

Impact Statement

Jessica Wu, Grade 11

Voices in Color, 2025

Colored pencil, pastel, graphite on paper, 11 x 14 inches

Lexington High School, Lexington, MA

Teacher: Yue Zheng, Independent Study

Unsung Hero: Lorraine Hansberry

When Broadway's lights first caught Lorraine Hansberry's words, they illuminated a truth too long left in shadow. *A Raisin in the Sun* was not just a play—it was a living, breathing defiance. Hansberry redefined who should be on America's most prominent stages by becoming the first Black woman to have her play performed on Broadway. The title of her play is drawn from a line in Langston Hughes's poem *Harlem*, which asks, "What happens to a dream deferred?"—capturing the ache and volatility of aspirations that are continually suppressed. Through the Younger family's story, Hansberry explored themes of race, class, and the fragile promise of the American Dream. I chose to honor her because, as someone who enjoys theater and has been in many productions, I understand how powerful it can be to see yourself and your struggles reflected onstage. When we talk about Broadway today, it's easy to think of dazzling spectacles dominated by white performers. But before that dazzle, there was Hansberry, planting something far deeper: a story of Black life told with unapologetic honesty.

Hansberry's impact stretches beyond the footlights. She crafted a space where Black families could see themselves, not as background characters, but as full, striving, aching human beings. Her work forced audiences to confront a reality they often chose not to see and invited Black audiences to recognize their own power. Offstage, she fought fiercely for civil rights, gender equality, and international liberation, never separating her art from her activism. What inspires me most is her belief that storytelling itself could be a form of resistance, a way to carve out freedom where none was offered.

In my artwork, I centered Hansberry in black and white: shoulders up, smiling—a vision of timelessness and strength. Surrounding her are four colored scenes from *A Raisin in the Sun*, each carefully chosen. These snapshots capture the pulse of the play—the yearning, the struggle, the light that refuses to go out. Additionally, with the contrast between Hansberry's portrait in black and white and the surrounding colorful scenes, I wanted it to be clear that while Hansberry lived in a time of racism and segregation, the play she created sparked conversations full of color, life, and possibility. I also included four handwritten quotes from *A Raisin in the Sun*, laying the brown paper onto the main piece. I wanted the loosely taped paper to look worn, lived-in, as if pulled from a desk.

drawer where they'd been reread and carried across generations. It also mimics how stories are preserved, passed down, and pieced together. The color of the paper speaks to memory: how history is often messy, weathered, but still burning with meaning. My choices of graphite, colored pencil, soft pastels, and collage reflect the way Hansberry's story spans not just time, but different forms of resilience—some soft, some urgent.

In developing this project, I researched Hansberry's speeches and lesser-known writings in addition to studying her play. I learned that she viewed writing as a form of activism, believing that artists had a duty to address injustice. I tried to reflect that spirit of purposeful creation in the layout and material choices of my artwork. The blending of materials symbolizes how Hansberry's impact cannot be confined to a single dimension; it lives in many emotional, political, and personal layers. Furthermore, researching Lorraine Hansberry's life taught me that art can, and should, demand something of the world. Her voice urges me to create with purpose, to speak even when it feels easier to stay silent. Moving forward, I hope to use my art not just to express myself, but to connect with my community and tell stories that might otherwise go unheard. I plan to share this piece with my teachers and peers, where we can engage in meaningful discussions about Hansberry's legacy and the questions she raises about race, justice, and belonging. I also hope to display the artwork publicly—whether in a school hallway, the library, or during a Black History Month event or art show—accompanied by a short explanation of Hansberry's story and impact.

Lorraine Hansberry once said, "Never be afraid to sit awhile and think." Through this project, I have sat, thought, and created something that honors her spirit—a reminder that even dreams deferred still pulse with life, and that art can be both a mirror and a hammer for change.