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**Institutionally Complicit: Challenging Leadership Orthodoxies
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Brief Biography of Lorraine Hansberry

Lorraine Hansberry was born in South Side, Chicago of the 1930's, where she was raised until the age of seven. Due to a US regime of racial apartheid enforced at this time, her neighborhood, "a small strip of land seven miles long and one-half mile wide...known as the Black Belt," served as an urban enclosure for the large influx of around 277,000 black migrants who arrived to Chicago from the Southern US throughout the first four decades of the twentieth century (Shabazz 2). As the daughter of a wealthy real estate broker and desegregation activist, during her childhood years her family came to occupy a "disputed property in a hellishly hostile 'white neighborhood'" (Nemiroff 36) that was surrounded by a suffocating climate of anti-black racism. Howling mobs would surround Hansberry's childhood home to intimidate her family. As she enumerates in her memoir *To be Young, Gifted, and Black*: "My memories of this 'correct' way of fighting white supremacy in America include being spat at, cursed and pummeled" (36). These experiences of racialized violence combined with her father's unsuccessful legal battles against segregation laws, and early death in Mexico City where he was planning to move his family after becoming a disillusioned exile, directly informed the critical stance she developed towards prevailing notions of US exceptionalism.

While Hansberry writes about struggles against racial oppression locally in *Raisin in the Sun* (1959)—the play which drastically raised her profile by making her the first black woman to author a Broadway production—her less recognized posthumous play *Les Blancs* (1970), written in the wake of fierce opposition to desegregation and Black liberation movements, takes these themes to a global scale. Hansberry wrote *Les Blancs* with a newfound sense of urgency as African national independence was on the rise by 1960, as the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing of Birmingham, Alabama resulted in a 1963 uprising which the Kennedy Administration responded to by deploying U.S. Army Troops, and as the 1964 Freedom Summer murders of three civil rights workers in the Mississippi Delta shook the South. Reflecting a widely felt skepticism in the aftermath of the Sunday school bombing, this play joined a collective reflection of the question on the minds of social justice activists at this time: Is nonviolence the way? (Hansberry 94).

Summary of *Les Blancs*

The dramatic action in *Les Blancs* transpires around a settler colonial missionary hospital within the jungle of a fictional African country named Zatembe (which closely resembles Kenya, East Africa), a contact zone of the native Kwi people and European colonizers. The hospital is staffed by a pair of medics, Marta Gotterling and Willy DeKoven, while the Mission is operated by its founders Reverend Torvald Neilsen and his wife Madame Neilsen. The opening scene depicts the arrival of Charlie Morris, a white liberal journalist from the U.S., whose entry coincides with uprising liberation movements

against the settler colony. All along, the characters await the return of Reverend Neilsen and pan-African leader Amos Kumalo—neither of whom ever arrives—while hostility increases. In earlier times the local Kwi community befriended the Neilsens. Yet, as of recent friendships ended as complicity between the missionary hospital and the colonial army calls attention to the underlying pederasty and routine sexual assault they mutually reinforce.

At the beginning of the play a Kwi leader, Old Abioseh Matoshe is assassinated prompting his two sons Abioseh junior and Tshembe to return to the village for a funeral. As the story unfolds we learn of an offstage presence, Aquah, the Kwi wife of the assassinated leader and mother of Tshembe and Abioseh junior, who died while giving birth to Eric—a child conceived in rape. A fraternal feud spawns between the older brothers regarding the question of Eric's guardianship. Aquah's rapist Major George Rice, an active head of the expeditionary forces, does not acknowledge Eric's existence. In Reverend Neilsen's absence, for whom Eric symbolized "the living denial of everything he stood for," (167) the missionary hospital is commandeered by Major Rice as an impromptu barracks. While the procedures of natural resource extraction, curfew imposition, and political imprisonment gain momentum during the drama's climax, the missionary hospital's staff is pitted against the settler colonial military and the Kwi rebellion.

Theoretical Framework

Hansberry's dramatization of Third World resistance challenges, what French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni referred to as, the "dependency complex of the colonized." *Les Blancs* analyzes an avenue of inquiry explored by Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, who describe how the racialized infantilization inherent in the "dependency complex" is based on a racist logic which legitimizes the view that colonized peoples depend on their colonizers for their well-being. Today, research on childhood studies points out how infantilization is still used to disqualify many marginalized communities who are formally and informally characterized as childlike, and therefore "established as without reason, constrained by the logic of diminished capacity, and incapable of full citizenship" (Meiners 53-54). Hansberry's doubt in this persistent mental construct is indicative of her ability to pinpoint long-term psychosocial consequences of prolonged exposure to violence, from warfare abroad to domestic policing.

The field of critical prison studies has long reckoned with the fact that carceral power, "policing, containment, surveillance, the establishment of territory, and the creation of frontiers," has always functioned not only within "architectural structures designed to hold people captive within enclosed physical spaces" but in landscapes that have been "*prisonized*" (Davis, 2003; Hatch; Shabazz 2015). This observation builds on Foucault's description of the "carceral continuum" which acknowledges the mundane ways in which social institutions dominate, oppress, and control through the appropriation

of carceral power (303). This broadened applicability of carcerality has brought increased scrutiny on established social theories, such as Foucault's idea of 'biopolitical control,' which proposes that modernity resulted in reduced disciplinary cruelty and that capital punishments became less conventional as institutionalized "care giving" increased. For Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe, the presumed maintenance of "the biological existence of a population" (Foucault 137) inherent within the procedure of exercising bio-power seemed to contradict the reality of settler colonies where "weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons," thereby giving rise to the practice of 'necropower' (40). Although the mythic African colonial scene Lorraine Hansberry metaphorically evokes in her play is "molded by her imagination and not outright reality" (Effiong 282), the depiction of the missionary hospital in *Les Blancs* incisively shows how supposedly neutral institutions are also involved in the consolidation of carceral control.

Close Readings: Carceral Aspects of "Health Care"

At the same time *Les Blancs* transforms the theatrical stage into a political venue through depicting revolutionary aspirations, the play also challenges patriarchal leadership orthodoxies by foregrounding the role of youth and women in defying settler colonial rule. One way in which Hansberry transcends gendered stereotypes is through the character Eric (aka Ngedi), a mixed-race queer youth. During the first appearance of Eric in the play, he quickly stands out, "a sodden, fair skinned youth in the late

teens, in shorts, filthy undershirt and sneakers, and incongruously—a clean white pith helmet.”¹ Eric sneaks up from backstage, cautiously assuring he is unobserved. Madam Neilsen and Charlie, also wearing a pith helmet, monitor Eric as he takes a swig from a liquor bottle stashed in a tree stump.

Ironically, it is the medical doctor Willy who provides Eric with liquor bottles and cigarettes.

The only other adult man in Eric’s life closer to him than Willy is Ntali (aka Peter), a middle aged man with graying hair, who is both the Mission’s porter and an undercover Kwi rebel recruiter. Contrastingly, while under Willy’s supervision Eric is gifted alcohol, tobacco, European fashion imports and cosmetics—meanwhile as Peter’s apprentice Eric serves as a porter-in-training before accepting his invitation to join the native paramilitary group targeting Major Rice’s brigade. Tshembe’s ribald way of teasing his younger brother Eric involves implying that Willy’s gift-giving is an exchange made in order to sustain a homoerotic relationship, which he mentions later in order to discredit Eric’s decision to join the revolt (Higashida 916). Eric responds to Tshembe’s homoerotic innuendo and justifies his relationship with Willy based on the doctor’s kindness.

While some scholars see this queer relationship as a site of patriarchal critique, especially since Eric’s “lover understands the violence of colonialism” (Perry 143), such interpretations tend to obfuscate its

¹Act one, Scene one, 66

pederastic attributes. Elaborating on the notion of “pederastic modernity” Kadij Amin reminds us that: “As an erotics, [pederasty] is sparked by differentials of social power; as a reprovved practice, it is the object of disciplinary, pathologizing, and stigmatizing power” (44). By calling attention to the blatant power asymmetry inherent in being a medical doctor in the settler colony, I contend that Hansberry uses Eric and Willy’s inegalitarian same-sex intimacy to highlight an “erotically charged hierarchy” taking place within an “imperialist project” (Amin 43). Through his straddling of an erotically charged hierarchy premised on ‘adult-adolescent’ and ‘doctor-patient’ dynamics, Willy is reminiscent of the current university doctor-abuse scandals being revealed across the country, which have prompted us to acknowledge that “Abuse at a university health center implicates the entire university” (Ellis). As a medic on the front-lines, Willy comes to recognize the violence of colonialism. We see this in his dialogue towards Charlie which addresses disparities in access to health care:

DEKOVEN. Mr. Morris, there is a hospital for Europeans only seventy-five miles from here. Entirely modern. Here things are lashed together with vines from the jungle. Surely you must have wondered why...Electric lines between here and Zatembe could be laid within weeks, a road in three months. The money exists. All over the world people donate to Missions like this. (151)

Narratives from Women’s Prisons

Comparatively, the disparities in access to health care Willy describes brings to mind present-day accounts of gendered violence and health care issues faced by incarcerated women today. For example, the case of Olivia

Hamilton a mother who was incarcerated while pregnant and had the misfortune of being due on Memorial Day weekend—when doctors would be gone. Consequently she was induced into labor, handcuffed to her hospital bed, and forced to have a C-section in a Pennsylvania prison infirmary (32-34). The *Justice Now* program in Oakland has shed light on the case of Sherdi Dwight, a formerly incarcerated mother from South LA who was sent to a local hospital in Chowchilla for a surgery to remove two ovarian cysts, only to learn afterwards that the surgeon had conducted a full hysterectomy without her consent. (47-50). Such cases are not exceptional. The surgeon who sterilized Sherdi Dwight won the lawsuit against him due to the statute of limitations and still treats CDC women (51-52). And although protective policies and laws have been created in the US to end shackling during labor, they are only limited to delivery and fail to address “the shackling of incarcerated women throughout pregnancy” (243).

Close Readings: Education and Carceral Control

Willy’s dialogue illustrates how colonial expansion and development sought to “make [the] country into *something*,” as Major Rice proclaims, since “*They* had it for centuries and did nothing with it” (92), while simultaneously sustaining a system of infrastructural racism. Such a display of discriminatory attitudes towards a racialized population via the installation of infrastructure (including biomedical technologies) that inadequately serves the community for whom it is installed is evident both in the play as well as in the narratives from women’s prisons.

The plot thickens, however, regarding the narrative of justifying settler colonial development due to native inaction, as Willy further points out to Charlie: “This mission has been here forty years. It takes perhaps twenty-five to educate a generation. If you look around you will find not *one* African doctor. (*Shrugs*) Until they govern themselves it will be no different” (153). Alluding to the (mis)education system Hansberry implies that schooling (or lack thereof) can also become a tool of carceral control used to assign the “untrained” to an inferior role in society.

The educational questions Hansberry tangentially addresses in *Les Blancs* gloss over issues of indigenous language revitalization and sonic literacy. For instance, through drumming the play creates an acoustic connection between “the allegorical, unnamed African woman warrior,” who repeatedly appears throughout the play and “the white mother figure,” Madame Neilsen (Higashida 918; Perry 144). While Tshembe plans to flee the colonial conflict and rejoin his new family in Europe where he may listen to congos on the phonograph (168), we learn that Madame Neilsen was taught by his deceased mother Aquah how to read the local drumming and speak Kwi, in exchange for lessons in English, French and Norwegian (65). The strategic usage of the colonizer’s tongue amongst the Kwi becomes blatantly evident in the case of Ntali (aka Peter), who feigns “broken speech” in front of Europeans, while revealing himself to be eloquent among his tribal members. Additionally, naming takes on profound anti-colonial significance

as characters rename themselves in mid-play. The contrast of Biblical names and Kwi warrior names has an impact on Eric who sees in Ntali's valorization of his African name a way of honoring his late mother. We first learn of Ntali's dual identity early on when he breaks from his role as "Peter the Porter" to unsuccessfully attempt recruiting Tshembe into the rebellion. One of the play's running jokes involves Major Rice routinely catching Peter strategically conducting housekeeping duties so as to place himself within earshot of conversations regarding military operations. In order to avoid raising suspicions Peter performs a "profound subservience" as the mission's porter while he secretly gathers intelligence for the local Kwi council among whom he uses his tribal name, Ntali. Meanwhile, Abioseh junior plans to change his Kwi name to Father Paul Augustus upon ordainment with the Roman Catholic Church. Later on Ntali subsequently summons Eric to join the insurgency. From then on out Eric uses the name his mother gave him, Ngedi. After Abioseh junior learns of Peter's involvement in recruiting Eric, he colludes with his mother's rapist to orchestrate the revolutionary porter's assassination.

Although Major Rice's demeanor towards the Kwi shows that he does "not establish a distinction between combatants and noncombatants" (Mbembe 24), Tshembe remains defiant of the call to join the revolt up until his loved ones start to become caught in the line of fire. During the final act of fratricide at the end of the play, Madame Neilsen is shot dead in the

crossfire, and Eric tosses a grenade into the missionary hospital/barracks. Aside from Peter, who is also murdered by Major Rice, Madame Neilsen is one of the only other characters that urges Tshembe to fight. This ending brings us back to the play's scenes featuring the unnamed African woman warrior, whom I read as the spirit of Aquah, and who artfully performs a powerful call to arms.

By depicting an adolescent who rejects the models gender roles and sexuality available to him in the settler colony, *Les Blancs* attempts to go beyond "the binary of Afrocentric versus Eurocentric standpoints" to address "the problems of gender and sexual orientation internal to black communities" (272 Higginbotham). Correspondingly, the play's rebellious ensemble is made up of those who are often overlooked in accounts of paramilitary endeavors: a middle aged porter, a youth, and women who support them—people who are presumed to be exceptionally entitled to social protections within a heteronormative social order. In the face of fraternal gender policing which forms deep irreconcilable divides between the brothers, Eric stands to challenge widely held perceptions of gendered hierarchies in relation to radical non-state militancy. Moving forward, my approach to further literary analyses will continue to examine the role of racialized queer youth so as to further investigate how normative masculinity is narrated as a device of entrapment.

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