

## ***A Review of Dramatic Movement of African American Women: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Class***

By Yuvraj Nimbaji Herode

New York: Anthem Press, 2023. 202 pages.

\$110.00 (hardcover), \$35.00 (EPUB and PDF)

“Man...I trusted you...Man, I put my life in your hands. Man...that money is made out of my father’s flesh!” is one of my favorite lines from Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. The scene in which this line appears captures a myriad of emotions as we see Walter Lee Younger, the protagonist, go from laughing to feeling loss, disappointment, anger, betrayal, and finally grief after losing much of the inheritance left by Big Walter, the patriarch of the family. This scene signifies a heartbreaking turning point in the lives of the Younger family as they strive to obtain the American dream. In Yuvraj Nimbaji Herode’s thought-provoking new book, *Dramatic Movement of African American Women: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Class*, *A Raisin in the Sun* is described as “an authentic portrait of the aspirations, anxieties, ambitions, and contradictory pressures affecting humble African American people in Chicago. Hansberry, in her play, addresses the sensitive question of liberating them from the burden of racial discrimination. The characters in the play raise a universal representation of black people’s hopes and dreams” (p. 85). Throughout this book, Herode invites readers to critically engage with the complexities of race, gender, and class in the works of Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, and Suzan-Lori Parks.

*Dramatic Movement of African American Women: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Class* takes the reader on a captivating journey through the often-overlooked history of African American women playwrights and their plays. Herode specifically highlights how writers use playwriting as a tool to fight against racism, sexism, and classism. In this meticulously researched book, Herode sheds light on the creativity of African American women dramatists who challenge Eurocentric narratives by crafting nuanced characters that show the resiliency of African Americans:

The African American women dramatists recount the social, economic, cultural, political, and educational problems of African Americans and particularly the African American women in the racist white society. These dramatists captured the African, African American, and especially African American women’s experiences in their dramas. They highlighted their existential troubles to reveal African and African American life, history, and culture. (p.37)

Herode's passion for this subject matter shines through on every page, making this book a must-read for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of African American theatre and Black women playwrights. The book is divided into five chapters: *Introduction to the Dramatic Movement of African American Women*, *Alice Childress*, *Lorraine Hansberry*, *Suzan-Lori Parks*, and *Conclusion*. The first chapter provides a succinct historical overview of African American playwrights, placing women at the center of this examination. Each subsequent chapter offers a life sketch and explores the works of these groundbreaking writers.

The second chapter is an examination of Alice Childress. Herode presents Childress as a pioneering dramatist, actress, director, novelist, and activist. Herode highlights five of Childress' plays: *Florence*, *Gold through the Trees*, *Trouble in Mind*, *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*, and *Wine in the Wilderness*. These plays expose the triple jeopardy and subjugation of African American women due to racism, classism, and the patriarchal social order. *Florence*, for example, reveals the visible and invisible symbols of racism that oppressed African American women in the 1940s by unmasking the difficulties that lack actresses faced when trying to find work in the white-dominated theatrical world (p.52). *Trouble in Mind*, a protest play that illuminates the shortage of roles for African American actors in the theatre, centers on an African American actress who struggles for creative self-sufficiency in the predominantly white Broadway theatre (p. 58). *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* exposes the tragic repercussions of anti-miscegenation laws in the United States. Herode also analyzes *Gold through the Trees* and *Wine in the Wilderness*. The author suggests that Childress' works prove that change can only be made by the community itself.

The third chapter introduces the reader to Lorraine Hansberry. Herode places emphasis on Hansberry's exploration of the social, economic, political, and cultural exploitation of Africans and African Americans. Herode analyzes *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, *Les Blancs*, *The Drinking Gourd*, and *What Use Are Flowers*, paying particular attention to the ways in which Hansberry's characters present radical world views. Herode notes that *A Raisin in the Sun*, which is set against the backdrop of explicit racism and unavoidable segregated housing and discriminated race relations in Chicago in the 1950s, celebrates both Black culture and Black resistance to white oppression through many generations as it dramatizes the efforts and frustrations of a family in pursuit of the American dream (p.86). *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* addresses the oppression of women, existentialism, patriarchy, political opportunism, betrayal, and the sexual double standard (p. 94). *Les Blancs* depicts the African quest for freedom from European colonialists (p. 100). *The Drinking Gourd* is a three-act play about American plantation slavery set in the 1850s, and *What Use Are Flowers*, a play that warns white racists not to rely on the supposed passivity, endurance, and infinite forbearing of Black people, are also studied.

The fourth chapter focuses on Suzan Lori-Parks whose work reshapes African American identities while questioning dominant ideologies that perpetuate racism and sexism by shining

light on how Africans and African Americans can reclaim their history and culture (p.167). Herode discusses *The America Play*, *Venus*, *In the Blood*, *Fucking A*, and *Topdog/Underdog*. *The America Play* interrogates the erasure of African Americans from the national history of America (p. 132). In *Venus*, Parks explores the objectification and degradation of an African woman. *In the Blood*, a play that borrows from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, tells the story of a Black woman who is brutally victimized by a racist system and white patriarchal social order (p. 142). *Fucking A*, which is also inspired by *The Scarlet Letter*; dramatizes modern social ideals that are the roots of the oppression and suffering of subordinate classes in American society (p. 160). Lastly, *Topdog/Underdog* explores the plight of African American males as they grapple with family dysfunction, urban poverty, and social oppression.

The fifth chapter is the conclusion, which amplifies the importance of Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Suzan-Lori Parks by recognizing how their plays reveal the social, economic, political, cultural, and educational oppression of African Americans in a racist white society. Herode states that these playwrights have captured African, African American, and especially African American women's experiences in their dramas while giving women agency (p. 167). Additionally, their works show how theater has been used to encourage African Americans to protest social injustice and uplift the race and gender.

*Dramatic Movement of African American Women: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Class* provides a thorough examination of the contributions of African American women to the dramatic arts. The book's accessible writing style makes it suitable for a wide range of readers, including scholars, students, and general audiences interested in the intersection of race, gender, class, and the performing arts. By centering the experiences and voices of African American women, Herode challenges the reader to trouble their understanding of theater and ponder whose stories deserve to be told. With both engaging and thought-provoking writing, Herode seamlessly weaves together historical context and critical analysis. The reader will appreciate how Herode contextualizes the contributions of African American women within broader historical, social, and cultural frameworks, which enhance the readers' understanding of the placement of Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Suzan-Lori Parks in the American theater canon.

While *Dramatic Movement of African American Women: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Class* provides a comprehensive overview, there may be aspects of the topic that lack depth. The book primarily focuses on the experiences of African American women within the context of race, gender, and class potentially overlooking the intersectionality of other identities such as sexuality and ability. While the historical perspective is valuable, the book may not fully capture the contemporary landscape of dramatic movement among African American women, including recent trends and developments in the field. Whereas Herodes' intentions for writing this book were clear, it would have been nice for the reader to know what inspired him to write the book and complete such extensive research. Yuvraji Nimbaji Herodes' *Dramatic*

*Movement of African American Women: The Intersections of Race, Gender, and Class* is a compelling and timely book that serves as a powerful call to action, urging readers from all backgrounds and interests to recognize and celebrate the enduring legacy of African American women playwrights who have shaped the cultural landscape of America.

Garrison Paige  
Assistant Professor  
History and Africana Studies  
Chicago State University

---

**Garrison Paige** is an Assistant Professor at Chicago State University in the department of History and African American Studies. She earned a Ph.D. from the Department of Africology and African American Studies at Temple University in 2020 for her dissertation titled “We Are What We Speak: An Afrocentric Analysis of The Manifestation and Impact of Agency Reducing Identities Found on Instagram.” Dr. Paige’s research interests include Ebonics, African and African American Women Studies, African Spirituality, African and African American Cinema, African and African American History, African and African American Folklore, African and African American Music, and African and Diasporic Rhetoric.

---