BLACK WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS IN THE 60s and 70s:
THE SHARED VISION

Genevieve Fabre contends in *Afro-American Poetry and Drama*, that the 1950s saw the definite emergence of black playwrights. She points out that William Branch's *A Medal for Willie*, Alice Childress's *Trouble in Mind* (1955), Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), and Loften Mitchell's *A Land Beyond the River* (1957), are among the best known plays by black playwrights of the 1950s.\(^1\) In the majority of these plays protest is voiced, but violence as a solution is dismissed. The message in several of these plays, however, is that violence may soon become the only possible course of action. Mance Williams argues in *Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s* that "plays during the 1950s expressed a new form of protest, one that not only exhorted Black people to stand up for their rights but warned whites that Blacks would settle for nothing less than their full share of the American Dream."\(^2\)

The 1960s saw a more radical, militant theatre with Amiri Baraka at its head. Williams has
observed that "whether playwrights of the 1960s fell into the category of realism or naturalism, Marxism or structuralism, the prevailing mood of the period was that of revolt, outside and inside the theatre." James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* asserts that Blacks will remain victims as long as they depend on white liberals to free them from racial injustices. Like Baraka and Baldwin, Hansberry in *The Drinking Gourd* and Childress in *Wedding Band* express anger, disappointment and a sense of helplessness during the 1960s.

Though less overtly violent than Baraka's plays, the works of Childress and Hansberry are an outgrowth of the militant tradition. Their black characters are assertive, caustic and unyielding to the demands of the whites. Other playwrights of the revolutionary theatre include Sonia Sanchez and Martie Charles, whose plays advocate that blacks disassociate themselves from the decadant white society and its values.

A close examination of the plays of black women between the 1950s and 1980s reveals that, though they treat many of the same themes as black
male dramatists, their vision is different. Unlike their male counterparts, Childress, Hansberry, and Shange have brought to the American stage a multiplicity of images of female heroines and have not confined themselves to such limiting images of black women as immoral, promiscuous, wanton, frigid, overbearing, or pathetically helpless. Peopling their plays with heroines who are challenging and innovative, Childress, Hansberry, and Shange are fore-runners in the development of black playwriting and thus warrant serious critical study. A study of symbols in selected plays by Childress, Hansberry, and Shange reveals a shared vision: blacks must struggle together to secure political, social, and economic gains. What emerges as one examines the symbols in these plays is a conscious effort on the part of these dramatists to illuminate the condition of blacks in patriarchal America. In this "Theatre of Struggle" where battles are frequent, black resiliency and spirit of survival are heralded.

Labelled controversial because her works confront social and political issues in depth, Childress believes that all art is and must be
political. Articulate about her philosophy of art, Childress admits that "even when a writer seeks to evade all that is political, because it is politic to do so, that then becomes political."^4

Childress is a dramatist whose ideas are no less complex than the form she uses to express her thoughts. A writer who constantly evaluates her beliefs and craft, Childress has commented, "I try to bend my writing form to most truthfully express content to move beyond politically imposed limitations."^5 In Florence she skilfully manipulates tonal form to express content. Florence,^6 set in the waiting room of a small Southern railway station, is fraught with potent symbols and symbolic gestures that serve as signposts to the play's main idea. Childress' symbols point out that blacks must not turn over to liberals the responsibility of nurturing young, black dreamers but must encourage their children to fight to reach their fullest potential in spite of racial biases.

One important symbol is the signs that divide the railway waiting room. 'Colored' and 'White' signs hang over the doorway entrances to
each side. The division is further emphasized by the hanging of "Colored Women" and "Colored Men" and "White ladies" and "White gentlemen," over the restroom doors. Hay argues that the signs are significant because they are both signs and symbols and concludes that "they are signs because they serve to make us notice the situation; they are symbols because they help us understand the situation." The sign in this Jim Crow railway station are symbols because they point to the separate and unequal treatment of blacks.

Racial inequity is signaled by the very use of the words "ladies" and "gentlemen" on the restroom doors designated for whites. These titles, which suggest grace, culture, wealth or royalty do not appear on the restroom door for blacks, an implication that coloured men and women are a cut below white ladies and gentlemen. Another example of Childress' orchestration of this sign-symbol occurs when the porter tells Mama that should she need to use the restroom, she must use the coloured men's because the other one is out of order. It is illegal for Mama to step into the "White ladies" restroom.
So she will have to demean herself and risk having her privacy invaded in the coloured men's restroom.

The out-of-order restroom becomes a symbol of the black woman's historical burden in America, that of struggling to keep together the family that slavocracy plotted to destroy. Childress implies that the coloured woman, is the mule of the world. On another level, Childress' symbol suggests that the American societal structure is non-functioning for African Americans. Childress mirrors a society that is and will remain out of order as long as people are judged by the colour of their skin.

In addition to the obtrusive signs that bar whites and blacks from crossing lines, a low railing divides the waiting room. This railing serves as a physical and emotional barrier between whites and blacks and is the symbol around which the central idea of the play is developed. Conversations and actions are structured around this dividing line that reminds the audience that there are special limitations placed on blacks and whites. Childress moves both the black and white characters toward or away from this low railing to suggest
racial constraints. She demonstrates that the railway prevents both blacks and whites from crossing into each other's territory. On one level, the bar symbolizes the need for blacks to fight against racism and to cross the line to secure those privileges in life that belong not just to whites but to all human beings. On another level, the railing suggests that segregation breeds ignorance. Childress illustrates that the Jim Crow laws that were set in place to restrict blacks also kept whites from interacting with blacks. The point is that when whites are barred from first hand knowledge about blacks, they are forced to create stereotyped images.

Childress uses the railing to show that whites are barred from knowing blacks. She insists that blacks are victimized or oppressed by the dominant race because of this unfamiliarity with black life.

Hansberry, like Childress, believed that the black artist has a responsibility to tell the truth about the miseries that afflict the peoples of the world, particularly people of colour. Hansberry wanted a world where blacks could breathe.
To achieve this, she argued that blacks would have to involve themselves in every single means of struggle, even if they must "harass, debate, petition, give money to court struggle, sit-in, lie down, strike, boycott, sing hymns, pray on steps and shoot from their windows when the racists come cruising through their communities."\[^8\]

What was so extraordinary about Hansberry was that though she was struggling with pain, both from the cancer that plagued her body and the cancer that she felt was affecting American society, she turned her vision inward to celebrate the joy of living and struggling together. Hansberry was eternally optimistic and held the view that the world could be reconstructed. She was committed to capturing the human spirit that swings between despair and joy. Hansberry's tone in her works reflects this bitter sweet philosophy of life in America.

The symbolism of *A Raisin in the Sun*\[^9\] and *The Drinking Gourd*\[^10\] suggests that Hansberry, though she was angered by the oppression of blacks, she continued to believe in life's possibilities and people's ability
to "embrace the stars." She uses several symbols to set the tone of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Margaret Wilkerson notes that Hansberry carefully orchestrates the moods of the play, using highly symbolic, non-realistic actions when needed to guide readers through "a maze of emotional and humorous moments."

The play opens with an important symbol. The furnishings on stage symbolize the shabbiness, and the spirit of desperation of the ghetto. Hansberry once wrote, "we must come out of the ghettos of America, because the ghettos are killing us; not only our dreams, but our very bodies." The furnishings, which are described as "tired" from having had to sustain the living of too many people for too many years, suggest the weariness of the inhabitants of this Southside of Chicago apartment where roaches and rodents share the family's living space. The furnishings suggest two things: the struggle and the deferred dreams.

Like the furniture that sags, so does a little plant belonging to Mama. The feeble plant growing doggedly in a pot on the window sill represents the suffering and disillusionment that
Mama and other poor blacks experience when they find themselves in deplorable living conditions. Through much of the play, Mama tends this withering plant that suffers because the apartment has only one, small window, through which comes a minimal amount of sunlight. The paucity of sunlight represents the faint hope of the blacks to keep searching for personal and political freedom. Whereas the sunlight battles its way through the tiny window to get to the plant, the Youngers struggle to find an exit from the ghetto. Mama compares the plant's resiliency to the spiritedness of her children and goes on to say that the plant expresses her. That little plant is the symbol of hope for a family determined to escape the squalor and violence of the ghetto. Linked to the plant is the garden that Mama envisions whenever she thinks of the new house. Mary Louise Anderson suggests that the garden is a symbol communicating the idea that the house will be the place where the family can grow and flourish in better conditions.  

Hunger is often associated with ghetto living. Hansberry uses food to symbolize the
emotional or spiritual deprivation that results when dreams are thwarted. One of the early scenes centres around Ruth insisting that Walter Lee eat his eggs. Each time Walter Lee attempts to talk to his wife about his dreams of becoming an entrepreneur, she tries to circumvent the issue by offering him eggs. When Walter Lee complains that black men are yoked to a race of narrow-minded women, Ruth disinterestedly tells him that he should eat his eggs and be quiet. Later, when Walter Lee comes home inebriated because Mama will not give him money to invest in a liquor store, Ruth offers him hot milk. Lashing out at her, Walter Lee demands to know why Ruth keeps trying to feed him. Ruth despondently replies, "What else can I give you, Walter Lee Younger?" (79). Ruth cannot satisfy her husband's yearnings for excellence. So she tries to satiate him with food. Hansberry again uses food to suggest yearning or emotional hunger in the nickname given to Beneatha by the African intellectual Asagal. He refers to Beneatha as "Alaiyo," "One for Whom Bread - Food - is Not Enough" (52).
Ntozake Shange resembles Childress and Hansberry in her commitment to telling the truth. Her first choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* addresses the emotional and physical abuse heaped upon women in America. Shange incisively expresses her commitment to women and children, when she says: "There are dead children out here, desperate women out here, the sky is falling and I am choking to death, it has not always been this way." She insists that though there are millions of American women and children who are abused every year, the American public refuses to take responsibility for protecting them.

The tone of this work angered many men, particularly black men, but incited women of all colour from everywhere to hail Shange as a heroine and as a major American artist. Martin Gottfried of the *New York Post* describes Shange's tone in *For Colored Girls* as "bitter, funny, ironic and savage; fiercely honest and personal." Unequivocally, Shange's first choreopoem presents men as instruments of pain. Sensing the antagonism that her work stirred up, Shange admits that she is capable of writing "very pernicious, nasty, awful, terrible, cruel, vitally sadistic things."
Shange's perspective in works beyond *For Colored Girls* shows her to be multifaceted in her approaches to the world. She resents what she considers the systematic cultural attack on black people. She further attacks the view that black artists can be categorized and placed in a narrow corner.20

A gifted poet/playwright, Shange orchestrates symbols in *For Colored Girls* as indices to tonal form. One symbol in *For Colored Girls* that legitimizes women's vision is the array of colours worn by the seven women, including brown, yellow, red, green, purple, blue and orange. These colours of the rainbow suggest the diversity of women, their limitless possibilities. Shange uses the rainbow myth — presumably a pot of gold can be found at the end of a rainbow — to illustrate that these coloured women are moving towards something good, liberating, and dynamic.

Shange also uses the elusiveness and ephemeral nature of the rainbow to demonstrate the mystery of life, particularly of the lives of her women who have been marred by strangers and
acquaintances alike. There is a certain amount of illusory hope expressed by these women who do not always understand why they have been victimized. With names lower-cased, suggesting self-effacement, invisibility and a lack of self-confidence, these women battle the storm before they can enjoy the quiet of the rainbow.

Another important symbol is the tagging that occurs as the play opens. The seven women stand motionless until the lady in brown tags each one. This touching invigorates each woman who comes alive to share her experiences with the world. This gesture is significant because it stands for the networking that women must involve themselves in, if they are to have the strength to survive the blows levelled at them in a sexist world. The tagging also suggests spiritual and cultural communion among women.

Shange ends the choreopoem with a gesture that is more powerful than the tagging. The seven women experience a laying on of hands, chanting that they have found God in themselves and they love Her fiercely. This locking of hands represents a
cementing of spirits and sensibilities. These women celebrate their wholeness. They form an impenetrable circle that stands for the shield they must wear to empower themselves with the courage to begin again. This closure represents freedom to move beyond anguish and pain. Shange emphasizes that women must be about the business of nurturing and protecting each other, and that women must turn inward to the God in themselves for sustenance.

Dancing is another symbol that shapes tonal form in this choreopoem. Resembling a kind of catharsis, dancing is a freeing agent for these coloured girls. Shange's female characters also use dancing as a defence mechanism. Shange uses dancing in "Graduation Nite" to suggest initiation into womanhood. Choreographing both their vulnerability and resiliency, Shange portrays the spirit of survival of these coloured girls.

It is not surprising that Childress, Hansberry, and Shange chose to write about racism, sexism and poverty. These are problems that seriously affect the quality of life of African Americans. These playwrights have taken up the cross once carried
by black women playwrights who wrote before 1950. Whereas the early mavericks often spoke softly, these black women playwrights have lifted their voices in order to raise the level of consciousness in the "Theatre of Struggle." The authors' tonal form, shaped by the skilful development of private and public symbols, ranges within each play from disappointment to outrage.

REFERENCES:


3. Mance Williams, p. 113.


11. Hansberry, *To Be Young Gifted and Black*, p. 41.


20. Claudia Tate, p. 164.