

**When Hiding isn't Enough: How has the Expression of Queerness within Black Feminism  
Changed Over Time**

by

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## Abstract

The relationship of queerness and Black feminism works as an unbalanced scale. Within the transformative era of the 20th century, Lorraine Hansberry, Nina Simone, and Audre Lorde both created and expressed radical Black feminist thought through their artistic and intellectual contributions. Their work in music, poetry, and literature proliferated through Black communities and later the world, giving way to conversations about Black women's lived experiences that would be otherwise neglected or ignored. However, Lorraine and Nina did not publicly fight for the rights of black LGBTQ+ individuals, but that choice can be attributed to their politics. The same can be said about Audre; she embraces the risk of living as a black lesbian, but the rise of the gay rights movement has provided a type of social cover that was not afforded to Lorraine and Nina.

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## When Hiding isn't Enough: How does the Expression of Queerness within Black Feminism Change Over Time?

The relationship of queerness and Black feminism works as an unbalanced scale. Both of these ideologies have a history of having to fight for visibility and legitimacy in the eyes of heterosexual Black men and White feminists. Queerness finds itself in a battle of visibility, legitimacy, and belonging within Black feminism. Queerness itself has a history of being a hidden dilemma for many, but for Black queer women, it can be damning with the internal battle of choosing between fighting for womanhood, Blackness, or queerness.

Margaret Sloan-Hunter states, "I'm not black Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and a woman Thursday, Friday and Saturday."<sup>1</sup> She calls out the ignorance in asking a Black woman to split her identity into digestible points of oppression when each piece shapes the others all the time. There is no picking out shades of oppression when they all affect the person in some shape or form. Similarly, Black queer women can't split their oppression across six days. The replication of this harmful ideology of splitting one's identity within Black feminist circles then becomes particularly damaging. This counteracts the notion of assumed unity for now these Black feminist circles (in most cases, heterosexual circles) become the perpetrator of the same divisive oppression towards a more marginalized community.

From the 1960s to the end of the 1980s, Black feminists pushed to include queerness in their framework rather than disregard its existence. The societal and cultural changes that occurred during the 20th century allowed for Black queer women's experiences to be acknowledged openly. The nationwide push for Black liberation via the modern phase of the

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<sup>1</sup> Burress, "Margaret Sloan-Hunter -- united black, feminist struggles"

Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the emergence of Black Gay and Lesbian organizations of the Gay Liberation Movement during the 1970s and 1980s provided Black queer feminists a chance to formulate a new inclusive framework.<sup>2</sup>

Within the transformative era of the 20th century, Lorraine Hansberry, Nina Simone, and Audre Lorde both created and expressed radical Black feminist thought through their artistic and intellectual contributions. Their work in music, poetry, and literature proliferated through Black communities and later the world, giving way to conversations about Black women's lived experiences that would be otherwise neglected or ignored. These writings and music explored the nuanced experiences of Black women while critiquing the hypocrisy of American values as applied to Black women. From beauty standards to international liberation, their work explored the layered and complicated experience of being Black queer women in America. These women voiced their opinions and became fighters for universal justice and equality.

In comparison to other figures such as Angela Davis and Pauli Murray, Lorraine and Nina are not historicized in the same manner. Audre is pivotal to the Black feminist movement and the Black Gay Liberation movement, but for the sake of my argument, I am presenting her as an example of how the perspectives about being a Black queer woman shifted from deviancy to acknowledgment over the 20th century. The art of Lorraine, Nina, and Audre is mentioned as being a part of the cooperative movements of black feminism and black liberation. With the contributions of Lorraine and Nina, they are placed within the Black Art Movement of the mid-20th century and the fight for black liberation. Audre's speeches and writings are foundational to the black feminist movement of the 20th century. However, Lorraine and Nina did not publicly fight for the rights of black LGBTQ+ individuals, but that choice can be attributed to their politics. The same can be said about Audre; she embraces the risk of living as a

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, *Home Girls, A Black Feminist Anthology*, 264

black lesbian, but the rise of the gay rights movement has provided a type of social cover that was not afforded to Lorraine and Nina. With all three, their expression of queerness is a historical outline of how queerness fits within the theory of intersectionality and the broader framework of Black feminism. It also speaks to the evolution of intersecting freedom struggles in the 20th century. Their personal choices to either hide or not are a recall to Carol Hanisch's phrase "the personal is political," and through this, the queerness of these women can be examined as an addition to the potential identities that some Black women have to contend with.

Their art and participation in the development of black feminist thought should be analyzed as pivotal to understanding and promulgating a more inclusive story of black feminism. By advancing the notion of Black, queer, feminist artistry as an essential piece of this particular history of feminism, I am arguing that these three women bring the perspective and identity of Black women dealing simultaneously with racism, sexism, and homophobia to the table of intersectionality, shifting the conversation towards a more diverse narrative of Black feminism. Through this research, I am encouraging a Black feminist praxis that examines the importance of analyzing Black women's art as a means of resistance, protest, and identity. I am also engaging with each of them through the lens of holistic Black feminism, deciphering their choices in life to understand their conception of Black women's liberation. Lastly, this paper explores how the individual queer identities and presentations of Lorraine Hansberry, Nina Simone, and Audre Lorde reflect their historical placement both in the timeline of Black feminist thought and the 20th century more broadly.

## I. The Origins of Black Feminism

Before this paper can unravel the connection between queerness and black feminism, the origins of Black feminism is discussed in the next few pages. This section serves the purpose of

introducing what Lorraine, Nina, and Audre built their feminist identities on and how each of them mirrored and redefined black feminism within the 20th century. Conventional histories of Black feminism locate its origins in the 20th century. Angela Davis insists, however, that we find this origin point in the 19th century. The horrific and inhumane conditions of slavery also manufactured the concept of intersectionality as Black slave women dealt with the repercussions of racial and gender inequality, which made their condition different from that of Black men.

Angela Davis expresses this idea in her 1981 book, *Women, Race, and Class*:

But women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women. Expediency governed the slaveholders' posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles.<sup>3</sup>

Seen as property, enslaved women endured forced sexual actions in order to produce more slaves after the end of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808. As "breeders", slave owners denied enslaved women their humanity and exploited them for monetary gain. In the midst of the early 19th century, calls for abolition and expanded rights for white women battled for contingency. The early beginnings of the women's rights movement declared that women should be allowed to vote, but this did not include Black women. Despite many white suffragists aligning with the cause of abolition, they did not include black women in discussions of suffrage and equal rights. The 1851 speech "Ain't I A Woman" by Sojourner Truth deepens the roots of Black feminism as Truth proclaims that her womanhood and motherhood went unacknowledged as she climbed into carriages or when her thirteen children were sold into slavery.<sup>4</sup> Her speech proclaimed that American society ignored her humanity on the basis of gender and race. As the

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<sup>3</sup> Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, 9

<sup>4</sup> Sojourner Truth, "Sojourner Truth: Ain't I A Woman?," National Park Service, 2017, [Sojourner Truth: Ain't I A Woman? \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](https://www.nps.gov/sojourner-truth-aint-i-a-woman/).

century continued, the emancipation proclamation and the North's subsequent victory in 1865 marked a new era of social relations between Blacks and Whites.

The reconstruction era brought supposed change and advocacy for the newly freed blacks. The 14th and 15th amendments brought about citizenship and voting rights for black men, but this enraged some white suffragists, for they believed that their support for abolition should be matched by the black activists of the time to support universal suffrage. However, the call for suffrage did not include black women, and the white suffragists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton showed disheartening attitudes towards the new rights given to black men. Lori Ginzberg writes of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's overt racism towards Blacks in her biography of the acclaimed feminist and activist. "...her choice of all-too-familiar racist language had broad and lasting consequences, both theoretical and strategic, for the movement she helped lead."<sup>5</sup> This notion of racism and elitism made it difficult for Black women activists to associate themselves with the fight for suffrage. Thus, they had to create their own entities to fight against the overwhelming oppressions of racism and sexism.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Black feminism emerged within two public entities: the Black church and the public sector. The Black church became a battleground for gender equality, in which Black women missionaries used the Bible to legitimize their claim for fair treatment. Historian Evelyn Higginbotham writes of the strides taken by women such as Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Virginia Broughton, and Mary Cook, whom she called feminist theologians. Black women Baptists' struggles with sexism made their work two-fold as they fought against racial and gender inequality. Feeling unwelcome and unseen by black men and white suffragists, these women formed their own societies. They employed the tactic of "radical obedience," in which they used the Bible to criticize the sexist ideology of the church as it

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<sup>5</sup> Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, 183



pertains to Black women..<sup>6</sup> During the 1830s, Maria Stewart used the Bible to denounce "sexism, slavery, the denial of adequate education to Blacks, and other forms of oppression." The National Baptist Convention's Women's Convention proposed feminist themes in which these women continued to use God's word to dispel archaic, sexist views and promote equality.<sup>7</sup>

The use of feminist theologizing gave Black Baptist women access to new terminology and tools to fight against racial and gender oppression.. Higginbotham notes, "While each of the feminist theologians had her own unique style and emphasis, a textual analysis of their writings reveals their common concern for women's empowerment in the home, the church, social reform, and the labor force."<sup>8</sup> The new feminist interpretations of the Bible by these Black women positioned them as individuals who are ordained by God to spread the message of equality, given the fact that they too suffer from sin like their male counterparts.<sup>9</sup> The role of the woman did not stop with "mother," as all the roles levied on feminine bodies are as important and imperative for the morale of the home and the world. Feminist theologians also redefined the woman's relationship with Jesus as one of service to mankind and not just to her husband (or father, if single). Broughton, Cook, and other feminist theologians used female characters of the Bible to justify their need to do work outside of the home. They used the example of Huldah and Deborah as examples of women who did the same work as men.<sup>10</sup> The push for Black women to learn the importance of labor and not be dependent on just the domestic sector persisted during

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<sup>6</sup> Coined by Higginbotham, radical obedience describes the early framework of Black feminism within the Black Baptist church. These Black women championed an anti-sexist, anti-slavery, and anti-racist rhetoric under the pretense that God's word spoke against these ideas. Yet, these women also sacrificed these claims for the larger scope of Black liberation. (see pages 148-49 in *Righteous Discontent*)

<sup>7</sup> The Women's Convention formed as an auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention in 1900. This organization provided a space for Black Baptist women to criticize the shortcomings of American society and the social structure of the Baptist church. These women promoted education, suffrage, abolition, labor rights, and gender equality using the word of God to strengthen their call for equality and freedom. (see pages 8-13 in *Righteous Discontent*)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 127

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 128-29

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 135

this time as well. Lucy Smith addressed this in her 1886 speech to the American National Baptist Convention, as she dismantled the notion that women should only be dependent upon men and encouraged black women to pursue careers in fields outside of domestic work.<sup>11</sup>

As the 19th century progressed and into the beginnings of the 20th century, Black feminist theologians influenced the broader feminism movement of that time. When Frances Willard, an evangelical liberal and feminist theologian, spoke of the mother's heart and the power of a woman's gentle touch, her ideas resembled those of Broughton and Cook's use of the Bible, in which they advocated for the advancement of women. Anna Julia Cooper spoke of the same sentiments as Maria Stewart, as she preached the same intersectional discourse and used the Bible as a tool to fight for equality for Black women and men. Outside of the church, the introduction of morality politics in both Black and white spaces emulated the ideas of these black feminist theologians, in which the presence of morality and dignity thrived through the existence of women. This can be seen through the progression of racial uplift and the participation in respectability politics by African-Americans as well as the rise of the suffrage and temperance movements with white women. As the 20th century presented new proponents of racism and white supremacy, the language of Black feminist theologians shifted from being aggressively feminist to being conciliatory towards men.<sup>12</sup> Unable to fully change the hierarchical system of the church, their actions, papers, and speeches continued to inspire the next generation of Black feminists.

From the late 1890s until the end of World War I, black women contested for better treatment within the domestic workforce, reproductive rights, better education opportunities, and more protections against the aggressive monster of white supremacy. Towards the end of the

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 134

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 135

nineteenth century, the National Federation of Afro-American Women emerged in 1895, and the following year, Mary Church Terrell's National League of Colored Women merged with the NFAAW and created the NACW, or National Association of Colored Women. Sticking to the roots of predecessors such as Truth, Stewart, and Burroughs, these clubs looked to provide a framework of racial uplift that placed Black women at the forefront. The writings of Cooper continued to circulate as these women saw themselves as the hope for the race and called out against any hindrance to their mission of racial equality.<sup>13</sup>

The war brought in new types of employment as men left for war. Two separate entities (the Women Wage Earners Association and the National Association of Wage Earners) emerged as these black women activists advised black women workers to unionize and stand together as wage earners once the men came back from the war. Their efforts to provide education and inspire Black women stemmed from the uplift concept that unfortunately manipulated Black women to follow the gendered ideas that a woman's priority was the household and being a helpmate to the husband.

After the first world war, the ideas of pan-Africanism and black nationalism proliferated in the social climate as Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) called for black liberation in all parts of the world. His second wife, Amy Jacques Garvey, wrote on the importance of women's issues as the editor of the women's page of the organization's newsletter, the *Negro World*. She asserted that women have an important role as mothers and wives, but having the ability to vote and access to education is not enough. Issues such as poverty, racial segregation, mob violence, and child warfare were of importance as well.<sup>14</sup> She also discussed how multiple forms of oppression made the Black woman's situation different

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<sup>13</sup> Shetfall, *Words of Fire*, 8

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 11

from that of their male counterparts. The intersectional concept of Black feminism articulated by other feminists of the 19th century continued with Garvey. Her position asserts Black women as compassionate leaders who need recognition, education, and equity in order to thrive within American society.

As the century progressed, black feminism continued to redefine itself under the umbrella of Black liberation. Communism in the United States and the Second World War influenced the social and political climate of the country. The Black Liberation Movement engaged with the rhetoric of Communism to challenge Jim Crow and the white supremacist antics of the American government. Claudia Jones participated in the Communist Party and articulated ideas of radical Black feminism as well. Jones did not subscribe to the gendered uplift form of black feminism of the 19th century and early 20th century.

Her ties to the Communist Party insisted on the idea of a triple oppression that propagated the black woman's condition as one of special and needed attention. Her 1949 essay "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman" addressed the failures of progressive movements of the day, such as her own party, to acknowledge the problems of the Black woman. Like Garvey, she acknowledged the domino effect of Black women's liberation as it pertained to eliminating the powers of imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism. She criticized the chauvinist attitudes of those who see Black women's organizations as charity workers, stating that black women are the real active forces—the organizers and workers of the movement.<sup>15</sup> Speaking on the failures of Marxist doctrine, which overlooks race and gender, she articulates a position that places Black women at the forefront of universal

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<sup>15</sup> Claudia Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman," *PRISM: Political & Rights Issues & Social Movements* (1949): pp.9

liberation. With that sentiment, Black women should be liberated entirely, which in turn would liberate the rest of the Black community.

Throughout its existence, Black feminism and Black feminist thought dealt with the false claim of race betrayal by Black men and the microaggressive motives of white feminists. Despite this battle for legitimacy, Black feminists continued to challenge the negative connotations of our womanhood by creating "specialized knowledge" about our circumstances as Black women.<sup>16</sup> The 20th century saw an influx of Black feminist thought that articulated the ideas and thoughts of Black women. Poets, writers, singers, and others used their art form to address the need to advocate for those who couldn't speak for themselves. In the world of Black feminism, there is no monolithic definition because the experiences of Black women are not solely based on race but can be influenced by a number of identities that make our experiences differ. Along with the classifications of race, gender, and class, sexual orientation emerges as the lesbian rights movement rises in the mid-1950s. The identities of Lorraine and Nina fall under the oppressive sectors of race, gender, and sexual orientation. However, the fight for racial equality that rose to prominence in the 1950s suppressed the opportunity for Hansberry and Simone to fight for their queer liberation as well.

## II. Lorraine's Revolution

Activism and Black exceptionalism hovered over Lorraine's existence. Her middle-class status on the south side of Chicago made her experiences different from those of her peers. Her father had to go all the way to the Supreme Court to move his family in the 1930s to a nicer part of the neighborhood in *Hansberry v. Lee*, a court case that challenged the use of racial

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<sup>16</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 12

covenants.<sup>17</sup> Her uncle, William Leo Hansberry, worked in the history department of Howard University and later created the African Civilization section of the department. Before her father's death in 1946, her parents enforced the "talented tenth" ideology on Lorraine.<sup>18</sup> Their active participation with the NAACP in Chicago and associations with prominent Black leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois and Paul Robeson influenced Lorraine's identity. However, the notion of Black exceptionalism and respectability weighed heavily on Lorraine. Imani Perry writes in *Looking for Lorraine* that this often created a sense of loneliness for Lorraine. Lorraine writes that "the thing that makes you exceptional if you are at all, is inevitably that which must also make you lonely."<sup>19</sup> The projections of her father to never betray the family or the Black race influenced how far Lorraine would go within her own liberation and how she would portray herself to the public.<sup>20</sup> Despite these expectations, Lorraine forged a radical identity that would later emerge in her writings, interviews, and daily life.

After graduating high school in 1948, Lorraine attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she became involved with the Progressive Party. Becoming a member of the Young Progressives of America, Lorraine served on Henry Wallace's campaign in 1948.

<sup>21</sup> Despite his humiliating loss to Truman in the 1948 presidential election, Lorraine continued to protest against issues on campus such as Jim Crow hiring policies, cold war-inspired attacks against leftist-thinking faculty, and the raising of tuition.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Hansberry v. Lee*, 311 U.S. 32 (1940).

<sup>18</sup> The "Talented Tenth" ideology was coined by W.E.B. DuBois in an essay of the same title in 1903. This percentile of African Americans were the leaders of the community and have been entrusted with the task to rise above the Negro problem. These individuals were highly educated leaders of their society and the fate of Black exceptionalism rested in their hands.

<sup>19</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 134

<sup>20</sup> Hansberry, *Young, Gifted, and Black*, 18

<sup>21</sup> Henry A. Wallace was a former Vice President for F.D. Roosevelt and Secretary of Commerce for the Truman presidency. In 1948, he ran on the Progressive ticket, calling for gender and racial equality and nationwide healthcare insurance for Americans.

<sup>22</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 32-34

After two years in Wisconsin, Lorraine pursued a career in New York as a writer. Her first job was with the newspaper *Freedom*. Led by Robeson and DuBois, this newspaper dedicated itself to black liberation through radical leftist thought. Hansberry came on as a writer at the age of twenty-one and stayed there until the paper disbanded in 1955. She wrote articles on a number of world events, such as the Korean War, and criticized the imperialist and racist strategies of Europe and America. In most of her articles, she emphasized the woman's experience and focused on providing the woman's perspective on the progression of the Black Freedom Struggle that was happening throughout the world. Her critiques of Broadway and their treatment of Black performers and writers spoke to her own desires of being a playwright. Her calls for better roles for Black actresses and actors and her hatred of the perpetuation of stereotypes described an activist stance on equal and humanistic representation of Black life in American media. One of the last articles she did for *Freedom* entitled "Life Challenges Negro Youth."; spoke on the Black youth and how their experience was riddled with unreasonable expectations. Drawing from her own experiences and seeing these expectations asserted onto the new generation, she described the Black youth's battle for freedom and opportunity as being completely different from that of their white peers. She spoke on the rampant erasure of Black culture and history and how this influenced the youth into the politics of "imitative instincts."<sup>23</sup> She alludes to the unique experience of Black girls in the "Naturally ugly" section. Here, she addressed the media's portrayal of "Grace Kelly-Marilyn Monroe monotyped ideal" as another hindrance for Black girls dealing with the racist construction of beauty standards.<sup>24</sup> These standards left Black girls feeling inadequate and inferior, and for Lorraine, this created a second class identity that influenced how Black children would present themselves in society.

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<sup>23</sup> Lorraine Hansberry, "Life Challenges Negro Youth," *Freedom*, March 1955, 5 edition, sec. 3, pp. 7-8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* Pp. 7-8

Lorraine's early writings for *Freedom* emphasized the idea of Black radicalism. Along with writing for *Freedom*, Lorraine traveled and covered numerous events, such as the Sojourners for Truth and Justice conference in 1951 and an international peace conference in 1952.<sup>25</sup> While working for *Freedom*, Lorraine showed solidarity with the Communist Party and other leftist groups. She crossed the paths of prominent radical thinkers such as Claudia Jones, and these encounters shaped her politics. Her experiences with *Freedom* shaped her identity as a Black woman who believed that there had to be a dramatic push towards universal Black liberation in order to bring about a new era of peace and equity for all. These budding ideologies of Black feminism, anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, and Black liberation continued to thrive in Lorraine's writings as she catapulted from a meager journalist to a Broadway phenomenon.

After the disbanding of *Freedom* in 1955, Lorraine focused on her play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. She wrote scripts commemorating Black history for performances for *Freedom*, but this play reflected on her life in southside Chicago by telling an American story of community, discrimination, racism, gender, and dreams. Her own family inspired her portrayal of the Younger family. In an interview later repurposed for the 1975 documentary, "The Black Experience in the Creation of Drama", Lorraine recalls watching a monologue from a Sean O'Casey play's *Juno and the Paycock*. In the monologue, an Irish mother loses her son to government violence. This portrayal clicked at her soul, reminding her of her own otherness as she noted, "I did not think then of writing the melody as I knew it in a different key."<sup>26</sup> Walter's obsession with money, Beneatha's intergenerational battle for agency and purpose, and Ruth's particular role as mother, worker, and homemaker demonstrated an intersectional visualization of Black life during the 20th century. The differences in race, gender, and class emerged vibrantly

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<sup>25</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 57

<sup>26</sup> Lorraine Hansberry: The Black Experience in the Creation of Drama, documentary, directed by Ralph J Tangley, (1975), Youtube.



through the lives of the Youngers in Hansberry's play. *A Raisin in the Sun* displayed Lorraine's dissection of Black life in which she used her own ideas to illustrate an American family who just so happened to be Black.

Her interview with Studs Terkel speaks on her hopes for a new America, and her own awareness of how her art can be seen as a mirror to the realities of living in America as a Black woman. Questions about the characterization of the play and the role that her play signified during that time inspired a conversation about the importance of Black women and their double edged fight against white supremacy and Black sexism. She answers one of Terkel's questions stating "the most oppressed group of any oppressed group is its women."<sup>27</sup> Beneatha's character mirrored Lorraine's own personality as she displayed feminist views throughout the play and spoke to Lorraine's sentiment about Black women's multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender.

Beneatha's dream to become a doctor is immediately questioned by her brother Walter, who asserts that she should be a nurse like all the other women.<sup>28</sup> When it came to relationships, she did not want anyone to do anything for her. Lena and Ruth question Beneatha about the relationship with George Murchison and believe that his high status should be enough for Beneatha, but she doesn't care about him or his money:

"RUTH: You mean you wouldn't marry George Murchison if he asked you someday? That pretty, rich thing? Honey, I knew you was odd—

BENEATHA: No I would not marry him if all I felt for him was what I feel now."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Lorraine Hansberry interview (1959)" Interview by Studs Terkel, August 18, 2018, video, 46:35, [https://youtu.be/ZkFR\\_6DGJ3o](https://youtu.be/ZkFR_6DGJ3o)

<sup>28</sup> Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 41.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* pp.52

George's snobbish and shallow attitude infuriated Beneatha; she considered him and his family to be worse than white people. Beneatha calling Walter an assimilationist and her decision to wear her natural hair displayed a statement of pride and affirmation that would not be seen as such for another decade. During the first half of the 20th century, Black people used the practice of straightening or "conking" their hair to produce a style deemed more presentable and respectable. The late 1960s emergence of the Afro challenged this notion becoming a sign of Black Power and beauty.

"GEORGE What in the name of—

RUTH (Touching BENEATHA'S hair): Girl, you done lost your natural mind!? Look at your head!

GEORGE: What have you done to your head—I mean your hair!

BENEATHA: Nothing—except cut it off.

RUTH Now that's the truth—it's what ain't been done to it! You expect this boy to go out with you with your head all nappy like that?

BENEATHA (Looking at GEORGE) That's up to George. If he's ashamed of his heritage—"<sup>30</sup>

This small section of dialogue between Beneatha, George, and Ruth in Act II, scene I illustrates Hansberry's fearlessness in pushing against the norms of the day and placing Black women as dignified individuals who should not have to conform to European beauty standards. She presents a character who does not want to exist as a helpmate or as another Black woman subjected to the gendered norms of the day. In many ways, Beneatha illustrated Hansberry's feminist self because her actions and thoughts emulated Hansberry's true feelings.<sup>31</sup> The multiple oppressions placed on Beneatha for wanting to be a doctor and showing strong affirmations of

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid* pp. 82

<sup>31</sup> Ghani, "I was Born Black and Female", 1300.

Black pride spoke to the Black nationalism movement of the late 1960s and, in some ways, the womanist literary movement of the 1980s. From a Black feminist and Womanist perspective, Beneatha is a literary example of a Black feminist and a womanist because she put herself first and not the desires of her family.<sup>32</sup> The characterization of Beneatha precedes these movements. The idea of a Black woman who did not need the validation, protection, or approval of the Black man could not be fathomed during the 1950s because of the radical obedience of Black women who desired to provide a united front to the cause of universal Black liberation. Nonetheless, Lorraine believed that art should tell the truth.<sup>33</sup> She lived and represented her true desires through Beneatha but in reality, she could not bask in the essence of true freedom.

With the bountiful success of *A Raisin in the Sun* during its Broadway run in 1959, Lorraine propelled into stardom. She began to make more appearances and cross paths with other writers, poets, and entertainers like James Baldwin. As an eclectic writer and activist, Baldwin used his writings to explore the nuances of Black life and advocate for Black radical liberation. Hansberry and Baldwin connected on the basis of intellectualism and loneliness. They did not want to succumb to the evils of white supremacy, the pressures of Black exceptionalism, and taunts of being disconnected from the Black experience due to their success. Baldwin and Hansberry differed in their representation of queerness.

While Baldwin was publicly known as a gay Black man, Hansberry was not out publicly as a Black lesbian. Baldwin saw no point in hiding who he was. In fact, he saw his coming out as a necessity for his writing to continue.<sup>34</sup> Baldwin's second book, *Giovanni's Room*, featured a

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 1301

<sup>33</sup> "Lorraine Hansberry interview (1959)" Interview by Studs Terkel, August 18, 2018, video, 46:35, [https://youtu.be/ZkFR\\_6DGJ3o](https://youtu.be/ZkFR_6DGJ3o)

<sup>34</sup> "James Baldwin on Being Gay in America", interview by Richard Goldstein, *The Village Voice*, June, 26 1984, [James Baldwin on Being Gay in America - The Village Voice](https://www.villagevoice.com/1984-06-26/james-baldwin-on-being-gay-in-america/).

homosexual character, forcing Baldwin to publish it in England in order to sell it. By publishing this book, Baldwin opened the door for criticism and hatred to come from all sides yet, this book represented the freedom to be himself and not hide his queer identity. As he explains, “Look, men have been sleeping with men for thousands of years... This is a Western sickness, it really is. It’s an artificial division... It’s only this infantile culture which has made such a big deal of it.”<sup>35</sup> For Baldwin, living in all of his truth meant going with his heart rather than what was deemed acceptable. Unlike Baldwin, Lorraine could not explore her emotions and inner desires because she was not allowed the capacity to. Within Black culture and American society in general, the Black woman serves as the funnel for Black existence in which morality, respectability, and life feeds itself through. Going against the conventions of heterosexuality and respectability politics placed Lorraine in a position of great pressure. This can be traced back to the economics and racial politics of chattel slavery. The Black man and woman were property. However, the woman could produce more property and thus, her motherhood was seen as a profitable outcome. The Black woman’s body became a source of capital to slave owners. After slavery, the Black woman’s body continued to be a source of capital for the morality of the Black community. Similar to the ideals of Republican motherhood, Black women were held to a higher standard to have Black children and to teach them how to be respectable in society. This pressure turned queerness into the antithesis of Black motherhood and womanhood because Black lesbians could not produce nor would they be deemed moral enough to teach the next generation. Likewise, Lorraine’s necessity to present herself on a moral high ground spoke to this pressure and her upbringing as the rules of her father persisted as she maneuvered through life as a closeted Black lesbian.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Harris, “The Double Life of Lorraine Hansberry”

Within the last five years of her life, Hansberry made great strides towards being socially active. Unlike Malcolm X and James Baldwin's radicalism, Lorraine remained a closeted radical, and due to her softness and charm, she remained under the radar. As reviewers and critics interpreted her play as a tribute to the model of the American dream, Lorraine was not seen as a threat. From open letters to the *New York Times* to her own diary entries, Lorraine's version of activism supported socialism, Black independence from White imperialism, and rejected the xenophobic views towards those who practiced Islam and/or communism.<sup>37</sup> In addition, she condemned the US occupation of Cuba during the 1960s, stating that the government cascaded in hypocrisy by interfering with the lives of sovereign people while ignoring their own shortcomings when it came to the rights of Black Americans.<sup>38</sup> She supported different causes of Black liberation, such as Pan-Africanism, the Nation of Islam's call for Black nationalism, and the young protestors of SNCC. She fought against the exceptionalizing of Black Americans and did not fully side with the now romanticized portion of the civil rights movement that valued nonviolence and legislation.

In one of her last public appearances, Hansberry gave a speech entitled "The Black Revolution and the White Backlash." In this speech, she celebrates her father's landmark case against housing discrimination while acknowledging that the south side of Chicago remains segregated despite her dad's efforts. She recalls a three hundred and forty-five year request for agency, humanity, and rights for Black Americans that has been brutally ignored by America. "Negroes have tried every method of communication, of transformation of their situation from petition to the vote, everything. We've tried it all. There isn't anything that hasn't been exhausted."<sup>39</sup> She commands the audience with her call for revolution and American radicalism

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<sup>37</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 155.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 158

<sup>39</sup> Hansberry, "The Black Revolution and the White Backlash"

despite being severely sick.<sup>40</sup> Her desires to be an American radical are evident in her calls for Black liberation and equality, but that same sense of radicalism did not reach her hidden identity of queerness. Like the Black feminists of the 19th century, her subtle calls for Black female liberation echoed in a few writings, especially within the characterization of Beneatha, but these remnants of Black feminism took a backseat when it came to Black liberation. She wanted to see what kind of revolutionary she was and go down south, but unfortunately, she never got the chance.<sup>41</sup> Her longing to be a revolutionary and her love for the people persevered in Nina as she sang at Lorraine's funeral, "Oh what a lovely precious dream. To be young, gifted and black... To be young, gifted and black is where it's at."<sup>42</sup>

### III. Hiding in Plain Sight: The Friendship of Lorraine and Nina

On May 21st, 1961, Nina shared the stage with Miriam Makeba, a South African political songstress; both of these women performed as a part of a benefit concert for the Church of the Master, located in Harlem. The night filled with sounds and songs reminiscent of Makeba's homeland while Nina wowed the crowd with her classical piano licks and meshing of multiple sounds creating a folk jazz sound that one reviewer gleamed as "a mixture of wit, dramatic fervor, and bubbling imagination."<sup>43</sup> The performance ended with a call from Lorraine; the call was not one of congratulations but one of concern as Lorraine detailed the arrest of Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>44</sup> Lorraine wanted Nina to become more involved with the movement. This was a normal encounter between Lorraine and Nina. Lorraine was three years older than Nina and Lorraine took Nina under her wing. As the Civil Rights movement gained traction in the 1960s, Lorraine became more involved and wanted Nina to do the same. Within two months of the

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<sup>40</sup> Lorraine was diagnosed with Pancreatic cancer in 1964. She died on January 12, 1965.

<sup>41</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 186

<sup>42</sup> Nina Simone, *Young, Gifted, and Black* (New York, RCA records, 1965), [Lyrics – The Official Home of Nina Simone | The High Priestess of Soul](#)

<sup>43</sup> Shelton, "Two Folk Singers Present Concert"

<sup>44</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 129

Carnegie Hall performance, Nina participated in a SNCC meeting with Lorraine.<sup>45</sup> In 1962, the two became almost inseparable as Nina recalls in her autobiography that she and Lorraine talked about “Marx, Lenin, and revolution...real girls talk.”<sup>46</sup> Along with James Baldwin, this little club of Black, queer activists used their platforms to speak about the need for Black revolution. However, there was a closer bond between Nina and Lorraine as they shared similarities in life and often had to suffer in silence when it came to their own autonomy. The exhausting and overwhelming pressure of Black exceptionalism also drove them into that loneliness that they both knew so well. Locked in loveless marriages, Lorraine and Nina connected over their struggles in life and their queerness.

Lorraine hated and loved her homosexuality.<sup>47</sup> She participated in the hidden but not so hidden world of New York’s Greenwich Village. She contributed as a member of the Daughters of Bilitis but never went to a meeting; she wrote to the Daughters of Bilitis newsletter *The Ladder* praising them for their existence and noting the correlation between hate for queer people and hatred of women. Lorraine connected feminism and lesbianism within her writings and letters to *The Ladder*.<sup>48</sup> She associated herself with ONE, another gay organization writing under the pseudonym Emily Jones.<sup>49</sup> In her story “The Anticipation of Eve” she alludes to the hardship of being a queer woman and the need to hide yourself. Eve represents temptation, but a temptation of being out and free.<sup>50</sup> In one of her last letters to *The Ladder*, Lorraine responded to the notion that married lesbians could just leave. She writes that comparing the option to leave to

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 130

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 130

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 95

<sup>48</sup> The Daughters of Bilitis was a Lesbian Rights Organization founded by Del Martin and Phylis Lyon in 1955. *The Ladder* was the Daughters of Bilitis’ monthly newsletter that spanned from 1956-1972. It featured letters and organizational news from the DOB’s headquarters and national chapters.

<sup>49</sup> ONE was a Gay Rights organization founded in 1952 and became pivotal to the Daughters of Bilitis in its early years.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 87

be with other women, and the option to leave to be with other men is not socially comprehensible.<sup>51</sup> The stigma of coming out in the midst of McCarthyism, the pressures of her play, the constant reminders of her father's angst against racial and familial betrayal, and the lack of economic security and protection kept her in the closet. Lorraine constantly battled with her sexuality, yet it did not bring her shame.

Nina did not feel the same when it came to her bisexuality. She absolutely abhorred her attraction to women and didn't understand the gay community's admiration for her.<sup>52</sup> Despite living longer than both Lorraine and Audre, she never came out publicly. She hung out at Trude Heller, a New York lesbian bar but stopped after her career took off in the late 1950s.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps her hatred of her queer identity could have stemmed from her Christian upbringing as well as her ex-husband Andrew Stroud's anti-gay sentiments and abusive treatment. She did not want to be seen as a bisexual woman.<sup>54</sup> For both of these women, silence overshadowed their homosexuality. Lorraine's sexuality traveled only among trusted friends as an open secret, whereas Nina's bisexuality barely scrapes the surface in any writings by and about her. This silence is not anything to be disappointed in but should be recognized as a tool of advancement for the bigger cause of Black liberation.<sup>55</sup> Especially with Nina, this choice to not act on her bisexuality represented her willingness to preserve the movement and allow the focus to be on Black liberation. For her, the movement weighed more heavily than her own queerness.

With Lorraine, this pressure came from her middle class background and her father's high expectations of her as a role model for the sake of the family and the race.<sup>56</sup> Lorraine wrote of

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<sup>51</sup> Lorraine Hansberry, "Letter to The Ladder", August 1957, <https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1003347887>.

<sup>52</sup> Light, *What Happened, Miss Simone?*, 67

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 66

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 72

<sup>55</sup> Holden, *Book Talk on Surviving Southampton*

<sup>56</sup> Hansberry, *Young, Gifted, and Black*, 18



her father and mother not being capable of giving love for love's sake because their relationship with her and her siblings was utilitarian in nature.<sup>57</sup> This unresolved familial trauma translated into Lorraine's adulthood, as it was hard for her to exist outside of her writings. This internal disconnect made it difficult for her to explore the fluidity of her own humanity, but it pushed her into aggressively fighting for the rights and lives of the Black people that she loved so dearly. This same sentiment weighed on the shoulders of Nina, but more so with the reception of her music. Her classically trained piano skills made her an outlier in the world of Jazz from the very beginning of her career. Her presentation and style of singing removed her from the stereotype of a Jazz singer. She did not want to be seen as just a Jazz singer but as a Black classical piano player who sang Jazz. Her uncanny abilities as a pianist placed her in rooms that were mostly white and/or masculine by nature. This longing for freedom drove them both into a militant state of being. With their art and their position as Black artists, they propelled themselves into the Civil Rights movement; they did not wait for the United States to fix their mistakes. To Nina, freedom is no fear<sup>58</sup> and for Lorraine, the charge of impatience is simply unbearable.<sup>59</sup> Their actions and involvement with the Civil Rights Movement addressed the problems of the day through a radical and feminist lens, questioning the tactics of the nonviolent male leaders of the movement and using their Black celebrity status to present their viewpoint to a plethora of audiences.

Lorraine pushed Nina into the movement, suggesting to Nina that even she could get involved with politics.<sup>60</sup> Along with Lorraine's adamant coaxing, the recent events of the early 1960s enraged Nina. The assassination of Medgar Evers in the summer of 1963 and the horrific

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 17

<sup>58</sup> Rodis, *Nina: A Historical Perspective*

<sup>59</sup> Hansberry, "The Black Revolution and White Backlash"

<sup>60</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine*, 130

bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church that killed four little girls in September of the same year inspired Nina to write “Mississippi Goddam.” This became her first Civil Rights song, and it was met with admiration and disgust. Advertisements from that year onward criticized Nina for performing the song. One reviewer wrote of her performance, “When you pay to see and listen to a jazz concert, I don’t think it should end up as a political party for CORE”.<sup>61</sup> Some reviewers resorted to calling the protest song raucous and kooky, but Nina did not care.<sup>62</sup> She recalled her initial feelings after the 16th Street Baptist church bombing saying “When they killed those children is when I said, I have to start using my talent to help Black people.”<sup>63</sup> For her, she could not just sing “I Love You, Porgy” and not address the issues that affected her Black listeners. Despite her label and her husband’s anti-protest sentiments, Nina continued to perform these songs. The politically charged lyrics of “Mississippi Goddam” asserted her anger, and challenged the conservative perspective of the movement at that time. “Hound dogs on my trail; School children sitting in jail. Black cat cross my path; I think every day's gonna be my last...Don't tell me; I tell you; Me and my people just about due; I've been there so I know. They keep on saying "Go slow!" But that's just the trouble.”<sup>64</sup> “Mississippi Goddam” started her transformation from a Black classical piano player who sang Jazz to an afrocentric revolutionary.

Throughout the sixties, Nina’s protest of white supremacy continued through her dress, lyrics, and activities. She mocked and questioned the role of nonviolence and respectability politics in the movement. “They keep on saying “Go Slow!” But that’s just the trouble.”<sup>65</sup> She did not agree with the antics and ideals of the nonviolence coalition of the Civil Rights

Movement. The song “Backlash Blues” released in 1967 and showed similar sentiments against

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<sup>61</sup> Valley Times, “Review”

<sup>62</sup> Hadlock, “Meet Nina”

<sup>63</sup> Nina Simone, *Sinnerman* (New York, Philips Records, 1965), [Nina Simone - Sinnerman Lyrics | AZLyrics.com](https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/ninasimone/sinnerman.html)

<sup>64</sup> Simone, Nina. Mississippi Goddam. MP3. s.n., 1963.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*

discrimination towards Black people in America. “You raise my taxes, freeze my wages and send my son to Vietnam. You give me second-class houses and second-class schools. Do you think that all colored folks are just second-class fools?”<sup>66</sup> Written by Langston Hughes before his death in May of 1967, the song spoke out against the Vietnam War and the racist white supremacist policies of Lyndon B. Johnson’s America.

Nina often alluded to her church roots to create a cultural bridge with her Black listeners. Along with singing about revolution and protesting the illicit actions of America, Nina’s live performances displayed her appreciation for Black American culture, and through her appearance, she cultivated a connection to her African roots as well. One song in particular, “Sinnerman”, reflected her mother’s experience in revival meetings. Nina sings of the sinnerman not finding relief for his sins and the Lord would not help him. “He [the Lord] said, “Go to the devil” All on that day So I ran to the devil, he was waiting.”<sup>67</sup> This portrayal of judgment day could be easily seen as Nina alluding to the waiting punishment for those who projected harm and ill will towards the Black community. In her performance of “I Wish I Knew How It Would Be to Be Free”, Nina’s voice rang and her playing reminisced that of Baptist tent revivals. The crowd carried the beat as Nina would leave the piano and dance freely.<sup>68</sup> She conversed with the crowd through music and dance. The rawness and intensity of her vocals spoke to her desire to see a world where Black people could be free and fearless.

Her songs regarding Black women vocalized a form of radical feminism that elevated the experiences of Black women domestic workers, and like Hansberry, she also challenged the eurocentric social values that were placed on Black women. Her song “Pirate Jenny” describes a woman calling for the murder of all the gentlemen as she rides on a Black freighter. “And they’re

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<sup>66</sup> Simone, Nina. Backlash Blues. MP3. s.n., 1967

<sup>67</sup> Light, *What Happened, Miss Simone*, 97

<sup>68</sup> Rodis, *Nina: A Historical Perspective*

bringin' em [the gentlemen] to me. Askin' me "Kill them now, or later?" ... Then they pile up the bodies And I'll say "That'll learn ya!" And the ship The Black Freighter disappears out to sea and on it is me."<sup>69</sup> The call to destroy the agents of racism and White supremacy is represented in this song. Other protest songs such as "Sinnerman", "I Wish I Knew How It Would Be to Be Free", and her rendition of the Billie Holiday classic, "Strange Fruit" positioned Nina as a new voice of protest that highlighted the conditions of Black women. Pete Townshend recalls Nina as towering and formidable, describing her as the first true music industry radical feminist.<sup>70</sup>

One of her most famous songs entitled "Four Women" debuted in 1966. Through the course of this song, Nina is sharing the stories of four different Black women who have been troubled and ignored by means of racism, colorism, and eurocentric beauty standards. Nina wanted to share a song that highlighted the history, beauty, and complexity of the Black woman's experience. The unique and multifaceted characters of this song challenged the monolithic view of the Black woman and presented the idea that all these women are valuable and cannot be defined by worlds that do not understand their existence. To Nina's surprise, many Black radio stations banned the song, and for some listeners, it was a song that went over their heads.<sup>71</sup>

This song portrayed four archetypes of the Black woman experience. The mammy ("Aunt Sarah"), the mulatto ("Saffronia"), the Jezebel ("Sweet Thing"), and the revolutionary ("Peaches") prescribed negative connotations against Black women and their existence. Nina intended to reclaim these tropes as beautiful examples of Black women, reclaiming their bodies and redefining their existence as one of pride and not shame. "The women in the song are black, but their skin tones range from light to dark and their ideas of beauty and their own importance

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<sup>69</sup> Simone, Nina. *Pirate Jenny*. MP3. s.n., 1963

<sup>70</sup> Light, *What Happened, Miss Simone*, 119

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 135

are deeply influenced by that. All the song did was to tell what entered the minds of most black women in America when they thought about themselves: their complexions, their hair—straight, kinky, natural, which?—and what other women thought of them. Black women didn't know what the hell they wanted because they were defined by things they didn't control, and until they had the confidence to define themselves they'd be stuck in the same mess forever."<sup>72</sup> The use of "I am" signifies announcement and proclamation. It is a term used by an individual stating their own identity and power. Nina's choice to use "I am" announced power and a declaration of self. Despite accusations of being offensive towards Black women, this song provided Black women with the power to stand firmly in their existence and proclaim that their self-worth trumps the dissatisfactions of the world. "Four Women" embraced the nuances and beauty of the Black woman connecting it to Black women's liberation.

A new movement emerged in the midst of the nonviolent campaign of the Civil Rights Movement. The Black Power movement emerged in June of 1966 as Kwame Ture (then Stokely Carmichael) invoked a crowd in Mississippi with the famous phrase "Black Power." A few months later, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale started the Black Panther party (BPP). This movement projected ideas of Black radicalism, nationalism, and embracing the beauty of the Black body, as seen through the "Black is Beautiful" campaign. This movement was inspired by the 1962 Kwame Braithwaite's fashion show of the same name and his photographs of Black men and women embracing their natural selves. Nina proclaims and delivers that same message in her presentation on stage. In one interview, Nina sees it as her duty to "make them [Black People] curious enough or persuade them, by hook or crook, to get more aware of themselves and where they came from and what they are into and what is already there, and just to bring it

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<sup>72</sup> Simone. *I Put a Spell on You*. 117

out. This is what compels me to compel them and I will do it by whatever means necessary.”<sup>73</sup>

The blackness that she speaks of is presented in her African attire, her hairstyles of Zulu Topknots and Edamburu, her dances, and her lyrics. Her ultra-Black agenda and presentation embraced the new identity of the “Black is Beautiful” campaign and provided Black women with an example of unapologetic confidence and integrity.<sup>74</sup>

Lorraine and Nina expanded the ideals of Black feminism by presenting their work and themselves as vessels of protest. Both women contested the Eurocentric beauty standards by presenting themselves and the characters of their work as individuals of societal disobedience. Lorraine’s politics highlighted her radicalism, and Nina continued the fight through her involvement with the Black liberation movements of the 60s and 70s after Lorraine’s death. During this time, Nina befriended Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, becoming more militant in her music and appearance.<sup>75</sup> Unlike the “radical obedience” of the Black feminists before them, Nina and Lorraine forged themselves as actors in the movement. With their art and influence, they recreated the voice of the Black woman by projecting words of resilience, honesty, and community. Despite Lorraine and Nina’s great strides to advocate for Black rights, their queerness placed them in a particular realm of “radical obedience”; they did not have enough social space or support to fight for their queerness and their Blackness. At that time, Nina and Lorraine needed to prioritize overcoming the oppressions of Blackness because the internal and external dangers of coming out during the 1950s and 1960s exceeded the freedom of being their authentic selves.

#### IV. Enter the Warrior Lesbian Poet

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<sup>73</sup> Simone. *That Blackness* (n.d.), Youtube

<sup>74</sup> The Zulu Topknots and Edamburu are traditional African hairstyles worn by Nina Simone in her performance. Zulu Topknots are commonly worn by the Zulu people of Southern Africa and Edamburu or Braided crown is commonly worn by women of the Mangbetu in the Congo region.

<sup>75</sup> Simone. *I Was Never a Nonviolent Person* from “Madame Nina Simone: La Legende,” (1992), Youtube.

“I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.”<sup>76</sup> Audre Lorde delivers the paper “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.” in 1977 at the Lesbians and Literature panel at the Modern Language Association. To her, silence did not equal justice but negligence. Silence did nothing to change the direction of situations but left them at a standstill. Silence could not save you because your thoughts and regrets would speak in the midst of that silence. Audre spoke of the resilience that empowered her since childhood. She could not ignore the differences in her existence and that of others. This verbal protest against silence stemmed from her mother’s fears of explaining racism to young Audre. Audre saw silence as death and remissive to the opportunity for change.

Born and raised in Harlem, NY to a family of Caribbean immigrants, Audre’s life mirrored that of Nina’s and Lorraine’s, as her parents showed aloofness and distance. There was no sense of familial love because her parents saw tough love as the method of choice in raising Audre and her two sisters. Respectability and honor were highly regarded in the eyes of her parents, as Audre recalled her mother telling her and her sisters to act like sisters in front of strangers (white people).<sup>77</sup> Audre could not follow her mother’s allegiance to silence and passivity. She found her voice to be vital and important for survival in this world, and she found poetry as her weapon to fight against those who wanted to tear down her house of difference.

In the years following her high school and college careers, Audre went on to work as a librarian in New York. During this time, she wrote poems and participated in the feminist movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the antiwar movement. Hughes commissioned her to write poetry for his *New Negro Poets USA* in 1964. During the progression of the sixties and

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<sup>76</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 40

<sup>77</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, 81

seventies, Lorde became more involved with the feminist movement and developed critiques against the second wave feminist movement that emerged in the aftermath of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*. Throughout her career, Lorde opposed the women's liberation movement, criticizing it as a movement for white, middle-class women with no reach or understanding of other women's struggles. In her 1979 speech, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", she argues that the white women who proclaim themselves to be feminists are using the same tactics to negate the positions and needs of other women to boost their own liberation.<sup>78</sup> Using the word interdependence/interdependency correlates with the theory of intersectionality proposed by Crenshaw a decade later. For Crenshaw, the idea of intersectionality states that Black women have been theoretically erased due to the lack of acknowledging the problems that are attributed to both their race and class. Crenshaw calls for feminist theory and antiracist politics of the 1980s to acknowledge the intersection of race and sex as it relates to Black women creating a multidimensional framework for all.<sup>79</sup> Lorde sees the differences in identities as strengths beneficial to the progression of the movement. Noting, differences are a "crucial strength" for women to come together as a unit of "empower and conquer"<sup>80</sup> To Lorde, white academic feminists must acknowledge their privilege as white women and humble themselves by engaging in thoughtful and intentional actions for the betterment of all women. Lorde's self-awareness of her own battles with racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia introduced the idea of intersectionality long before Crenshaw wrote her famous article in 1989. One of Lorde's speeches, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex" gives a

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<sup>78</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2020), pp. 110-114.

<sup>79</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (2018): pp. 139-167.

<sup>80</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2020), pp.112



precursor analysis to the term. In the first few paragraphs, Lorde addresses the differences between race, age, and sex, yet she states that “it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences...”<sup>81</sup> Years later, Lorde’s words would be reinterpreted as intersectional failures by Crenshaw as they relate to contemporary politics and Civil rights policies that fail to include Black girls and women.<sup>82</sup> Throughout the speech, Lorde calls out white women for focusing on oppression as it relates to their womanhood but ignoring the differences relating to sexual orientation, race, class, and age. To her, sisterhood cannot exist without acknowledging differences as Lorde explains, it “presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power”<sup>83</sup>

In addition to condemning the hypocritical actions of white feminists, Lorde addressed the suppressive views and antics of Black men and women when it came to Black lesbians. In her speech, “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving”, she addresses the self-described Black woman as a vital component of Black liberation, stating that Black women fighting for their individual rights is no threat to the rights and lives of Black men. This reflects a different brand of Black feminism that would emerge in the womanist and third wave feminist movements of the 1980s and 90s. She describes the Black woman of today as different from the black woman of the past, in that there is no concealing of thoughts and beliefs for the sake of patriarchy. Audre proclaims that the voice of the Black woman rings loudly in the face of white supremacy and Black sexism. She calls out the use of homophobia in the Black community as a distraction from the wrongs of racism and sexism.<sup>84</sup> Audre then voices

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<sup>81</sup> Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2020), pp. 114-124.

<sup>82</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “WOW 2016,” *WOW 2016* (2016).

<sup>83</sup> Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2020), pp. 114-124.

<sup>84</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 47

her concerns about the actions of heterosexual Black women criticizing the self-loathing attitude of Black women who continue to identify within the parameters of Black male acceptance and Black woman liberation. Towards the end of the speech, Audre recalls the traditional bond of Black women as seen in West Africa with the Agoije warriors of the Dahomey kingdom. (and even to an extent, the Black Baptist feminist theologians of the 19th century). Audre explains that tearing down Black women and Black lesbians hurts the movement in the same way that racism and sexism do. These oppression olympics between Black men and Black women is what Audre called a “prevalent error”, for the goal of universal freedom can only be reached through unity and not division.<sup>85</sup>

The two decades following 1960 saw a plethora of movements fighting for contingency and inclusion. Despite it being a central focus for Black Americans, the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power movement dealt with criticisms of being heteronormative and indifferent to the needs of Black women and Black queers. The Lesbian Rights movement began to recognize the tactics of the Civil Rights movement and apply them to their own purposes. This turn towards civil activism led to division with the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) as they slowly began to lose members who did not see the correlation between the Lesbian Rights movement and the Black liberation movement.<sup>86</sup> The Black feminist movement came out of the background as Black women activists involved with the Civil Rights and Black Power movement saw this as an opportunity to engage the public on the multiple jeopardies of race, class, and gender that were inherent to the Black woman experience while voicing their aberrations against the whitewashed feminist movement. As Frances Beale stated in her speech, “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 51

<sup>86</sup> Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 117-20

Female”, “Any White group that doesnt have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the Black woman’s struggle.”<sup>87</sup>

Groups such as the Black Women’s Alliance of SNCC and the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) sought to combat these challenges through the lens of Black women and wanted to push for more advocacy for Black women. Lorde saw that her identity as a Black lesbian mother did not easily fit within the ideals of any of these movements. She participated with the NBFO, but became more active with the Combahee River Collective which broke off from the NBFO. This group adamantly promoted support and provided a voice for Black queer women who were often silenced in the heteronormative spaces of Black feminism and Black liberation. Lorde and other members of this collective agreed and published the “A Black Feminist Statement ” that sought to fight against antiracist, antisexist, heterosexism and capitalist oppression.<sup>88</sup> Another group to emerge was the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gay Men in 1978. Lorde became essential to this group’s formation and framework as well. Her 1979 speech at a march for the organization projected that “lesbians and gay men have always been in the vanguard of struggles for liberation and justice.”<sup>89</sup> She aligned the struggles of lesbians and gay men with the struggles of all oppressed people, despite the differences in the struggles. One of her speeches entitled “There is No Hierarchy of Oppression” clearly states an opinion in which she chastises those who only fight for one particular group of oppressed people. She did not see identities as clothes you picked from your identity closet. The freedom of one could not come at the expense of the others. She called out those who only wanted to fight for Black liberation but not queer liberation and did the same to those who fought only for queer liberation and not Black liberation. “Gender oppression was not inseparable from other oppressive systems

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<sup>87</sup> Shetfall, *Words of Fire*, 153

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 234

<sup>89</sup> Lorde, “Audre Lorde Speaks”, 0:26-35

like racism, classism and homophobia”<sup>90</sup> The recognition of all of her identities as opponents of white patriarchy and supremacy created an intersectional fight that she continued until her death in 1993.

For Audre, the space to be a Black lesbian feminist became available to her due to the increased presence of queer Americans during the 1960s and the heavily publicized Stonewall incident of 1970. More organizations centered around queer life and liberation emerged, such as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), and Lesbian Activist Women (L.A.F.), and already established organizations such as the National Organization of Women (NOW) and NBFO included lesbianism and antihomophobia rhetoric within their establishments. She did not engage in the idea of “radical obedience” like Nina and Lorraine. The pressure of Black exceptionalism did not weigh heavy on the shoulders of Audre for her house of difference had to be protected at all costs. Her differences were her strengths and her source of power.

## V. The Performance

Reinterpreting this thesis into a scripted reading speaks to my medium of expression. As an artist, my interpretation of events, people, and concepts goes beyond what’s in the archives and what’s been written down as history. This thesis stems from not really seeing Lorraine Hansberry and Nina Simone fully examined as participants in the development of US social and cultural history. Adding Audre Lorde to this study gives an ending to my change over time analysis as Audre Lorde expresses her queerness with more fullness than Hansberry and Simone because of societal changes that occurred during her adult life in regards to the LGBTQ+ and Black liberation movement. With all three of these women, the choices each of them made

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<sup>90</sup> Audre Lorde, “There Is No Hierarchy of Oppressions,” accessed December 12, 2021, [https://uuliveoak.org/pdfs/worship\\_9-04-09\\_excerpts\\_no\\_hierarchy\\_of\\_oppressions.pdf](https://uuliveoak.org/pdfs/worship_9-04-09_excerpts_no_hierarchy_of_oppressions.pdf).

around their queerness speaks to not only the larger social movements of the period but also their personal stories and conditioning as Black women in 20th century America.

The choice to turn this 42 page paper into a script came from my studies of Saidya Hartman, E. Patrick Johnson, Katori Hall, and Ntozake Shange. Hartman's article "Venus in Two Acts" traces how the usage of Venus vilified the existence and stories of Black enslaved women. Navigating the lack of archival information around these women, Hartman describes her motive as an attempt to address the forced silences placed on Black enslaved women by addressing the pretentious use of Venus as a means to erase and dehumanize these women.<sup>91</sup> Hartman asks the question of how she can tell a story of genuine humanity outside of trauma. It tends to be the case with stories about Black people that these stories are riddled with pain, struggle, and trauma. This hyper obsession with Black pain and resilience is consumed daily, from videos of unarmed Black people being killed by police to the regurgitation of mainstream civil rights stories such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Emmitt Till. In Hartman's case, she is diving into the heart wrenching monster of chattel slavery. She carefully searches through the information available to create a narrative that displays the whole story. Hartman admits to the possibility of fashioning a narrative around archival research, and with this, the goal is not to change the past but to widen the lens of the past to be more coherent with the women's existence through critical fabulation.

The method of critical fabulation is used by Hartman in both her article "Venus in Two Acts" and her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. This methodology takes the information of a particular group, persons, and/or event and develops a narrative that presents a holistic interpretation of it all. For her article, Hartman acknowledges her task as one that still demands unsolicited usage of the enslaved women but in

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<sup>91</sup> Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12, No. 2: 2

realizing her shortcomings, Hartman engages with the fact that her writing and personal connection to the idea of Venus remain at a historical standstill between hope and bitter reality as it relates to the Black woman experience.

E. Patrick Johnson's one man performance of his oral history collection *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* uses the methods of co-performance and critical performance ethnography. In gathering these stories, the men that Johnson interviewed shared their personal experiences, and the vulnerability of it all could not be tarnished by academic invasiveness. Johnson writes that this project "demands that the researcher not only be conscious of his/her privilege, but also uphold an ethos of social responsibility toward the people being studied."<sup>92</sup>

Johnson shares that these interviews took place in these men's homes, front porches, and in their community. He could not ignore his privilege as a revered scholar to overtake the vulnerability of these men's stories. Likewise as a Black queer woman of the 21st century and scholar, I could not make this script through the lens of current Black queer discourse. There is a level of homage and respect for Lorde, Hansberry, and Simone throughout the creation of my script. Again, the notion of holistic Black feminism and taking into consideration all the sociopolitical and personal factors of these women's lives shaped how I approached this performance.

Ntozane Shange's work *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* and Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* are two plays that I studied during the writing of this script. Replacing enough with "enuf" pays homage to Ntozake Shange's work *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. Shange's collection of poems premiered in 1976, aligning her with Lorraine Hansberry as the second Black woman to have a play on Broadway.<sup>93</sup> Shange's work embodied themes of Black Feminist thought such as

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<sup>92</sup> Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 10

<sup>93</sup> Lamia Khalil Hammad. "Black Feminist Discourse of Power in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 3,2 (2011): pp.258

self realization, self respect, and integrity. The characters of this choreopoem struggled with the trials and tribulations of Black womanhood in the mid-20th century. Topics such as domestic violence, sexual assault, abortion, and self image are included within the dialogue of these poems. Shange's characters speak on these topics to reclaim their agency and emerge from these traumatic events as Black women who will not be defined by the actions and thoughts of men but instead, are worthy and valid in their own identities. Her intention focused on celebrating Black women for just existing.<sup>94</sup>This body of work illustrates a feature of Black feminism that has reverberated throughout its existence: the push to fight against patriarchy, white supremacy, and its byproducts by establishing our agency and validity as Black women. My script and interpretation of Hansberry, Simone, and Lorde's journey as Black queer women tackle the importance of agency and the longing to exist. With Hansberry and Simone, the triumph is not fulfilled in the same way as with Lorde when it comes to their queerness, but all three of these women and their artistic contributions add to the timeline of Black feminism, furthering the existence of queerness within the movement.

Katori Hall's reimagining of King's last night on earth in her play *The Mountaintop* reinterprets Martin Luther King Jr. as a human with flaws and not as the godlike crusader of Civil Rights that we have come to know him as. Similarly to Hartman, Hall uses the information that is available to her to conjure a story that reflects on King's fears, shortcomings, hopes, and dreams.<sup>95</sup> Unknowingly, Hall's usage of Hartman's methodology of critical fabulation does not make a mockery of King nor attempt to rewrite history, but it is written in a way to repurpose King as a man of complexity. With Hansberry, Simone, and Lorde, I am not taking away their contributions to Black feminism and culture; I am presenting a holistic interpretation of their

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 265.

<sup>95</sup> *Amsterdam News*, "Triumphant playwright Katori Hall talks about 'The Mountaintop,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, November 28, 2011, 2.

queerness and how they maneuvered through their experiences. Their multiple identities as well as their social conditioning and personal decisions influenced how queerness shaped their personhood.

## VI. Conclusion

The works and lives of Lorraine, Nina, and Audre share a common thread. Their backgrounds and stories of familial detachment speak to the ideas of Black exceptionalism and generational trauma. Their mothers' aloofness influenced their own self worth and social interactions. While this is not a sociological paper in nature, the historical background of their lives also played a factor in who these women became. Using a holistic Black feminist praxis, the analysis of each woman's social environment can provide a deeper understanding of their politics. Being an out Black queer woman in the 1950s and 1960s equaled suicide. From McCarthyism to racial exile, the space to be publicly out as lesbian came with social costs and even death. This triple jeopardy engulfed them in loneliness but incited a power within to fight for Black feminism and Black liberation. Nina and Lorraine's form of radical obedience pushed the ideas of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements to new audiences. Through their art, they projected a sense of pride and self respect for Black women and their bodies.

Audre's childhood and adolescence mimicked Nina's and Lorraine's but she decided to speak in all of her identities and dwell in that house of difference. Her activism in the Civil Rights Movement is in the background of her activist career; she wrote poems and marched in the March on Washington in 1963 but her criticism of the second wave feminism movement of the 1960s–80s solidified her position as a Black feminist poet. She did not have to pick a struggle; she did not have to engage in the radical obedience tactics used by the Black feminists before her. She participated in politics as a Black lesbian feminist poet due to queerness



becoming more active in the public eye and the unfortunate downturn of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Her poems and speeches provided a new language and framework that would be continued by the likes of Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill-Collins, and Melissa Harris-Perry. Lorraine, Nina, and Audre engaged with Black feminism in their own ways, and their individual queerness gave them another source of difference to relate to. Whether in hiding or loud and proud, their art presented truth and identity, creating intellectual bridges between disciplines and allowing for conversations between scholars and non-scholars to flourish.

## VII. The Script

### Thesis Performance

Inspired by E. Patrick Johnson's *Pouring Tea: Black Gay Men of the South Tell Their Stories* and Ntozane Shange's *For colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*, this adaptation of my 2023 paper "When Hiding isn't Enuf: How does the Expression of Queerness within Black Feminism Change Over Time?" is a combination of historical analysis, performance studies, and social commentary on the position of Queerness within the realm of Black Feminism. The art and careers of Lorraine Hansberry, Nina Simone, and Audre Lorde can be found within the backgrounds of the African American experience of the mid to late 20th century. Indeed, their work had a lasting impression on the ideas of self-expression, African American norms and politics, and Black feminism. However, the ways in which they engaged with their queerness speaks to the relationship between perception and community and how those lines began to blur once we reach the late 1960s and into the 70s, 80s, and 90s. These artists provide real life examples of how the presence of queerness changes one's perception of equality if their queerness is not allowed and as time progressed, the life and works of Audre Lorde explore the nuances of Black feminism and Black feminine identity in ways that Lorraine and Nina could not.

### Scene 1: Sun Dried Dreams

[Lorraine sits at the desk]

Tucked away in the Southeastern part of Greenwich Village, Lorraine's small brownstone features shelves of books and the homely atmosphere of a desk, couch, and lamp. As her bookshelf collects dust, Lorraine sits at her desk writing a new play. She's wearing a somewhat baggy but comfortable black polo and corduroy pants. Her trash can is full of discarded ideas; she is frustrating all of her creative power to complete a page.

[Walks Downstage to Stand]

Lorraine:

How can I write what I can't live  
Betrayal of self for others approval  
Satisfaction  
Denied, hidden attractions  
made to die a lonely death

A brutal destruction of self fulfillment  
I am left to the devices of past lives  
The ideas of being Black and woman determined by a man

"Don't betray the family nor the race"

His words I write on the walls of my psyche  
Grinding me down

Scorching my soul until

It dries.

[Lorraine walks upstage to seat]

Scene 2 interlude: Cue audio clip of Studs Terkel from Studs Terkel Radio Archive from 1959 Terkel interview Hansberry highlighting *A Raisin in the Sun* success and Lorraine's opinion of playwriting:

Studs Terkel: A question is often, I'm sure, is asked you many times. You may be tired of it. Someone comes up to you and says, "This is not really a Negro play, 'A Raisin in the Sun'". I'm sure you've been told this many--what's your reaction? They say, This is a play about anybody. Now what do you say?

Lorraine Hansberry: That's an excellent question because invariably this has been the point of reference. People are trying--I know what they're trying to say. What they're trying to say, and mistakenly as a matter of fact, which I'll speak about, what they're trying to say is that this is not what they consider the traditional treatment of the Negro in the theater. They're trying to say that it isn't a propaganda play. That it isn't a protest play--

Studs Terkel: No message play.

Lorraine Hansberry: And that it isn't something that hits you over the head, and the other remarks, which have become cliches themselves, as a matter of fact, in discussing this kind of material. So what they're trying to say is something very good. They're trying to say that they

believe that the characters in our play transcend category. However, it's an unfortunate way to try and do it because I believe that one of the most sound ideas in dramatic variety is that in order to create the universal you must pay very great attention to the specific. In other words, I've told people that not only is this a Negro family, specifically and definitely culturally, but it's not even a New York family or a Southern Negro family. It is specifically South Side Chicago. That kind of care, that kind of attention to the detail of reference and so forth. In other words, I think people will, to the extent they accept them and believe them as who they're supposed to be, to that extent they can become everybody. So I was--it's definitely a Negro play before it's anything else.

Studs Terkel: We'll let that rest for a moment and we'll see it. That's it--we'll see it. But since you mentioned opera there was a--perhaps you were misquoted or I want to get--"The New York Times" quoted you. You spoke of a certain irritation in seeing plays, so called. Plays about the Negro, as such, written by people wholly removed--

Lorraine Hansberry: Yes. Yes.

Studs Terkel: From the situation. What was the crack? It was [rather?] wonderful--about "Carmen Jones"--something you said about it that was very funny.

Lorraine Hansberry: Well, as you know, I probably alluded to the fact that I've been struck that the whole concept of the exotic, you know; that in Europe they think that, well, the gypsy is just the most exotic thing that ever walked across the earth is because he's isolated from the mainstream of European life. So that, obviously, the natural parallel in American life is the Negro, you know, very exotic. So whenever they get ready to do something like a Bizet opera which involves the gypsies of Spain it's translated, they think, very neatly into a Negro piece. And I just think this is sort of a bore by now. That this is--it's very fine music but, you know.

Studs Terkel: The cliches are there.

Lorraine Hansberry: I'm bored for the cliches.

Studs Terkel: It's pretty worrisome by now.

Lorraine Hansberry: I don't think very many people realize how boring, aside from being nauseating, that stereotyped notions are also very dull. You know, I think this is said far too--not often enough that--it isn't only a matter that "Porgy and Bess"--I'm talking about the book now because once again this is good music, this is beautiful music. I mean this is great American music in which the roots of our native opera are to be found. Someday. But the book--the Dubose Haywood book--not only is that offensive, you know, it isn't only that it insults me because it's a degrading concept and a degrading way of looking at people but it's bad art because it doesn't tell the truth and fiction demands the truth. You know. You have to give [a?]

many-sided character. In other words, there is no excuse for stereotype. Now I'm not talking socially or politically. I'm talking as an artist now.

Studs Terkel: Aesthetically now [you're saying?].

Lorraine Hansberry: Exactly. That if someone feels that this is a lie, you know, because it's just one half of me then the artist should shudder for reasons other than the NAACP. The responsible artist.

Studs Terkel: Something you just said: art must tell the truth.

Lorraine Hansberry: I think so. It's almost the only place where you can tell it.<sup>96</sup>

Cue title of scene two on scrim slowly (powerpoint title)

## Scene 2: What Is Free Exactly?

Enter Audre Lorde who sits on the right side of the stage. Wearing light brown riding breeches and a light blue sweatshirt, Audre is in the mirror getting ready to go to the Bagatelle, a lesbian bar located in Greenwich village. She's contemplating whether or not she should go.

Audre  
[fingering through her afro as if she is in the mirror sitting]  
Our world isn't that much different  
Gay-girls  
Under the eyes of systems and identities  
It seems to me we cannot escape  
Systems and identities  
To walk, talk, dress, dance, kiss  
So many roles in that cramped space  
The darkness cannot hide the Blackness of my sisters  
Our queerness isn't measured or acknowledged by the world around us  
Some of us hide; some of us change  
We're all just acting  
Put on the clothes of butch or femme  
  
I stand to the side

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<sup>96</sup> "Lorraine Hansberry Interview," Interview by Studs Terkel, 1959, Video, 1:08-1:48, 32:25-35:01, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkFR\\_6DGJ3o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkFR_6DGJ3o).

Away from their eyes  
It just feels like a show  
Their power reverberates throughout that cramped space  
So many roles in that cramped space  
Fighting to be seen in that cramped space  
High heeled, combat booted, fast car driving, two timing,  
Pin up, wash and set, expensively dressed  
In that cramped space  
Freedom doesn't seem real in that cramped space  
Race doesn't seem all that important in that cramped space  
So why the roles, this toughness?  
Fighting to be seen in that cramped space

Working to find myself amongst the  
Systems and identities

Surviving the cramped space  
I am so tired of fighting

[Lights on Audre fade to black]

Enter Lorraine and Nina [walk downstage to stands] discussing their latest readings on Dubois and Marx. Lorraine holds her journal while Nina, lost in her own musical world, looks around carelessly while humming a melody.

Lorraine  
[tickles Nina with a look]  
Nina! You keep getting louder and louder!

[To the right of the stage, we see Audre. Sitting with herself, she clasps her hands together in anger. Wrestling tears, her journal sits open and she holds her pen against the side of her forehead. It's been two weeks since the bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL. She thinks back on her day and soberly remembers that another Black boy was killed by police. Even in the midst of all of this tragedy, It seems like Birmingham and Harlem aren't that much different after all.]

Audre: [Writing in her journal sitting]:

Blood stains on the asphalt  
Another Black soul taken  
Brown eyes closed as the bullet sounds off from the barrel  
Paddy wagon aggressive  
Hunted like animals

Another Black boy  
Young and hopeful  
Robbed of an innocence that was never his  
Shot like a rabid dog

Well, at least a dog could run  
Handcuffed  
He didn't stand a chance  
Paddy wagon aggressive  
Reminds me of stories from Mississippi  
*Within my eyes  
the flickering afterimages of a nightmare rain  
a woman wrings her hands  
beneath the weight of agonies remembered  
I wade through summer ghosts  
betrayed by vision  
hers and my own  
becoming dragonfish to survive  
the horrors we are living  
with tortured lungs  
adapting to breathe blood.<sup>97</sup>*

Blood stains of another one taken  
I weep silently for the boy  
Over and over again

Nina keeps walking around humming. Processing words into this melody, Her anger builds and wants to share this with her dear friend.

Nina:

Oh, I just can't get this song out of my head. I can't stop thinking about those girls. If they will kill children, no one is safe. Why is Black skin so threatening to them? Those four little girls, Lorraine. You got to be a demon from Hell killing children. GOD DAMN THOSE SONS OF BITCHES.

Lorraine:

Well, you know you can't go back to Porgy and Bess. They don't care about us. This moment in time needs your voice, your power, and your blackness. Their comfort is no longer your concern.

Nina:

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<sup>97</sup> Audre Lorde, "Afterimages," Poetry Foundation, 2023,  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42582/afterimages>

But Martin and the rest of those preachers down south wanna hold hands and pray for relief and they are bombing us! They want to play their game and it's rigged! These crackers are killing our children and Martin wants us to wait.

Lorraine:

Take all of this in, Nina. Write exactly how you feel and let your voice ring out. Let your truth be heard and let the cards fall where they may. These white folks continue to show us and like Jimmy says, "I can't believe what you say because I see what you do."<sup>98</sup> You have power in your stardom and your international reach with your music. It's time for your music to be for the movement. You're Black just like those girls and they aren't here anymore. We will never know what they could have done for our people but I know and you know that it's time for you to take a stance on this.

Nina,

You know, Lorraine? You are right. With everything that's going on, I just felt so powerless. First, Medgar's shot in front of his family and now these girls. I can't be swallowed by this...this depression. I'm angry, God damnit! I'm tired, Lorraine and this rage inside me is overflowing.<sup>99</sup> I just got to let it out and I don't care how anybody feels. GOD DAMN...I just...[lets out a long sigh] Those poor girls.

Lorraine:(Sweetly)

I want to hear the song.

[Nina is pacing inside of Lorraine's Brownstone. Two weeks have passed since the bombing and Nina is restless. Her anger makes her tired and she stops near the bookshelf. Stuck in this spot, the words to this melody of hers stings her soul. Slowly, she sits back down in her seat pulling a cigarette out and Lorraine sits close to her. Lorraine places her hand on Nina's shoulder. A worried half-smile draws across her face]: Singing acapella from "Mississippi Goddam"

[lights fade to a spotlight on Nina]

Nina:

*Alabama's gotten me so upset  
Tennessee made me lose my rest  
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam  
Can't you see it  
Can't you feel it  
It's all in the air  
I can't stand the pressure much longer  
Somebody say a prayer*

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<sup>98</sup> Jimmy was a nickname for James Baldwin. Lorraine, Nina, and James Baldwin were close friends

<sup>99</sup> Cohodas, "Mississippi Goddam"—Nina Simone (1964)" 1-2

*Alabama's gotten me so upset  
Tennessee made me lose my rest  
And everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam<sup>100</sup>*

Nina looks out into the audience wrestling with her vision of the 4 little girls murder. The lights have faded into a single spotlight on the troubled singer. In the background, we hear Dr. Martin Luther King deliver the eulogy for the four little girls

Lorraine [Sitting]

Wow, Nina. That song. I've never heard you sing like this before. You just sounded so free. Can my own words be that free? I wonder what that feels like. [Turns back to face Nina] Is it powerful? Hopeful? Happiness? What is that?

[Nina sits tall with a sly smirk on her face]

Nina

No fear, Lorraine. No fear indeed.

Lorraine

Freedom. Something we all desire.

Nina

We do and we deserve it. We should be free! With no fear! [Angrily, Nina looks back out to the audience motioning her arms outstretched] Look at what we've done for them! Because of them! [Nina's starts to ball her fists and breathing heavily] Why can't we be free!? Whitey out here alive, free, in love, in lust, no stress, no bully sticks up side the head, no bullets, no bombs killing their babies, and me? Why can't I have that? I just have fear. Why can't I be free, too?

Lorraine:

I wish I could give you an answer.

[Lorraine walks and sits at the desk to type]

[Lights up]

Scene 3 Interlude

Cue title of scene three "Lavender + Black = Me" on screen

Lorraine reads parts of her letter to Daughters of Bilitis from 1957

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<sup>100</sup> Simone, Nina. Mississippi Goddam. MP3. s.n., 1963.



*I'm glad as heck that you exist. You are obviously serious people and I feel that women, without wishing to foster any strict separatist notions, homo or hetero, indeed have a need for their own publications and organizations. 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 and sustained. Thus, I feel that THE LADDER is a fine, elementary step in a rewarding direction.*

*Rightly or wrongly (in view of some of the thought provoking discussions I have seen elsewhere in homosexual publication) I could not help but be encouraged and relieved by one of the almost subsidiary points under Point I of your declaration of purpose, "(to advocate) a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society." As one raised in a cultural experience (I am a Negro) where those within were and are forever lecturing to their fellows about how to appear acceptable to the dominant social group, I know something about the shallowness of such a view as an end in itself....*

*What ought to be clear is that one is oppressed or discriminated against because one is different, not "wrong" or "bad" somehow. This is perhaps the bitterest of the entire pill. HOWEVER, as a matter of facility, of expediency, one has to take a critical view of the revolutionary attitudes which in spite of the BASIC truth I have mentioned above, may tend to aggravate the problems of a group.*

*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. Thus, I agree with the inclusion of that point in your declaration to the degree of wanting to comment on it.<sup>101</sup>*

### Scene 3: Lavender + Black = Me

Lorraine is pacing back and forth from across the stage. She's wearing a striped turtleneck and some black slacks. She's holding a letter that is addressed to the Daughters of Bilitis. Her internal dilemma between who she wants to be and who she has to be makes her nervous. She takes in a deep breath and exhales. She repeats this until she reaches her seat. She sits down and searches for a pen. Writing takes her away from the present and she just wants to get out of her head. She begins to write down a list of things she hates and things that she loves.

Lorraine[still sitting at the desk]:

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<sup>101</sup> Lorraine Hansberry, "Letter to The Ladder", May 1957, <https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1003347887>.

April 1, 1960

I Like

Mahalia Jackson's music..  
Dorothy Secales' eyes  
Dorothy Secales...  
My homosexuality  
Being alone

I Hate:

My homosexuality  
Stupidity  
Most television programs...  
Racism  
Jean Paul Sartre's writing  
Not being able to work  
Death<sup>102</sup>

As she writes, her shoulders relax and she eases into a groove. [The rings of the phone start faintly and gradually get louder to take Lorraine out of her groove. As the rings get louder, the lights slowly come up] Lorraine walks over to the couch(your chair) and takes the call. It is Del Martin from Daughters of Bilitis.

[Lorraine Walks Back to Her Chair]

Lorraine [Picks Up Phone]:  
Hello?

Del Martin [offstage]:  
Hey, Lorraine. You told me to call today. How's it going with you?

Lorraine:  
It's going I guess. Just doing some writing until Nina swings by. I wanted you to call so that I could tell you and Phyllis something. Is she there too?

Phyllis [overhearing her name]:

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<sup>102</sup> Vanessa Willoughby, "This random list of things Lorraine Hansberry liked and disliked is delightful," last modified May 21, 2021, <https://lithub.com/this-random-list-of-things-lorraine-hansberry-liked-and-disliked-is-delightful/>

Hey, Lorraine. Yes, I'm here.

Del [chuckling]:  
Yes, she is. What's on your mind?

Lorraine:  
Well [Lorraine pauses and plays with the phone cord] I want to first say that I really appreciate what you two are doing for women like me. Your organization and newsletter gives me great joy in knowing that I am not alone but—

Del:  
But?

Lorraine:  
I just can't get any more involved with the organization. I can't risk anything [she pauses again] I just can't risk anything unbecoming to arise in the papers and I just don't want to jeopardize my reputation. I will still give money discreetly but I just can't do anything publicly with the organization. I'm sorry.

Del:  
It's alright, Lorraine. There is so much going on right now and we would not want to put you in a position of hostility. We love you and have the utmost respect for you. You are one of the most intelligent and gracious women we have ever met and we know that you would do more if you could.

Lorraine:  
Thank you for being so understanding, Del. Tell Phyllis goodbye for me and I hope that we can all get together the next time you two are in New York.

Del:  
Goodbye, Lorraine<sup>103</sup>

[Lorraine hangs up the phone]

The phone call ends and Lorraine is alone with her thoughts, her desires, and her fears. She walks back towards her desk but can't sit down. Her mind is rattled with thoughts of shame, disappointment, restlessness, and anger. She picks up the list and throws it to the ground.

Lorraine (sitting):

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<sup>103</sup> This conversation has been creatively interpreted from Imani Perry's *Looking for Lorraine*. She mentions that Del Martin spoke highly of Lorraine and that they did interact with one another. (See citation number 5)

How can I write what I can't live  
Betrayal of self for others approval  
Satisfaction  
Denied, hidden attractions  
made to die a lonely death  
A brutal destruction of self fulfillment  
I am left to the devices of past lives  
The ideas of being Black and woman determined by man

[She raises her finger and points to the audience in chastisement]

“Don't betray the family nor the race”

His words I write on the walls of my psyche  
Grinding me down scorching my soul until

It dries.

Lorraine places her head down on the stand. She is exhausted and her face looks defeated. The door knocks and Nina enters. She is dressed in a Black dress with a red coat. She has just returned from a performance in Washington, DC. She walks in and sees Lorraine looking hopeless. She sees the fear and sadness in her dear friend's face.

Nina(Sitting)

Hello, Lorraine. [she sits down] I know there really isn't any point in me asking 'what's wrong' when it is all over your face. I just—

Lorraine [sits up and faces her body away from Nina]

I am tired, Nina. I am so tired. This feeling of loneliness. Emptiness. How can I be whole when I can't even be myself? I just got off with Del Martin and told her that I can't be associated with  
DOB—

Nina:

What's DOB?

Lorraine:

Daughters of Bilitis. They are a lesbian organization based in San Fran. I've written letters to them before the Raisin premiere and I—I just can't write to them anymore.

Nina:

Well, you do have a lot to lose if it ever came out that you're a—[speaks in a uncomfortable and scared tone] lesbian

Lorraine:

Well, I am Nina! I can't help it and you say it as if I am a criminal or something. It wasn't so long ago that you were at Trude Heller's. You act as if you never loved a woman before.

Nina:

But that was before the fame and we can't be out here acting immoral with all these eyes on us. We're not just artists; we're activists too. Are you crazy? You're the first—THE FIRST Black woman with a play on Broadway. You can't be a bulldagger like them white girls outside. We're out here funding NAACP events and working with SNCC and if it comes out that we're gay, it won't destroy not only us but everyone who has ever worked with us.

Lorraine:

I know, Nina but don't act like that part of you doesn't exist. Even if you don't let anyone else know, please be honest with me. I accept you for you. All of you. I just ask for the same when we're in this place because here, neither of us have to hide. My health is too weak to stay like this. I've spent my whole life pleasing everyone. This fame and money doesn't mean freedom and you know that. True freedom will not know me in this form. Maybe, it will know you but don't ever hide from me, Nina.

Nina:

[Holds Lorraine's hand]

Of course.

Nina wants to ask what she meant by her health being weak but she couldn't find the words. Nina reaches for Lorraine's hand and pulls her in for a hug. The embrace comes from a place of understanding and loneliness as well. Nina pulls away from the hug and holds Lorraine's hand again

Nina (Walks Downstage with Stand):  
How can I sing words that aren't mine  
Fighting and fighting for rights that only suffices  
for half of me  
Maybe not half  
more like one third  
one quarter

Prayer and congregation constricting notions of full identity

Lorraine pulls away and walks downstage right and then back to her seat

Lorraine

[pointing to the sky]

Don't betray the family [tapping on her arm aggressive] nor the race

Nina  
[Sitting with her arms outstretched]  
or the faith!  
Mother's eyes cutting deep into my heart  
So I stopped. He complained and I lied  
How can I sing words that aren't mine?

Lorraine  
How can I write?

Nina  
How can I sing?

Lorraine  
How can I write!?

Nina  
How can I sing!?

Both:  
How can they live and still be alive  
They don't know our fears  
They don't have our scars

Lorraine:  
  
The ideas of being Black and woman determined by man

Nina:  
  
The ideas of love I never knew of my own

Both:  
Shielded from pain for their skin makes them human.  
But, I have to choose; [Pointing aggressively to their own chests] I HAVE TO CHOOSE

Nina:  
Scorching my soul,

Lorraine:

Grinding me down

until

It dries.

Nina walks upstage to her seat. Lorraine lays her head on Nina's shoulder and the lights dim slowly. Lights slowly comes up on Nina playing To Be Young, Gifted, and Black on the piano. An audio clip of Nina Simone inspiration for to be young gifted and black.

Lorraine walks offstage as the clip plays

#### Scene 4. Missing One

Lorraine has passed away. Her brownstone is empty except for the couch and the writing desk. Nina walks in and begins to circle around the small space. She touches the walls and traces her fingers across the desk. A smile tries to emerge, thinking back on the laughs shared but grief takes over her body. Her knees get weak. Her mind is elsewhere but her body is here. Here in this place of beautiful memories. Holding back tears, she ends at center stage in an all Black dress and a veil that covers her face [On the stage, there will be one chair and stand for Nina and a spotlight shines on Nina]

Nina [Walks Downstage holding her head down]:

Would my freedom be free if i'm still hiding  
Missing my dear friend only she knew my battles  
How we talked and cried over the Negro problem  
I can't go back to singing what makes them happy

She had her secrets and I have mine to hide  
Another struggle to bear  
being Black in America  
Another struggle to stand for  
Being woman in a man's world

Is there room for my freedom  
Is there room for me  
I make room for two  
A date with Jim Crow

{She takes off her overcoat and reveals an African print dress.}

[Standing up straight]  
The strange fruit still hangs

And 'Sippi is cursed  
Four little girls wasn't enough  
Whitey wants us all dead

Would my freedom be free if i'm still hiding  
Missing my dear friend only she knew my battles  
How we talked and cried over the Negro problem  
I can't go back to singing what makes them happy

I stand for Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches  
But what about me?

Nina lowers her head again and lays some lavender flowers on the ground for Lorraine. Nina walks offstage. The spotlight fades to Black as "Four Women" by Nina Simone plays

#### Scene 5 Interlude:

(Voiceover from my thesis paper is overheard) *Lorraine and Nina expanded the ideals of Black feminism by presenting their work and themselves as vessels of protest. Both women contested the eurocentric beauty standards by presenting themselves and characters of their work as individuals of societal disobedience. Lorraine's politics highlighted her radicalism and Nina continued the fight through her involvement with the Black liberation movements of the 60s and 70s after Lorraine's death. During this time, Nina befriended Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, becoming more militant in her music and appearance.<sup>104</sup> Unlike the "radical obedience" of the Black feminists before them, Nina and Lorraine forged themselves as actors in the movement. With their art and influence, they recreated the voice of the Black woman by projecting words of resilience, honesty, and community. Despite Lorraine and Nina's great strides to advocate for Black rights, their queerness placed them in a particular realm of "radical obedience"; they did not have enough social space or support to fight for their queerness and their Blackness. At that time, Nina and Lorraine needed to prioritize overcoming the oppressions of Blackness because the internal and external dangers of coming out during the 1950s and 1960s exceeded the freedom of being their authentic selves.*

#### Scene 5. House of Difference

[Leave out one chair and stand for Audre. Lights up

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<sup>104</sup> Simone. I Was Never a Nonviolent Person from "Madame Nina Simone: La Legende," (1992), Youtube.



Audre walks into Lorraine's apartment. She is wearing a white button down with Acid washed blue jeans. Her boots reverberated around the almost empty apartment. She sits at center stage.]

Audre [Reciting a portion from Zami: A New Spelling of My Name]:

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different.

It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference. (And often, we were cowards in our learning.) It was years before we learned to use the strength that daily surviving can bring, years before we learned fear does not have to incapacitate, and that we could appreciate each other on terms not necessarily our own

My foundation lies in the words of my ancestors  
The makings of my walls connected through love and resilience  
I am the carpenter of rebellion  
Respectability, traditionally I can never

I am a daughter, a sister, a mother, a lesbian, a warrior  
This house is built on love and resilience (2x)  
A home that welcomes the shunned and forgotten  
A home that shelters the innocence, the different

For here, you don't have to choose  
For here, your whole self is worthy  
You are the carpenter of your existence

Welcome to the House of Difference

{Audre leaves the stage and lights fade to black}

Out of costume, I walk out and recite the last three paragraphs of my thesis. [A picture featuring all three women appear in the background]

Zion

*The works and lives of Lorraine, Nina, and Audre share a common thread. Their backgrounds and stories of familial detachment speaks to the ideas of Black exceptionalism and generational*

*trauma. Their mothers' aloofness influenced their own self worth and social interactions. While this is not a sociological paper in nature, the historical background of their lives also played a factor into who these women became. Using a holistic Black feminist praxis, the analysis of each woman's social environment can provide a deeper understanding of their politics. Being an out Black queer woman in the 1950s and 1960s equaled suicide. From McCarthyism to racial exile, the space to be publicly out as lesbian came with social costs and even death. This triple jeopardy engulfed them into loneliness but incited a power within to fight for Black feminism and Black liberation. Nina and Lorraine's form of radical obedience pushed the ideas of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements to new audiences. Through their art, they projected a sense of pride and self respect for Black women and their bodies.*

*Audre's childhood and adolescence mimicked Nina's and Lorraine's but she decided to speak in all of her identities and dwell in that house of difference. Her activism in the Civil Rights movement is in the background of her activist career for she wrote poems and marched in the March on Washington in 1963 but her criticism of the second wave feminism movement of the 60s-80s solidified her position as a Black feminist poet. She did not have to pick a struggle; she did not have to engage in the radical obedience tactics used by the Black feminists before her. She participated in politics as a Black lesbian feminist poet due to queerness becoming more active in the public eye and the unfortunate downturn of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 60s and early 70s. Her poems and speeches provided a new language and framework that would be continued by the likes of Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill-Collins, and Melissa Harris-Perry. Lorraine, Nina, and Audre engaged with Black feminism in their own ways and their individual queerness gave them another source of difference to relate to. Whether in hiding or loud and proud, their art presented truth and identity creating intellectual bridges*

*between disciplines and allowed for conversations between scholars and non-scholars to flourish.*

### End of Scripted Reading

Cue “Crazy, Classic, Life” by Janelle Monae

Actors and Crew come out and bow


Fin.

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