THE RHETORIC OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Lorraine Hansberry's 1957 Letters to the *Ladder*

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> I have suspected for a good while now that the homosexual in America would ultimately pay a price for the intellectual impoverishment of women, and, in this instance, of homosexual women. . . . Men continue to misinterpret the second-rate status of women as implying a privileged status for themselves; heterosexuals think the same way about homosexuals; gentiles about Jews; whites about blacks; haves about have-nots.
>
> Lorraine Hansberry,
> unpublished letter to *ONE* magazine, April 18, 1961

> Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never come before.
>
> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*

One of the challenges of queering historical public address is to resist the impulse to produce an account of a "real" queer figure that in the end simply produces yet another discursive formation. Public address scholars such as Morris have articulated the ambiguities of the queer rhetorical persona who evades easy identification.[1] An interesting example of this can be seen in the discursive construction of Lorraine Hansberry, who, while widely regarded as a signifier for racial justice for close to fifty years, was not constructed as a queer signifier until after her death in 1965. That "revelation" came about in 1976 when Barbara Grier, former editor of the lesbian periodical the *Ladder*, publicly identified Hansberry as the author of two public letters published in the *Ladder* in 1957.[2] Excerpts from the letters were then published in Katz's 1976 edition of *Gay American History*.[3] Three years later in a 1979 special issue of *Freedomways* dedicated to Hansberry, the lesbian poet and critic Adrienne Rich referred to the letters in a critical interrogation of the silences surrounding Hansberry and her work.[4] Since then, Hansberry has been increasingly identified as a lesbian in lesbian and gay, African American, and other literary biographies.

But whereas from one perspective much has been made of the two *Ladder* letters—the fact of her speaking and the concurrent silencing of that speaking—relatively little has been made about what Hansberry actually says in the letters or in her other writing that addresses sexuality.[5] Few critics link the *Ladder* letters to Hansberry's other writings or address how Hansberry also wrote about gay experience and politics in two of her plays: *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* and *Les Blancs.* In this chapter I will read the letters in their historical context as well as in relation to a number of her key texts across a range of genres, including plays, political speeches, letters and essays. My aim is to deepen our understanding of Hansberry's rhetorical vision and her commitments to social and political transformation. Thus I will not investigate Hansberry's "private" self in search of her "true" sexual identity. Rather I follow the path of cultural and queer studies that view identities as, in Stuart Hall's phrase, "necessary fictions."[6] As Scott Bravmann describes it, identities are seen as "temporary but compelling fabrications that are remade through the actively inventive projects of political mobilization and social movements, rather than as antecedent, immutable, essential truths."[7] My argument, however, is not that Hansberry or her sexual life did not exist: history is, and lives happen. The heavily occluded historical record suggests that Hansberry did articulate and theorize lesbian experience and that she had women lovers.[8] Rather than undergo a search for evidence of Hansberry's personal identity, however, I will instead explore Hansberry's publicly constructed rhetorical voice for its articulations of counterhegemonic perspectives on sexuality, race, gender, and class. For, in spite of her decision to stay closeted throughout her short life, Hansberry nevertheless articulated a vital lesbian political ethos.[9] Her passing as heterosexual can be understood as an example of what Morris calls a rhetorical tactic of resistance. "For certain individuals, passing constitutes the public expression of homosexual double consciousness, a measured and strategic form of straight masking employed to resist, and not merely survive, homophobic oppression."[10]

By interpreting the *Ladder* letters in relation to Hansberry's other writing, as well as their historical context in the 1950s homophile movement, I endeavor to read Hansberry as a major political rhetor and public intellectual of her time who, twenty years before the Combahee River Collective's landmark "Black Feminist Statement,"[11] and thirty years before critical interrogations of identity occupied the center of major intellectual debates, explored the complex interlocking intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality from antiracist, postcolonial, feminist, antiessentialist, lesbian, and Marxist perspectives. Considering her peers—she was one year older than Toni Morrison, four years older than Audre Lorde, two years younger than Maya Angelou, and one year younger than Adrienne Rich—one can only imagine the contribution Hansberry might have made had she lived longer.

Personal History

Biographically, Hansberry was a complex and even contradictory figure who personally straddled multiple class, race, and sexual cleavages. She was born in 1930 in Chicago to a middle-class African American family in a South Side ghetto and experienced firsthand the structural violence of Jim Crow education and the physical violence of racism. In 1938 her father, a Republican businessman and U.S. deputy marshal, moved the family to a white neighborhood to deliberately contest racial restriction clauses. Carl Hansberry's suit was ultimately successful, and the events of the case created the background for what was to become, twenty years later, her critically acclaimed Broadway hit *Raisin in the Sun*.[12] Hansberry briefly attended the University of Wisconsin.

After moving to New York City in 1950, Hansberry soon joined with radical black and communist activists (including her future husband, Robert Nemiroff), and in 1951 began working at the progressive black paper founded in 1950 by Paul Robeson, *Freedom* (with Louis Burnham as editor), first as reporter then as associate editor. In 1953 she married Nemiroff, a white Jewish songwriter, and quit her job at the paper to focus full time on playwriting. In the late 1950s she wrote the two letters to the *Ladder*, clandestinely dated women, and attended meetings of the New York Chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis, the nascent organization for lesbians. In March 1959 *Raisin* opened on Broadway, and Hansberry won the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award for best play of the year, becoming the first black playwright and fifth woman to win this prestigious award. In 1961 the film version of *Raisin* won the Gary Cooper Award for "outstanding human values" at Cannes.

Battling severe illness that was to be diagnosed as cancer only shortly before her death, Hansberry divorced Nemiroff in the spring of 1964 and three months later named him her literary executor. Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s she wrote and spoke widely against racism, sexism, and the burgeoning Vietnam War. In October 1964, three months before she died, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* opened and ran for 101 days. Despite its lukewarm critical reception, friends from the theatrical, literary, and political communities kept the play running until her death on January 12, 1965. Malcolm X and other intellectual and theatrical luminaries attended her funeral, and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., sent a letter to be read aloud. Julius Lester notes the irony of Hansberry's death falling a little more than a month before Malcolm X's assassination: "Somehow it seems like more than a coincidence that the two should die within less than a month and a half of each other and scarcely nine months before the 'deferred dream' exploded in the streets of Watts."[13]

As a public rhetor, Hansberry was prolific: in addition to her plays she wrot public letters to the *Ladder*, the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*; she wrote essay and journalism for *Freedom*, *Monthly Review*, *Black Scholar*, *Ebony*, *Liberation*, an the *Village Voice*; she gave speeches at New York Town Hall, the American Academy of Psycho-Therapists, the American Society of African Culture, the Unite Negro College Fund, and, at age twenty-two, to the Inter-Continental Peace Congress in Uruguay. In 1963 she took part in a historic meeting between civil right leaders and Bobby Kennedy. According to James Baldwin, Hansberry ended the meeting after Kennedy denied her request for a "moral commitment": "The meeting ended with Lorraine standing up. She said . . . 'I am very worried about the state of the civilization which produced that photograph of the white cop standing on that Negro woman's neck in Birmingham.'"[14]

Yet in spite of these contributions, Hansberry remains a marginalized figure in that she has yet to be acknowledged as the public intellectual she was. Even luminaries of black culture sympathetic to gender and sexuality issues, such as Cornel West, tend to leave Hansberry out of the equation when listing black intellectuals and those who "championed the struggle for freedom and justice in a prophetic framework of moral reasoning."[15] Those who have written about Hansberry voice this frustration. For example, Doris Abrams wrote, "Not enough has been said about her as an American (black) intellectual leader. Her essays presaged the concerns of the 1960s. She had strong connections to Africa. Her writings provide a challenge to black and white America."[16] More recently, Jewell Gomez noted, "Because we have not studied Hansberry as a cultural worker and thinker but only as a dramatist, we have lost touch with the urgency of her political message and the poetry of her writing."[17] Even Amiri Baraka, who was part of the Black Arts movement that loudly criticized *Raisin* as bourgeois melodrama in the early 1960s, in 1995 wrote, "The truth is that Hansberry's dramatic skills have yet to be properly appreciated—and not just by those guardians of the status quo who pass themselves off as drama critics."[18]

Hansberry's marginality comes at least in part from the failure to read her as a political writer, specifically as a black, feminist, Marxist, lesbian thinker. As Barbara Smith has noted, "When black women's books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at Black women's works they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics."[19] Documenting the omission of black lesbian writers in many anthologies of black women's criticism and literature such as those by Wallace, Washington, and hooks, Cheryl Clarke writes, "Black bourgeois female intellectuals practice homophobia by omission more often than rabid homophobia."[20] Thus, in spite of her ostensible acclaim, Hansberry's rhetorical voice and vision have not been sufficiently critically addressed.

Thinking Politicially: Intersectionality and the Simultaneity of Oppression

Perhaps one of Hansberry's most significant contributions to the public discourse of her era may have been her comprehensive grasp of what Sojourner Truth first publicly articulated in her 1851 "Ain't I a Woman?" speech, what Barbara Smith theorized in 1983 as the "simultaneity of oppression," and what Kimberlé Crenshaw further developed in 1989 as the concept of "intersectionality."[21] As Smith describes it, "The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought. . . . we saw no reason to rank oppressions or, as many forces in the Black community would have us do, to pretend that sexism, among all the 'isms' was not happening to us."[22] According to Patricia Hill Collins, "Intersectionality thus highlights how African American women and other social groups are positioned within unjust power relations, but it does so in a way that introduces complexity to formerly race-, class-, and gender-only approaches to social phenomena."[23]

That Hansberry thought intersectionally is evident in all her writings, regardless of genre—whether it be in the full-blown critiques of racism, sexism and capitalism in *Raisin;* of racism, homophobia, and colonialism in *Les Blancs;* or of capitalism and racism in her documentary text *The Movement.* Describing her early relationship with Louis E. Burnham, she says, "The things he taught me were great things: that all racism was rotten, white or black, that everything is political."[24] Hansberry's grasp of intersectionality is evident in *The Movement,* for example, a book that narrates documentary photographs of the civil rights movement. In the book Hansberry attends to race-class intersectionality in several places where she links racism to wider systems of economic and social exploitation: "The [white police] men in helmets are from a class of Southerners who are themselves victims of a system that has used them and their fathers before them for generations."[25] And beneath a photograph of an industrial slum, she writes, "The coming of industry into the Southland has not changed the problems of many of its people—white or black—for the better."[26]

In fact, Hansberry took on an astonishing range of political issues, all inflected with an intersectional perspective, including racism, colonialism, sexism, capitalism, heterosexism, and black nationalism. She articulated a critique of the "exotic" as "other" two decades before Edward Said, and three before Stuart Hall.[27] Her deconstruction of political "illusions" in her 1959 speech to the Society for African Culture could provide the curriculum for any contemporary course in cultural studies, which includes critiques of "a year's steady diet of television, motion pictures, the legitimate stage and the novel."[28] Among the illusions Hansberry takes on in this speech: "Most people who work for a living are executives, women are idiots, people are white, negroes do not exist . . . sex is very bad, sex is very good . . . war is inevitable, so are armies . . . any form of radicalism (except conservativism) is latent protest against Mom, toilet-training, or heterosexuality."[29] Later in the speech she asserts, "And as of today, if I am asked abroad if I am a free citizen of the United States of America, I must say only what is true: *No.*"[30]

Further, Hansberry's political imagination included all cultural formations, and most especially theater, as a forum for political expression. In a letter responding to a note from a theater enthusiast, she writes, "That is—'thesis plays' and 'social plays' are supposed to be, by this reasoning, plays which plead a cause. We have grown so accustomed to this abuse of language and ideas that most people try to explain *why* that is so and do not understand that there are *no* plays which are not social and no plays that do not have a thesis."[31] Hansberry's political imagination is perhaps most comprehensively sketched in her 1959 speech, in which she outlines her theory of art as deeply political: "There is a desperate need in our time for the Negro writer to assume a partisanship in what I believe has been the traditional battleground of writers of stature for centuries, namely the war against the illusions of one's time and culture."[32] As a careful reading of her texts, including those published in the *Ladder,* reveals, some of the most unacknowledged cultural illusions Hansberry battled against were heterocentrism and homophobia.

Subaltern Counterpublics: The Daughters of Bilitis and the *Ladder*

In spite of what Eric Garber and other historians document as a flourishing homosexual subculture for African American gays and lesbians during the Harlem Renaissance (1920–1935),[33] the witch hunts of World War II and subsequent homophobic persecution and gay-baiting of the McCarthy period had driven much of New York's African American and white gay and lesbian subcultures underground by the 1950s. The period was, according to Lillian Faderman, "perhaps the worst time in history for women to love women."[34] In contrast to earlier decades, in the 1950s gays and lesbians were subject to what John D'Emilio calls systematized oppression, which included frequent police arrests and harassments; FBI harassment and infiltration; expulsion from the military, government employment, teaching positions, and university study; and job discrimination. "From 1947 through mid-1958, 1,700 job seekers were denied employment because of homosexuality. After that period, the government expanded its screening procedures."[35] Gay and lesbian bars were routinely raided, and patrons were not only arrested on morals charges, but also had their names and addresses published in the next day's newspaper. According to D'Emilio, "[Arrests] in the District of Columbia exceeded 1,000 per year during the early 1950s. Washington police frequently resorted to entrapment by plainclothesmen in Lafayette Park and downtown movie houses to arrest male homosexuals. In Philadelphia during the 1950s, misdemeanor charges against gay men and women averaged 100 per month."[36]

Ironically, however, it was during this same period that the self-titled "homophile movement" first took shape in the form of three different gay and lesbian organizations based in California: the Mattachine Society (founded in 1951 by and for gay men), the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB; founded in 1955 by and for lesbians), and One (an organization that began as a magazine started by Mattachine but split off, becoming its own organization around 1953). Each of these organizations built subaltern counterpublics to resist and find respite from oppressive social and discursive conventions of the ostensibly mainstream public. The notion of subaltern counterpublics derives from work by postcolonial, feminist, and critical theorists seeking to describe the existence of multiple (rather than singular) subordinate (rather than dominant) publics in democratic societies; the centrality of these publics to the development of subaltern political voice, critique, and identity; and how ostensibly democratic societies appropriate, marginalize, and occasionally accommodate the voices of oppressed minority groups who comprise subaltern counterpublics.[37] The1950s homophile organizations built previously nonexistent communities through face-to-face semipublic social interactions, public meetings, and national publications. In 1957, the organization One also undertook both an undergraduate and graduate school as well as a homosexual news service. Although each of the three organizations emphasized different aspects of and strategies for liberation, each was committed to overcoming the isolation and persecution of gay men and lesbians.

DOB was founded in 1955 by eight women from San Francisco "with a vague idea that something should be done about the problems of Lesbians, both within their own group and with the public."[38] One year later, they began publishing the *Ladder*, the first national lesbian publication.[39] The circulation of the first issue in October 1956 was 100, growing to 400 by the end of the first year and 3,800 by the last issue in 1972. As Alisa Klinger notes in a survey of lesbian activist writing, "The use of print by multicultural lesbian activists to establish strategic political identities and affinities and to articulate passionately their aspirations for civil rights and elemental social change has been the crux of lesbian liberation politics."[40]

The DOB statement of purpose, published in the first issue of the *Ladder*, indicates a mixture of both emancipatory and assimilationist aims: "Education of the variant, with particular emphasis on the psychological and sociological aspects," by establishing a library, sponsoring public discussions, educating the public, participating in research projects, investigating the penal code, and "advocating a mode of behaviour and dress acceptable to society." It was in relation to this last assimilationist aim in particular that Hansberry addressed her first letter to the *Ladder*. The early issues of the *Ladder* included essays, book reviews, fiction, poetry, letters from readers, calendars of meetings and events, and reports about public discussions held by DOB and other homophile organizations, which often included panels of "experts" debating psychological and legal perspectives on homosexuality. For example, the March 1957 issue contained a report of a panel of male psychologists, psychiatrists, pastors, and attorneys discussing the topic of "The Homosexual Neurosis." The *Ladder* reporter wrote, "The crossfire period was delightful. A highlight for the homosexuals present occurred when someone asked Dr. Doebler why he felt that all homosexuals were neurotic. He answered that he'd never known any 'happy' homosexuals. The audience rocked with laughter [when] the next questioner asked Dr. Doebler if he'd ever had any 'happy' heterosexual patients. Dr. Doebler squirmed but answered forthrightly that he never had."[41] Other public discussions and articles reported in the *Ladder* concerned raising children in "a deviant relationship," lesbians and fear, psychotherapy versus public opinion, job hunting, criticism of mainstream media depictions of homosexuality, and the psychological dimensions of self-acceptance.

As part of its public advocacy and educational role, the DOB and the *Ladder* also organized and promoted impromptu actions in response to oppressive public actions against lesbians. For instance, the second issue included an article on a San Francisco police raid of the Alamo club, a lesbian bar, which resulted in the arrest of thirty-six women. The article focused on the question of civil rights and advocated public education for lesbian civil rights: "At the hearing the following Monday we understand that only four of those arrested pleaded not guilty. We feel that this was not due to actual guilt on the part of those so pleading but to an appalling lack of knowledge of the rights of a citizen in such a case."[42] The article concluded with an announcement of a DOB-sponsored public meeting with a San Francisco attorney who would discuss "The Lesbian and the Law."

Thus many of the public discussions and some of the writing featured the opinions of "expert" authorities, reflecting the values, aims, and perspectives of the largely middle-class constituency of the organization—particularly the value of what Faderman identifies as the aspiration for integration.[43] Further, in addition to the organization's conservative stance on assimilation and the politics of accommodation, the DOB took several perplexing positions during the late 1950s. For example, an article based on the "expertise" of psychologists in the March 1957 issue claimed that "the only thing a homosexual has to fear when looking for a job is whether his or her ability matches the job applied for—the problem of homosexuality per se does not enter the employment picture."[44] This is a fairly bewildering claim in light of the antigay persecutions occurring in plain sight in the fields of government and education. Even more mystifying, in the same issue, the DOB commended the "ACLU for its fine work in the defense of civil rights for all citizens." The article then quoted from the ACLU's newly published stand on homosexuality, which tacitly condoned homophobic laws: "It is not within the province of the Union to evaluate the validity of laws aimed at the suppression or elimination of homosexuals."[45]

The DOB, however, was aware of and even apologetic about its largely middle-class constituency. In the fourth issue of the *Ladder*, the editors described the DOB membership: "College students, saleswomen, dental technicians, photographers, stenographers, teachers, traffic management people. Some are home-owners, some are saving for a home, some are just living. . . . We aren't 'bar-hoppers' but people with steady jobs, most of them good positions. . . . At the moment we are all what might be termed 'white-collar' workers, but we want all kinds—those who want help and those who wish to help."[46]

Despite the editors' recognition of class and the ostensible desire to include lesbians from the working and upper classes, the concomitant remark distancing DOB members from "bar-hoppers" should be understood in its class and racial context. According to contemporary work in lesbian history, the 1950s lesbian bar culture was an important public arena for the creation of lesbian community. In their oral history of lesbians in Buffalo during the 1950s, Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy argue that "this public bar community was a formative predecessor to the modern gay liberation movement. These bars not only were essential meeting places with distinctive cultures and mores, but they were also the central arena for the lesbian confrontation with a hostile world. Participants in bar life were engaged in a constant, often violent, struggle for public space. Their dress code announced them as lesbians to their neighbors, to strangers, on the streets, and of course to all who entered the bars."[47]

Significantly, however, the 1950s lesbian bar culture was a largely white working-class space.[48] Oral histories, biography, and autobiography suggest that in many if not most U.S. cities, the bar culture by and large did not include black lesbians. In her autobiography *Zami*, for example, Audre Lorde describes thinking she and her friend were the only black lesbians in New York's Greenwich Village: "It seemed that loving women was something that other Black women just didn't do. And if they did, then it was in some fashion and in some place that was totally inaccessible to us, because we could never find them."[49] Similarly, in Rochella Thorpe's oral history of black lesbians in Detroit in the 1950s, African American lesbians describe both overt and covert incidents of racism that left them feeling unwelcome or invisible in predominantly white bars. Thorpe's history documents how Detroit black lesbians created semipublic spaces in the form of house parties to circumvent the racism of the white lesbian community and the homophobia of the black community. She writes, "One reason historians of lesbians have not been successful locating lesbians of color might be that they have assumed bars have been the center (both theoretical and actual) of lesbian communities."[50]

It was, however, to the *Ladder*'s discursive community, the only national lesbian counterpublic in existence at the time, that Hansberry addressed herself in 1957 while she was writing the play *A Raisin in the Sun*. Her first letter was published in May 1957, the eighth issue of the nascent publication, and her second three months later in August. The letters are actually more akin to essays and are longer than most of the other letters published in the *Ladder:* the May letter is approximately 840 words and the August letter roughly 1,340 words. Following the *Ladder*'s editorial conventions, neither letter is addressed or signed by name; the May letter is signed

with the initials L.H.N., New York, and the August letter signed simply L.N., N
York. This is in contrast to the rhetorical persona Hansberry used in her other wr
ing (that is, the name "Lorraine Hansberry"); however, in public letters to the
lage Voice and the *Ladder* she instead employed her married initials.[51] What we
to make of this is unclear, but it raises an interesting question about the constrai
on Hansberry's public voice. Hansberry apparently wrote no other letters to t
Ladder, though in 1961 she did write a letter to *One*, which was never mailed.

The *Ladder* Letters

A letter is a relational act of address: to write a letter is to place oneself in a di
logue with an explicitly acknowledged addressee. To write a public letter is to sit
ate oneself in relation to a public, a real or imagined community of auditors w
share, at the very least, the experience of the address. As Robert Fulkerson notes
his analysis of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," writers of public letters c
address more than one audience simultaneously, and moreover, those audiences ar
at the time of writing, "always a fiction."[52] Yet in contrast to other forms of the pu
lic letter, such as Cesar Chavez's "Letter from Delano," which explicitly drew
Mexican American historical traditions of public letters,[53] the anonymous publ
letters of the *Ladder* are not only without historical rhetorical heritage, but a
also at once both public and private. The anonymous public letters of the *Ladd*
thus occupy a liminal space—not quite public and not quite private, yet at the sa
time both public and private. Privacy is accorded to both writer and reader, eac
of whom remains unnamed and indirectly addressed. Yet the address is shared
a multiplicity of readers, who are an assumed public audience of interlocutor
In fact, letters to the *Ladder* were a central part of the periodical's textuality-
sometimes even constituting intertextual dialogue.

Rhetorically then, this form of anonymous public letter invites us, the unima
ined audience, to attend differently. As in other forms of the public letter,
making explicit their relation to prior speech acts, the letter writer engages in co
versation still ongoing and unfolding; that is, they belong equally to the future as
the past. A letter is also an elicitation, an invitation for response. It anticipate
expects, and even demands a response. When Hansberry wrote to the *Ladder*, it w
both a call as well as a response, a "here I am," to other lesbians. Thus her lette
both acknowledge and construct a relationship between hidden writers and hidde
readers who made up the secret subaltern public of the lesbian nation.

Hansberry begins the May letter with a request for as many back issues of th
journal that $2.00 would cover, adding a promise of future "sizeable (for me, tha
is) donations" and then moves into four of what she calls "off-the-top-of-the-hea
reactions": (1) a brief exposition on the importance of separate publication venue
for lesbians; (2) a longer disquisition in support of the DOB declaration of pur
pose that advocates modes of "acceptable" behavior and dress; (3) two sentence

applauding the journal; and (4) a suggestion for overseas communication. Hansberry ends her letter with an elicitation for thoughts on the comparative dearth of gay and lesbian organizations on the East Coast: "Would like to hear speculation, light-hearted or otherwise." Hansberry's tone conveys warmth and a personal connection to her interlocutors; she uses informal, personal, and idiomatic expressions, such as "I'm glad as heck that you exist"; "Would it be presumptuous or far-fetched to suggest?"; and "Just a little afterthought."[54] Here, in contrast to her other published letters, Hansberry projects a kind of comfort and familiarity with her readers, as if, perhaps, she were writing to friends.

Despite its somewhat breezy and informal tone, the first two points of the letter resonate with Hansberry's elsewhere-articulated political vision. Before developing her argument for why women need "their own publications and organizations," Hansberry begins by denying any intention to "foster strict *separatist* notions, homo or hetero." This caveat comports both with the kind of coalition politics Hansberry advocates in other writing as well as her critiques of racial separatism. As to the former, for example, in her speech to New York's Town Hall Hansberry urges whites to stop being liberals and work side by side with African Americans in the struggle for civil rights. "The problem is we have to find some way with these dialogues to show and to encourage the white liberal to stop being a liberal and become an American radical."[55]

Hansberry's critique of separatism in this letter also resonates with her rejection of the kind of racial separatism advocated by black nationalism as expressed in her plays *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Les Blancs* and her other writings. For example, in *The Movement* she writes: "The Black Muslim movement represents a potluck nationalism that looks backward, not to the wonderful of black African civilization of medieval and antique periods, but to Arabic cultures. Muslim 'separation' is not a program, but an accommodation to American racism."[56] This idea is also developed in *A Raisin in the Sun* when, for example, the Younger family daughter, Beneatha, argues with her friend, an African student named Asagai, about racial reasoning.

> Beneatha: I know that's what you think. Because you are still where I left off. You with all your talk and dreams about Africa! You still think you can patch up the world. Cure the Great Sore of Colonialism with the penicillin of Independence!
>
> Asagai: Yes!
>
> Beneatha: Independence and then what? What about all the crooks and thieves and just plain idiots who will come into power and steal and plunder the same as before—only now they will be black and do it in the name of the new Independence—WHAT ABOUT THEM?!![57]

This critique of race-based separation also emerges in *Les Blancs*, in which an African expatriate living in England returns home for his father's village funeral to experience imminent anticolonial revolution. On encountering a white American journalist, the young man, Tshembe, soundly critiques separatist racial thinking: "Race—racism—is a device. No more. No less. It explains nothing at all. . . . It is simply a means. An invention to justify the rule of some men over others."[58] To sense how progressive these ideas were in the 1950s one need only read the words of Cornel West, thirty years later, as he critiques the ideas of black authenticity and racial reasoning. "In short, blackness is a political and ethical construct. Appeals to black authenticity ignore this fact. . . . The claims to black authenticity that feed on the closing-ranks mentality of black people are dangerous precisely because his closing of ranks is usually done at the expense of black women. It also tends to ignore the divisions of class and sexual orientation in black America. . . . In this way black nationalist and black male-centered claims to authenticity reinforce black cultural conservatism."[59]

In this brief opening to her May letter Hansberry also articulates her developed feminist consciousness. "Our problems, our experiences as women are profoundly unique as compared to the other half of the human race. Women, like other oppressed groups of one kind or another, have particularly had to pay a price for the intellectual impoverishment that the second class status imposed on us for centuries created and sustained."[60] This point echoes, for example, to arguments she makes in an unfinished essay, "In Defense of the Equality of Men," where she articulates a strong feminist argument and celebrates nineteenth-century feminists who "set a path that a grateful society will undoubtedly, in time, celebrate."[61] The point is also echoed two years later when, in an interview with Studs Terkel, she states, "Obviously the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women who are twice oppressed."[62]

The bulk of Hansberry's May letter, however, engages a debate about the politics of accommodation, respectability, and conformity just beginning to unfold in the *Ladder*. As I mention above, one of the DOB statements of purpose was to "promote" acceptable dress and behavior among lesbians. This statement reflects both tactical and class tensions that were already present in the homophile movement before DOB was born. In its early years (1951–1954) the Mattachine Society challenged mainstream views of homosexuality "as an individual problem, as evidence of moral weakness, criminality, or pathology," with the view that homosexuals were an oppressed minority group, akin to other oppressed minorities.[63] This perspective reflected the views of the group's founder, Harry Hay, who, like Hansberry, was a communist.

But tensions produced in large part by anticommunist persecution led to a change of Mattachine's leadership in 1954, resulting in the organization's more assimilationist ethos. This new perspective was shared by the DOB leadership and was elaborated in a message from the president, D. Griffen, in the November 1956 issue of the *Ladder,* where she writes, "Let me again state that this is a homosexual *and* heterosexual organization that wishes to enlighten the public about the Lesbian and to teach them that we aren't the monsters that they depict us to be."[64] The president then quotes a letter from a so-called "lass" who writes, "But the kids in fly-front pants and with the butch haircuts and the mannish manner are the worst publicity we can get." "Very true," the president writes. "Our organization has already touched on that matter and has converted a few to remembering that they are women first and a butch or fem secondly, so their attire should be that which society will accept."[65]

But whereas the lesbian community's antiassimilationist perspective was not reflected in DOB, it did in fact exist. According to lesbian historians such as Davis and Kennedy, Faderman, and Joan Nestle, the "butch" persona emerged largely in response to sex, class, and gender oppression. "In the fifties, with the increased visibility of the established gay community, the concomitant postwar rigidification of sex roles, and the political repression of the McCarthy era, the street dyke emerged. She was a full-time 'queer,' who frequented the bars even on week nights and was ready at any time to fight for her space and dignity."[66] As Faderman discusses, however, the lesbian subcultures of the 1950s were as class-stratified as the rest of society: "Class mixing was extremely rare. Working-class lesbians tended to socialize only with other working-class lesbians. While some wealthy lesbians would occasionally have times among middle-class lesbian groups, more often those groups tended to be made up exclusively of women who earned their livings in professions as teachers, librarians, or social workers."[67]

Hansberry's second and more fully elaborated point in the May letter involves a thoughtful reflection on this debate that includes both a qualified endorsement of the assimilationist position and an engaging political explication of what "acceptable" dress and behavior mean for lesbians and other minorities. Thus, whereas several writers, such as Neil Miller and Joan Nestle, have cited this passage from Hansberry's letter as evidence that she disapproved of butch/femme role-playing and advocated assimilationist and conformist politics,[68] a closer reading of the letter in the context of her other work offers a different interpretation.

Hansberry begins her discussion on dress by disclaiming the moral high ground for her position by stating, "Rightly or wrongly (in view of some of the thought-provoking discussions I have seen elsewhere in another homosexual publication) I could not help but be encouraged and relieved" by the DOB policy. Hansberry then continues her equivocation by outing herself as "a Negro" and quickly dispatching the "shallowness" of lecturing one's "fellows about how to appear acceptable to the dominant social group."[69] She proceeds to offer an the argument against assimilation by drawing an analogy to racism: "The most splendid argument is simple and to the point. Ralph Bunche,[70] with all his clean fingernails, degrees, and of course undeniable service to the human race, could still be insulted, denied a hotel room or meal in many parts of the country. (Not to mention the possibility of being lynched on a lonely Georgia road for perhaps having demanded a glass of water in the wrong place)."[71] This statement reflects not just a counter-assimilationist argument, but also Hansberry's recognition of larger structures underlying antigay oppression that would not be obviated by mere or mindless conformity. "What ought to be clear is that one is oppressed or discriminated against because one is different, not 'wrong' or 'bad' somehow. This perhaps the bitterest of the entire pill."

After offering this eloquent critique of assimilation, however, Hansberry turns toward the brighter sun of pragmatism by offering a "critical view of revolutionary attitudes which . . . may tend to aggravate the problems of a group" and thus returns to her argument in favor of assimilation: "I have long since passed that period when I felt personal discomfort at the sight of an ill-dressed or illiterate Negro. Social awareness has taught me where to lay the blame. Someday, I expect, the 'discreet' Lesbian will not turn her head on the streets at the sight of the 'butch' strolling hand in hand with her friend in their trousers and definitive haircuts. But for the moment, it still disturbs. It creates an impossible area for discussion with one's most enlightened (to use a hopeful term) heterosexual friends."

As with her plays, Hansberry here offers a dialogic approach to her argument; she explicates contending perspectives in a way that vivifies and strengthens her argument, but she is also willing to acknowledge that her perspective may not be "right." Thus Hansberry's moral imagination, while set on a focused set of liberatory ends, is not unyielding with regard to questions of means. She wants to discover the "way" collectively, in dialogue with others of her community (as, she remarks, her enlightened friends cannot). Her equivocation, however, speaks not just to her moral imagination, but also to the fact that Hansberry's "double-consciousness" was not nor could ever be only, or even primarily, as a lesbian, but as an African American woman. Here, as for other African American queers, the complexities of intersectional politics come to the foreground. The communist- and gay-baiting of the McCarthy period exacted a steep price for not just for queer radicalism, but also for radicals in the civil rights movement, gay or straight.[72] In fact, an interview with early founders and members of DOB archived in the Lesbian Herstory Archives speaks directly on this point. According to Marion Glass, an early member of the New York chapter of DOB, one of the first activities of the new chapter was to contact Hansberry. "In her cordial discussion with us, Miss Hansberry reaffirmed her view that personal freedom and freedom from discrimination for the homosexual as well as for blacks would continue to receive her support. However, her business agent had advised her that open support of the homosexual would adversely affect the black civil rights movement and would be most untimely. Miss Hansberry felt that there was about to be a major development in the civil rights movement. She asked us to be patient."[73] This point is echoed in DOB founders when they write, "Many Black women who had been involved earlier in the homophile movement found themselves forced to make a choice between two 'causes' that touched their lives so intimately. One of them wrote a play that was a hit on Broadway."[74]

Thus Hansberry's approach to and critique of assimilation is markedly different than the kind of depoliticized conformity advocated by other DOB writers, including the well-known science fiction writer Marion Zimmer Bradley, who interestingly also wrote a proassimilationist letter published in the same issue of the *Ladder.* It states, in part, "I think Lesbians themselves could lessen the public attitudes by confining their differences to their friends and not force themselves deliberately upon public notice by deliberate idiosyncrasies of dress and speech; . . . the so-called normal does not consider that his private life is of concern to the general public; whatever he does in private, in public he makes an attempt to be courteously inconspicuous, and I believe that homosexuals and Lesbians might well do the same."[75]

But whereas Bradley situates the question of sexuality in the depoliticized context of "private life," Hansberry acknowledges the political dimensions of sexuality as it pertains to minority group oppression (at the same time as she is willing to sacrifice revolutionary politics to the pragmatics of political expediency). Hansberry rejects the notion of sexuality as a nonpolitical and private issue in several other texts, including *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window,* her unpublished letter to *One,* and her August letter to the *Ladder.* In the letter to *One,* for example, Hansberry explicates her notion of political intersectionality and explicitly links homosexuality to other forms of political oppression. She writes, "It is true that all human questions overlap and while our understanding of a trial in Israel or an execution in Vietnam may not momentarily be rapid-fire, life has a way of showing up why we should have cared all along. Men continue to misinterpret the second-rate status of women as implying a privileged status for themselves; heterosexuals think the same way about homosexuals; gentile about Jews; whites about blacks; haves about have-nots."[76] Further, whereas *Sign* includes two characters who express outright homophobia toward the play's single gay character, the otherwise radical protagonist Sidney reveals his heterocentrism through an entirely depoliticized view of sex:

> Sidney: And you, David, you have now written 14 plays about not caring, about the isolation of the soul of man . . . when what you really want is to say that you are ravaged by a society that will not sanctify your particular sexuality! If you don't like the sex laws, attack 'em, I think they're silly. You want to get up a petition? I'll sign one. Love little fishes if you want. But, David, please get over the notion that your particular 'thing' is something that only the deepest, saddest, the most nobly tortured can know about. It ain't—it's just one kind of sex—that's all. And in my opinion, the universe turns regardless.[77]

In reading this passage out of context, Miller cites this speech as a reflection of "Hansberry's own viewpoint."[78] But reading this speech in the context of Hansberry's *Ladder* letters and other writing allows an interpretation of Sidney's trivilization of homosexuality ("love the little fishes" and "just one kind of sex") as an error of misrecognition. That is, Sidney, by failing to see the social and political dimensions of homosexual persecution, falls prey to one of the cultural "illusions" of his time.

Although Hansberry does not take up the issue of lesbian assimilation elsewhere in her published writing, she does acknowledge briefly in her August letter a June *Ladder* essay on "Transvestism," which deepens the political analysis Hansberry had begun. "I am now pleased to see that there are those who have given and are giving good attention to the question in a most serious way." In the essay entitled "Transvestism: A Cross-Cultural Survey," Barbara Stephens sketches both political and psychological dimensions of women's cross-dressing, including what she calls "defensive transvestism," as resistance to sexism and the sexual objectification of women. In other words, by shifting the discursive ground about lesbian dress from the terrain of "passing" as straight to an issue of gender conformity as compliance with gender oppression, Stephens thus articulates the centrality of sexism to lesbian experience.[79] And this, to Hansberry—twenty years before lesbian-feminism emerges as a movement—is a laudable move. It is unclear from Stephens's essay whether or to what extent she is responding to Bradley's or Hansberry's May letters—she directly refers to neither letter—but she does write that "conformity has been recommended as a solution, but too often forced conformity is the mother of further neuroses."[80] I found no other writing in the *Ladder* on the topic of dress conformity for another year.

Like her May letter, Hansberry's August letter again opens with matters financial: an enclosure of $5.00 to "make good a so far neglected earlier promise of financial support." The tone of this letter is somewhat less breezy than the May letter, though it is still quite informal. Further, although Hansberry does not number her points as she did in May, she moves very quickly to her argument. The vast majority of this longer letter addresses a discussion on married lesbians initiated in the June issue by Nancy Osbourne in an article entitled "One Facet of Fear" and then further developed by Marion Zimmer Bradley in an essay in the July issue entitled "Some Remarks on Marriage." Whereas Osbourne recommends that the heterosexually married lesbian might best "keep her secret," Bradley recommends the lesbian divorce unless she can say to herself, if not her husband, "I find other women interesting; that does not in any way affect our relationship."[81]

Hansberry opens with an acknowledgment of Osbourne's letter, though she spends most of the text responding to two of Bradley's points by sketching, in opposition to Bradley's preferred psychosexual analysis of married lesbians, her own analysis of lesbian sexuality, politics, economics, and ethics. In this letter Hansberry again begins with a caveat, confessing that, although she was interested in Bradley's essay, "I understood what she was saying far less." Hansberry next goes on to rebut one of Bradley's premises: that if a married lesbian takes her marriage vows seriously "her interest in other women will affect her marriage no more than the heterosexual woman's healthy interest in other men."[82]

Hansberry's initial move is to distinguish Bradley's depiction of lesbians as having an "interest" in women from "the homosexual impulse," which Hansberry defines as having one's "most intense emotional and physical reactions toward other women."[83] Hansberry then advances a line of argument that examines the social context of married lesbians:

> Further, to assert that such women ought to be able to put genuine truth in the statement that her interest in other women will affect her marriage no more than the heterosexual woman's interest in other men is making an equation of two decidedly different social circumstances that simply have no equality in life. A woman of strength and honesty may, if she chooses, sever her marriage and marry a new male mate and society will be upset that the divorce rate is rising so—but there are few places in the United States, in any event, where she will be anything remotely akin to an "outcast." Obviously this is not true for a woman who would end her marriage to take up life with another woman.

Hansberry then suspends this line of argument for a paragraph to reflect briefly on the ethics of violating marriage vows, which she does not condone. "Not so much because of any sacredness of our dubious social morality, but rather because it involves the deception of another human being—and that, as always, is intolerable."[84] She then returns to the main line of her argument, adding both an economic and gender dimension to her analysis, before turning back to ethics:

> I suspect that the problem of the married woman who would prefer emotional-physical relationships with other women is proportionally much higher than a similar statistic for men. This is because the estate of woman being what it is, how could we ever begin to guess the numbers of women who are not prepared to risk a life alien to what they have been taught all their lives to believe was their "natural" destiny—AND—their only expectation for ECONOMIC security. It seems to me that this is why the question has an immensity that it does not have for male homosexuals. We must, as noted above, take a dim view of anyone who treats a married partner without respect; but at the same time I should imagine that we would have a particularly sensitive and sympathetic awareness of the nature of the "social trap" (I cannot think of a better set of words at the moment) which the fundamental position of women as a sex is likely to force many women into—homosexual or heterosexual.

Here Hansberry's analysis of marriage and its implications for women's sexuality reflects her sophisticated intersectional politics—she not only goes far beyond a privatized and psychological framing of marriage, but also explicates a feminist and political-economic understanding of the specific historical particularity of women's and particularly lesbian (as opposed to homosexual) experience. This understanding critiques the ideology of "naturalized femininity" first articulated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (here I refer to her famous claim "that one is not born but is made a woman"). Thus, when Hansberry challenges what women "have been taught all their lives to believe was their 'natural' destiny," she is both joining and extending a feminist dialogue about the ideology of gender begun with de Beauvoir and continuing today.[85]

Further, Hansberry's aphoristic but compelling sketch of women's "social trap" is echoed in *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, where she explores the economic dimensions of race and gender oppression through the ill-fated relationship between the play's sole black character, Alton, and his white fiancée, Gloria, a prostitute. Hansberry first explores the intersectional problematics of race and gender oppression through Alton's eyes in a scene where he tells Sidney his reasons for breaking his engagement to Gloria.

> Alton: Someone who has coupled with my love . . . used her like . . . an . . . inanimate object . . . a thing, an instrument . . . a commodity. . . . Don't you understand, Sidney? Man, like I am spawned from commodities . . . and their purchasers. Don't you know this? I am running from being a commodity. How do you think I got the color I am, Sidney? Haven't you ever thought about it? I got this color from my grandmother being used as a commodity, man. The buying and the selling in this country began with me.[86]

But, whereas Alton recognizes the particular price paid by African and African American women slaves—he castigates the sexual commodification of slaves—he is oblivious to the commodification of women symbolized by heterosexual marriage. Hansberry explores this linkage in a conversation between Gloria and Sidney when she rehearses what she will say to Alton to explain her prostitution in a monologue that includes the "rationale" that, "the *real* prostitutes are everybody else; especially housewives and career girls."[87]

Hansberry returns to the question of ethics in the next full paragraph of her August letter, when she articulates a call for women intellectuals:

> For instance, the whole realm of morality and ethics is something that has escaped the attention of women by and large. And it needs the attention of intellectual women most desperately. I think it is about time that equipped women began to take on some of the ethical questions which a male dominated culture has produced and dissect and analyze them quite to pieces in

> a serious fashion. It is time that "half the human race" had something to say about the nature of its existence. Otherwise—without revised basic thinking—the woman intellectual is likely to find herself trying to draw conclusions—moral conclusions—based on acceptance of a social moral superstructure which has never admitted to the equality of women and is therefore immoral itself. As per marriage, as per sexual practices, as per the rearing of children, etc.[88]

What is especially interesting about this letter is how Hansberry responds to Bradley's vaguely Freudian psychoanalytic framing of the question of married lesbians, which foregrounds questions of maternal desires. Hansberry's response instead foregrounds the social and economic contexts in which desire is rendered meaningful, or even possible. It is as if here, if for only a moment, the Hansberry-Bradley dialogue anticipates, if only in sketchy outline, pending debates between historical materialists and poststructuralist Lacanians. What Bradley presented as a psychological issue (she refers to lesbianism as a "psychosexual orientation") Hansberry reconfigured as a historically material experience grounded in social and political context. Hansberry did not respond to the psychological issue at all, brushing off the entire question with "I am afraid that homosexuality, whatever its origins, is far more real than that, far more profound in the demands it makes."[89]

Also remarkable is how Hansberry locates the sphere of the ethical. In contrast to first-wave feminists and contemporary civil rights activists who predicated ethical claims on notions of Christian or universalized morality, Hansberry predicates her political imagination not on a universalized morality that ignores, flattens, or obliterates distinctions, but in a historical-materialist context that recognizes questions of both the universal and the particular. That is, in contrast to abolitionist/feminist foremothers such as Angelina Grimké, who argued that women were equally capable of moral reasoning as were men, Hansberry argues that, because of historical and material conditions, women had different contributions to make—contributions that would expand the boundaries of moral thinking. Stephen Howard Browne, for example, summarizes Grimké's abiding principles of human rights as, "All human beings possess rights because they are moral beings; All human rights are essentially the same because moral nature is essentially the same. . . . Sex, being incidental, is subordinate to the primary and essential rights of moral being."[90] Hansberry is moving beyond the ethico-political domain of rights claims and into the ethico-political domain of moral possibility and imagination—a move from deontic spheres of moral duty and obligation to epistemic spheres of radical moral possibility. Thus Hansberry is not to be understood as essentialist—she is not arguing that women are different because of biological difference, but rather because of historically specific social location, in particular the social context of oppression.

This argument echoes the debates Hansberry engaged about *A Raisin in the Sun*, where she was accused of (or lauded for, depending on the audience) celebrating a depoliticized and decontextualized transcendent universality. But to Hansberry, historical specificity is, paradoxically, the ground and basis of universality. For example, in her 1959 speech, after riffing on the glorious potentialities of "man," she sets herself personally in historical context of extraordinary specificity: "I was born on the South Side of Chicago, I was born black and a female. I was born in a depression after another. While I was still in my teens the first atom bombs were dropped on human beings at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and by the time I was twenty-three years old my government and that of the Soviet Union had entered actively in the worst conflict of nerves in human history."[91] Similarly, when Studs Terkel asks how she responds to the claim that *A Raisin in the Sun* "is not really a Negro play," she says,

> I believe one of the soundest ideas in dramatic writing is in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific. Universality, I think, emerges from truthful identity of what is. In other words, I have told people that not only is the play about a Negro family, specifically and culturally, but it's not even a New York family or a southern Negro family—it is specifically Southside Chicago. To the extent we accept them and believe them as who they're supposed to be, to that extent they can become everybody. So I would say it is definitely a Negro play before it is anything else.[92]

The search for truth—historical, embodied, particular—is therefore central to Hansberry's political and moral imagination.

Hansberry's August letter to the *Ladder* closes with a tentative exploration of the link between homophobia and sexism: "In this kind of work [women's intellectual labor] there may be women to emerge who will be able to formulate a new and possible concept that homosexual persecution and condemnation has at its roots not only social ignorance, but a philosophically active anti-feminist dogma."[93] This theme is recapitulated in her letter to *One*, in which she also links the oppression of homosexuality to the oppression of women. "The relationship of anti-homosexual sentiment to the oppression of women has a special and deep implication. That is to say, that it must be clear that the reason for the double standard of social valuation is rooted in the societal contempt for the estate of womanhood in the first place. Everywhere the homosexual male is, in one way or another, seen as tantamount to the criminal for his deviation; and the woman homosexual as naughty, neurotic, adventurous, titillating, wicked or rebellious for hers."[94]

Not all black lesbian scholars, however, agree that lesbian sexuality is privileged over gay male sexuality "everywhere"—particularly in black communities. Ann Allen Shockley, for example, describes the special hostility directed toward black lesbians in the black community during the 1960s and earlier. "Combining with the stereotypical concepts and Black male power thrust of the 1960s was the sexism displayed by non-Lesbian Black females toward their Black Lesbian sisters. 'Fags' to

Black women are cute, entertaining, safe, and above all tolerated. Males are expected to venture sexually from the norm."[95] Although she is careful to contest the idea that black communities are more homophobic than other communities, hooks echoes Shockley: "In the particular black community where I was raised there was a real double standard. Black male homosexuals were often known, were talked about, were seen positively, and played important roles in community life, whereas lesbians were talked about solely in negative terms, and the women identified as lesbians were usually married. Often acceptance of male homosexuality was mediated by material privilege. . . . They were influential people in the community. This was not the case with any women."[96]

This point is echoed by Garber, who writes that during the Harlem Renaissance, "For Black lesbians, whose social options were more limited that those of their male counterparts, the support offered by the black entertainment world for nontraditional lifestyles was especially important."[97] Although each of these writers shares with Hansberry the interstitial connection of sexism to lesbian experience, the differences between Hansberry's and these other analyses raise questions both about Hansberry's experiences with gay and lesbian communities of color as well as her imagined audiences of the *Ladder* and *One.*

Hansberry's letter ends with a caveat that is also an indirect solicitation for dialogue. "But that is but a kernel of a speculative embryonic idea improperly introduced here." It is as though the dialogic form that serves as the underlying structure of Hansberry's dramatic writing is also central to her correspondence to the *Ladder.* For whatever reason, however, the August letter was Hansberry's last to the *Ladder,* and her 1961 *One* letter was never mailed. Hansberry never again publicly returned to issues of sexuality and sexism, focusing her remaining time and energy instead on the increasingly pressing battles against racism.

Conclusion

To deepen our understanding of the significance of Hansberry's letters to the *Ladder,* I have engaged in an intertextual reading of Hansberry's work within both her own textual context and the historical context of the period. Though perhaps unusual in blending literary texts and political discourse, the study offers a first step toward what Thompson describes as "queering" the discipline.[98] Morris, for example, writes, "Against the reasonable objection that such a 'literary' case study falls beyond the disciplinary pale of critical practice, I submit that recognizing and understanding various and complex responses to homophobic oppression which predate the Stonewall revolution often require critics, by necessity, to explore unorthodox texts."[99]

In addition, this chapter also attempts to resist one of the commonly received narratives about Hansberry articulated in both African American and lesbian and gay contexts—that she was an assimilationist playwright of little political importance except biographically (that is, as an African American lesbian). As I have trie to show in my analysis, this shortsighted narrative demands reinterpretation if no outright contestation. A careful reading of her work in its historical context, as we as in the context of her entire corpus of writing, reveals Hansberry as a write whose acumen and breadth clearly distinguish her as one of the foremost publi intellectuals of her time. Moreover, in the context of queer studies of publi address, Hansberry's contributions to the *Ladder* exemplify a distinctive and frequently omitted perspective in contemporary debates over race, gender, and sexuality.

The point of this chapter, however, is not to celebrate Hansberry as a heroic individual figure cut from the cloth of "great man" historiography. Critical historiography has rightly challenged the kind of rhetorical history that does no more tha celebrate status quo assumptions and ideologies, particularly those of heroic individualism. Yet at the same time black women's voices, particularly black lesbia voices, still have yet to receive the critical attention and recognition their contributions warrant. It is long past time that we, scholars of public address, remedy tha omission. As Gomez writes, "As a Black woman, a writer, and a lesbian-feminist, need Lorraine Hansberry so that her brilliant vision lights my path. . . . She ha lately become an insurgent again, inside of me."[100] Thus studying the contribution of black lesbian voices such as Hansberry's does not merely replicate the simplisti formulations of liberal individualism that serve to valorize mythic individuals wh flourish without regard to context, community, or contest. In fact, critical interrogations of marginalized rhetors will in the end serve to contest such easy and reductive celebrations. As Nestle writes about African American lesbian Mabel Hampto "Ms. Hampton's lesbian history is embedded in the history of race and class in thi country; she makes us extend our historical perspective until she is at its center. Th focus then is not lesbian history, but lesbians in history."[101]

Thus, while valuable, the contributions of critical historiography that appropriately destabilize notions of the mythic individual are misappropriated when use to further erase or silence the contributions of marginalized speakers. Similarly, critiques of identity politics fail us when they are used to foreclose inquiry into th rhetorical formation and historical production of queer discourse, despite the myriad theoretical problematics of the category "queer." For example, in discussing th dual tensions between the political necessity of recognizing and articulating th lived materiality of queer experience on the one hand, and the insufficiency c identity categories such as "queer" on the other, Judith Butler asks us "to affirm th contingency of the term [queer] so that it can become a discursive site whose use are not fully constrained in advance."[102] To affirm the contingency of the term "lesbian" in this case would be to recognize the complexity of Hansberry's historicit as both a rhetor witnessing political persecution and as a person of history experiencing it. Further, affirming the contingency of Hansberry's *Ladder* letters means reading Hansberry the way she read the world—from a historically grounded intersectional perspective that denies no question its due.

Notes

1. See Charles E. Morris III, "Contextual Twilight/Critical Liminality: J. M. Barrie's *Courage* at St. Andrews, 1922," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82 (1996): 207–27; Morris, "'The Responsibilities of the Critic': F. O. Matthiessen's Homosexual Palimpsest," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 261–82.

2. Sharon DeLano, "An Interview with Barbara Grier," *Christopher Street* (October 1976), 41–46. In the interview, Grier states, "We got a lot of early work from writers who went on to be very well known. . . . we had work from Muriel Spark, Lorraine Hansberry."

3. Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), 425.

4. Adrienne Rich, "The Problem with Lorraine Hansberry," *Freedomways* 19 (fourth quarter 1979): 247–55.

5. One important exception is Barbara Smith's introductory essay to the 1983 *Home Girls*, which quotes from one of the letters as a means to critique what she calls "anti-feminist myths." Smith writes, "I would like a lot more people to be aware that Lorraine Hansberry, one of our most respected artists and thinkers, was asking in a Lesbian context some of the same questions we are asking today, and for which we have been so maligned." Barbara Smith, introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Smith (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), xxxi.

6. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cultural Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

7. Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 23.

8. According to Elise Harris, Hansberry had several affairs with women in New York in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the longest with a woman named Dorothy Secules, a secretary who lived in Hansberry's building in Greenwich Village. Elise Harris, "The Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry," *Out* (September 1999): 96–101, 174–75.

9. An intriguing but unexplored acknowledgment of this is offered in a critical analysis of Hansberry's drama that quotes Robert Nemiroff stating that "Hansberry's 'homosexuality' was not a peripheral or casual part of her life but contributed significantly on many levels to the sensitivity and complexity of her view of human beings and of the world." Steven R. Carter, *Hansberry's Drama: Commitment amid Complexity* (Ubana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 6.

10. Morris, "'The Responsibilities of the Critic,'" 263.

11. This radical black feminist statement reads, "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking." Combahee River Collective. "A Black Feminist Statement," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981), 210.

12. The case, *Hansberry v. Lee* (311 U.S. 32), was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court.

13. Julius Lester, introduction to *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*, ed. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Random House, 1972), 3.

14. James Baldwin, "Lorraine Hansberry at the Summit," *Freedomways* 19 (1979): 272.

15. Despite the fact that he does not name her, West's phrasing aptly describes Hansberry's work. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 48.

16. This quote was omitted from the published version but is contained in Abrams's notes held in the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York. Doris Abrams, notes for "Lorraine Hansberry," in *Notable American Women, The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 310–12.

17. Jewelle L. Gomez, "Lorraine Hansberry: Uncommon Warrior," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian Book, 1990), 314.

18. Amiri Baraka, "A Critical Reevaluation: *A Raisin in the Sun*'s Enduring Passion," in *A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, ed. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Vintage, 1990), 10.

19. Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), 6–23.

20. Cheryl Clarke, "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," in *Dangerous Liaisons*, ed. Eric Brandt (New York: New Press, 2000), 38. See also Clarke, "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Moraga and Anzaldúa, 128–37. In fact, hooks mentions Hansberry twice in her 1981 *Ain't I a Woman*, but, as Clarke notes, she fails to mention lesbian subjects or subjectivity anywhere in the book. bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981). This omission is corrected in a later book, where hooks not only critiques homophobia in black communities, but also describes a double standard that often valued male homosexuals while deriding lesbians. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989).

21. "Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gibs me any best place! And a'n't I a woman." Sojourner Truth, "A'n't I a Woman?" in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal*, ed. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 67–68. Barbara Smith, *Home Girls*. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, ed. Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Garry Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: New Press, 1995), 357–83.

22. Smith, *Home Girls*, xxxii.

23. Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 205.

24. Lorraine Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, ed. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Vintage, 1995), 79.

25. Lorraine Hansberry, *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), 68.

26. Ibid, 13.

27. For example, in an essay published in the *Village Voice* in 1959 she wrote, "For in the minds of many, Walter remains, despite the play, despite performance, what American racial traditions *wish* him to be: an exotic. Some writers have been astonishingly incapable of discussing his purely *class* aspirations and have persistently confounded them with what they consider an exotic being's longing to 'wheel and deal' in what they further consider to be (and what Walter never can) 'the white man's world.'" Lorraine Hansberry, "An Author's Reflections: Willy Loman, Walter Younger, and He Who Must Live," in *Women in Theatre: Compassion and Hope*, ed. Karen Malpede (New York: Limelight Editions, 1985), 167.

28. Lorraine Hansberry, "The Negro Writer and His Roots: Toward a New Romanticism," *Black Scholar* 10 (March–April 1981): 4 (originally presented to a major black writers conference convened by the American Society of African Culture on March 1, 1959).

29. Ibid., 4.

30. Ibid.,10.

31. Hansberry's letter is published without a date, but it is addressed to a Mr. Ashworth. Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, 119.

32. Hansberry, "The Negro Writer and His Roots," 3.

33. Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1989), 318–31.

34. Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 157.

35. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 44.

36. Ibid., 49–50.

37. See, for example, Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 109–42; Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, *Counterpublics and the State* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

38. The *Ladder* (October 1956): 2. The founders of DOB took the organization's name from the title of a fictitious ancient Greek lesbian love poem written by Pierre Louys in 1894.

39. In 1947, however, a woman using the anagrammatic pen name Lisa Ben self-published a monthly magazine called *Vice Versa*, which was then passed from hand to hand. The magazine ceased publication after nine issues. See the *Ladder* (December 1956): 5.

40. Alisa Klinger, "Writing Civil Rights: The Political Aspirations of Lesbian Activist-Writers," in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 69.

41. Sten Russell, "The Searchers Probe 'The Homosexual Neurosis,'" *Ladder* (March 1957): 14.

42. "San Francisco Police Raid Reveals Lack of Knowledge of Citizen's Rights," *Ladde* (November 1956): 5.

43. Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 180.

44. "Job Hunting Doesn't Need to Be a Problem," *Ladder* (March 1957): 5.

45. "The ACLU Takes a Stand on Homosexuality," *Ladder* (March 1957): 8. As mentioned above, however, DOB did take some moderately progressive political positions. For example, in the June 1957 issue the *Ladder* published an editorial supporting *One*'s Supreme Court case defending its right to publish, and DOB encouraged readers to contribute as much money as possible to the suit.

46. Del Griffin, "President's Message," *Ladder* (January 1957): 9.

47. Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "Oral History and the Study of Sexuality in the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, New York, 1940–1960," in *Hidden from History*, ed. Duberman, Vicinus, and Chauncey, 427.

48. See Davis and Kennedy, "Oral History"; Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers;* and Rochella Thorpe, "'A House Where Queers Go': African-American Nightlife in Detroit, 1940–1975," in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Lewin, 40-61.

49. Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1982), 180.

50. Thorpe, "'A House Where Queers Go,'" 41.

51. Lorraine Hansberry, "On Strindberg and Sexism," in *Women in Theatre*, ed. Karen Malpede (New York: Limelight Editions, 1985) (originally published as a letter to the *Village Voice* in February 1956).

52. Robert P. Fulkerson, "The Public Letter as a Rhetorical Form: Structure, Logic, and Style in King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979): 121–36.

53. "To understand the letter and thus the debate between Chavez and the growers, it is crucial to understand the rhetorical history of Mexican Americans, of the public letter and other written documents as a rhetorical form of historical significance for those of Mexican descent, and of the discourse and person of Cesar Chavez." John C. Hammerback and Richard J. Jensen, "History and Culture as Rhetorical Constraints: Cesar Chavez's Letter from Delano," in *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases*, ed. Kathleen J. Turner (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 208.

54. Lorraine Hansberry, "Readers Respond," *Ladder* (May 1957): 26–28.

55. Lorraine Hansberry, "The Black Revolution and the White Backlash," in *Black Protest: History, Documents and Analyses: 1619 to the Present*, ed. Joanne Grant (New York: Fawcett, 1968), 447 (originally delivered as part of a forum sponsored by the Association of Artists for Freedom at Town Hall, New York, June 15, 1964).

56. Hansberry, *The Movement*, 48.

57. Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 133–34.

58. Lorraine Hansberry, *Les Blancs* (New York: Random House, 1972), 121.

59. West, *Race Matters*, 39–42.

60. Hansberry, *Ladder* (May 1957): 26.

61. Lorraine Hansberry, "In Defense of the Equality of Men," in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: Norton, 1985), 2062. Was this ironic title inspired by Wollstonecraft's first and initially most famous book, *A*

Vindication of the Rights of Men? Hansberry's essay contains an ironic exposition on the ways sexism presupposes "that men are in reality inferior human beings who have to be 'propped up.'" Elsewhere Hansberry mentions both William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, though not the text in question.

62. Lorraine Hansberry, "Make New Sounds: Studs Terkel Interviews Lorraine Hansberry," *American Theatre* (November 1984): 6 (the article is a transcript of a radio show that originally aired in Chicago, May 12, 1959).

63. D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 9.

64. Del Griffin, "President's Message," *Ladder* (November 1956): 2.

65. Ibid., 3.

66. Davis and Kennedy, "Oral History," 428.

67. Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 178.

68. See Joan Nestle, "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s," in *Lesbian Culture: An Anthology*, ed. Julia Penelope and Susan Wolfe (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1993); Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

69. Hansberry, *Ladder* (May 1957): 27.

70. Ralph Bunche, scholar, activist, Africanist, and world statesman, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 for his United Nations mediation work, which led to armistice agreements in the Middle East. Bunche was the first black person to be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. Benjamin Rivlin, *Ralph Bunche: The Man and His Times* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1990).

71. Hansberry, *Ladder* (May 1957): 27.

72. Bayard Rustin, John Lewis, Paul Robeson, and Josephine Baker are a few that come to mind. See John D'Emilio, "Homophobia and the Trajectory of Postwar American Radicalism: The Career of Bayard Rustin," in *Modern American Queer History*, ed. Allida M. Black (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001). Neil Miller also describes some of the tensions around Rustin's homosexuality in the civil rights movement. Miller, *Out of the Past*, 360–62. Garth Pauley describes how concessions to pragmatism led to the revision of John Lewis's historic speech. See Garth E. Pauley, "John Lewis's 'Serious Revolution': Rhetoric, Resistance, and Revision at the March on Washington," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (August 1998): 320–40. For a thorough explication of these issues, see Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

73. Lesbian Herstory Archives, "Oral History of Daughters of Bilitis: Glass, Revised DOB Script, 10/9/95," 13.

74. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman* (San Francisco: Glide, 1972), 122.

75. Marion Zimmer Bradley, "Readers Respond," *Ladder* (May 1957): 21.

76. Lorraine Hansberry, "Unpublished Letter to *One*," in Carter, *Hansberry's Drama*, 6.

77. Lorraine Hansberry, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (New York: Samuel French, 1965), 57.

78. Miller, *Out of the Past*, 331

79. For example, Stephens lists the uses of transvestism as a "barrier against possible sexual assault" and "the rejection of the 'super-sex cult'. . . . In this day of the glorified pin-up girl there are some who would rather be rated on their character and intellect than on hypertrophied anatomy." Barbara Stephens, "Transvestism: A Cross-Cultural Survey," *Ladder* (June 1957): 10–14. Stephens's political analysis of nonconforming women's dress was supported by two subsequent letters published in July—one of which stated, "We consider dresses, high heels and stocking holders the most uncomfortable contraptions men have invented to restrict the movements of women so they cannot walk very far, lift many things, or sit with their legs apart in warm weather" (A.C., N.Y., N.Y., "Readers Respond," *Ladder* [July 1957]: 28). Another writer critiqued dress conformity in the lesbian community from a different perspective: "The cult of conformity itself remains to be questioned. . . . Those who depart from the rules are punished for the 'crime' of not behaving like a typical Negro, professional worker, or feminine woman. The homosexual world is as guilty as the rest, when they would confer the straitjacket of 'Butchhood' upon its embryo members" (B.S., San Leandro, "Readers Respond," *Ladder* [July 1957]: 29).

80. Stephens, "Transvestism," 13.

81. Marion Zimmer Bradley, "Some Remarks on Marriage," *Ladder* [July 1957]: 14.

82. Ibid., 15.

83. Lorraine Hansberry, "Readers Respond," *Ladder* [August 1957]: 27.

84. Ibid., 28.

85. Hansberry was apparently influenced by *The Second Sex* and left at her death an unpublished essay on Simone de Beauvoir. Lorraine Hansberry, "Simone De Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*: An American Commentary," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 128–42.

86. Hansberry, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, 84.

87. Ibid., 106.

88. Hansberry, *Ladder* (August 1957): 30.

89. Ibid., 29.

90. Stephen Howard Browne, *Angelina Grimké: Rhetoric, Identity, and the Rhetorical Imagination* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999), 108.

91. Hansberry, "The Negro Writer and His Roots," 11.

92. Hansberry, "Make New Sounds," 6.

93. Hansberry, *Ladder* (August 1957): 30.

94. Quoted in Carter, *Hansberry's Drama*, 6–7.

95. Ann Allen Shockley, "The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview," in *Home Girls*, ed. Smith, 85.

96. hooks, *Talking Back*, 121.

97. Garber, "A Spectacle in Color," 325. Also see Gregory Conerly, "Swishing and Swaggering: Homosexuals in Black Magazines during the 1950s," in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. Delroy Constantine-Simms (Los Angeles: Alyson, 2001), 384–94. Conerly documents the qualified acceptance of black homosexuals and intolerance of black lesbianism in the magazines *Ebony* and *Jet* in the 1950s.

98. Julie Thompson, "On the Development of Counter-Racist Quare Public Address Studies," present volume.

99. Morris, "'The Responsibilities of the Critic,'" 279

100. Gomez, "Lorraine Hansberry: Uncommon Warrior," 316.

101. Joan Nestle, "I Lift My Eyes to the Hill: The Life of Mabel Hampton as Told by a White Woman," in *Queer Representations*, ed. Martin Duberman (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 258–75.

102. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 230.

TRAUMATIC STYLES IN PUBLIC ADDRESS

Audre Lorde's Discourse as Exemplar

Lester C. Olson

Of what I move
toward and through
and what I need
to leave behind me
for most of all I am
blessed within my selves
who are come to make our shattered faces
whole.

Audre Lorde, "Outside,"
The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde

This chapter identifies salient features of what I am tentatively characterizin
traumatic styles in American public address. One such feature consists of advoca
remarks concerning shattered illusions of invulnerability after fundamental assu
tions about safety, trust, and communal life have disintegrated during an ord
Another feature is the rhetorical immediacy in advocates' narrative depiction
past traumatic experiences as abiding timelessly in the present such that their v
memories are located outside of ordinary narrative time. In addition, certain c
acteristic emotive dynamics suffuse the public discourse, oscillating among nu
ness, disbelief, fear, anger, and rage. Another recurrent element of the styles is
advocates' calls for vigilance in coping with the hatred of oppressive adversaries
betrayals by similarly situated people seeking to survive. Finally, advocates typic
depict a dichotomous and polarizing moral view of the world while seeking
support of onlookers in a dramatic struggle between rival groups, often portra
as an agonistic struggle between good and evil. Taken together, I will argue, t
characteristics constitute the synthetic core of highly variable traumatic styles.

Queering
PUBLIC ADDRESS

Sexualities in American Historical Discourse

EDITED BY CHARLES E. MORRIS III

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