Lorraine Hansberry's Roving Global Vision

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By Vinson Cunningham **The New Yorker** May 4, 2020

Hansberry struggled to synthesize her interest in politics, humanism, and beauty. Photograph by David Attie / Getty

Since early April, when the great literary critic and English professor Cheryl A. Wall died, I have been thinking about the last book she published, "On Freedom and the Will to Adorn," about the African-American essay tradition. Wall was one of the foremost scholars and interpreters of the work of Zora Neale Hurston, and, in "On Freedom," Wall latches on to Hurston's assertion that the "will to adorn"—a tendency toward linguistic flourish, even under duress—is an important aspect of "Negro expression." Wall believed that the black essay has often fulfilled two barely extricable purposes: to argue for political, economic, social, racial, and sexual liberation, and to satisfy a writer's urge for self-expression through aesthetics.

Wall's insight goes beyond the essay; it's more like an unveiling of the impulses—sometimes harmonious, sometimes dissonant—that come together to make art of any kind that is anchored in place and time but can also move past those parameters. There may be no better example of this capacity in the modern American theatre than the life and art of the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, who died in 1965, at the age of thirty-four, but left behind enough genius for lovers of literature to follow like a trail of generous crumbs. (May 19th will mark the ninetieth anniversary of Hansberry's birth.)

Even before her sparkling career as a playwright began, Hansberry walked a political-artistic tightrope, making personal and creative adjustments in order to achieve the kind of balance that Wall describes. In her early twenties, having just arrived in New York from the Midwest, she published poems in radical journals; worked as a journalist for *Freedom*, a black leftist newspaper published by the actor and singer Paul Robeson; and studied with W. E. B. Du Bois, at the Jefferson School of Social Science. She was beginning to hone her lifelong leftward politics into a roving, endlessly empathetic global vision.

Around that time—according to "Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry," Imani Perry's intimate, ruminative book, from 2018, more documentary portrait than strict biography—Hansberry sent a letter to her boyfriend, Robert Nemiroff, whom she would later marry. The letter ended with a tellingly determined manifesto:

1. I am a writer. I am going to write.
2. I am going to become a writer.
3. Any real contribution I can make to the movement can only be the result of a disciplined life. I am going to institute discipline in my life.
4. I can paint. I am going to paint.
The END

Hansberry was not only personally ambitious but also hoped to merge her aesthetic and political concerns, which had grown together like a tree with twin trunks—its highest branches intermingled, its sustenance coursing through a mutual system of roots.

Perry's book is an elegant, softly subjective rereading of the facts of Hansberry's life. If Hansberry's own story is a kind of drama, Perry is her most perceptive, unabashedly biased critic, helping to reiterate and build on her themes, and to make her performance live again. "Looking for Lorraine" tunnels deep into Hansberry's psyche, showing how the dissonance of her youth yielded a poised artist, cut down too early by illness. Hansberry had a relatively bourgeois, liberal, middle-class upbringing, in Chicago, but it was ringed by violence. When her father, a real-estate entrepreneur, bought a house in a white neighborhood, the family was greeted with a cement block thrown through their front window; it just missed Lorraine's head, and lodged itself into a wall.

If Perry has one persistent obsession, it is how, after this harrowing moment, Hansberry struggled to synthesize her attraction to politics, her deeply felt humanism, and her native interest in beauty: how she learned to move from helpless frustration to a contemplation of the earth's magnificence in one mental stroke. "There were her politics, centered on the poor, the marginal, the oppressed and outsiders," Perry writes, "and there was her grasping at the interior life."

In 1959, Hansberry had an astounding success, with "A Raisin in the Sun," becoming the first black woman to have a play début on Broadway. The plot centers on a Chicago family's complications in moving to an all-white neighborhood. It satisfied every requirement of a "well made" domestic drama, setting its characters' generational, religious, and political divisions so artfully against one another that the eventual climax—Walter

Younger's loss of his family inheritance—feels like a glimpse beyond setting and character and into the country's future of commingled hopes and desires.

After "Raisin" 's run, Hansberry wrote a post-apocalyptic fantasy called "What Use Are Flowers?" She conceived it as a television special, but decided to make it a play instead. Parts of it have been adapted for radio and staged readings, and some of its text was used in "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," the posthumous play that was edited by Nemiroff. To read "Flowers" now—alongside other post-"Raisin" works, such as "Les Blancs" and "The Drinking Gourd," all of which, along with "Flowers," are collected in a book called "Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry," from 1972—is to be reminded that, for Hansberry, "Raisin" was a beginning, not an end. The theatre, with its urge to make the interior visible, and to force contradictions through the refiner's fire of confrontation, was a perfect vehicle for her to develop both her politics and her art.

"Flowers" begins in a bleak landscape, empty except for a group of scantily clothed kids. They are prelingual, and look hungry. It's unclear what has happened to civilization, but the clear reference—given the time, and Hansberry's global political concerns—is to the bomb. Hansberry had watched Du Bois, her mentor and a family friend, get arrested and indicted after starting a petition against nuclear weapons. He was ostracized in polite circles, both black and white, and was labelled a Soviet agent.

Hansberry's admiration for Du Bois was total. In a journal entry, she called him "freedom's passion, refined and organized." That formulation sounds like an eerie anticipation of Wall's: Du Bois's 1903 book, "The Souls of Black Folk," in which he brought together social science, reportage, music criticism, and even fiction, is a cornerstone of the black essay tradition. He had used his peerless education, personal fastidiousness, and artistic flair as a conduit for his passions, not an excuse to dampen them in the name of respectability. He had paved a road that Hansberry hoped to travel.

In "Flowers," the kids kill an animal and fight over the body. Nobody coöperates; it's a microcosm of Hobbes's "war of all against all." A struggle ensues, and, Hansberry notes in her stage directions, "those who are strongest triumph." Apocalypse has exposed human ruthlessness and set it loose as the highest law.

Into this brutal scene enters a man who describes himself as a hermit. He walked into the woods twenty years ago and is now returning to a nightmare. Once he realizes what has happened, he makes the children his project. He was an English teacher in the old world. He says of the people he left behind, all of whom, except for these children, are now presumably dead, "What a strange tribe they were! Lunatics and heroes all!" The children, he learns, were brought here by a man and a woman who hoped, perhaps, that they would survive and live to propagate the species. (Awkwardly, there's only one girl among them.) The hermit teaches the children to speak, introducing them to simple concepts, one by one.

But abstractions are difficult. The hermit strains, especially, to explain what it means to "use" something. Soon, the organs of civilization start to return. One kid learns to speak passably well. Another "invents" the wheel. Violence still breaks out, but beneath it hope peeks through. There's a question that the hermit never successfully answers, though—one that seems as relevant today, as we walk through our own real-life apocalypse, as in this barren imagined landscape. One child asks what "use" flowers have—why beauty? The hermit's struggle to answer feels like the whole agony of creation. The stakes seem absurdly high, but it's a plausible diagnosis of the human problem, resolvable only by keeping one eye on surfaces and the other on the spirit: imagine or die. ♦