

Something Glorious to Draw On

James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry Now

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The proliferation of projects spotlighting the ever-vital contributions of James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry has been a source of optimism and inspiration amid all the angst, grief, and other ugly feelings the past few years have wrought. From the spellbinding reworking of Hansberry's *Les Blancs* at London's National Theatre in 2016 to the equally affecting revival of Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in 2020, theatre-goers, in particular, have been afforded rich opportunities to experience the vastness of Baldwin and Hansberry's dramaturgical imaginations.¹ Exhibitions like *Twice Militant: Lorraine Hansberry's Letters to The Ladder*, which was on view at the Brooklyn Museum from November 2013 to March 2014, and *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin*, which David Zwirner presented from January through February 2019, have served to shed additional light on the revolutionary work and complex interior lives of these pathbreaking black, queer writers.²

Baldwin and Hansberry were notably the closest of friends. Theirs was a bond formed through mutual respect and admiration for each other's intellect and artistry, as well as a love for the theatre, language, and, perhaps above all, black people. Baldwin reflected on the intensity of their too-brief relationship in "Sweet Lorraine," the essay he published in *Esquire* four years after Hansberry's premature death in 1965 at the much-too-young age of thirty-four:

We spent a lot of time arguing about history and tremendously related subjects in her Bleecker Street and, later, Waverly Place flat. And often, just when I was certain that she was about to throw me out, as being altogether too rowdy a type, she would stand up, her hands on her hips (for these down-home sessions she always wore slacks) and pick up my empty glass as though she intended to throw it at me. Then she would

walk into the kitchen, saying, with a haughty toss of her head, “Really, Jimmy. You ain’t *right*, child!” With which stern put-down, she would hand me another drink and launch into a brilliant analysis of just why I wasn’t “right.”³

As Imani Perry observes, “The friendship that grew between Lorraine and Jimmy is storied. It was both an intellectual and soulful partnership.”⁴ Perry’s *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* is just one of the many books to emerge in recent years that have served to expand our knowledge and deepen our understanding of two of the most important and influential writers of the twentieth century. Others include *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* edited by Michele Elam, Eddie Glaude’s *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Lessons for Our Own*, and Soyica Diggs Colbert’s *Radical Vision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry*.⁵ Striking about each of these texts are the ways in which they reveal Baldwin and Hansberry’s prescience and, indeed, the profound relevance of their work for our time. Glaude makes the case explicitly in *Begin Again*, asserting: “Ours, like the moments after the Civil War and Reconstruction and after the civil rights movement, requires a different kind of thinking, a different kind of resiliency, or else we succumb to madness or resignation. Baldwin, I believe, offers resources to respond to such dark times and to imagine an answer to the moral reckoning that confronts us all.”⁶ A similar thing might surely be said of Hansberry, who, like Baldwin, used her talent and craft to insist that another kind of world was yet still possible. Of course, what endeavors such as the Goodman Theatre’s 2016 mounting of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (which, in 1964, became Hansberry’s second play to reach Broadway), and Barry Jenkins’s 2018 film adaptation of Baldwin’s novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) remind us is that both writers left behind resources that have lost none of their urgency.

This urgency is brought into even sharper focus in Raoul Peck’s *I Am Not Your Negro* and Tracy Heather Strain’s *Lorraine Hansberry: Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart*, documentaries that reacquaint viewers with the incisiveness of Baldwin and Hansberry’s cultural insights and critiques.⁸ Premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016 and 2017, respectively, both of these award-winning films are significant additions to the ever-expanding body of biographies, exhibitions, revivals, reworkings, and reimaginings that have invited additional critical engagement with Baldwin and Hansberry as comrades, artists, and revolutionaries.

I Am Not Your Negro is as much a film about the present as it is the past. Indeed, even while Peck draws much of the voiceover narration provided by Samuel L. Jackson from notes, letters, and other materials—many related to *Remember This House*, the unfinished memoir Baldwin began writing in the late 1970s to reflect on his relationships with assassinated civil rights leaders Medgar Evers,

Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—he offers up a rich array of visual images that betray the film’s broader concerns with interrogating what it continues to mean to live as a black person in an unrelentingly anti-black world. The murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, which served to catalyze the Black Lives Matter movement, had not yet taken place when Peck began working on the project in the late 2000s. The film, as Peck observes, “cruelly shortens time and space between acts of police brutality in Birmingham in 1963 and images of the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri, after the killing of Michael Brown; recent images of protests over the death of George Floyd extend that tragic connection to the present-day.”⁹ In so doing, it also makes clear why so many black Americans have remained deeply ambivalent about what Baldwin often referred to as their “situation” in American society.

In listening to Baldwin reflect on the relationships he shared with several of the friends that he would outlive, one is reminded of how routine premature death is to that “situation.” Scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production or exploitation of a group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”¹⁰ Peck brings this troubling reality into devastating view by intersplicing photographs of murdered black youth—Tamir Rice, Darius Simmons, Trayvon Martin, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Christopher McCray, Cameron Tillman, Amir Brooks—with video of the speech Baldwin delivered at the West Indian Student Centre in London in 1968. “I know how you watch, as you grow older—literally, this is not a figure of speech—the corpses of your brothers and your sisters pile up around you. And not for anything they have done. They were too young to have done anything. In any case, too helpless,” Baldwin reflects.¹¹ The repetition of this violence, he goes on to intimate, is the consequence of the American people’s refusal to “face the fact that I am flesh of their flesh, bone of their bone.”¹²

When Baldwin fled the United States for Paris in 1948 at the age of twenty-four, he did so, in part, because he no longer believed that he could make a meaningful life in a nation intent on extinguishing his light. “I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem. (Sometimes I still do.) I wanted to prevent myself from becoming merely a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in what way the specialness of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them,” he reflected in the 1961 essay, “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American.”¹³ Baldwin would live off-and-on in Europe for the remainder of his life, with notable stops in France, Switzerland, and Turkey. France, in particular, would become a significant site for much of his writing. Of his time in Turkey, he was known to exclaim that it had “saved my life.”¹⁴ Magdalena Zaborowska’s

James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile compellingly explores the importance of Baldwin's stints in the country to his sense of himself as a black, queer writer. Turkey, Zaborowska asserts, "provided a haven where Baldwin worked on some of his most important, and arguably most American, works."¹⁵

Of course, even while the streets of Paris and Istanbul afforded Baldwin ample opportunities to fully explore and embody his signature gregariousness and, crucially, to work through some of the psychological blocks that sometimes hampered his ability to commit words to the page, the plight of black people in America very much remained on his mind. Indeed, in an excerpt featured early in *I Am Not Your Negro*, he recalls how seeing the photograph of fifteen-year-old Dorothy Counts being sneered at while trying to integrate Charlotte's Harry Harding High School in 1957 compelled him to return to the States and join the struggle for civil rights:

There was unutterable pride, tension and anguish in that girl's face as she approached the halls of learning with history jeering at her back. It made me furious. It filled me with both hatred and pity, and it made me ashamed. Some one of us should have been there with her. But it was on that bright afternoon that I knew I was leaving France. I could simply no longer sit around Paris discussing the Algerian and the Black American problem. Everybody else was paying their dues. And it was time I went home and paid mine.¹⁶

Among the ways Baldwin paid his dues was by documenting the experiences of black people in Jim Crow America and leveraging his relationships with the powerful to change those conditions. It was by no means an easy undertaking. "I was in some way in those years, without entirely realizing it, the Great Black Hope of the great white father," Baldwin observes in the film. It was a role he rejected.¹⁷ And yet, Baldwin perhaps understood better than anybody that "the story of the Negro in America is the story of America."¹⁸ He also understood that the perennial failure to reckon with this fact was at once dangerous and deadly.

Hansberry also understood this and said as much at a meeting she, Baldwin, Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne, Kenneth Clarke, and a few others attended with then-attorney general Robert Kennedy in 1963. The event is recounted in both *I Am Not Your Negro* and *Lorraine Hansberry: Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart*, though it is described in much greater detail in the latter. Baldwin recalls that the meeting was one of the last times he saw Hansberry "on her feet." And, while she was very much in the throes of her battle with pancreatic cancer, she was unequivocal in her demands for a "moral commitment" from the Kennedy administration to



Lorraine Hansberry and Nina Simone singing in a small group in 1963. Photo courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Collections.



James Baldwin with fellow activists at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 28 August 1963. Photograph by Dan Budnik. ©2020 The Estate of Dan Budnik. All Rights Reserved. Photo courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.

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address the contempt and violence with which civil rights activists, protesters, and ordinary black people were increasingly being met.

The overall portrait of Hansberry that emerges in *Sighted Eyes/Feeling Hearts*, which spins a narrative that moves chronologically from the writer's early life in Chicago to her storied arrival on the New York arts and activist scenes to her untimely demise, is one of defiance. While the acclaim that her play *A Raisin in the Sun* achieved on Broadway in 1959 led some to disregard her as an integrationist and, worse, an accommodationist, the documentary demonstrates the extent to which Hansberry remained committed to using her voice and platform to speaking truth to power—and creating possibilities to imagine and cultivate a more just world while doing so.

Hansberry first arrived in New York City in 1950, after a somewhat rocky spell attending the University of Wisconsin, Madison. While her first stop was Greenwich Village, she always knew she belonged in Harlem. "I live (to my total dissatisfaction) on the Lower East Side . . . would prefer to live in Harlem however, but it is too damn crowded in the ghetto for even those who want to move in," she wrote to a friend from her Wisconsin days, Edythe Cohen.¹⁹ She would ultimately move to Harlem in 1951 and join the staff of *Freedom*, the radical newspaper that Paul Robeson helped launch in 1950. It was during this period, Imani Perry reflects in *Sighted Eyes/Feeling Hearts*, that Hansberry "enters the world of the Black left, who [were] not concerned simply with civil rights but also with economic rights—with the lot of the poor."²⁰ Hansberry expressed as much in another letter to Edythe, explaining: "Quite simply and quietly as I know how to say it: I am sick of poverty, lynching, stupid wars, and the universal maltreatment of my people and obsessed with a rather desperate desire for a new world for me and my brothers."²¹ Hansberry's tenure at *Freedom* would prove formative. In addition to bringing her into community with notable activists like Robeson, Louis Burnham, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alice Childress, and Eslanda Goode Robeson, it also granted her space to articulate her radical race, class, gender, and anti-imperialist politics. It also helped reaffirm her desire to transition away from journalism to writing fiction.

Hansberry never hesitated to contribute to efforts that would allow a more nuanced story about black people to be told, and she believed that the theatre was an especially potent medium in which to wrestle with pressing issues concerning black life. "The theatre is such a way to express yourself, and to express yourself eloquently and with imagination. Not just with power, not just with the physical power of one's self, but with one's mind, one's voice, one's thoughts. You could fight whatever you wanted to fight in so many different ways," Lloyd Richards

remarks in the film.²² There was, no doubt, much that Hansberry was eager to take on in her playwriting. This is perhaps evidenced best by the fact that she was working on multiple projects in the months before her death. “1964 will be work, glorious work,” she declares in the narration delivered by Anika Noni Rose in the documentary. “I will finish *Sidney*, then *Les Blancs*, then *Toussaint*, and then *Laughing Boy*. The writing urge is on.”²³ Ultimately, her declining health would render completing all of the projects an impossibility.

Hansberry’s was a life marked by profound foresight and complexity. She was, as Baldwin insists, an artist and a witness, one who fervently believed that there was “no more dynamic combination a person might be” than “to be young, gifted, and Black.”²⁴ Hansberry concluded the congratulatory remarks she gave to the 1964 winners of the United Negro College Fund’s writing contest where she asserted the latter maxim by saying: “Write about *our people*: tell their story. You have something glorious to draw on begging for attention. Don’t pass it up. Use it. Good luck to you. This Nation needs your gifts.”²⁵

Powerfully, Peck, and Strain’s documentaries—and the abundance of other works bringing fresh attention to these two writers—illuminate just how much the nation still needs Hansberry and Baldwin’s gifts. To be sure, they continue to give us something glorious to draw on. We would be wise to take heed.

NOTES

1. I count both productions, which I reviewed for *Theatre Journal*, among my most transformative theatergoing experiences in recent years. See, Isaiah Matthew Wooden, “Review of *Les Blancs* by Lorraine Hansberry,” *Theatre Journal* 68.4 (December 2016): 661–663; Isaiah Matthew Wooden, “Review of *The Amen Corner* by James Baldwin,” *Theatre Journal* 73.1 (March 2021): 91–93.

2. *Twice Militant: Lorraine Hansberry's Letters to The Ladder* was organized by Catherine Morris. *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin* was curated by Hilton Als and featured works by, among other artists, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Alvin Baltrop, Beauford Delaney, Marlene Dumas, Ja’Tovia Gary, Glenn Ligon, Alice Neel, Cameron Rowland, Kara Walker, and James Welling.

3. James Baldwin, “Sweet Lorraine,” in *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black: An Informal Autobiography of Lorraine Hansberry* by Lorraine Hansberry, adapted by Robert Nemiroff (New York: Signet Classics, 2011), xi.

4. Imani Perry, *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (New York: Beacon Press, 2018), 118.

5. Michele Elam, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America*

and *Its Lessons for Our Own* (New York: Crown, 2020); Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Radical Vision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

6. Glaude, *Begin Again*, xxiv.

7. The Goodman Theatre's production of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* was directed by Anne Kauffman and ran from April 30–June 6, 2016. Barry Jenkins's adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 9, 2019 and would go on to garner many awards, including an Oscar for Regina King's performance as Sharon Rivers.

8. Raoul Peck, director, *I Am Not Your Negro* (Los Angeles: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2017); Tracy Heather Strain, director, *Lorraine Hansberry; Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2017). All subsequent references are to these versions of the films.

9. Raoul Peck, "James Baldwin Was Right All Along," *The Atlantic*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/07/raoul-peck-james-baldwin-i-am-not-your-negro/613708/>

10. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

11. Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*.

12. Ibid.

13. See James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 3–4.

14. Quoted in Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 8.

15. Ibid., 7.

16. Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, 97.

20. Strain, *Lorraine Hansberry*.

21. Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, 103.

22. Strain, *Lorraine Hansberry*.

23. Ibid.

24. Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, 262.

25. Ibid., 263.

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