

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

CUNY Graduate Center

2014

Opening Remarks to Outing Lorraine at the Schomburg Center

Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz
CUNY Graduate Center

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/247

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

In The Life: Outing Lorraine

May 22nd, 2014 6:30pm

Langston Hughes Auditorium

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

As part of the *In The Life Series* coordinated by Steven Fullwood, w/panelists: Alexis DeVeaux, Joi Gresham, and Steven Fullwood - moderated by Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz

Document title: Opening Remarks to Outing Lorraine at the Schomburg Center

Opening Remarks by Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz

Welcome everyone to the panel discussion on Lorraine Hansberry. First I'd like to thank the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture for orchestrating this talk, and our panelists, Steven Fullwood, the Assistant Curator for the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division as well as the founder of the Black LGBT Archive here at the Center, Alexis de Veaux, biographer and writer, and Joi Gresham, Director of the Lorraine Hansberry Literary Trust. I'd also like to be bold enough to welcome Lorraine Hansberry into the room, who I feel is here in spirit through the thoughts and intentions of everyone in this room. So, if I may, welcome Lorraine to the room (although, I doubt that she will be able to answer any questions directly)!

My name is Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz. Please call me Shawn. I am a librarian at the CUNY Graduate Center and a volunteer archivist for the past 8 years at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. The format of the evening will be that I'll say a few

words, introduce the panelists formally, who will each say a few words. Then I'll pose a few questions to the panelists and open the space for dialog.

To begin, first I'd like to point to the wealth of information that exists on Lorraine Hansberry in her archival papers that she has left behind in the Trust to Robert Neimeroff her ex-husband and Joi Gresham's father.

To provide a brief biography, she was born on May 19th, 1930 in Chicago Illinois to an upper middle class family. Her parents had a history of dedicating their lives to political education and reform. Although she began her career studying painting at the Art Institute of Chicago, in 1950 at around twenty years old, she moved to New York City and studied at the New School then one year later, joined the staff of Freedom, a militant black newspaper headed by Paul Robeson in Harlem. She also taught at the Jefferson School of Social Science which was known as a Marxist education center. Likely due to her radical footprints from home, she had been under FBI surveillance for her Communist ties dating as far back to 1948, two years prior to entering New York City.

While in New York City she worked side by side with leftists, feminists, and socialists. Her non-fiction writings and speeches were paramount in her publications. By 1952 she became the associate editor of Freedom, and met Robert Nemiroff, whom she married in 1953. She moved to Greenwich Village with Nemiroff, and was able to work full-time on her writing.

In 1957, she completed *A Raisin in the Sun* her first full-length play and also wrote letters to the second nationally distributed lesbian periodical the Ladder (the first lesbian periodical being the 9 issues of Vice Versa which started in 1947). The

Ladder was a definitively lesbian journal, active in what was self-proclaimed as the homophile movement, defined as a pre-Stonewall time arguably between the years of 1945 to 1969, when Lesbians and Gay men were considering their placement in a heterosexual society, often with assimilationist agendas. Hansberry signed her first letters with the initials L.H.N, then her second L.N. In 1959, not even 30 years old, (and if I may add, during her Saturn's Return), her play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway. Her fame was derived from the immediacy of critics to embrace this play. She was the first black woman to have a play on Broadway; it quickly won the New York Drama critics circle award, which was the first time an African American has won this award in the history of theater. Battling with cancer, Hansberry transitioned in her short 34 years of life on January 12th 1965, leaving us with an archive of a series of full-length plays, countless non-fiction articles, and as is most relevant to this talk, a legacy still to be questioned for how far it extends.

In some ways, it takes the work of scholars and researchers to use archival materials to uncover the depths of meaning that is left behind in these primary texts. As a result, there is also a wealth of secondary literature, not created by, but about the work and life of Lorraine Hansberry. I've created a pamphlet, or zine, which illustrates a small snippet to date what I gathered this week on the Graduate Center's holdings of Hansberry's secondary literature.

In the question of "outing," I recommend to look to the archive, but also begin with the work of those who have done so before you, and look to the secondary literature.

Folks will ask:

Were the letters to the Ladder even Hansberry's letters at all?

The answer is that in a 1976, not only did Jonathan Katz publish a comprehensive monograph, *Gay American History* where Hansberry's letters were featured, but also an interview with Barbara Grier, one of the founders of the Daughters of Bilitis, the organization that distributed the ladder, noted, "We got a lot of early work from writers who went on to be quite well known" then named Lorraine Hansberry.

Hansberry's letters to the ladder are not the single point of reference to her sexuality. In 1979, Freedomways published an issue dedicated to her work, and lesbian scholar and poet Adrienne Rich published a groundbreaking article, "The Problem of Lorraine Hansberry." In 1983, Barbara Smith's forward in the Anthology *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, pointedly acknowledged that Lorraine Hansberry had been asking questions in a lesbian context. There are also dissertations, articles, and conference papers, namely those written by Cheryl Higashida, Lispeth Lipari, and Kathlene Ann McDonald. Lastly I'll point to the 1999 article by Elise Harris who wrote the *Double Life of Loraine Hansberry*, where she interviewed friends of Hansberry's who were in the Greenwich village and who spent time with Hansberry and her lovers.

Skeptics will still promote that all of this is here-say, not based on the plays, despite the lesbian and gay minor characters that seemed to creep into Hansberry's narrative. Regardless of the skepticism of her sexual life, the question remains if her sexual orientation should matter. I would challenge us to consider why not? Consider the harm that is implicit in our psyches that "outing" will do to a person's

character. Similarly, how does race play a role? Does naming a black icon lesbian negatively distort the legacy, or is Lorraine finally free, and in this room, and forever we release her?

I'll end with the recent exhibition this past November 22nd, 2013 to March 16th 2014. "Twice Militant: Lorraine Hansberry's Letters to 'The Ladder' " was on exhibition at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. The curator, Catherine Morris, and two representatives of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, myself, and my friend and mentor Flavia Rando, were interviewed by a local television station, BRIC TV on Hansberry's lesbianism. The materials were gathered from archives, including the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the Schomburg Center for Research and Black Culture, and the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco. Morris felt it was a groundbreaking exhibition because it was a "facet of Hansberry's biography that [she] actually didn't know."¹ Us Archivettes² thought, really, you didn't know?! How many people don't know? And what are the implications for this erasure?

And finally, as I stated recently on the Schomburg tumblr: There has been an erasure in our encyclopedias and history books on the African American experience and the contributions that African Americans have made in US History. The erasure of peoples of LGBT experience from history stems from this same act. We – black people, black LGBT people, black librarians, archivists, women, activists, scholars,

¹ Catherine Morris says this at 10:00mins in the following audio clip during a BK Live interview on her Brooklyn Museum exhibition "Twice Militant. <http://vimeo.com/80012981>

² Archivettes are internal names for coordinators of the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

and queer – are finally in a place of power and access to not only (re)write our histories, (re)claim our rich narratives, but ultimately, to right the wrongs bestowed upon us for generations. It is time to fill in the blanks of these systemic erasures.

In respect to the conversation of “Outing Lorraine,” this concept of “outing” assumes the existence of shaming those who choose to bring to light a more complete and true Lorraine Hansberry. Being silent when information is clearly laid out before us is a worse crime than erasure. We know that Hansberry was married to a Communist. We know that Hansberry had an FBI file years before *Raisin in the Sun* was debuted. We also know that Hansberry was involved in lesbian feminist social networks. As responsible scholars and researchers, it is our duty to make connections to these, until recently, disparate points of Hansberry’s life. None of these facets are unrelated; Hansberry’s alliance and social networks with white lesbian feminists provides an added layer of complexity to any implied intentions for her work. Deepening the understanding of Hansberry’s life in mid-twentieth century McCarthy era, by using the analytical tools and access of African American and LGBT scholars and archivists today, the more lessons we as a global nation may receive from Hansberry’s work tomorrow.

I now open up the panel to bring light to Hansberry and these very interesting questions of outing and its implications.

Bibliography

- “BK Live 11/20/13”. *BRIC TV* vimeo video, 1:00:10. November 20, 2013. <http://vimeo.com/80012981>.
- Ehrenstein, David. “The Black Divide.” *Advocate*, April 27, 2004, 37-38.
- Harris, Elise. “The Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry.” *Out Magazine*, September 1999, 96-101.
- “Her Business, or Ours? Outing Lorraine at the Schomburg Center.” Blog. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, May 20, 2014. <http://schomburgcenter.tumblr.com/post/86331149480/her-business-or-ours-outing-lorraine-at-the>.
- Higashida, Cheryl. “To Be(come) Young, Gay, and Black: Lorraine Hansberry’s Existentialist Routes to Anticolonialism.” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (December 1, 2008): 899–924.
- Lee, Dorothy H. “Hansberry, Lorraine (1930-1965).” *GLBTQ Literature*, January 2007, 1–2.
- Lipari, Lisbeth. “Queering the Borders: Lorraine Hansberry’s 1957 Letters to The Ladder.” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association, San Diego, CA, May 2003.
- . “The Rhetoric of Intersectionality: Lorraine Hansberry’s 1957 Letters to the Ladder.” In *Queering Public Address: Sexualities in American Historical Discourse*, edited by Charles E Morris. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2007.

McDonald, Kathlene Ann. "Audacity within Confinement: Radical Women Writers in the McCarthy Era." PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2002.

Proquest (document ID 288094457).

Rich, Adrienne. "The Problem of Lorraine Hansberry (1979)." In *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*. New York: Norton, 1986.

Schwartz, John. "A Concealed Voice Rings Loud and Clear." *New York Times*, October 25, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/27/arts/artsspecial/a-concealed-voice-rings-loud-and-clear.html>.

Smith, Barbara, ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New York: Kitchen Table — Women of Color Press, 1983.

Wilkerson, Margaret B. "The Sighted Eyes and Feeling Heart of Lorraine Hansberry." *Black American Literature Forum* 17, no. 1 (April 1, 1983): 8–13. doi: 10.2307/2904160.