

Impact Statement

Alastair Donofrio, Grade 11.

"I am a writer. I am going to write.", 2023.

Acrylic on canvas, 11 x 15 inches.

Hopewell Valley Central High School, Hopewell, NJ

Unsung Hero: Lorraine Hansberry

In my English class last year, we read "A Raisin in the Sun," and the play made a large impression on me. I was inspired by Hansberry's characters, by her eloquent writing, and by the fact that she was the first Black woman to have a play produced on Broadway—but was also saddened by the cycles of urban poverty and systemic racism that afflict the family in the play. Upon seeing her name in the list of unsung heroes, I was interested to learn more about Hansberry, her life, and her impetus for writing. I read about how her experiences with racial injustice and segregation when she was young informed her work, how she often used her writing to explore societal issues of the time, and her deep commitment to activism, justice, and social change; I also learned that she was a closeted lesbian, making her life fascinatingly intersectional. She was truly a radical and inspiring person, her contribution to American literature was enormous, and she opened the way for many more Black writers and artists to make their work known in the future—despite the fact that many of her ideas will likely remain unknown forever because of her tragic early passing due to cancer. As a result, I felt that she and her work deserved far more recognition.

Trying to do justice to Hansberry and her work was a humbling experience. It was challenging to attempt to represent her, her life, and her achievements in a single painting, in a way that adequately illustrated the complexity of her ideas and the richness of her contributions to the world; there is much more that I could have included, and by no means is my work a complete representation of everything Hansberry achieved. However, I tried to incorporate elements that represented many of the key parts of her life and character. My painting depicts Hansberry alongside her typewriter, and a swirl of papers containing the titles of several of her plays and other works—some of which she never finished and were only published after her passing—as well as the covers of *Freedom* and *The Ladder*, publications she contributed to. Also in the foreground is a sprawling plant meant to represent the one that Mama, the matriarch of the family in *A Raisin in the Sun*, keeps in a pot by their apartment's kitchen window; the plant's stubborn persistence symbolizes how her family holds on to their dreams and perseveres despite the racism and poverty that press down on them. The background features several buildings meant to resemble those of Chicago in the 1940's and 50's, where Hansberry grew up and where *A Raisin in the Sun* takes place. Through these references to her work and background, I hoped to illustrate the connection between Hansberry's life experiences and the issues she explored in her writings.

Rather than simply painting a portrait of Hansberry on its own, I decided to combine a portrait with several other elements in an overlapping composition, so as to equally commemorate her, her writings, and her life. I used a variety of reference imagery—and fabricated some parts from my imagination—to realize these elements. For instance, the photo I used as my primary reference for Hansberry's face and position was in black-and-white, so I used other photos that

were in color to inform the colors I used for her skin and hair. The buildings in the background are not exact representations of real buildings; I looked at a variety of images of Chicago during Hansberry's lifetime to inform how they look, but their details are not direct replicas of any of the images I based them on. In addition, I chose to portray the background in gray tones and the foreground elements—Hansberry's portrait, the typewriter, her writings, and plant—in color, as a way of emphasizing how her vibrant artistic expression defied and transcended the constraints that racially oppressive societal structures tried to impose on her.

Conducting research about Hansberry and her work was eye-opening for me. She was part of a broader current of artists, thinkers, and activists during the 20th century who grappled with issues related to racism, socioeconomic inequity, gender roles and stereotypes, and sexuality; it was fascinating to learn how her ideas fit into—and influenced—this progression. After creating this artwork, I have gained a new understanding of how art can be used both to commemorate and further the messages and ideas of past artists, and to continue to push for social justice.

In addition to submitting my artwork to the Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes' ARTEFFECT competition, I will also share my experience with others by showing the artwork, and explaining its purpose, to family members, friends, and other members of my school and local community. Though the English teachers from whom I learned about Lorraine Hansberry last year are not currently teaching at my school, I will show my project to my current English teacher, and ask whether it might be shared with future students when they learn about *A Raisin in the Sun*. I hope that my artwork will honor and continue Hansberry's legacy and invite others to learn more about her.