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Community as a Force of Action in Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*

*Lily Jensen*

Throughout her works, Lorraine Hansberry shows special attention to the practice of community formation as a way to overcome the racist systemic barriers holding back all people. In *The Movement*, a book written in collaboration with SNCC, Lorraine Hansberry writes, “if a society does not erect artificial barriers between the people at every point of contact, the people might fraternize and give their attention to the genuine, shared problems of the community” (*The Movement* 26). Hansberry viewed community formation as an antidote that could work against these “artificial barriers.” All her works, especially her plays, argue that practicing community, especially in the face of seemingly irreconcilable history and differences, leads to the most effective action.

*Les Blancs* interrogates several different facets of community, including how efforts to create community fail, how people sacrifice for each other to create community, and how people navigate complexity to form community. Ultimately, the play illustrates what people must do to become effective in the face of a destructive power structure. Many critics have examined how Hansberry incorporates her arguments about complex community in her most famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Kristin L. Matthews argues in a paper about *Raisin* that Hansberry uses a unique plurality of voices to argue that the Younger family, and by extension, anyone seeking justice and equity,
works better with more voices involved (567). Michelle Gordan writes about how segregation structures Raisin, examining how the play grapples with class, protest, and structural white supremacy. Because this play is less known than Raisin, criticism of Les Blancs has not yet explored how Hansberry’s philosophy of community works within this lesser-known play. Criticism of Les Blancs has instead focused on how Hansberry inserts cultural, mythic, and violent aspects of characters into Les Blancs to construct “a pragmatic exposition of human reality” (Effiong 282), and how the play reflects the geopolitical moment Hansberry was writing in, specifically, in the American Civil Rights movement (Abell). While scholarship has examined Hansberry’s work to depict community in Raisin, and scholarship focusing on Les Blancs has explored topics such as war, revolution, and the impacts of colonialism, few connect Hansberry’s urgent analysis of community that appears throughout her work to Les Blancs. This is likely because this play is less known than Raisin, but also because Les Blancs as a play is more ambitious in its arguments about community, presenting it in a more complicated way than her other works.

Through examining the use of complex characterization within this text, and considering how the medium of theatre aids this text in its arguments, readers can see more clearly how Hansberry’s philosophy of community enters this text. Les Blancs illustrates a wrestle with questions about what to do with the “artificial barriers” enforced by the colonizers, and how the community can work to push against this power structure. The community Hansberry creates in this play requires transformation from individuals. It requires individuals to be better than they are through their sacrifices, their truth-telling, and their commitment to their community. By recognizing the role of community in this play, audiences can see more clearly Hansberry’s arguments about what is required of individuals to come together and create change.

Hansberry uses complex characterization in Les Blancs to reflect human reality, both exposing the power structure of the colonizers and portraying the different ways the African characters respond to this oppression. Hansberry wrote Les Blancs partially in response to Genet’s play, The Blacks. She criticized this play for its exoticization of African characters, saying “To have had to deal with human beings . . . would have been to confront Guilt with a greater imperative: the necessity for action” (Nemiroff 32). In contrast to Genet, Les Blancs features complex white and black characters.
to illustrate the impact a white supremacist power structure has had on everyone. Hansberry uses this complex characterization to urge for action and community creation.

*Les Blancs* employs the characterization of the colonizers to show the impact of a white supremacist power structure on a community. Through humanizing the various white characters, Hansberry illustrates how efforts to create community fail when individuals can buy into an oppressive power structure. Madame Neilson’s character is an example of this complexity. She presents herself as an ally and friend to the African people in this play. She has lived in this country for decades, made efforts to learn the language of the people, and made loving relationships with characters like Tschembe’s mother. When Tschembe comes back from Europe, Tschembe and Madame Neilson embrace. This specific scene reveals that Madame means a lot to Tschembe, that she genuinely cares for him and he for her. But she is oblivious to why the African people would be angry or upset about the presence of the mission. Later in the play, she tells Charlie, “some cold wind blew in over our people here and chilled their hearts to us” (51). Near the end of the play, we learn that the Reverend, Madame Neilson’s husband, had refused to help Tschembe’s father, which resulted in a lot of harm for the whole African community. By including a character who is initially sympathetic, this text forces readers and watchers to evaluate how a lack of action leads to the perpetuation of harm, undermining any good intention or efforts at community formation.

Hansberry also includes white characters who are overtly violent to the African people, arguing that community formation fails when privileged groups remain quiet in the face of harmful power structures. Major Rice’s characterization is an example of this status quo. Major Rice is determined to either control or destroy the African community around him as signaled by the sound of “several loud rifle shots” that mark his entrance into the play (47). Charlie asks Rice, “what’s going on, Major?” to which Rice replies, “Come to do a piece on our “New World,” eh? No place on earth like it” (48). This side-stepping of Charlie’s question, and Rice’s comment in return tells the audience that Rice’s top priority is sustaining the power structure. This is seen in the next few lines when a prisoner, someone who had just come to get medicine for his child at the mission, is taken away by Rice. Charlie asks, “What will they do with him?” and Dekoven shrugs (49). No one in the mission likes Major Rice, but all are compliant with his efforts to control so
that the white colonizers can remain in power. Even a character like Charlie, despite his claims of being an “outsider,” is in submission to Rice. Although he would not claim to be a colonizer himself, Charlie’s character uses the language of colonization when speaking to Tshembe after both sat through one of Rice’s racist tirades. He says, “I think I know everything you were feeling when that ugly scene was happening . . . I felt very sorry for both you men, you and Rice, then” (72). In saying this, Charlie assumes that Rice and Tschembe have equal power in this state, revealing his blindness to the power structure of the colonizers. Through constructing these white characters with different backgrounds and political beliefs, Hansberry makes the colonizers more human. This humanity makes their decision to buy into the power structure more horrific, forcing her audience to “confront Guilt” and making action necessary for the African characters. By not shying away from complexity, this text forces audiences to consider the ways they might be aiding or perpetuating harmful power structures, implicating the readers and pushing them towards further action instead of a passive reading or watching experience.

Hansberry uses complex characterization with the Matoseh brothers to urge action in response to the colonial power structure, despite the strenuous sacrifice that action may require. Philip Uko Effiong writes that Les Blancs “shows that people are largely a fusion of evil and good, valor and fear, conviction and confusion, indifference and involvement” (273). This is especially true of Abioseh, Eric, and Tschembe, as all three brothers are facing horrific wounds because of the colonizers, would make all three lost or disconnected from their home community. In writing about their need for action, Hansberry also constructs moments where the Matoseh brothers overcome these blocks and work to create community, such as Tschembe’s loyalty to tradition and his elders, and Eric’s loyalty to his African heritage. None of the Matoseh brothers are perfect in their quest to uplift or save their community from the violence they face—by including these characters’ individual motivations and complexities, this text argues that true community formation and effective action requires sacrifice and clear-eyed confrontation of the past, even when it is painful.

Les Blancs shows how internalized racism gets in the way of community formation through Abioseh’s characterization. Throughout the play, Abioseh remains more loyal to the structures of colonization than to his brothers, tradition, or other African people. Audiences first see this when he is reunited
with Tschembe and Eric for the funeral and he refuses to perform the ritual, even though Tschembe points out “We are our father’s sons. Our people expect it” (61). In the end, Abioseh chooses to betray his people in hopes of taking part in the power structure of the white settlers. Abioseh exhibits no loyalty to his father or his brothers but is convinced that the only way for peace to happen is for his people to give up all of their African heritage and loyalty. He is not a part of the community formation that leads to action at the end of the play, but instead, opposes the change necessary to be free of colonization. Hansberry uses his character to argue that facing the truth must be part of community formation; anything less will not be enough to dismantle harmful power structures like colonialism or white supremacy.

Like Abioseh, Tschembe’s character also shows how internalized racism and disillusionment with change blocks his connection to his brothers, and to the larger African community, preventing community formation. Tschembe yearns to be a part of the European community, far away from his home, and detached from the community he came from (79). His lostness comes from a disillusionment from revolution, change, or “talk” (56). When the Woman—symbolizing all the history of his people— comes to urge him to fight, he screams at her “It is not my affair! . . . I HAVE RENOUNCED ALL SPEARS!!” (79). Tschembe is caught in the clash of settler and African society. Although he criticizes Abioseh’s acceptance of colonial power and inaction against their abusers, Tschembe also does not want to give up the life he created by escaping his home. However, in contrast to Abioseh, Tschembe does have moments where he seeks community connection. He has chosen to come back to Africa to honor his father. He is committed to performing the traditional funeral rituals because his “people expect it” (61) and he chooses to defend his elders and become a part of the resistance. Through Tschembe, this play argues that community is not merely a group of like-minded people, but a practice. Tschembe only becomes closer to his people, to his brother, when he chooses to sacrifice ease or comfort for the better of his community. Because he chooses to sacrifice, he becomes a leader to free his people as they seek to dismantle the white supremacist structures harming their lives.

In contrast to Abioseh and Tschembe, Eric’s character demonstrates how lies and constraints put on by the power structure can block connection and community formation. In an article about Les Blancs, Joy L. Abel writes that Eric “is caught between two worlds, neither fully African nor fully European” (467). Labeled “Caliban” by Madame (52), his character is set
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up to be lost because he cannot completely belong to the colonizers or the African people because of the artificial barriers that exist in the colonizer’s power structure. However, Eric is the brother most committed to his African community from the beginning. Audiences can see this in his choice to stay with Tschembe and Abioseh’s father as he was dying and, in his decision, to join the resistance. When Tschembe learns that Eric has joined the rebels, he says, “You are half European. Which part of yourself will you drive to the sea!” to which Eric responds, “I am African enough not to mock when my people call!” (107–108). Tschembe begs him to come to England with him, and Eric replies, “I am staying here—where I belong” (109). By establishing Eric as yearning for community and yearning to belong, Hansberry argues that effective communities can only form once they confront the lies of the power structure that have been constraining them. Eric feels such shame because his Africanness is denied—he is the product of colonial violence, so no one knows what to do with him. He starts to change when his Africanness is affirmed and when he is asked to be a part of the community seeking change.

At the end of the play, it is Eric who burns down the mission, symbolizing moving forward from the wounds caused by colonial violence. This final act argues that these artificial barriers of racism can be torn down by confronting the truth of colonial violence and further commitment to action. Tschembe’s character also accepts this when he tells Madame, “I am lying . . . To myself. And to you. I know what I must do,” to which Madame replies, “Then do it, Tschembe . . . Our country needs warriors . . . Africa needs warriors” (126). Tschembe’s choice to join the resistance and be a warrior for his people expresses how commitment to one’s community and sacrifice of comfort allows for the breakdown of harmful power structures. The play ends at a beginning as the Woman watches while Eric burns the mission down, and as Tschembe cries in grief over Abioseh’s fate. The Woman signifies a new start for the African community, free of the power structure of the colonizers. Tschembe and Eric usher in this new beginning through their choices to confront their past and their complex circumstances, moving past fragmentation and indecision to seek truth and understanding. Les Blancs portrays community as complex and messy. It addresses questions about how people can possibly move forward when unbelievable injustice has been done to them and illustrates how people act when they are divided vs. how they act when they are unified. The play also argues that community formation fails when people try to force this unity because of selfish reasons or
to dominate other people. The end of *Les Blancs* argues that true community emerges out of this complex human experience when people seek truth and active understanding.

Beyond exploring community on a plot level, Hansberry’s choice of Theatre as medium allows for her arguments about community to become embodied, emphasizing her philosophy that “all art . . . is social” (“The Negro Writer” 5). Hansberry always meant for this text to be experienced and analyzed from a performance perspective. She purposefully chose to work in a medium that was immediate and exact, one that would collapse the space between audience and text, and ultimately, where audiences and creators could come together to think and prepare for action. In one interview she stated:

I’m particularly attracted to a medium where not only do you get to do what we do in life every day—you know, talk to people—but to be very selective about the nature of the conversation. It’s an opportunity to treat character in the most absolute relief, one against the other, so that everything, sympathy and conflict, is played so sharply, you know—even a little more than a novel. (*To Be Young* 138)

By placing her arguments in *Les Blancs* within a medium that requires people to gather in the same room together and watch other people “talk to each other,” Hansberry’s goal was to engage in the kind of community creation that promotes action and works to dismantle harmful power structures. Examining the performed text allows readers to take the community formation present in the written text and see how that text urges an audience to pay “attention to the genuine, shared problems of [their] community.” In 2016, the National Theatre put on *Les Blancs*; this was the first time *Les Blancs* had been on such an established world stage. This performed text expands Hansberry’s idea of community as a radical unifying force through its embodiment of community.

The prologue of the 2016 National Theatre performance expands the presence of the African community established in the written text through changes in stage direction and characters. The dramaturg for this production wrote, “The play is an entire society in microcosm while it’s also telling that story through a family drama . . . [Hansberry] synthesizes the macrocosm in the microcosm in a very powerful way” (Lichtenberg). Hansberry’s written text creates a sense of boundless history and legacy primarily through the character of the Woman. In Hansberry’s written text, she begins the play
by pulling a spear from the earth, foreshadowing the conflict ahead (41). In contrast, this production starts with characters not included in Hansberry’s text—a chorus of singers. These African Matriarchs enter the stage wearing traditional clothing and singing in umngqokolo—Xhosa split tone singing—creating a tangible, poetic image of voices coming together into a community. They remain present on the stage for nearly the whole play. By adding these characters to the symbolic image of the Woman, the Matriarchs create a presence of colonized Africa that involves more bodies, more voices, and more ghosts. Their voices embody the urgent call to action that is present throughout the written text and make that call to action louder.

The production also expands the presence of symbolic community by putting the Woman in more scenes than the original text does. In Hansberry’s script, the role of the Woman is to represent the conflict within Africa and within Tschembe. This character appears in the Prologue, the end of Act 1, Scene 3 of Act 4, and the final scene of the play. In the National Theatre production, the Woman is there for the funeral procession of the Matosehs’ father (37:44), she is there when Eric makes his first entrance in the play and she sees him look up in pain, exhausted (21:15), and she is there when Tschembe kills Abioseh (2:19:55). She also has a different physicality than the original text describes, such as when she makes her entrance in the prologue. Instead of dancing or holding a spear as written in the original stage directions, she walks slowly around the structure of the mission, staring forward. She moves over to the structure of the mission, pushing it, foreshadowing the reckoning ahead (1:32). This change in physicality happens again when she climbs onto Tschembe’s back in Act 4 rather than staring him down as written in the text. She watches Eric run in with a torch, setting fire to the mission, and she stretches her arms up and out, turning in a circle, and ending the play. These changes in movement and in presence suggest that her role in this version of the text is slightly different than in Hansberry’s original script. Because she is more present, instead of acting primarily as Tschembe’s forced inner conflict, her character embodies the violence witnessed by millions of African people for hundreds of years, and the action they must take to change. By enhancing her presence, this production is symbolically inviting in people and history beyond the characters on stage, allowing the portrayed community to extend through the history and weight of colonization.
The production seeks to implicate the audience as a community that can act against harmful power structures through the staging of the colonists in the prologue. Existing criticism of Hansberry’s plays has touched on this idea of the theatre as a community-building tool that allows the audience to “participate in the process of community building” (Matthews 558). This production uses this aspect of Hansberry’s philosophy in the direction of the colonists’ entrance. When the colonists make their entrance, they don’t come from behind the stage like all the other African characters have done. The colonists slowly march down the stairs of the theatre, through the audience. The audience sees an embodiment of the colonist’s invasion of the African community. The African people all stop walking and stand and stare as these white people come into the mission and set up shop and the matriarchs stop singing as the white colonists come to the stage. The white colonists move onto the structure and look out at the African people standing outside (0:4:15). At this point in the play, no words have been said, but simply by the presence of these two communities looking at each other, the play is depicting hundreds of years of conflict coming to a head in this image, and the audience has taken part as they sat and watched it all happen. By adding this stage direction, this performance enhances the tension that already exists in the text and demands that the audience face the truth of white supremacist power structures.

All these changes to Hansberry’s original script—the addition of the matriarchs, the increased presence of the Woman, and the staging of the colonizers—work to enhance Hansberry’s philosophy of community already present in the text. The audience feels the urgency to act that Hansberry wanted to create through all her art, specifically Les Blancs. Through examining the embodied community in this 2016 production, both in story and in process, Hansberry’s arguments about community as a force of action become clearer. By portraying community as a radical unifying force that requires sacrifice, honesty, and commitment, Les Blancs argues that community can be a force of action to dismantle harmful power structures. Hansberry expresses this through her complex characterization in her written text and her choice of theatre as the medium to communicate this argument. This play, one of Hansberry’s most ambitious projects, takes on hundreds of years of injustice. Les Blancs does not suggest that community formation is easy, but ultimately, the play argues that this kind of collective action is the only thing powerful enough to create real, lasting change. Hansberry’s vision of
community in *Les Blancs* requires a transformation of people to be better than they are on their own, radically unifying them to push for the most effective action.


