

Revolutionary Homosexuality in *Les Blancs*

By Arielle Raymos

Les Blancs (premiered 1970, published 1972) was “the first major work by a black American playwright to focus on Africa and the struggle for black liberation” (Nemiroff, “Critical Introduction” 31). However, Lorraine Hansberry had begun exploring Africa and its liberation in her first published and staged play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959); she viewed *Les Blancs* as *Raisin*’s successor as it addresses the “widespread misinterpretation” of her most famous play (Abell 468). In *Raisin*, Joseph Asagai, an international student from Nigeria, is the vessel through which Hansberry introduces African independence as well as African heritage and its significance (or lack thereof) to African Americans. The theme of African independence is expanded in *Les Blancs*, as Hansberry believed that “the ultimate destiny and aspirations of the African people and twenty million American Negroes are inextricably and magnificently bound up together forever” (“The Negro Writer” 6). While *Les Blancs* is the subject of a significant amount of scholarship, it is not regarded as the “successor” Hansberry envisioned. The play’s 1970 Broadway debut was short-lived and received mixed reviews. Unfortunately, like its predecessor, *Les Blancs* was widely misunderstood by some audiences and critics, with *Playboy* theorizing that “critics generally sympathetic to black-theatre aims were...appalled” by the end of the play, which they purportedly understood as “advocat[ing] the genocide of non-blacks as a solution to the race problem” (Nemiroff, “Postscript” 133). However, the play is experiencing a revival because of the present surge of interest in

Hansberry and her work, as it has been staged in several theatres in recent years.¹

Generally, scholarship on *Les Blancs* focuses on its connection to its African socio-political lens (Effiong 273), postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon (Wilkins 194), its synthesis of African and European culture (Carter 31), and its connections to the American Civil Rights Movement (Abell 459). Consequently, several lesser-explored avenues, especially those cohering around men's same-sex and homosocial bonds, remain in the play Hansberry saw as her magnum opus. I am most interested in the relationship between Hansberry's portrayal of homosexuality and revolution in *Les Blancs*. Hansberry weds these two elements within Eric Matoseh, a mixed-race man and the youngest of the three Matoseh brothers, who is heavily implied to be in an interracial, homosexual relationship. Hansberry positions Eric as the character who achieves a revolutionary consciousness within the action of *Les Blancs*: by the end of the play, Eric's consciousness allows him to lead, literally, the armed revolution against the European settler-colonists. I argue that Hansberry's portrayal of homosexuality, specifically in Eric and his relationship with Dr. Willy DeKoven, is an important element with which to rethink Hansberry. It reflects her radical racial and sexual politics that are often overlooked due to the way in which Hansberry was read as "assimilationist" and "integrationist" due to the widespread misinterpretation of her most famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), as "assimilationist" or "integrationist."

¹ Recent productions of *Les Blancs* include: Yaël Farber's 2016 production at the Royal National Theatre in England; Gregg T. Daniel's 2017 production at the Rogue Machine Theatre in Los Angeles; and Melinda Wilson Ramey and Lisa Thew's 2018 co-production at the Sacramento State's Playwrights' Theatre in California.

While *Les Blancs* premiered on Broadway in 1970 and was posthumously published in 1972, Robert Nemiroff² dates Hansberry's initial drafts to the "late spring or summer of 1960" (Nemiroff "Critical Introduction," 31). She continued working on it until her death in 1965, "carr[ying] the manuscript with her into and out of hospitals" (34). Although Hansberry titled it as an "immediate visceral response" to Jean Genet's *Les Nègres* (1958), an absurdist play that implements a play within a play to explore racial prejudice and Black identity, the plot and characters are not reminiscent of Genet's play (Nemiroff, "Critical Introduction," 32). Rather, the title reflects Hansberry's concern that *Les Nègres* is "a conversation between white men about themselves" (32).³ Hansberry proposed that this one-sided conversation "would be nullified by a drama wherein we were all forced to confrontation and awareness" (32). As a result, interrogating the difficulties and effectiveness of interracial communication is a major theme in *Les Blancs*.

Any scholarly work with *Les Blancs* necessitates a consideration of Robert Nemiroff's editorial presence in its performance and publication. By the time of her death in 1965, Hansberry had written several near-complete drafts of the play. After her death, Nemiroff edited and completed the script used in its posthumous performance and publication. Scholars such as Adrienne Rich ("The Problem with Lorraine Hansberry") have pointed out the uneasiness with which they approach Hansberry's posthumously published work due to the lack of clarity surrounding Nemiroff's role, which includes his compiling and editing the

² Hansberry's ex-husband whom she named the literary executor of her estate. Upon his death in 1991, his wife, Dr. Jewell Handy Gresham-Nemiroff, took over. Her daughter, Joi Gresham, is the current director and a trustee of the Lorraine Hansberry Literary Trust.

³ Nonetheless, *Les Nègres* is a significant play in African American theatrical history: it calls for an all-Black cast, making it a rare opportunity in the late 1950s-60s for Black actors to play main roles that were not stereotyped caricatures.

“informal autobiography” *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1969). I believe it is important to acknowledge and reflect on Nemiroff’s role in the process of editing and publishing these pieces, especially his decision to withhold the homophile and lesbian-related documents from Hansberry’s paper collection⁴, and I do not wish to dismiss concerns over his editorial presence. However, Hansberry and Nemiroff maintained a deep friendship regardless of their marital status, and he served as an editor and sounding board for her writing throughout her lifetime. Rather, as Rich pointed out in 1979, a promising avenue for future scholarship would be to compare the different drafts of *Les Blancs* and its associated materials. A project such as this would allow us to work towards a concrete understanding of the specifics involved in Nemiroff’s editorial process rather than engage in idle speculation on his intentions. The care with which Nemiroff curated and collected Hansberry’s paper collection and the effort he went to make her work consistently available speaks to his main intention: to keep Hansberry’s legacy alive and available to all.

Les Blancs’ overarching plot follows the eldest Matoseh brother, Tshembe, as he returns from Europe to his homeland to participate in the funeral rites for his father, the deceased chief of the Kwi people. Tshembe struggles to comprehend the changes in his family members that occurred in his absence. Abioseh, named after their father, converted to Roman Catholicism prior to the play’s action and plans to take his final vows of priesthood in the spring. Abioseh’s conversion effectively allies him with the Europeans in the eyes of the Kwi resistance fighters (and even to the conflicted Tshembe), an assertion which is

⁴ Kevin J. Mumford’s work documents the fact that they were only released to him via written request in 2011. To my knowledge, these items are now integrated within Hansberry’s paper collection at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City.

eventually confirmed by his actions (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 61). Half-brother to Tshembe and Abioseh, Eric was fathered by Major Rice, a white colonial administrator. Not only is Eric mixed race, but Hansberry also implies he has a sexual relationship with the white missionary doctor, Dr. Willy DeKoven. Half-white and half-Black, Eric oscillates between each community, neither of which fully accepts him, before ultimately allying himself with the Kwi revolutionaries.

All three of the Matoseh brothers—Tshembe, Abioseh, and Eric—are between communities: African and European, indigenous religion and Christianity, Black and white, respectively. However, unlike his brothers, Eric's conflicted identity transforms into a sophisticated revolutionary consciousness within the play, leading to my interest in exploring his trajectory throughout. Setting up Tshembe's development as a foil to Eric's, the main plot of *Les Blancs* pays particular attention to Tshembe's struggle against being swept into the revolutionary tide fomenting amongst his people. In contrast to the future "Father Paul Augustus" (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 61) but distinct from Eric, Tshembe is torn between two poles: Europe educated him and is home to his wife and child, but Africa pulls on his increasingly tenuous ties of brotherhood and ancestral responsibility. The final scene heavily implies Tshembe joins the resistance, though it does not explicitly state whether he does. Tshembe's ambiguous fate is in direct contrast to Eric, who at the end of the play, armed with Old Abioseh's spear and shield, throws a grenade into the Mission and begins the armed battle for independence, leaving no question as to his allegiances.

Scholarship focusing on *Les Blancs* is numerous, but that which deals specifically with Eric's role in the play is less common. Along these lines, Imani Perry's analysis of Eric is particularly helpful to this analysis. Perry locates several aspects of Eric's characterization in James Baldwin,

Hansberry's close friend. She also positions Eric as an illustration of the way in which Hansberry "believed in troubling gender," as "valor, courage, and truth...[are] not limited to the idealized masculine man" in *Les Blancs* (143-44). Perry writes that "all three brothers are called to question their intimate connection to whiteness," which "is also part of the inheritance of colonialism, of slavery, of what it meant to be Black in the modern world" (143). Furthermore, Cheryl Higashida argues that Eric and DeKoven's relationship articulates that Hansberry's "critique of heteropatriarchal racial and national identities and...interrogation of traditional gender norms" is "integral to the play's anti-colonial nationalism" (75, 79). Both Perry and Higashida's analyses help articulate my overall argument about the connection between homosexuality and revolution in *Les Blancs* and how that link manifests in Eric.

Although he is not the protagonist, Eric's presence is significant in many critical moments in the play, supporting my assertion that Hansberry intentionally positions him this way to demonstrate his ability to achieve a revolutionary consciousness. In the play's opening scene, Eric is the first person Tshembe encounters in a scene that establishes both Eric's association with Africa as well as his fondness for European items, which work to signal his mixed heritage. Additionally, in an action that directly facilitates the main plot, Eric was the one who wrote to Tshembe in England and asked that he come home and visit their deathly ill father. Furthermore, Eric's parentage is set up as a mystery that journalist Charlie Morris pursues with great interest. Abioseh and Tshembe also infantilize Eric throughout the play, each assuming authority over him and judging his lifestyle and interests with derision; finally, Eric asserts his independence, assumes Old Abioseh's spear and shield, and leads the charge against the Mission, and thus, the settler-colonists.

Throughout *Les Blancs*, Eric is associated with Africa through his actions and dialogue, but the persistent theme of his love for European items serves as a constant reminder of his mixed heritage and what some characters interpret as his inherently divided loyalty. Eric is associated with Africa before any dialogue occurs: The stage directions note Eric is “a sodden, fairskinned youth in the late teens, in shorts, filthy undershirt and sneakers, and—incongruously—a clean white pith helmet” (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 52). Additionally, he is whistling “an African tune” and Tshembe, “hearing the whistle...sneaks up on the hut and joins in the tune” (53). He then “throws his arms together straight out over his head and claps three times in the Kwi “sign” of greeting” (53). Tshembe greets Eric traditionally, in the manner of their mother’s people. Though initially correlated with Africa, Eric is also knowledgeable of white European customs. While washing himself, Tshembe dries off with raffia (palm leaves):

ERIC. Wouldn’t you like a towel?

TSHEMBE. Raffia works up the blood better! (56)

Eric assumes that Tshembe has adopted European customs despite Tshembe’s excitement to return to his native customs. This scene also introduces a persistent theme throughout the play of Eric’s fascination with imported items—he is delighted at American cigarettes, whiskey, and a mirror imported from Holland. His interest in European goods is introduced early in the play to signify Eric’s internal complexities – he derides Tshembe’s European wife’s features and Kwi funeral traditions at different points. More subtle than Tshembe or Abioseh’s conflicts and portrayed using seemingly insignificant items and plot points, Eric’s affinity for European items also comes to signify his relationship with DeKoven, and thus, what Tshembe sees as Eric’s inherently divided loyalties. Nonetheless, Hansberry takes pains to emphasize Eric’s connection with

Africa in his first appearance onstage – through his customs; behaviors; items; and the tune he whistles.

Eric functions as a provocative character in the text due to his politics and his sexuality; both are heightened by the origins of his birth, which is set up as a mystery that journalist Charlie Morris becomes set on solving. Although the audience is initially led to suspect that the founder of the Mission, Reverend Neilsen, fathered Eric, the truth is revealed when Charlie speaks with Dr. Willy DeKoven, late in the play:

CHARLIE. Yes. Eric. Well...he is the father, isn't he?

Reverend Neilsen—with Abioseh's wife?

DEKOVEN. Yes...It was Abioseh's wife. She died in childbirth: the Kwi say from shame. But, Morris, it wasn't the

Reverend...it was George Rice. (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 116)

The fact that the colonial administrator, Major George Rice, is Eric's father is a dramatic reveal at this point in the play: the audience has witnessed several instances of Rice's derision and abuse of the Kwi people in his position as the head of the Mission's military outfit, which also seems to serve as their haphazard version of "law enforcement." Rice does not acknowledge Eric as his father in any way throughout the play, which is unsurprising based on his characterization.

The text is also ambiguous about whether the relationship between Rice and their mother, Aquah, was consensual or rape. Scholars identify it varyingly: as a rape exemplary of the colonizer/colonized dynamic (Carter 42; Abell 466); as an "adulterous relationship" because Aquah was married to Old Abioseh (Effiong 278); or simply acknowledge the fact that Eric is mixed race without speculating further (Wilkins 201). This indeterminacy is largely due to the lack of a concrete answer within

the text. However, subsequent details surrounding Eric's birth in the text support the interpretation that Rice raped his mother. Specifically, a conversation between Tshembe and Madame Neilsen (the Reverend's wife) reveals that the Reverend intentionally let their mother, Aquah, die while birthing Eric: "to him it was clear: the child was the product of an evil act, a sin against God's order, the natural separation of the races" (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 125). While embodying the threat of miscegenation, Eric also functions as a "testament to three centuries of rape and self-acquittal" (125) which I interpret as referring to both the individual case of Rice raping Aquah as well as the white settler-colonist's proverbial rape of the country.

Speaking to the "self-acquittal" portion of Madame's comment, despite the fact that Rice fathered Eric, the major's treatment of the native Kwi people is violent and emphatic—his administrative methods are built around his assertion "that authority in this colony has always depended on the sacredness of a white life" and he is prepared to do anything to protect that sanctity (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 100). Rice remains unapologetic for neither his heavy administrative hand nor the circumstances of Eric's birth and Aquah's death—a result of the Reverend's intentional negligence and inability to confront his own complicity in her rape, and a death Aquah's people believed was ultimately caused by her "shame" (116). In positioning Eric, one inherently divided due to his heritage, as the eventual harbinger of armed resistance against colonial power, Hansberry imbues his character with heightened significance: or, in other words, "the bastard child might be the one best suited to avenge the disinherited" (Perry 144). As the youngest and the literal product of white colonial

domination over the native African population, Eric represents the future generation who must grapple with the aftereffects of colonialism, even if independence is achieved.

Hansberry does not explicitly identify either DeKoven or Eric as homosexual. The play's treatment of DeKoven's relationship with Eric is mostly conveyed in character innuendo. These innocuous hints, and the fact that Eric and DeKoven "almost never share the stage," is a marker of what Higashida terms "the play's ambivalence toward homosexuality" (79). This ambivalence is the reason that Eric and DeKoven's relationship flies under the radar in most criticism on *Les Blancs*, but, as this essay attests, while Eric's mixed heritage is a key component in developing a revolutionary consciousness, his sexuality is also implicated within that development. The obliqueness that is characteristic of homosexuality in this play is particularly apparent in the most pointed reference to DeKoven's sexuality. Charlie interviews the female doctor at the Mission, Dr. Marta Gotterling, and she decidedly dismisses any possibility of a male romantic partner at the Mission. Charlie comments, "I take it that Dr. DeKoven isn't..." to which Gotterling replies, "Dr. DeKoven *isn't*" (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 84, emphasis in original). The exact word that DeKoven "*isn't*" could be many things—straight? interested in women? — but the consensus is that he is not open to a heterosexual relationship. This exchange, especially when read alongside suggestive commentary from other characters about DeKoven's relationship with Eric, support the interpretation that DeKoven is homosexual.

The most numerous textual evidence supporting reading Eric and DeKoven as homosexual consists of suggestive references: seemingly idle

comments with gossipy undertones revolving around the nature of their relationship. These comments begin early in the play as does the special attention DeKoven gives Eric, such as supplying him with alcohol. Eric is clearly an alcoholic enabled by DeKoven's gifts. This dependency is shared, however, as Eric "can't help it any more than" the "tortured" DeKoven "can help giving it to him" (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 50). When the white American journalist Charlie Morris inquires into DeKoven's alcoholic gifts to "the natives," he receives another oblique response: DeKoven doesn't "give it to the natives—he gives it to Eric, which is something of a different matter," and the stage directions indicate that Charlie "is, of course, confused by this" (50-51). Eric's alcoholism, read within the colonial power structure, may be a metaphor for the dependence of the colonized on the colonizer: Eric is dependent on DeKoven, a white European, for his alcohol supply. This dependency is also an innuendo for their sexual attraction; both men's inability to curb their impulses also refers to their romantic/sexual relationship. While the others seem to accept the existence of the relationship (or at the very least are not openly hostile), an interracial, homosexual relationship between a white missionary doctor and a Kwi man would likely be unacceptable to either the missionaries or the Kwi.

To others, Eric's mixed heritage and his relationship with DeKoven make both men susceptible to divided loyalties between one race or the other. For example, when the revolutionaries lead an attack on a Mission site across the river, DeKoven reprimands Rice for demanding identification papers from Tshembe:

DEKOVEN. Well, it would appear that you may now go protect civilization someplace else, Major! This particular "terrorist" has turned out to be a son in mourning!

RICE. I will hope, Doctor, that had you seen those little children lying in their own blood tonight, you might finally be able to get your sympathies in order. Whatever the nature of your attachments—*elsewhere!* (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 69)

Rice alludes to DeKoven's relationship with Eric and implies that their relationship inherently divides DeKoven's loyalties, a comment that seems particularly callous with the later-revealed knowledge that Rice is Eric's father. Admittedly, DeKoven's relationship with Eric may be why his understanding of the Kwi perspective is much more sophisticated than the other white characters. Though not making any revolutionary pronouncements, DeKoven's articulation of the conflict demonstrates the effect of communication between the races—something Hansberry sought to emphasize in this play (Nemiroff "Critical Introduction," 32). This instance of the theme is easily lost without particular attention to the underplayed homosexual element within the play and exemplifies the importance of examining homosexuality within the play. When read in this way, Eric and DeKoven's relationship serves as a foil to the relationship most scholars see as evidencing the overarching theme of interracial communication: Charlie Morris and Tshembe. These characters' heated debates on race do make up a large part of the play, but the two—crucially—do not reach a true understanding. While much more subtextual, Eric and DeKoven's relationship offers an alternative method of interracial communication and understanding, which can be seen in DeKoven's perspective on the colonial enterprise.

While both African and European characters express concern or derision towards Eric's relationship with Dr. Willy DeKoven, the relationship is not characterized simply as complicity with colonial forces. DeKoven is aware of the negative effects of his position as a white missionary doctor as well as the larger colonial structure his presence in

Africa sustains. In an early scene, DeKoven refuses to identify a Kwi revolutionary suspected of theft to Major Rice and stresses to Charlie that “there is a *war* going on here” (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 49). DeKoven regularly expresses dissent and disillusion with whites’ presence in Africa. When the revolutionaries mount attacks on white missionaries near the Mission, DeKoven argues against being ordered to carry a firearm, questioning: “Who will order me to *fire* it, Major?” before storming out of the room (70). DeKoven’s understanding of the Mission’s purpose is also markedly dissonant:

DEKOVEN. I came here twelve years ago believing that I could—it seems so incredible now—help alleviate suffering by participating actively in the very institutions that help sustain it. Oh, I have saved hundreds of lives; all of us here have. I have arrested gangrene, removed tumors, pulled forth babies—and, in doing so, if you will please try to understand, I have helped provide the rationale for genocide. (114)

The depth of DeKoven’s disillusionment has remarkable prescience towards Africa’s bleak future if the white colonizers remain. He also espouses that “the struggle here has not been to push the African into the Twentieth Century—but at all costs to keep him *away* from it” (113). Deftly engaging in ongoing debates on the manner in which Western countries aid developing countries, DeKoven’s position makes him starkly aware that his presence in Africa is part of a bigger picture. The Mission is a gear in the machine of Western imperialism, and DeKoven’s medical practice is an even smaller cog; both work together to arrest the post-colonial development of Africans, ensuring that they remain uneducated and dependent on white missionaries. Thus, DeKoven and Eric’s relationship is complicated when we consider it as embedded within this hierarchy of colonial power that intentionally cultivates dependence

among the colonized. Nonetheless, the play suggests there is room to negotiate whether the two men can truly be equals in a relationship.

More explicit than the oblique references throughout the play about the nature of their relationship, Tshembe's reaction to and discussion of Eric's relationship with DeKoven represent a major source of textual evidence supporting a reading of their relationship as homosexual. Eric, along with many other elements of home, has changed in Tshembe's absence. The changes in Eric, which Tshembe finds particularly disdainful, are consistently related to DeKoven. When Tshembe and Eric reunite, Tshembe offers Eric cigarettes:

ERIC. American cigarettes! Willy almost never has American cigarettes.

TSHEMBE: Willy—? Dr. DeKoven? He gives you things—

ERIC. Yes.

TSHEMBE. Cigarettes? Whiskey even? (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 54).

The brothers' discussion is rife with an underlying tension about Eric and DeKoven's relationship. Tshembe does not pursue this line of questioning further in this scene, but it becomes evident that Tshembe finds DeKoven's gifts to Eric particularly egregious. Like Eric's alcoholism, to Tshembe, the gifts represent another form of dependency on the colonizer. As Higashida writes, from Tshembe's "heteropatriarchal perspective," the "sexual violence of colonialism...appears to take a new form" in Eric and DeKoven's relationship (77). Tshembe is undoubtedly reminded of Eric's origins: he views their relationship in the same class as George Rice's rape of their mother.

Due to his "heteropatriarchal perspective" combined with the trauma of colonialism, Tshembe cannot comprehend Eric's relationship as

anything other than the colonizer taking advantage of the colonized. This tension is further evidenced in the scene when Eric asks Tshembe if Kumalo, the leader of the non-violent effort for independence, will “support the terrorists”:

TSHEMBE. When did you become interested in politics, Little Toy? Does your doctor whisper politics in your ear when he pours your whiskey?

ERIC. *He discusses many things with me. (Hansberry Les Blancs, 57).*

Tshembe’s suggestive questioning gets at another issue he has with Eric and DeKoven: as DeKoven is older than Eric, there is undoubtedly an issue of power and influence in their relationship. Tshembe also implies that Eric is not mature enough to form his own opinion on the political situation in the country in which he lives, a country Tshembe has not inhabited recently. Indeed, he goes so far as to call Eric “Little Toy,” implying that he is simply idle entertainment to DeKoven and nothing more, as well as re-emphasizing a sense of emasculation, which seems to particularly upset Tshembe. Responding to Tshembe’s infantilization and condescension, Eric emphasizes that, as opposed to others seeing him as a baby brother or a drunk, he and DeKoven discuss politics and current events as equals. Conversations about their relationship with other characters evidence a concern that the relationship between the two men is exploitative and manipulative; however, Eric’s responses emphasize that their relationship contains intellectual discussions and that the gifts are things Eric genuinely desires.

Related to Tshembe’s derisive treatment of Eric’s relationships and interests, Eric’s identities also shape his response to the burgeoning revolution. The unique facets of his identity result in a response that his brothers cannot fathom from their perspective. As the tension between the colonial powers and the Kwi revolutionaries heightens, Tshembe’s

exchanges with Eric become more intense and gesture toward Hansberry's synthesis of the complexities inherent in Eric's intersectional race, gender, and sexual identity. As discussed earlier, Eric's affinity for European items serves as an early indicator of his mixed-race heritage. His collection of European trinkets encompasses DeKoven and their homosexual relationship, yet does not equate to erasure of his African identity. Tshembe's anxiety about his own conflicted identity cause him to lash out over what he perceives as Eric's loyalty to his problematic white paternity, culminating in this exchange:

TSHEMBE. (*Picking up the mirror again and turning it about*)

"Made in Holland." Also from Dr. DeKoven?

ERIC. Willy.

TSHEMBE. Willy! (*Grabs ERIC's bag and angrily empties it*) ...A woman's cosmetics! So, Eric, if you cannot quite be a white man you have decided to become a white woman? (*Cruelly knocking the pith helmet from the boy's head*) And toys like this! What else does he give you to make you his playtime little white hunter?

ERIC. He is kind. No one else is kind. You and Abioseh were gone. (*Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 88*)

While clearly implementing stereotypical associations of male homosexuality with behavior culturally encoded as female, this is the most open acknowledgement of the homosexual relationship between Eric and DeKoven within the play. It also reveals Eric's situation after Tshembe's flight to Europe, the younger Abioseh's conversion to Roman Catholicism, and the death of Old Abioseh: he was lonely, isolated in both communities due to his problematic paternity. Tshembe repeated references to the West when deriding Eric's belongings—the mirror from Holland, "little white hunter," and Eric's pith helmet—call to mind the pastimes of European colonizers in Africa.

Tshembe attaches sexual innuendoes to the items when cruelly hypothesizing about how they are used, but he also connects them to the West, demonstrating a link between homosexuality and whiteness in order to, in his eyes, invalidate Eric's African identity.

While others perceive a divided loyalty in Eric, he is not conflicted when his people need him. He unequivocally chooses to fight for independence. In contrast, Tshembe's internal conflict between his loyalties—Africa or Europe—is not explicitly resolved by the end of the play. When summoned to the council of elders in order to assume leadership of the independence movement after his father's passing, Tshembe refuses to answer the summons (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 94). Through Eric, Hansberry suggests neither neutrality nor non-violent tactics will succeed in the fight for independence. In contrast to Tshembe, Eric answers the call to arms: as "several AFRICANS rush across stage and off. ERIC is among them. He enters hurriedly and reaches for the shield of old Abioseh" (107). His brothers skeptically question his actions, but the council of elders summons Eric to fight. He reveals that "they have asked me to take the oath" to join the revolutionary forces, and that "they call me by the name my mother gave me," Ngedi (109). While Tshembe and Abioseh refuse to believe Eric's dedication to the fight for independence, the Kwi elders on the council clearly do not associate Eric with the colonial powers.

In Eric, Hansberry crafts a character who, despite others' accusations, ultimately possesses the most cohesive identity. Eric's identity is not in crisis like Tshembe. Rather, others assume his identity crisis to be in crisis due to his mixed race. However, Eric does not need an internal battle, as Tshembe does, to fight for the Kwi. Furthermore, Eric's acceptance to fight as well as the Elder's acceptance of him as authentically "African" highlight Hansberry's depiction of the complex

intersections between race, gender, and sexuality in *Les Blancs*. Other characters equate his homosexuality with whiteness and, thus, a negation of his African identity; however, Eric's actions and dialogue do not support this. Of the three brothers, Eric is the one to don Old Abioseh's spear and shield, even though he is not Eric's biological father. With his immediate dedication to the independence movement, Eric becomes the most authentic son:

ERIC. I know it is time to drive the invaders into the sea. And that I shall carry the spear and shield of our father.

TSHEMBE. You are half European. Which part of yourself will you drive into the sea?

ERIC. I am African enough not to mock when my people call!

TSHEMBE. And what will you do when your doctor calls, Eric? It takes more than a spear to make a man.

ERIC. What does it take, Tshembe? [...] A white wife and son?
(Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 108)

Tshembe goads Eric with a double entendre with what it takes to "make a man." This implies Eric's lack of manhood; while this references his age, it is also directed at his relationship with DeKoven. Earlier in the play, upon finding the makeup DeKoven gave Eric, Tshembe ridicules Eric for wanting to become a "white woman" (88). Tshembe's inclusion of DeKoven in this barb about manhood further establishes a link between homosexuality and emasculation. Perry reads this as Tshembe "[implying] that Eric's intimacy with Willy is a sign of his debasement at white hands" (143). However, when Tshembe questions Eric's manhood based on his heritage and sexuality, Eric rebuts by questioning the source of Tshembe's conflicted identity: his wife and child in Europe. While Eric's relationship with a white man "debases" him in Tshembe's eyes, Tshembe's marriage to a white woman does not represent African

“manhood” to Eric. Additionally, the stage directions indicate Tshembe stumbles into this scene “quite drunk,” and Eric shoves him away with the observation that he “stink[s] of cheap whiskey” (108). While others criticize Eric’s drinking throughout the play, Tshembe is one of the most vocal in his disapproval. However, the roles are reversed significantly in this scene. This reversal further hints at the unstable foundation that Tshembe’s identity rests upon. That is, his conception of manhood—which he advocates over Eric’s lifestyle—does not keep him from similar behaviors to those he dislikes in Eric.

Les Blancs ends in chaos as audiences could have been left satisfied that Eric, secure in his identity and called upon by the Elders, fought beside his people as part of the revolutionary forces, in defiance of both of his brother’s plans for what his life should look like. Instead, Eric plays a key role within the rapid escalation of the armed revolution depicted in the final stage directions. In the final scene, Tshembe shoots and kills his brother Abioseh with a pistol, and Eric tosses a grenade into the Mission, effectively launching the Kwi into an armed resistance (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 128). Eric throwing the grenade that demolishes the Mission is a powerful image: the destruction of the Mission signifies the Kwi’s destruction of the vestiges of colonialism and paves the way towards independence. Barraged throughout the play by the impact DeKoven and his white parentage have on the formation of his intellect and knowledge, in the final scenes, Eric demonstrates that he has cultivated the strongest revolutionary consciousness. This is a radical move by Hansberry.

Hansberry’s concept of revolution is consistently depicted as the struggle to simply get to the point of self-determination, regardless of what may follow. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, when interrogating Asagai on the possibility that Black leadership may be just as corrupt as white,

Beneatha asks, “Independence *and then what?*” He retorts, “Don’t you see that there will be young men and women—not British soldiers then, but my own black countrymen—to...slit my then useless throat? [...] And that such a thing as my own death will be an advance?” (Hansberry *Raisin*, 135-36). Asagai’s vision of African independence is put into motion in *Les Blancs*. When Charlie questions the difference between white and Black rule, Tshembe replies, “I don’t know, Mr. Morris, we haven’t had much chance to find out” (Hansberry *Les Blancs*, 76). In *Les Blancs*, Hansberry chooses Eric, a mixed-race character who is coded as homosexual, to initiate the first proverbial punch in a battle for African independence. This move “challeng[es] homophobic ideologies of Black nationalism” and works against the impression of Eric as an inherently divided individual due to his mixed heritage (Higashida 77). Hansberry’s characterization of Eric illustrates that the complex interaction between his racial identity, gender, and sexuality unite to play inevitable, and possibly the most important, roles within the revolutionary movements.⁵

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