the artistic expression of the period, often referred to as the "Black Aesthetic." The Black Aesthetic was a cultural and artistic ideology that developed out of African American desire for self-determination. It served as a restorative means of helping black people escape what they believed was a poisonous mainstream (white) Americanism. It also encouraged the idea of Black separatism and the aspiration to strengthen black ideals and creativity. In his essay “The Black Arts Movement,” African American theater scholar, Larry Neal writes,

When we speak of a 'Black aesthetic' several things are meant. First, we assume that there is already in existence the basis for such an aesthetic. Essentially, it consists of an African-American cultural tradition. But this aesthetic is finally, by implication, broader than that tradition. It encompasses most of the usable elements of the Third World culture. The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world (Neal 2).

Neal’s definition of the Black Aesthetic and its motive to destroy all things white echoes

the views and ideology of El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, otherwise known as Malcolm X. A leader and minister for the Black Power Movement and the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X was assassinated in February 1965; his death was the “catalyst” for the Black Arts Movement¹. Started by activist Everett Leroi Jones, BAM has been considered one of the most controversial moments in the history of African American and American literary and cultural production. It rejected all previous forms of western art, including literature, poetry and theater, and claimed the African Arts as the sole source of knowledge for the African Americans, and for the black race as a whole. As he moved towards founding the Black Arts Movement, Jones changed his name to Amiri Baraka, meaning “blessed prince” in Bantu, to represent his views of the Black Aesthetic.

Prior to the start of BAM, artists addressed the black experience, but they did so within the confines of white literary conventions in terms of writing and expression. Although black artists produced work, their material did not represent their culture or their experiences. Baraka ushered in a new phase of poetry in which the form and content was more violent in order to address the injustices inflicted on the black community. Drawing inspiration from artists such as Sterling A. Brown, Baraka modeled his poetry after the vernacular of the urban black community. In his poem, “Black Art” (1969), Baraka uses this violence and vernacular to reject the poetry of dominant white culture. In the poem, his speaker declares that,

Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step...Fuck poems
and they are useful... We want live
words of the hip world live flesh &
coursing blood

¹ Finkelman 187

...
... We want poems that kill.
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland...
Let there be no love poems written
until love can exist freely and
cleanly. Let Black People understand
that they are the lovers and the sons
of lovers and warriors and sons
of warriors Are poems & poets &
all the loveliness here in the world

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
or LOUD (Randall, Ed. pg)

In this poem, Baraka's speaker preaches violence, boldly declaring that there will be no peace, "no love poems written until love can exist freely and cleanly." The speaker wants "poems that kill" and that "wrestle cops in the street" until everyone is treated equally. As evidenced by Baraka's eloquently militant phrasing in "Black Art," the poetry of the Black Arts Movement served as a vehicle to fight for justice and equality in all spheres of life: culturally, politically, socially and artistically. Baraka's call for a black world would transform the American literary canon forever. The Black Arts Movement brought African American literature to the forefront of the literary scene and with it, new forms of expression.

There were many writers who contributed to BAM, both men and women alike; their contributions to the movement included poetry, novels, and plays, among other forms of expression. All of the writers of the Black Arts Movement were influenced by

those who came before them and one of the most influential precursors of BAM was playwright, Lorraine Hansberry. Best known for her iconic play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry focused on the topic of race in American Society. She was at the height of her career during the Civil Rights Movement. Other writers at large during the Civil Rights era included, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Gwendolyn Brooks. Hansberry was considered part of this generation of writers and not part of the BAM generation because she died the year that the Black Arts Movement got underway. Since then, Hansberry's work has been considered to be only a precursor of BAM, and she, a grandmother of the movement.

Despite her untimely death, Lorraine Hansberry was not only a pioneer to the Black Arts Movement but she was also one of its most influential contributors. Moreover, her contributions are not limited to only the beginning of the movement; instead, her powerful body of work continued to inform the entire movement from its inception to its culmination. Through a close reading of two of her plays, *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Les Blancs*, I will extract themes from Hansberry's work that are considered characteristic of BAM, and compare them with the themes of two prominent Black Arts writers firmly established in the movement, Sonia Sanchez and Adrienne Kennedy. By doing this, I will prove that Hansberry's death did not prevent her work from joining the sphere of black art. The themes present in the literature of the Black Arts Movements are identical to the themes that exist in Hansberry's plays. While it can be said that she inspired the writers of BAM, categorizing Hansberry as solely a precursory influence and excluding her from the Black Arts Movement itself is a literary injustice, one which I will endeavor to remedy in this thesis.

My focus on three *women* of the Black Arts Movement allows me to address and interrogate the claim that BAM was sexist, in that it highlighted only the achievements and experiences of black men. Rather than focusing solely on debunking these claims, my discussion will, instead, examine how the works of Hansberry, Sanchez and Kennedy collectively combated sexism in the movement.

CHAPTER ONE

Black Art in Lorraine Hansberry

"I was born on the Southside of Chicago. I was born black and a female. I was born in a depression after one world war and came into my adolescence during another."

-Lorraine Hansberry ("To Be Young, Gifted, and Black, 11)

Playwright, essayist, and innovative writer, Lorraine Hansberry's body of work serves as an influential predecessor to the Black Arts Movement. Despite her lasting impact on the movement, Hansberry died in 1965 at the young age of thirty-four—the same year that marked the beginning of BAM. Arguably, if Hansberry had lived longer she would have been at the forefront of the movement. Her plays touched on many of the themes that recurred in the works of the movement and, in some ways, can be considered part of its early foundations.

Although her life was short, Lorraine Hansberry not only left her mark on American popular theatre, but she also influenced Black theatre and African American literature. Her work, finished and unfinished, served as beacons for many people during the movement. Her most successful play, *A Raisin in the Sun (1959)*, received critical acclaim and recognition from many theatre critics at the time. Based on Hansberry's

childhood experiences of desegregating a white neighborhood², the play won the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award for Best Play of the Year, and making Broadway history. Hansberry was the fifth woman to win this award; she was also the youngest American and the first black person to receive this honor. Her success, along with the content of her writing both influenced and encouraged many black writers, most of whom would later rise up during the Black Arts Movement.

Hansberry used the success of *A Raisin In the Sun* to support the Civil Rights Movement. Similar to writers and supporters of BAM whose work was influenced by early Civil Rights activists, Hansberry stressed the importance of breaking away from western culture and the need for blacks to free themselves from white imperial rule. Throughout history, white people dominated American culture, establishing Western European ideals as the societal “standard.” As noted earlier, the Black Arts Movement began as a vibrant retaliation to the white cultural standard; African Americans felt like strangers in their own country and BAM was the result of their collective desires for a separate culture and unique identity. Hansberry illustrates such desires in *A Raisin in the Sun*, as well as in her play, *Les Blancs* (1970), posthumously finished by her former husband, Robert Nemiroff.

A Raisin in the Sun gave audiences a glimpse of a day in the life of a working class black family living in a racially charged America. The title of the play is an allusion to Langston Hughes’ poem, *Harlem: A Dream Deferred* (1951). As one of the major Harlem Renaissance poets and writers in the 1920’s and early 1930’s, Langston Hughes,

² In 1937, businessman Carl Hansberry, Lorraine's father, defied the Woodlawn Property Owners' Association by purchasing a home in an all-white neighborhood in Chicago. Anna M. Lee, a white signatory of the restrictive covenant, filed suit against Hansberry for \$100,000. On November 13, 1940, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Hansberry v. Lee* that whites cannot bar African Americans from white neighborhoods.

like Lorraine Hansberry, helped lay the groundwork for black cultural producers who worked alongside him and followed in his footsteps.

During the Harlem Renaissance, also known as the “New Negro” movement, black artists, from writers to musicians, expressed themselves and their experiences through their art. The “New Negro³” was a term used to describe a black individual that spoke out against the racial segregation of the Jim Crow laws. The “New Negro” movement was similar to BAM in that it fought racial injustices. It inspired a hope for acceptance for the black race, both domestically and transnationally. Some common themes represented during the Harlem Renaissance were focused primarily on the influence of slavery, emerging African-American traditions and the effects of institutional racism. The Harlem Renaissance led to more opportunities for blacks to be published by mainstream companies, allowing black artists, writers, and poets to utilize art to demonstrate their humanity and to support their demand for equality.

However, *Harlem: A Dream Deferred* was written twenty years after the Great Depression. During these years, the Harlem Renaissance had already ended and the majority of the black community was devastated, with numerous factors contributing to its decline. The Great Depression of the 1930s drew attention away from the arts and redirected focus on economic issues. Organizations that had promoted the Renaissance in the 1920s became more concerned with economic and social needs. The Harlem Riot of 1935, which was the result of both the depression and growing racial tensions, was the final death blow to the “New Negro” movement.

³ The term, “New Negro” was coined by American philosopher and writer Alain Leroy Locke. He edited *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), which included work from writers such as, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and W.E.B Dubois.

It was in the wake of the Harlem Renaissance and its subsequent implosion that Hughes wrote *A Dream Deferred*. In his examination of postponed dreams, Hughes encourages his audience to think of what it really means to set one's aspirations aside.

“What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?” (Hughes 74)

Here, Hughes' speaker contemplates the fate of suppressed dreams. It's suggested that they begin to “fester” and shrivel up inside, much like a grape drying out to become a raisin in the sun. This poem addresses inequality in the sense that the desires and ambitions of black people were unimportant and stifled in American society by racism and its societal structures, such as segregation and the Jim Crow laws. Building tension with question after question, the closing line poses the final query about a deferred dream: “Or does [a dream deferred] explode?” The possibility of an explosion suggests that the suppression of black dreams might result in a type of violent outburst. This potential eruption, which would most likely present itself in the form of race riots and protests, is the metaphorical result of living in a society that oppresses and represses these dreams.

Similar to Hughes' poetic characterization, deferred dreams are what many African Americans dealt with in the 1950s and 1960s. Hansberry's reference to Hughes's poem in the title of her iconic play serves as a reminder of the rich literary history behind

it, such as the work of the Harlem Renaissance. It also refers to the importance of dreams in *A Raisin in the Sun*, alluding to the struggle that the characters will face. Hansberry equates the characters' striving for their dreams with the overarching plight of African Americans striving for the black dream of equality in America, because only when blacks achieve equality will they be able to pursue their dreams. The Youngers, the main characters of the play, are one of the first accurate depictions of a black family in America. Before this play, African-American roles were usually minor and/or stereotypical; the only roles generally given to black performers in the 1930s and 1940s were those of the mammy or the servant. Despite these negative depictions, there were black audiences who relished seeing any depictions of blacks, be it negative or positive. Because of their underrepresentation in the theater, these audiences were happy to see people of their race on the stage in any capacity. However, there were others who preferred not to support such plays with their patronage. The opening of *A Raisin in the Sun* ended this divide.

One main focus in the play is on the stress of trying to survive the oppression that emerges in one's community. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry uses the Younger family to illustrate how these stresses were dealt with. The Younger Family consists of Lena (also known as Mama), the matriarch of the family; Walter, her son, Ruth, her daughter-in-law; her grandson, Travis; and her daughter, Beneatha (Bennie). Each person has his or her own dreams that he or she wishes to fulfill, and throughout the play it becomes apparent that these individual dreams are causing the Younger family to fall apart. The climax of the plot happens when the Youngers wish to move into a nicer, *whiter* neighborhood. The family faces a lot of resistance in the face of this change, and their

only chance of succeeding is to prioritize the family's collective dream over their individual dreams.

Each member of the Younger family is faced with a challenge, but is able to solve it with the love and support of the familial unit. Through her depiction of this family and its struggles, Hansberry touches on the themes of identity and assimilation. For example, Joseph Asagai, an African student, constantly tries to convince Bennie to discover her "black roots." In this way, Hansberry illustrates the idea of celebrating African heritage, a notion that became popular during the Black Arts Movement. In contrast, she also uses the character George, Bennie's first boyfriend, to represent assimilation. George is confident, suave, and overtly cocky. His insulting one-liners reveal his condescending attitude throughout the play; one such instance occurs as he responds to Beneatha's pride in her African ancestry. He admonishes her, saying,

"Let's face it, baby, your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts!" Insulted, Beneatha smartly replies, "GRASS HUTS!...See there...you are standing there in your splendid ignorance talking about people who were the first to smelt iron on the face of the earth!" (Hansberry 2.1)

George's use of the pronoun "your" makes his assimilation into western culture clear. He and Bennie are both descendants of the African race, but he denies this commonality when he tells Bennie it is *her* culture, not his. He further denies his African ancestry when he deems the antebellum spirituals insignificant. George actually represents the voice of an ignorant racist when he denigrates these spirituals and suggests that Africans live in huts made of grass.

In contrast to these more obvious caricatures of conflicting societal views, Beneatha represents one of Hansberry's more complex characters and has been interpreted in many ways. In the article, "Black Women Playwrights: Exorcising Myths," Elizabeth Brown- Guillory describes Bennie's character as the "evolving black woman" (Brown-Guillory 125). She goes on to explain this label, stating that an evolving black woman is:

...a phrase which embodies the multiplicity of emotions of ordinary black women for whom the act of living is sheer heroism. This creature emphasizes understanding and taking care of herself. Not always the powerhouse of strength, the evolving black woman is quite fragile. Her resiliency, though, makes her a positive image of black womanhood. Self-respecting, self-sufficient, assertive, these women force others around them to recognize their adulthood (Guillory-Brown 234).

According to this model, Beneatha is the perfect example of an evolving black woman, striving for success and establishing her identity in a racist society. She represents the young, independent, female who definitely has dreams. With her name explicitly containing the word, "beneath," Beneatha not only resists the subservience her name implies, she also strives to elevate herself by becoming a doctor. Bennie's desire and ambition set her apart from the other characters as she struggles to establish her identity throughout the play. Hansberry uses the men in Beneatha's life to signify the choices she must make. Bennie is happiest with her Nigerian boyfriend, Asagai. He gives her the nickname, "Alaiyo," which means "One for Whom Bread—Food—Is Not Enough" (Hansberry 1.2). Asagai's nickname for Beneatha stems from his recognition of

Beneatha's desire to learn; he recognizes that even his teaching won't be enough to sustain her, and welcomes the knowledge that she will continue to learn beyond his expectations. Asagai loves that Bennie is ambitious and he inspires her to achieve her dreams. As mentioned earlier, Asagai also encourages Bennie to discover who she truly is by teaching her about African culture.

In contrast, Beneatha is most depressed and angry when she is with George, her pompous, affluent, African-American boyfriend. She identifies much more with Asagai's interest in rediscovering her African roots than with George's interest in assimilating into white culture. By making Bennie's relationship with Asagai a positive one, and her relationship with George a negative one, Hansberry is issuing a revolutionary social commentary. The Black Arts Movement was a way for African Americans to find their identity and many did so by tracing their history back to Africa. Hansberry's notion of finding one's "roots" as opposed to assimilating was just another example of the way in which her work served as a precursor for the movement.

Bennie's choice of a male companion is also a commentary on education. As George represents assimilation, his character demonstrates what happens to a black man once he assimilates. George's family is extremely wealthy; the audience knows this from both the dialogue and the way in which George dresses. As a result of his family's wealth, George can afford to attend college. It can be assumed that the college George attends is predominantly white and has shaped his thinking significantly. Consequently, Hansberry is critiquing the western education system and the effect that it can have on the black community through George's character. BAM was a movement that generated largely in response to the westernized education that was received in schools. Black

literature and history were not widely, if at all, taught in schools during the 1960s, a failing the Black Arts Movement sought to remedy.

George uses his white western education to demean the other black characters in the play. In act two, scene one, when Walter tries to have a conversation with him, he is noticeably uninterested; Walter retaliates and begins to criticize the concept of college and George's attire, saying that college is only teaching him "to talk proper and read books and wear them faggoty-looking white shoes" (Hansberry 2.1). George simply responds by calling him "Prometheus." In Greek mythology, Prometheus was a Titan known for his intelligence, and George's reference to him serves two purposes; firstly, it insults Walter, establishing an assumption that Walter is ignorant of classical literature and utilizing sarcasm to call Walter stupid. Predictably, Walter does not understand the reference because of his lack of education. The second purpose of this reference is to verify George's western education.

Another key theme of the Black Arts Movement that Hansberry captures in *A Raisin in the Sun* is black pride. Writers often expressed black pride by embracing non-white aspects of physical appearance. During a time when being black was considered a stigma, those involved in BAM coined the mantra, "black is beautiful." They began to set their own standards of beauty and encouraged people to live by them. One of the ways in which black beauty was represented was through hair. Prior to the black power and black arts movements, black women and men alike would perm or straighten their hair to resemble their white counterparts. Keeping one's hair in a natural state relates to the BAM theme of denouncing western culture, offering a way to return to one's "African roots."

In contrast to the natural hair movement, the women in *A Raisin in the Sun* are products of their time (the 1950s) and therefore wear their hair straight. In act one, Asagai visits Beneatha and brings her beautiful robes from Nigeria. In the following exchange, Asagai “jokingly” pokes fun at Beneatha’s hair:

ASAGAI: ...You wear it well... very well...mutilated hair and all.
BENEATHA (*turning suddenly*): My hair—what’s wrong with my hair?
ASAGAI (*shrugging*): Were you born with it like that?
BENEATHA (*reaching up to touch it*): No... of course not. (*She looks back to the mirror, disturbed.*)
ASAGAI (*smiling*): How then?
BENEATHA: You know perfectly well how... as crinkly as yours...that’s how.
ASAGAI: And it is ugly to you that way?
BENEATHA (*quickly*):Oh, no—not ugly... (*more slowly, apologetically*) But it’s so hard to manage when it’s, well—raw.
ASAGAI: And so to accommodate that—you mutilate it every week?
BENEATHA: It’s not mutilation!
ASAGAI (*Laughing aloud at her seriousness*): Oh...please! I am only teasing you because you are so serious about these things. (*He stands back from her and folds his arms across his chest as he watches her pulling at her hair and frowning in the mirror.*) Do you remember the first time you met me at school?...(*He laughs.*) You came up to me and you said—and I thought you were the most serious little thing I had ever seen—you said: (*He imitates her.*) “Mr.Asagai, I want very much to talk with you. About Africa. You see, Mr. Asagai, I am looking for my identity!” (*He laughs.*)
BENEATHA (*turning to him, not laughing*): Yes.—(*Her face is quizzical, profoundly disturbed.*)
ASAGAI (*still teasing and reaching out and taking her face in his hands and turning her profile to him*): Well... it is true that this is not so much a profile of a Hollywood queen as perhaps a queen of the Nile—(*a mock dismissal of the importance of the question*) But what does it matter? Assimilationism is so popular in your country.
BENEATHA (*wheeling, passionately, sharply*): I am not an assimilationist!
(Hansberry 1.2)

Although a joke, Asagai’s opinions have a significant impact on Beneatha. He does not say it blatantly, but both Bennie and the audience can make the connection between his “playful” words and his true opinions. To disrupt the natural state of one’s hair by straightening it unnaturally is a form of assimilation into the westernized, American

culture. His words seem to carry some weight, for in the first scene of act two, we learn that Beneatha has cut her hair short. When George sees her hair he exclaims, “What have you done to your head—I mean you hair?” (Hansberry 2.1). George’s initial question of what she’s done with her head is suggestive of his thoughts towards Bennie’s change as a result of some type of mental problem or erroneous thought process. Beneatha’s decision to go natural and wear an Afro represents her acceptance of her heritage. Her new hair serves as a symbol of the anti-assimilationist movement and the desire to regain one’s identity by tracing one’s African roots. Through Bennie, Hansberry declares that natural black hair is beautiful, and in doing so she prefigures the 1960s motto, “black is beautiful,” in 1959.

Finally, Hansberry hones in on the importance of family in the black community. Her play is not just about the individual’s dreams, but it is about the dream of the family as a whole. In the play, dreams are crucial. Hansberry focuses primarily on the dreams driving and motivating her main characters. These dreams function positively by lifting their minds from their tough lifestyle, as well as negatively, by fueling even more dissatisfaction with their present situations. For the most part, the negative dreams come from placing emphasis on materialistic goals, rather than on family. The Younger family struggles throughout the play, both financially and socially. As a result of the stress of these struggles they become broken, letting their individual dreams get in the way of their collective fate as a family. At the end of the play they reunite and realize their dream of buying a house.

Throughout the play Mama’s character signifies the need for an anchor in the midst of change. Mama strongly believes in the importance of family, and she tries to

teach this value to her family as she struggles to keep them together. When the characters begin to put their family before their individual desires, they merge their separate dreams with the family's unified dream. According to Hansberry, as long as people attempt to do what is best for their families, they can encourage one another to achieve their individual dreams as well. This was a powerful message for black families, and the black community in general, during the 50's and 60's and would remain just as powerful a message for black families in the 70's. Furthermore, Hansberry's message ensures that the notion of family is redefined, becoming a larger (black) community with common goals in which all members uplift one another.

Later playwrights, specifically those involved with BAM, often criticized Hansberry's plays because of their structure. Her plays followed a similar structure to her white counterparts in that they followed the standard form in terms of acts, scenes and vernacular. Part of the break with western culture that BAM encouraged included dismantling the standardized literary structure of poems and plays. Instead, BAM writers sought to create their own canon based on the black experience. This is why Hansberry has been considered a "sellout." Contrary to the plays of the Black Arts Movement, Hansberry's plays followed the same format as any western culture play. Her goal was to challenge her audience, but she utilized a different strategy. Rather than appeal to one culture, she appealed to both in order to reach a wider audience- specifically the white community. She explains as much in a letter to her mother written on January 19, 1959-- two months before *Raisin* debuted on Broadway. Of the play, she wrote,

Mama, it is a play that tells the truth about people, Negroes and life and I think it will help a lot of people to understand how we are just as complicated as they

are—and just as mixed up—but above all, that we have among our miserable and downtrodden ranks—people (Hansberry, 90).

Hansberry sought to educate both her white and black audiences, setting her apart from the writers of BAM. Although Hansberry's work suggests the need to break with western culture she does not exclude whites from the experience, welcoming them in a way that promotes social awareness and acceptance. She understood that in order to change the social circumstances of black community she had to engage the white community in her work as well.

After she wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry continued to reach out to the white community through her plays, but her views began to change. Once considered a liberal, Hansberry's newer work suggests that she decided that an exchange was not enough to evoke change. She began to share Amiri Baraka's vision of "an antistructural, confrontational black theater that would impel the audience to act" (Elam 58). In "The Revolutionary Theater," Baraka declared, "Revolutionary theater should force change. It should be change.... Revolutionary theater must Expose!..., Revolutionary theater must accuse and attack anything that can be accused and attacked"(Baraka 1). Although she continued to engage both white and black audiences, Hansberry's approach shifted from liberal to radical between *Raisin* and her final play, *Les Blancs*. When asked about Martin Luther King and his leadership in the 1960s, Hansberry admitted, "I support [him] and applaud [him]...At the same time I have no illusion that it is enough...I think that Dr. King increasingly will have to face a forthcoming generation of [Blacks] who question even the restraints of his militant and, currently, progressive ideas and concepts" (Barrios 29). Hansberry was correct in believing that Dr. King's approach would not be enough,

for shortly after she said this, the Black Power Movement, with its focus on militancy, emerged.

Debuted in 1970, *Les Blancs* is considered to be her most influential play. The title, meaning “the whites” in French, is a reference to Jean Genet’s play *The Blacks: A Clown Show*. In a review, Hansberry accused Genet of “taking the easy way out by writing a play that elicits white guilt instead of addressing the question of action” (Gordon 152). Genet claimed that the play was meant to shed light on whites’ misrepresentation of blacks but Hansberry argued that if Genet wanted to address the “white problem” then the play should have been entitled “The Whites” or “Les Blancs” because the play is one about whites.⁴ Furthermore, Hansberry responded to Genet’s play not only through the title, but also within the play, itself. Contrary to Genet’s representation of blacks as a “monolith” (indicated by his title), Hansberry demonstrates that there are individuals who have their own opinions and views within the black community. In his book, *Her Majesty’s Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age*, Lewis R. Gordon supports this claim when he writes:

In spite of Hansberry’s response to Genet’s play, she does not create a monolith to enclose Whites... Through the characters of Morris, the North American liberal, and Matoseh [Tshembe], the African intellectual, Hansberry reproaches both their attitudes and their lack of social commitment, which she believes indispensable to achieve social changes. By the end of the play, Morris and Matoseh realize that both need to take an action on the same side against oppression and colonialism (Gordon 152).

⁴ Lewis R. Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age*, 152

Hansberry rejects this concept of the monolith because, in reality, the monolith is a myth. This is why Genet's play could not do what was needed to evoke change. Realizing this, Hansberry created characters to which her audience, black and white, could relate.

The play's protagonist, Tshembe, is an African man who lives in Europe. He returns to his home in Africa for the funeral of his father, the leader of a resistance movement against colonial rule. In the play, Tshembe is faced with the decision to return to his roots and get involved in the movement his father founded, or to stay out of it and go back to his wife and child in Europe. Hansberry sets this play in Africa, far away from her American audience so that they would be onlookers, removed from the events of the plot. By distancing her audience, Hansberry presents them with issues that they can digest more easily; the issues seem distant but ultimately, they are surrogates for the same dynamics in the U.S. Furthermore, the audience is able to receive the lesson without any preconceived prejudices.

Each of the major characters in the play represents a different sentiment towards colonialism. Tshembe is the liberal African who "escaped" to Europe and is now struggling between his new comfortable life and his loyalty to his home and people. His brothers Eric and Abioseh represent the two sides of the struggle between the assimilationist and the non- assimilationist. Eric, a result of an interracial rape, is the revolutionary that welcomes a war against those who have invaded his home. Abioseh is a converted Christian and minister who wants peace and ultimately turns his back on his people in an attempt to achieve it, thus coming to represent the "traitor." Tshembe is placed between the two views as he is conflicted and struggles to choose a side throughout the play.

The white characters in *Les Blancs* also represent different approaches to colonialism and race. The Reverend Nielsen has kept the Africans from education, crippling them so they cannot move forward. Dr. Marta Gotterling is ignorant to the harm that their presence is doing in Africa; she feels that they have only enhanced the lives of the Africans and will not believe otherwise. Charlie is the liberal American who changes his views and turns radical in the end while Dr. DeKoven and Mme. Nielsen have always been aware of the damage and understand the natives' need to fight back.

One of the major themes in this play, like in *A Raisin in the Sun*, is the denial of western culture and the attempt to rediscover one's African roots. For Tshembe, who has lived in Europe with his white wife and child, his visit home to Africa turns into a journey to rediscover his identity. Once there, his experiences drive him towards the realization that he has to become part of the struggle to liberate his people. Not only does he join the resistance movement, he also chooses to stay in Africa, making the decision not to return to his European life. Tshembe is the symbol of anti-assimilation in *Les Blancs*, as Beneatha and Asagai were in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Hansberry takes the attention given to Africa in *A Raisin in the Sun* and expands it. In *Raisin*, Asagai's purpose as the African in America is to offer a critique of American society. The setting of *Les Blancs* serves the same purpose but in a different way; by setting the play in a foreign place, Hansberry attempts to make both African Americans and white Americans understand the dynamics of race relations and colonialism.

A Raisin in the Sun and *Les Blancs* share a number of other BAM themes as well. One of the themes that is present in both plays is religion, more specifically, Christianity. In *Raisin* the mother, Lena, is a devout Christian but Beneatha is not. Because Bennie

represents the anti-assimilationist, one can make the connection between her and the beliefs of the Black Arts Movement. Inspired by Malcolm X, many contributors to the movement adopted his belief that Christianity was the “white man’s religion⁵.” Slave owners in America did indeed use Christian theology to justify their actions and keep their black slaves obedient. Bennie’s denial of Christianity was characteristic of a black revolutionary in the 1960s and 1970s. Lena Younger is a Christina, but she also plays one of the strongest and influential characters. In contrast, Christianity is given an even harsher critique in *Les Blancs*. Abioseh has become a Christian priest and no longer values his African upbringing because of his new faith. He feels that he is doing God’s will by turning in the revolutionaries and ultimately, his choices result in his death. Abioseh represents assimilation through religion.

Hansberry also comments on the BAM theme of violence in her plays. Violence is present in *Raisin*, but it is not visible; violence is not staged but it is a foreboding threat that impacts the Younger family’s every move, especially their choice to move into an all-white neighborhood. Violence is very much an integral part of *Les Blancs*. As said earlier, Hansberry’s views became more radical towards the end of her life. In her memoir, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, she states, “I think it’s very simple that the whole idea of debating whether or not Negroes should defend themselves is an insult. If anybody comes and does ill in your home or your community—obviously, you try your

⁵ In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm X writes, “Christianity is the white man’s religion. The Holy Bible in the white man’s hand and his interpretations of it has been the greatest single ideological weapon for enslaving millions of non-white human beings. Every country the white man has conquered with his guns, he has always paved the way, and salved his conscience, by carrying the Bible and interpreting it to call the people ‘heathens’ and ‘pagans’; then he send his guns, then his missionaries behind the guns to mop up” (241-242)

best to kill him....” (Hansberry 242). Hansberry portrays this type of self-defense in *Les Blancs*; the natives’ home has been invaded, their way of life disturbed and, according to Hansberry, they have the right to revolt. Tshembe enters the violence and the fight for freedom when he kills his brother, who betrayed his people. Tshembe also mentions violence when he speaks about Kumalo, the leader of the independence movement, declaring: “Or do you think they have suddenly become impressed because Kumalo is saying the black man wishes freedom? We have been saying that for generations. They only listen now because they are forced to. Take away the violence and who will hear the man of peace?” (Hansberry 91). This comment is one of the most significant in the play. Not only does it capture the essence of the rebellion in *Les Blancs* but it also captures the essence of the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. Just as Tshembe discovers that talking is not the solution to the injustices of his people, the supporters of BAM realized that talking peacefully would not result in change and equality. It is from this realization that the militant streak of the movement developed.

Taking action is perhaps the most central message of *Les Blancs*. Furthermore, it was a message aimed at liberals, both black and white. Before Tshembe chose to fight with his people, he was rather indifferent and chose to stay out of the quarrel. It was not until Abioseh causes the death of an elder that Tshembe changes from a liberal to a radical. Charlie also starts the play as a liberal. He came from America not as a racist but he was not an advocate for black rights either. Once he sees the destruction that takes place in Africa, he leaves a changed man. In her essay, “The Intellectual Spear: Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*,” Barrios reflects on Hansberry’s decision to transform Charlie:

Hansberry does not punish Morris, the North American White liberal, the way Baraka does in *The Slave*. She still believes a solution must be found which she gears towards the need for the North American White liberal to become radical—as Morris seems to have done by the end of the play. It is actually Morris and Mme. Nielsen who totally support the African struggle and poke Matoseh to be part of it instead of trying to fly away to his family and television set in Europe (Barrios 32).

Hansberry created Charlie in order to reach the white liberals who would see her play; she wanted to encourage them to act rather than remain passive bystanders. Hansberry also shared her views in a public meeting, stating, “The problem is we have to find some way, with these dialogues, to encourage the white liberal to stop being a liberal and become an American radical. Radicalism is not alien to this country, neither black nor white” (Hansberry 239).

Through *Les Blancs*, Hansberry constantly shows the audience how difficult it is to identify with another race when one is not willing to learn about the other. Charlie and Tshembe's ignorance of each other's cultures affects how they see one another individually; it cannot be overcome because of their unwillingness to shed their lack of knowledge. The ignorance between the two protagonists is illustrated in a number of ways. After Tshembe defensively responds to one of Charlie's questions, saying he has only one wife⁶, he states, "It may be, Mr. Morris, that I have developed counter assumptions because I have had . . . too many long, lo-o-ong 'talks' wherein the white intellectual begins by suggesting not only fellowship but the universal damnation of

⁶ Stereotypical claim that Africans had more than one wife. This suggested that they were not civilized.

imperialism" (Hansberry 73). Tshembe demonstrates a certain type of ignorance by assuming that as a white man, Charlie, would assume that Tshembe would have more than one wife. Tshembe reacts in this way because of his experiences in Europe and America, where he came across white people who actually assumed that he had more than one wife. The exchanges between Charlie and Tshembe represent the dialogue that Hansberry believed had to take place between the two races in order for one to understand the other.

As a BAM precursor, Hansberry still addresses the themes of reclaiming one's black culture. She also uses Tshembe's call for violence to suggest that many thought that violence was the only way in which they could be heard, another common concept for the BAM contributors. However, Hansberry goes a step further by including inter-racial relations; she differs from the writers of BAM in that she addresses the white community as well. In her choice to engage both whites and blacks, Hansberry fits perfectly into the middle of two contradictory movements: the Civil Rights Movement, which was fundamentally a call to belong, and the Black Arts Movement, a call to separate. She illuminated the grievances of the black struggle while increasing white audiences' awareness. Hansberry was an activist ahead of her time, recognizing that in order to gain equality, both parties must strive to understand the other's position.

CHAPTER TWO

The Black Art of Sonia Sanchez

“Sonia Sanchez is a lion in literature’s forest. When she writes she roars, and when she sleeps other creatures walk gingerly.”

-Maya Angelou

Born Wilsonia Benita Driver in Birmingham in 1934, poet Sonia Sanchez is known widely for her contribution to the Black Arts Movement. Sanchez, also a playwright, activist and professor, was considered one of the foremost leaders of BAM. Having received a political science degree from Hunter College and a Masters degree from New York University, Sanchez knew a great deal about politics and civil rights.

In her career, Sanchez wrote a number of plays including *Sister Son / ii* and *The Bronx is Next*. In addition, she has written about sixteen books of poetry (both for adults and children), edited several books, and contributed to anthologies and periodicals including, *We Be Word Sorcerers* and *bum rush the page*. Her biggest contribution to the Black Arts Movement was her poetry. In 1969, Sanchez published her first book of poetry for adults entitled *Homecoming*. Following that book, she published *We a BaddDDD People (1970)*, which focused on African American vernacular as a poetic standard.

Her honors and awards set her a part as one of the most successful and influential poets of her time. Her achievements include the PEN Writing Award, the American Book Award for Poetry, the National Academy of Arts and Letters Award, the National Education Association Award, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pew Arts Foundation. She has also received the Peace and Freedom Award from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Pennsylvania Governor's Award for Excellence in the Humanities, the Langston Hughes Poetry Award, the Robert Frost Medal, the Robert Creeley Award, the Harper Lee Award, and the National Visionary Leadership Award.

When asked about the Black Arts Movement in an interview with Attie and Goldwater productions entitled, "BaddDDD Sonia Sanchez," Sanchez replied, "the Black Arts Movement happened because of Malcolm. And so when Malcolm was assassinated Jones/Baraka sent letters to all of the artists that he knew saying come we're gonna continue Malcolm's work." As noted earlier, Malcolm X's death was the trigger that set the movement in motion.

From his adoption of the beliefs of the Nation of Islam in 1952 until he broke with it in 1964, Malcolm X was a strong advocate for the advancement of the black race. He believed that black people were the original people of the world and that they were superior to the white race. According to him, the demise of the white race was on the horizon. In her poem entitled, "Malcolm," Sanchez says that he "was the sun that tagged the western sky" (Sanchez 15). For Sanchez, Malcolm was a beacon of light in the darkness of the "white western" sky. As a writer of the movement, Sanchez's themes of

denouncement of western culture, black pride and black militancy, were synonymous with Malcolm's beliefs.

These themes are the reasons why Sonia Sanchez's poetry epitomizes black art in the 1960's. The themes of BAM, such as the denouncement of western culture and the perpetuation of black pride, appear throughout Sanchez's work. In almost every one of her poems, Sanchez denounces western culture, either in terms of its structure or content (notable different than Hansberry). In terms of structure, Sanchez uses line breaks and indents in her poetry to set her work apart from western culture. The lack of rhyme in her work is also indicative of this. She often abbreviates some of her words, for example "blk" for black and she breaks words up with a forward slash (a/mer/ica). She does this to create the effect of the Black Aesthetic; her misspelling of words symbolizes her denouncement of the "white" vernacular.

In her interview with scholar Susan Kelly, Sanchez says that the main cultural influence on her work was "the existence of us as black folk in a place that did not speak well of us, a country that not only enslaved us but afterward had ignored us- had segregated us and conspired to keep us from learning even the simplest things" (Kelly 680). What Sanchez described as her influence was also the sole reason for the creation of the Black Arts Movement.

In the introduction of Sanchez's first book of poems, *Homecoming (1969)*, author, educator, and poet, Don L. Lee (now known as Haki R, Madhubuti), writes why he believes Sonia Sanchez is so significant and crucial to the black community:

Black people are in need of positive guidance. Direction. Heretofore, direction has come in the form of whi-te positivism: the New York Times & comic books;...3

meals of day, television, the church and in countless other areas that have helped shape the negro's mind... For the negro, reality is real (reality: whatever controls yr/ thought processes; controls yr/pure & unpure actions). Blackpeople's reality is controlled by alien forces. This is why Sonia Sanchez is so beautiful & needed; this is, also, why she is dangerous. The black artist is dangerous. Blk/art moves to control the negro's reality; moves to negate the influence of the alien forces (*Homecoming* 6).

For Lee, black art should work to reclaim what has been taken from blacks. Before the mass kidnapping and enslavement of blacks, they had their own culture and way of life. Once brought to America, that life and culture was taken away and ceased to exist. Through black art, the black community is able to connect with its past and is then able to develop a self-generated identity. Sonia Sanchez is the perfect example of someone whose work achieves this objective. Furthermore, as Lee asserts, "she doesn't have time to indulge in meaningless poetics. She need not talk about the aesthetics of a tree; there are no trees in Harlem or on the westside of Chicago. The only use/beauty she/ we see in a tree, at this time in space, is the number of rifle butts it will produce" (*Homecoming* 7-8). Here, Lee alludes to the idea of breaking away from western culture. Lee believes that western poetry consists of meaningless things such as trees and nature. Black Art is about bringing cultural and political issues to the forefront. Lee recognizes that, unlike her white counterparts, Sanchez is not concerned with writing about nature and other things that are irrelevant to her circumstances. Instead, she writes about the violence that other black people have endured and can relate to; she writes about social issues that concern her.

As stated earlier, Sonia Sanchez's poetry represents the epitome of the work that characterized the Black Arts Movement. The themes that she covers in her poems are very similar to the themes that Hansberry uses in her plays, such as denouncing western culture, encouraging black pride, and pronouncing violent militancy. In the following poem, "To all sisters," the themes of black pride and the denouncement of western culture play a major role in the comparison the speaker makes between black woman and white woman.

to all sisters

what a white woman got
 cept her white pussy
 always sucking after blk/ness
what a white woman got
 cept her straight hair
 covering her fucked up mind
what a white woman got
 cept her faggoty white man
 who goes to sleep in her
 without
 coming

what a white woman got
 cept money trying to buy up
 a blk/man?
 yeah.
what a white woman got? (Sanchez, 27)

"To all sisters" is a poem for all black women. Now and especially during the Black Arts Movement, the term "sister" or "brother" was used by African Americans as a way to identify with one another. This use of communal and familial terms resonates with Hansberry's use of the Younger family. During the struggle for civil rights and equality, black people saw each other as one body fighting for the same things; they were family. Sanchez begins with the query, "what a white woman got?" From this line and the title

itself, it can immediately be presumed that this poem is characteristic of a work of the Black Arts Movement. The question “what a white woman got?” is considered to be black vernacular and not proper English. Beginning the poem in this way immediately characterizes the poem as “Black Art.” Again, the title is a reference to the BAM theme of community. From the title we know that the speaker’s presumed audience is her “sisters.” Her tone and vernacular are characteristic of the angry “blackness” of the BAM. The poem calls for solidarity amongst the black race while this first line denounces the superiority of the white one, more specifically white women.

The poem continues with a certain, raunchy sexuality, a topic that female poets were not expected to broach. In her interview with Attie and Goldwater productions, Sanchez remarks on the reactions she received from audiences when it came to her raunchiness. When she would see that her audience was shocked she remembered thinking, “[they] had just applauded men saying the same thing but the moment I got on stage and said ... their mouths dropped.” Here, Sanchez points to the hypocrisy of the gender norms within the Black Arts Movement.

In order to combat the gender stereotypes of the movement, Sanchez used overt sexuality in her work by claiming that all a white woman had was “her white pussy sucking after” blackness; in doing so, Sanchez accomplished a number of things. First, the blatant sexuality, which was more commonly acceptable for men to write about, placed her beside her male counterparts. Second, Sanchez expressed the sentiments of many black females while lifting black men on a pedestal by making them “prize to be won”. This line refers to many black women’s feelings in the sense that these women felt that white women wanted their men. This same idea is also echoed toward the end of the

poem when Sanchez writes, “what a white woman got/ cept money trying to buy up/ a blk man.” Sanchez not only criticizes white women, but she also critiques white men. By calling them “faggoty” Sanchez emasculates them and therefore takes away their power. This charge is a direct contrast to mainstream American society, where the white man is considered the most powerful.

Sanchez also uses this poem to indirectly encourage black women to love themselves. In line 5, Sanchez refers to a white woman’s straight hair and how it is used to cover her “fucked up minds.” Again, straight hair was considered part of the dominant white culture and therefore was the standard of beauty. Genetically, black hair is kinky, not straight; women would either chemically alter or apply heat to their hair in order to make it straight rather than wear their hair in a more natural state because they fit in with the beauty standard. As black women began to reject white culture, members of the Black Arts Movement began to reject straight hair, and thus making the natural hair movement possible. The topic of black hair has been one of much debate over the years, especially during the Black Arts Movement when the sentiment was to be true to your African roots versus assimilate to western culture. We see the hair debate surface often during this period and can refer back to Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, when Bennie chooses Asagai over George. She gives up her straightened hair for an Afro and reclaims her blackness. Sanchez encourages her black sisters to be themselves. In fact, the poem in its entirety serves this exact purpose. To pose the question “what a white woman got?” is to ask, “what a white woman got, that a black woman doesn’t?” Sonia Sanchez’s answer resounds... absolutely nothing.

Sanchez continues her criticism of white women in the following poem, “to all brothers.” This time, however, rather than critique white men, she turns her attention to black men.

to all brothers

yeah.

 they
hang you up
those grey chicks
parading their
tight asses
in front of you.
some will say out
right

 baby i want
 to ball you
while smoother
ones will in
tegrate your
blackness

 yeah.
 brother
this sister knows
 and waits. (Sanchez, 10)

Here, the speaker addresses the black male population. The poem begins with her telling the “brothers” that she knows how they get caught up with “grey chicks.” To refer to white people as “grey” was common throughout the poetry of the Black Arts Movement; it allowed writers to branch out and describe their subjects as something other than just “white.” While grey suggests that “white people” are dreary and dull, it also serves as an intermediate color between black and white. This could mean that color is a very faulty concept when it comes to judging someone’s character. It can mean that whites and blacks are not as different they may think. Nevertheless, the speaker continues her criticism of white women by claiming they have “tight asses,” possibly referring to their

“stuck up” or “proper” attitude and/or the standard body type of a white female as having a small backside.

This poem also serves as both a warning and a reassurance for black men. First, the speaker warns them of the ways in which white women will attempt to use them. Some will be straightforward while others, the “smoother ones,” will try to “integrate” their culture into their own lives in an effort to seduce them. Like “to all sisters,” this poem represents the fears that black women had during this time. White women were often attracted to “the other” and pursued black men, demonstrating an exoticism. Interracial relations were frowned upon during the Black Arts Movement by the black community just as much as they were in the white community. Reinforcing this belief in his famous play, *The Dutchman (1964)*, Baraka’s protagonist, a black man named Clay, meets his tragic end as a result of getting involved with a white woman. Sanchez’s speaker not only warns her black male audience of the dangers of a relationship with a white woman, she also offers the men assurance that she understands how white women work and that she will wait. It is not clear what she will wait for but one can conclude that she will either wait until she is proven right or until her “brothers” wise up and return to their black women.

The previous two poems also share the theme of black pride within the black community. Where those poems aimed to encourage black women to love themselves, the next two poems are directed at black children. With these poems, Sanchez attempts to educate the children of the black community about their culture and to encourage them to have pride in that culture. Sanchez speaks about how Malcolm inspired a desire to learn at another point in her interview with Susan Kelly; she contends that, “so many of us

listened to Malcolm and began to talk about doing for self, and so many people also talked about the idea of beginning the process of loving our black selves and about taking control of the schools in New York City, and teaching black history and black English and black sociology” (Kelly 683). For Sanchez, and many others affiliated with BAM, to take pride in one’s self was to take pride in and gain control of one’s education. It was important for children to learn about their culture and history especially when growing up in a racially charged America. In the following poem, entitled “poem (for dcs 8th graders-1966-67),” Sanchez speaks to young black children. This poem, like “to all sisters,” encourages black people to love themselves and to love the color of their skin. Sanchez also uses this poem to reflect on the collective history of African Americans.

**Poem
(for dcs 8th graders-1966-67)**

Look at me 8th
Grade.
 I am black
Beautiful. I have a
Man who looks at
My face and smiles.
On my face
Are black warriors
Riding in ships
Of slavery;
 On my face
 Is Malcolm
 Spitting his metal seeds
On a country of sheep;
On my face
 Are young eyes
Breathing in black crusts.
 Look at us
8th grade
 we are black
beautiful and our black
ness sings out
 while America wanders

dumb with her wet bowels. (Sanchez 22-23)

Sanchez's speaker starts the poem by addressing 8th graders. One of her main concerns was the real education of black children. The minds of children are impressionable and the children of BAM were growing up in a society in which they were the minority, in which they were not considered beautiful and in which their culture was disregarded. BAM supporters understood the importance of teaching black children to love themselves and their culture. She tells them to look at her "beautiful" blackness. She says that she has a man who looks at her and smiles, solidifying her claim that to be black is to be beautiful.

Sanchez not only encourages black children to love themselves but she also stresses the importance of knowing where they come from as African Americans. Sanchez writes that her blackness, her existence, tells the history of her people. Her blackness is a representation and clear indicator of who her ancestors were. From her face, one should be able to see the history of her people, her ancestors, "black warriors" who were brought to America on "ships of slavery." She then moves into more current territory, paying tribute to Malcolm X, who contributed greatly to the theories of the Black Arts Movement.

Although Sanchez's language and attitude towards white western culture is not as aggressive in this poem as it is in "to all sisters," her opposition still remains. Perhaps she softened her tone because the speaker addresses children. She uses softer imagery such as Malcolm X "spitting his metal seeds on a country of white sheep," an image more appropriate for children, to illustrate the civil rights leader's effect on white America.

In the last stanza, the speaker instructs the children to no longer just look at her, but to “look at us.” She then says, “we are black.” Her pronoun usage is a part of her literary strategy to highlight inclusiveness. The phrase “our black/ness sings out/ while America wanders...” is an affirmation of their pride. It also represents the black culture as something to be proud of. It is Sanchez’s way of encouraging and instilling pride in young black children while again, denouncing white America and making them weak.

Another poem in which Sanchez addresses black children is “Definition for blk/ children.” Although this poem targets young black children, it is considered to be one of Sanchez’s more militant poems and therefore related to the militant component of the Black Arts Movement as a whole. It is also reminiscent of the call to arms in Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*.

Definition for blk/ children

a policeman
 is a pig
and he shd be in
 a zoo
with all the other piggy
 animals. and
until he stops
 killing blk/people
cracking open their heads
remember.
 the policeman
is a pig.
 (oink/
 oink.) (Sanchez 19)

The speaker immediately addresses the issue of police brutality. Throughout the United States in the 1960’s and 70’s black people, especially men, were victimized and brutalized by the police force. In incidents such as these, blacks were treated like animals.

This reference also relates to the history of slavery in the United States, when blacks were beaten, slaughtered and bought like livestock. The speaker in this poem reverses the notion of blacks as animalistic by calling the policemen pigs. The speaker does not blatantly say that these policemen are white but their white skin is implied once the speaker says they should remain in a zoo until “[they] stop killing blk/people.”

The speaker teaches the “blk children” the true definition of animal. By inverting the roles of the police the speaker suggests that black people were not the barbaric ones; those who preyed on others because of the color of their skin were the real barbarians. The speaker’s last two lines are in parentheses and are one word each: “oink/oink.” The onomatopoeia ends the poem with an emphasis on the sounds of an animal to remind both the children and the reader that the police brutality is animalistic.

Sanchez also expresses black pride and the reclamation of her blackness through her poem entitled “nigger.” The title of this poem is startling; the added period at the end of the word also suggests that its meaning is finite. Nigger, coming from the Spanish word for black, “negro,” was used to refer to and/or address a black person during the times of slavery. Now considered a derogatory, the word nigger was commonly used by whites as a term of inferiority during the 1960s.

nigger.

that word
ain’t shit to me
man.

don’t u know
where u at when
u call me nigger?
look.

my man. i’ll
say it slow for you.

N-I-G-G-E-R-

that word don’t turn

me on man.
 i know i am
black.
 beautiful.
 with meaning.
nigger. u say.
 my man
you way behind the set (Sanchez 12)

One can assume that the speaker is addressing a white man, but one should also consider that she is addressing any “man” because there is no reference to color. The speaker’s first phrase in the poem is “ that word ain’t shit to me man.” Her words are broken up into small lines as if she were speaking directly, with purpose. She immediately begins by letting the audience know that this word has no effect on her. When she asks, “don’t u know/ where u at when/ u call me nigger?” she is making a nod to slavery as if to say, “those days are over.”

The speaker not only deems the word as irrelevant, but in the next line she also reclaims it by saying it slow. The “slow” spelling of nigger is in capital letters and is positioned directly in the middle of the poem, making it the center of attention. The speaker continues to inform the audience that the word does not anger her because she knows that she is “black./beautiful./ with meaning.” Here, the movement’s mantra, “black is beautiful,” appears. The speaker is no longer plagued by the word nigger because she has found beauty within herself and her race. She is proud to be black and refuses to let the past reflect her future.

Sanchez also delves into the politics of BAM. The Black Arts Movement may be considered the artistic branch of the Black Power Movement, but that does not mean BAM contributors were not involved in politics. Sonia Sanchez used her poetry not only

to defy the western standard of grammar and content, but also to evaluate the American government and political decisions. In the next poem, Sanchez offers a sarcastic critique on America and how the government treats black people.

The final solution/

the leaders speak
america.
land of free/
dom
land of im/mi/grant
wh/ites
and slave/
blacks. there is
no real problem here.
We the
Lead/ers of free
a/mer/ica
say. give us your
hungry/
illiterates/
criminals/
dropouts/
(in other words)
your blacks
and we will
let them fight
in Vietnam
defending america's honor.
we will make responsible
citi/
zens out of them or
kill them trying.
america
land of free/dom
free/
enter/
prise and de/mo/
cracy.
bring us your problems.
we your lead/ers
always find a solution.
after all
what else are
we get/

ting pd for? (Sanchez 18)

The speaker in this poem takes on the voice of an American leader. The structure of the poem plays a very significant role in asserting its meaning. Throughout, the tone is loaded with heavy sarcasm and broken words. Words like “freedom”, “leaders”, “America”, “citizens” and “enterprise”, are all broken or divided by a slash. However, the two words that are not broken up are slave and blacks. This distinction is worth noting because in the majority of her poems, Sanchez usually abbreviates black (blk), but in this poem, where the majority of the words are fragmented, she chooses to include the complete spelling of black. This suggest that amidst all of the falsehood in American society, the one true thing is blackness.

The speaker’s sarcasm begins with a description of America as the land of freedom but the slash that divides the word “free/dom” suggests that there is a sense of rupture. The latter part of the word also sounds like “dumb, suggesting the speakers view on this supposed freedom. The speaker also claims that there is no problem with America sarcastically when she calls it the “land of white immigrants and slave blacks.” Clearly there is a problem with the term “slave blacks,” but as a white American leader, the speaker is either ignorant or insensitive to the needs of blacks. She describes the ways America has treated blacks. The leaders of America consider blacks to be “hungry” (or poor), “illiterates,” “criminals,” and school “dropouts;” all of these descriptions are negative. However, the speaker says that they will *let* blacks fight to defend America’s honor as if to say that dying in Vietnam for a country that doesn’t accept them is better than the lives they live. Contextually, this was what was happening in America society.

Sanchez takes these experiences of the black community and uses them to connect with and voice the concerns of her people.

One of the most striking lines in this poem is when the speaker promises, “we will make responsible citi/zens out of them or kill them trying.” In this moment, the sarcasm disappears. The speaker suggests the only way for blacks to survive in America is for them to assimilate and become “responsible” citizens; the choice is very simple: assimilate or die. This is the solution that the speaker refers to in the title. The poem ends with the American leader assuring the audience that they always find a solution to problems because that is what they are paid to do. In this case, the problem is the black American. The black American as the problem is also reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous question, “how does it feel to be a problem?”⁷ Sanchez uses her history and the literature that came before her to illustrate that not much has changed in American society since Dubois asked this question in 1903.

The following poem counters the America described in “the final solution.” “Listen to Big Black At S.F. State” calls for the black community to fight back against a system that is against them. This poem contains all of the themes that I previously discussed including the denouncement of the white western culture, (re)discovery of one’s African culture and black pride.

Listen to Big Black At S.F. State

no mo meetings
where u talk about
whitey. the craker
who done u wrong
(like some sad/ bitch

⁷ W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 2

who split in the middle of yo/ comen)
 just. gitting. stronNNNger.
 maken warriors
 outa boys.
 blk/woooomen
 outa girls.
 Moven in &
 out of blkness
 till it runs this
 400/ yr/ old/ road/ show
 (called
 amurica.
 Now liven off its re/ runs.)
 off the road.
 no mo tellen the man he is
 a dead/ die/ en/ motha/
 fucka.
 just a sound of drums.
 the sonnnnnNNg of chiefs
 pouren outa our blk/ sections.
 (Randall, Ed. 235)

The speaker believes that it is time for change. Like Lorraine Hansberry and other BAM contributors, the speaker no longer wants to sit around and talk about the wrong inflicted upon the black race, she wants to take action. She uses the derogatory terms, "whitey" and "cracker" to refer to white people but that is not the main focus of her diction. Instead, she is more concerned with the black race and how they will respond to the injustices they have received. She encourages her people to get "stronNNNger." Looking closely to the word "stronger," one cannot help but see the word "nigger" within it. By creating the word "nigger" with the word "stronger" Sanchez, once again is using the word to empower the black community.

For the speaker, it is time for boys to become warriors and girls to become "blk/woooomen." The comparison between the two genders suggests that black women are also warriors. Through this subtle comparison, Sanchez asserts both femininity, and black

women's pride. The theme of black pride continues throughout the rest of the poem. The speaker wants her audience to embrace their "blkness" until it "runs [the] 400 year all road show (called amurica...) off the road." For this speaker, the present system of America has run its course; she believes that the black community can bring about a change, a new America.

Many consider Sanchez to be one of the few creative artists who has significantly influenced the course of black American literature and culture. Her poetry not only brought about a new style but it also created a new standard of writing for African Americans. Through her writing the black community was able to collectively reclaim and own their identity. When concluding her interview with Susan Kelly,⁸ Sanchez asserts her belief that...

It is that love of language that has propelled me, that love of language that came from listening to my grandmother speak black English... It is that love of language that says, simply, to the ancestors who have done this before you, 'I am keeping the love of life alive, the love of language alive. I am keeping words that are spinning on my tongue and getting them transferred on paper. I'm keeping this great tradition of American poetry alive (Kelly 687).

Inspired by her upbringing, culture and history, Sonia Sanchez spoke to a generation and in doing so, was able to uplift her race during a crucial time in the history of black culture and struggle. She lent her voice to those who did not have one; she encouraged others to stand up for their rights and discover their identity for themselves.

⁸ Interview, "Discipline and Craft: An Interview with Sonia Sanchez

One cannot say for certain whether or not Hansberry influenced Sanchez, but it is clear that the BAM themes that Sanchez includes in all of her poetry mirror the themes and elements that Hansberry incorporated into her plays. Another playwright of BAM, Adrienne Kennedy, took up many of these same themes but turned them on their head in order to reach her audiences in a innovative and equally powerful way.

CHAPTER THREE

Kennedy's Inverted Black Art

“For the days are past when there are places and characters with connections with themes as in the stories you pick up on the shelves of public libraries....There is no theme. No statements... For the statement is the characters and the characters are myself”⁹

-Negro- Sarah, Funnyhouse of A Negro

On September 13, 1931 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Adrienne Lita Hawkins was born. The daughter of Etta Hawkins, a teacher and Cornell Wallace Hawkins, a social worker, Adrienne spent most of her childhood in Cleveland, Ohio. At a young age she spent most of her time reading books such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Secret Garden*. This young scholar would grow up to become African American playwright, Adrienne Kennedy. As a key figure of the Black Arts Movement, Kennedy used her plays to explore and critique the American experience. Noted for their surrealism, Kennedy's plays often lack a clear plot. They are symbolic and draw on historical figures as a way of exploring issues of race, family, and violence in American society.

Kennedy would go on to become a founding member of the Women's Theatre Council in 1971 and win several awards for her plays including two *Village Voice Obie Awards*. She wrote thirteen published plays, five unpublished plays, several autobiographies, a novella and a short story. With a BA degree from Ohio State University and a MA degree from Columbia University, she has taught at a number of

⁹ Taken from critical essay, “For the Characters are Myself” by Lorraine A Brown.

universities including Yale and Princeton. Like Sonia Sanchez's poetry, Adrienne Kennedy's plays help comprise the definition of "Black Art."

Many of the same themes, as those in Sanchez and Hansberry's work emerge in Kennedy's plays, including the desire to return to one's African roots, black beauty, and the denouncement of western culture. However, Kennedy approaches these themes differently; Hansberry and Sanchez showcase the themes of black pride, denouncement of western culture, black community and militancy in their work. In contrast, Kennedy takes these same themes and inverts them. Instead of black pride, she focuses on self hate, the desire to embrace western culture rather than denounce it; the destruction of the black community (or family), as opposed to its preservation and reformation; and violence against one's (black) self, rather than the need to assert one's value and the beauty of blackness. Kennedy inverts these themes to present her audience with a new and effective way of embracing black culture. By illustrating the tragic outcomes that result from a lack of black culture, Kennedy encourages her audience to avoid the dangers of assimilation. Her first two plays, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) and *The Owl Answers* (1965), both one-act plays, illustrate these Black Art themes and connect to both Sanchez's and Hansberry's work in that they share the common themes of black pride, community and violence despite Kennedy's inversion of them.

Kennedy's most popular play, *Funnyhouse of A Negro*, was written in 1960. It was first produced professionally at the East End Theatre in NYC January of 1964, almost exactly a year before Lorraine Hansberry's death. Since then, it has been played all over the world and has been included in a number of anthologies, such as *Black Drama: An Anthology* (1970), *The Best Short Plays of 1970*, and interestingly, for the

purpose of this essay, “*Contemporary Black Drama: From “A Raisin in the Sun” To “No Place to Be Somebody* (1971).

A “*funnyhouse*,” more commonly known as an insane asylum, is considered a place for the mentally ill and grotesque. Kennedy’s play makes clear associations with this definition and black identity, as her play is loaded with madness, discrimination, and oppression. The play itself represents a physical manifestation of the happenings inside the mind of a victim of double consciousness. Originally coined by W.E.B Du Bois, double consciousness refers to the psychological challenge of reconciling an African heritage with a European upbringing. Du Bois writes:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 215).

Similar to this sentiment in the early 1900s, many African Americans were feeling the weight of being doubly conscious during the 1960s. This consciousness connects to the previous chapter in which Sonia Sanchez explains the cultural influences on her writing. Blacks were conscious of the fact that they were in a place that “did not speak well of [them]” (Sanchez 680). They were aware that their history, specifically, the enslavement of their ancestors, in the United States still affected the way in which they were treated. The double consciousness that African Americans experienced was a result of this knowledge of their history and an effort to reconcile their “lost” identity with their

American lives. Du Bois continues his definition of double consciousness by explaining how the American Negro suffers from trying to make sense of his/her identity in a white America:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face (Du Bois 215).

This definition of double consciousness relates to the identity of the protagonist in *Funnyhouse*, Sarah. She experiences this feeling of twoness because of the events that took place before the play, itself. Though told in a fragmented nature, the plot of the play can be pieced together as the story unfolds. *Funnyhouse* revolves around Sarah, a young college student, also known as “Negro.” Sarah's mother, a light-skinned black woman with long straight hair, married Sarah's father, a dark-skinned revolutionary, and accompanied him to Africa. Sarah's mother falls out of love with her husband and becomes detached; one night, in a drunken rage, he rapes her. Sarah, the child born of the rape, watches as her mother and father begin to lose their minds as a result of this incident. These events are not a part of the play itself, for they are relayed to the audience only as past events. However, the histories of Sarah's parents set the stage for the main

actions in the play, which leads to Sarah's own suicide as she fails to reconcile herself with her roots.

It is interesting then, that Sarah's sense of twoness results in her creation of four different selves. Sarah has surpassed the mental dilemma that Du Bois refers to; she suffers from a fracturing that exceeds the twoness. In the essay, "Passed Over: The Tragic Mulatta and (Dis)Integration of Identity in Adrienne Kennedy's Plays," author, E. Barnsley Brown argues that "Kennedy shows that consciousness is not double, as W.E.B Du Bois would have it, but is instead multi-faceted and fragmented when one is a product of numerous socio-historical forces and even heritages" (Brown 283). In her opening monologue, Sarah describes her many selves, her educational background, her lineage, and her desire to become an "even more pallid Negro" (Kennedy, 14). She denounces her blackness, saying that black is evil. After reading the play one can assume that this behavior is brought about not only by Sarah's history of various physical and emotional abuses but also by her deep level of self-hate.

The four personas that coexist in Sarah's mind are all historical figures: Patrice Lumumba, Jesus, Queen Victoria, and the Duchess of Hapsburg. In the past, Patrice Lumumba was Prime minister of the Republic of the Congo. In 1960 he helped the Congo gain their independence from Belgium. The following year, a Katanga fire squad executed him. In Kennedy's play, the Lumumba part of Sarah's identity represents the African aspect of Sarah's multiethnic and multicultural heritage. Like the African setting in Hansberry's *Les Blancs*, the character of Lumumba adds a different perspective of black rights in politics, because he is African as opposed to an African American. It is interesting that Kennedy chose to use a figure that was executed by other Africans; it

could possibly serve as a symbol of inner turmoil for Sarah in that her hate for blackness (herself) is what causes her demise. It is also worth noting that Kennedy has chosen a man to play this part of Sarah's self. Sarah resents her Lumumba self, her black self, as much as she resents her black father. Sarah hates herself but is able to reconcile these feelings by finding comfort in the fact that she is "yellow." The two characters that Sarah hates most are black men. This hatred of black men is representative of the black man's inferior position in western white culture during the 1960s and 1970s.

The next "self," Jesus, the Son of God, is the central figure of Christianity, the religion that is known for justifying the enslavement and oppression of black people in the United States. Queen Victoria was the ruling monarch of the United Kingdom and Great Britain from 1837- 1901. Also called the Empress of India, Victoria was the first ruler of the British Raj, the British rule over India. The British Raj has come to define imperialism due to the long (and unwanted) occupation in India. As the first ruler of the Raj, Victoria represents the imperialism that takes control of Sarah's mind. The Duchess of Hapsburg, another of Sarah's selves; also represents imperialism and domination. As a member of one of the most important royal houses in Europe, the Duchess of Hapsburg epitomes European wealth for Sarah. In the play, these three personas are antagonistic toward the African presence. For them, blackness has tainted Sarah's existence.

These multiple characters all exist within Sarah's mind to the point in which Sarah believes that she is actually each one of these characters. In her essay, "Fragmented Selves in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers*," Rosemary K. Curb further illuminates the condition of Sarah and Clara, the protagonist from *The Owl Answers*. According to Curb, the two women "are mentally and

emotionally torn between their real external Black selves and the glorious dream White selves which they imagine and desire. Not only do they have ancestral White blood but they are also docile products of a White educational and cultural heritage” (Curb 180). Here, the theme of education arises. Both protagonists have white blood in them but more importantly, they have been exposed to and immersed in white culture specifically through education.

As Sonia Sanchez stresses in her poetry, education was an important aspect of the Black Arts Movement. Education in the black arts was one of the principal ways in which one could move away from western culture and discover her own identity. In *Funnyhouse*, Kennedy illustrates the ways in which assimilation can take place through education. Like George in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Sarah has received a formal westernized American education. She is an English major at a college in New York. Educated in what Brown calls the “Eurocentric tradition,” Sarah decorates her room with old books and photographs of English monarchs and castles (285). The dominant object in her room is a plaster statue of Queen Victoria, suggesting that Sarah idolizes this figure and its whiteness. Curb comments on how the shrine of Victoria negatively influences Sarah and intensifies her condition:

Sarah’s preoccupation with Queen Victoria enables her to deny her Black heritage in favor of what Victorianism suggests to her: White imperialistic plunder of continents populated by darker races, [and] the White man’s religion and culture...Recognizing White oppression of Blacks as a prime feature of Anglo-American history, Sarah experiences the racial warfare within herself (Curb 181).

Sarah's obsession with white culture and her white education lead to her hatred and denial of her black identity. In this passage, Curb also introduces the BAM theme of religion. The most significant reference to religion also appears in one of Sarah's selves, Jesus. As said earlier, Jesus represents Christianity, which is associated with the enslavement of blacks. Symbolizing Christianity in the play, the Jesus in *Funnyhouse* is ugly and stunted. Another reference to Christianity includes the story of Sarah's family. Sarah tells the audience that her father's mother "wanted him to be Christ" and to "save the black race." She says, "you must return to Africa...you must walk with a white dove and heal the race" (Kennedy 19). Curb brings up an interesting point concerning Christianity and Sarah's father. She writes, "although Sarah tells the audience that her father "wanted the black man to rise from colonialism" he nevertheless preached Christianity, a religion frequently used to support racial slavery. Not only guilty of having raped his wife, he also aids in the cultural rape of his own Black people in Africa" (Curb 183). For Kennedy and many black arts writers, Christianity and black identity did not mix because of the damage the religion caused during the time of slavery. This is why Christianity was considered part of the western culture that they rejected.

Perhaps the most significant theme in *Funnyhouse* serves as the direct opposite of black pride: self hate. Sarah hates being black; she wants to be affiliated only with her white culture and spends the entire play running from her blackness. Sarah tells the audience that she needs to be surrounded by white friends because she "need[s] them as an embankment to keep [her] from reflecting too much upon the fact that [she is] a Negro" (Kennedy 14). An example of this embankment appears in the form of her Jewish boyfriend. Black beauty and black pride are also significant. Hansberry and Sanchez have

expressed the need to love your natural hair through Beneatha and the speaker in “to all sisters,” but Kennedy reverses this concept. Sarah hates her hair; she considers her “unmistakably Negro kinky hair” to be her “one defect” (Kennedy 15). Furthermore, Sarah loves her mother’s straight hair because it is representative of the whiteness that is also within her. By the end of the play, all of Sarah’s hair falls out. Kennedy uses this image of hair loss to suggest what happens when one cannot accept herself for who she is. Even Sarah admits to the audience that if she had not “wavered in [her] opinion of [her]self, then [her] hair would never have fallen out” (Kennedy 14). Sarah recognizes that her split allegiances and her denial of her true self has caused her to suffer physically and psychologically. Now, instead of possessing hair that she hated, she has no hair at all.

Another theme that Kennedy inverts is the necessity of a supportive black community, in this case, the family. For Hansberry, the family is the most important part of identity. The Younger Family is able to achieve their individual dreams only when they come together to fulfill the dream of the family first. In *Les Blancs*, Tshembe returns home for reasons relating to his family; Abioseh betrays his family and his community and as a result, he must pay with his life. Sanchez’s use of the words “we,” “us,” “brothers,” and “sisters” also supports the BAM concept that collective and familial community was crucial to understanding the movement.

Rather than illustrate the importance of family and community through positivity, Kennedy chooses to represent it through the destruction of family and community. Sarah’s family is broken. Her mother dies hating her father and Sarah spends the entire play running from her father. Sarah’s love for (or obsession with) her mother, stems from wanting to look like her throughout the play. Her hatred for her father stems from her

hatred of the black race. She repeatedly says that her mother was the lightest of them all and that she had hair like a white woman's. Sarah desires complete assimilation into white culture, so much so that she brings about her own destruction. No longer able to withstand exclusion from dominant white culture, Sarah hangs herself to end her agony.

E. Barnsley Brown makes a valid conclusion concerning Kennedy's motives in writing a play such as *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. He writes that the play, "clearly serves as a warning against over-assimilation into the dominant culture" (Brown 286). Sarah believes that to be white is to be better, but the audience can see otherwise. Brown lists examples of ways in which the color white is described throughout the play and how it should influence the audience's take on the color white. These descriptions include: "It is a white satin Curtain of a *cheap* material and a *ghastly* white, a material that brings to mind the interior of a *cheap casket*" (Kennedy 11-12); "the quality of the white light is *unreal* and *ugly*" (Kennedy 12); "the [whitish yellow] face must be highly powdered and possess a *hard expressionless* quality and a stillness as in the face of *death*" (Kennedy 12); "the figure of Victoria is a sitting figure, one of astonishing *repulsive whiteness*" (Kennedy 25). Sarah praises the whiteness of her surroundings. She blames her father and blackness for the death and despair in her life; however, Kennedy highlights for the audience the powerful ways that Sarah's obsession with whiteness is not only deadly, but also leads to her destruction.

White also represents death in *The Owl Answers*. Clara Passamore, like Sarah is the product of "miscegenation." She, like Sarah, receives a "white" education. Clara's father, however, is white and her mother is black. The audience learns that Clara (or She) is the result of a sexual relationship between her father, the Richest White Man in Town

and one of his cooks. Again, we see the effects that interracial relations can have on one's identity as we get to know Clara.

Clara either imagines or remembers a time when she and her father visited England to see the land where "their" ancestors lived. Throughout the play, Clara holds onto this notion that white Europeans are her ancestors. While on this trip with her father he suddenly drops dead. Clara is (in her head) then taken to the Tower of London and kept prisoner there, despite her attempts to leave and be with her father's body at St. Paul's Chapel. In the tower, she is guarded by Shakespeare, Chaucer, and William the Conqueror, all notable figures of white western culture.

Clara immerses herself in English history and literature; and without a doubt, she learns about these three figures during her schooling. Kennedy chose these three individuals to guard Clara for two specific reasons. First, Clara sees them as the epitome of white culture and everything she wants in life; if she can convince **them** that she is white then she would finally and truly belong to the white race. Second, Kennedy uses three well-known western figures as a physical manifestation of the ways in which white education imprisons black scholars.

The theme of religion is also shown in a very different way from other BAM contributors. Clara's black foster father is a Christian pastor. At first glance one would assume that this creates an interesting contradiction between the concepts of the Black Arts Movement and Kennedy's suggestion that there can be a positive correlation between blackness and Christianity. Once we look deeper however, we see that Pastor Passamore is also overcome by whiteness. He is never without his "white" Bible and his closest companion is his canary, the "white" bird that also takes on the form of the white

dove, a blatant Christian image. Kennedy's critique of religion should not go unnoticed. In another one of her plays, *A Rat's Mass* (1967), the protagonists, mixed-raced siblings are lured to their death by a white Roman Catholic woman whom they thought they could trust. Kennedy does not hesitate to make the connection between white Christian ideology and death. In the three plays referenced, Christianity contributes to the demise of the black protagonist.

Clara's desire to join her father, both physically and figuratively, consumes her, like Sarah's desire to rid herself of her father also consumes her. Both characters seek whiteness and, by association in the context of Kennedy's plays, they both seek death. In the end both characters commit suicide because neither one of them can live with the inner torment of being torn between competing cultures. Kennedy's choice to invert and de-familiarize the common BAM themes is a powerful one. Although Sarah and Clara are black characters that hate blackness and stand for everything the movement fought against, they represent the dangers of assimilation and losing one's identity. Sarah and Clara are what many would call tragic mulattas. The tragic mulatto/mulatta is an individual who, while struggling to fit into white culture, alienates him or herself from black culture. This concept of the tragic mulatto was popular in 19th century slave narratives and 20th century literature. Throughout history, interracial unions were frowned upon by black and white communities, alike. The lesson that resulted from these unions was usually the demise of the offspring produced by the affair. Using the "tragic mulatt(a)" Kennedy expresses the sentiments of the BAM writers when it came to interracial relationships- they were dangerous and should be avoided.

Kennedy's choice to invert common BAM themes did not change the meaning of them. Through these inversions Kennedy only strengthened the claims of BAM doctrine. Yes, her characters hated their blackness, but their demise is the price they pay. Through the destruction of her two protagonists, Kennedy actually uses Hansberry's method of identifying the assimilationist and tracking her downfall. By inverting the common themes of BAM, Kennedy stays true to the ideology of the movement but does so by employing an innovative strategy.

CONCLUSION

“Measure Them Right”

The mid 1970s brought significant change and led to a backlash against the Black Aesthetic, the very concept that fueled the Black Arts Movement. This backlash ultimately led to the end of the Black Arts Movement, as many had previously known it. The year of 1976 marked the official ending of BAM but the decline of the movement began in 1974 when the Black Power movement was disrupted and co-opted by the government. Other black political organizations were also disrupted, and defeated by government measures and the Black activist leadership was replaced by trained administrators who were unreceptive, if not outright opposed, to the movements political orientation. Additionally, the movement, already economically fragile, was undermined by President Nixon’s push to promote Black capitalism in response to the Black Power Movement. As a result, all of the most popular BAM artists were recruited by major film, book, magazine and record publishers which resulted in a loss of focus on the BAM ideology.

With the ending of BAM, other attempts to define black identity were developed. Groups such as the New Breed, sought to change the concept of the Black Aesthetic entirely. The New Breed included writers, Ishmael Reed, Al Young and Cecil Brown. “They wanted to dethrone the Western mind from the seat of intellectual power and prestige” (Ed. Parini 195). The New Breed resolved that change would come about only if change took place in the mind. They wanted to eliminate the powerful influence of

“western” thought by addressing it explicitly rather than by dismissing it. Unlike the BAM writers, the New Breed writers did not ignore western culture; instead they shed light on it and critiqued it directly. Furthermore this new age of black art encouraged engagement rather than violence. Once again, Ms. Lorraine Hansberry was ahead of her time. As discussed earlier, Hansberry’s plays not only targeted black audiences, they also sought the attention of white audiences. Hansberry wanted blacks and whites to engage in meaningful conversation because she felt that dialogue was how change happened. She may have become more radical closer to the end of her life, but even in *Les Blancs*, her most radical play, Hansberry stuck to the concepts of debate and conversation to evoke change, in addition to the idea that both sides needed to take action.

Furthermore, Hansberry’s views reappear throughout the new black aesthetic (NBA). Specifically, there were two central figures that helped develop the foundations for the new black aesthetic; their ideas anchored the remodeling of NBA. First, Trey Ellis, an African American novelist and essayist, among other things, suggested that a New Black Aesthetic had grown from within the African-American artistic community. Additionally, Ellis coined the concept of the “cultural mulatto.” The term “cultural mulatto” refers to a black individual who has the ability to successfully navigate within a white society while also maintaining all facets of his/her complex culturally non-white identity. Ellis challenges the idea of the fate of the “tragic mulatto” that was prevalent in 19th and 20th century American literature and in BAM (Kennedy’s *Negro Sarah* and *She who is Clara Passamore*). Because of the creation of the “cultural mulatto,” the tragic mulatto has been redefined in postmodern society.

Author and social activist, bell hooks¹⁰ views on the black aesthetic laid the foundation for the second main thought. Like Hansberry, hooks believes that both blacks and whites, among others, must recognize “the need to see darkness differently.” In other words darkness, or the black community, is not a monolith. hooks believes that those of the black race and their counterparts should recognize their potential to do more and branch out to different cultures and experiences. Furthermore, hooks feels that black literature should be celebrated as another form of art rather than serve as the only acceptable form in society. In this case the western aesthetic is not considered “null,” as Larry Neal put it; it is just no longer the only art accepted into the literary canon. Interestingly, consumers do not consider this acceptance, or rather awareness, of the western culture a loss. In fact, hooks concludes that this knowledge of other art forms will lead to black empowerment. Having access to western art will open up new opportunities for more concrete criticism.

Like hooks, Lorraine Hansberry also valued the inclusion of western culture in change, as opposed to other writers of BAM. Where she differs slightly from her BAM colleagues, she connects with her successors of the NBA. Hansberry has always been widely accepted as a writer of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Because of this status, as well as her untimely death, she has also been considered merely a precursor to the Black Arts Movement. This comparative journey through her work alongside the work of two prominent women whose work is firmly rooted in the Black Arts Movement, contests Hansberry’s exclusion from BAM. By reading her work in relation to the work of

¹⁰ bell hooks does not capitalize her first or last name because she believes that the content of work should be the focus, not the author (herself). This is also apart of her black aestheticism.

Sanchez and Kennedy, the interplay between them proves that although Hansberry was not writing during the historical periodization of the movement, her plays can still be categorized as “black art.” Furthermore, Hansberry’s work still informed the movement in that it inspired those who were writing at the time.

The overlaps and intersections that link Hansberry’s cultural production to Sonia Sanchez and Adrienne Kennedy are so important because the relationship among these three women is crucial to understanding Hansberry’s overlooked place in the Black Arts Movement. All three writers not only challenged the racial stereotypes in BAM, but they also collectively contested an aspect of the movement that others never touched: the heteronormativity, or the lifestyle norms of gender roles, reproduced by many participants in the Black Arts Movement.

In both *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Les Blancs*, Hansberry creates strong women who serve as the catalysts for the plots. In *Raisin*, Hansberry gives a nod to the male dominant society that existed at the time. For example, there is the relationship between Beneatha and George; George considers himself an educated man who is entitled to speak his mind, but he expects Beneatha to become his “trophy wife,” to remain silent and look pretty. He praises her when she dresses nice (on his terms) for a date, but gets bored when Beneatha tries to engage in education and talk about politics. Hansberry portrays feminism through Beneatha when Asagai talks to her about marriage. Bennie has no desire to get married and says so throughout the play. Her only concerns are going to school, becoming a doctor and finding her identity. She relies on Asagai to help her reclaim her heritage but she does not need him for much else; Hansberry makes a point to show the audience that a man is not a necessity for Beneatha.

The other form of feminism in *Raisin* is Lena Younger, or Mama. Considered the matriarch of the family, Lena already occupies a position of power. What makes her a character that displays feminism is not just her position, but rather the role that she plays. Throughout the play, Lena is the “conscience” and peacemaker. What is not as obvious is Lena as a symbol of militancy. In her essay, “The Intellectual Spear...” Olga Barrios quotes historian and author, Gerda Lerner’s characterization of Lena as a militant matriarch: “Lena Younger is not the accommodating mammy who chooses the passive, safe path, but rather the folk figure, the courageous spirit that lends credence and power to the militant struggle. In her own determined way, she gives birth to revolutionaries and is herself a progressive force” (Lerner from Barrios 30). From this quote Barrios concludes that, “Hansberry, thus, had already begun to disrupt stereotypes...”(Barrios 30). It is Lena Younger’s desire to move into a white neighborhood; this act can be seen as black militancy in its own right. Lena also stands by her guns when Walter loses all of their money and she is the one who changes his mind about giving into the racist white community who wants them out. During the Black Arts Movement there were many real Lena Youngers. Barrios writes, “Gerda Lerner claims that it was hard for colored children to be proud of fathers who were treated like [boys or called that way or any other name in the South] and it was usually the...mother who had to keep a certain dignity in the family to offset the inferiority the white man inflicted on her husband”(Barrios 29-30). Lena Younger becomes a symbol and icon for those women who were both the “conscience” and backbone in their household.

In *Les Blancs*, there are also two female characters that represent Hansberry’s views on feminism. First, there is Madame Nielsen, the wife of the domineering

Reverend Nielsen. Mme. Nielsen knows that what her husband is doing is wrong and encourages Tshembe to join in the fight for his people's liberation despite what that would mean for the safety of her husband. Mme. Nielsen dies at the end of the play but she does so as a martyr for justice. She defies her husband and, in doing so, disrupts the gender and racial norms.

The other female character that Hansberry uses to express her feminist beliefs is the woman warrior. Interestingly, Hansberry originally planned to have a female protagonist for *Les Blancs*, but decided to write a play in which the only black woman does not have a name, does not speak, and is only referred to as "woman." This woman plays a significant role in the story. Although she has no lines, her presence alone presses Tshembe to take up arms and fight. This fact alone- that it is a woman who is militant and must encourage a man to be so- proves that Hansberry changed the way in which women were perceived during the movement. Barrios makes a significant connection between both of Hansberry's plays concerning the roles of women:

And in this play [Les Blancs] a woman plays the fundamental role. It is a woman warrior who first appears on an open stage, clutching a spear from the earth and holding it high. This woman warrior symbolizes the African continent and she is the one who haunts [Tshembe's] mind (like the ghost of Hamlet) for he is afraid to take action that might require violence... Like Lena encouraging her children to take a step, the woman warrior encourages [Tshembe] to take the spear and be a leader to his people to fight against the Western invader (Barrios 30).

By using these women as central characters, Hansberry has "torn to pieces the stereotypes of passive, uncommitted, and empty- brained Black and White women, as portrayed by

male writers” (Barrios 35). Hansberry’s female characters served to reinforce the social commentary on gender roles in her play.

Building on Hansberry’s groundwork, Sonia Sanchez deals with the issue of sexism through her poetry. In her essay, “Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions,” Cherise A. Pollard argues that at first glance many of the female poets “appear to position their speakers as powerless [in terms of gender] but they are not” (Pollard 177). Rather these poems are a “gendered critique” in which the power of manhood is challenged. Another one of Sanchez’s poems, also entitled “to all sisters,” is an example of what Pollard suggests.

to all sisters
hurt.

 u worried abt a
 little hurting.
 man
hurt ain’t the bag u
 shd be in.
 loving is
the bag. man.
 there ain’t
no MAN like a
 black man.
he puts it where it is
and makes u
 turn in/side out. (Sanchez 22)

In order for women’s poetry to gain acceptance by the dominant male audience of BAM, it had to uplift or encourage the black male in some way. Initially, it seems as if the speaker is chastising her audience, “her sisters,” for rejecting their black men. She tells them that “there ain’t no MAN like a black man” and proceeds to explain how he is sexually satisfying. If we take a closer look at the structure of the poem, however, a completely different message emerges. Pollard calls the use of line breaks, indentions and

punctuation a “contradictory interpretation” (Pollard 178). In the third line, the speaker uses the words, “little” and “hurting” when referring to the man. These words suggest that the man has weaknesses. Throughout the poem, the speaker also delivers the poem with a pang of sarcasm especially when she capitalizes the word “man” in line 10.

Many of Sanchez’s poems include this element of a hidden message when it comes to gender and feminism. This was not her only way of exhibiting feminist values in her work; she also used the language of male playwrights that consisted of vulgarity and sexuality, proving that she was just as capable of writing the type of poetry men wrote.

Complicating Sanchez’s notion of womanhood, Adrienne Kennedy’s plays focus on the female experience. The journey for identity that her characters undertake, relates to the 1950s and 1960s woman’s journey to be heard. Kennedy’s plays are feminist because they focus on the superficiality of beauty. However, although both female protagonists are educated, a characteristic associated with feminism, this education imprisons them. Despite this fact, Kennedy’s work is still important to women and contributed to the feminist aspects of the BAM. In her work, Kennedy presents the realities of black females’ experiences.

Through their materials, both Kennedy and Sanchez changed the course of American literature. Despite the differences in genre, their work shared major themes that identified them as “black art.” Lorraine Hansberry used the very same themes prior to the movement, yet her plays were referred to throughout BAM and even after it ended. Hansberry was not only a precursor of the movement she was also one of its staple writers. Her ideologies and themes emerge again and again throughout BAM texts. Her

influences on the ideas of Ellis and hooks prove that she lives on in the Black Arts
Legacy.

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