

Hansberry v. Lee

By Seth Leskanic



The Hansberry's house in Washington Park (retrieved from the Huntington Theatre Company)

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, a key historical aspect of the play is the segregation of African Americans and whites within communities. Lorraine Hansberry, writer of the play and an African American, took inspiration from a personal event within her family's life: *Hansberry v. Lee*, a Supreme Court case that involved her father, Carl Hansberry. In 1937, Carl Hansberry moved his family to an all-white neighborhood by the University of Chicago, where a case against the family was brought up by Anna Lee. The case was based off of a previous lawsuit, *Burke v. Kleiman*, where in 1934 the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that African Americans could not live within the area stated in the case and that all who lived there at the time would have to vacate within thirty days of the ruling.

With *Hansberry v. Lee*, Lee stated that due to *res judicata* (a legal term stating a matter adjudicated by a court previously may not be pursued again by the same party), Hansberry could not go to court and fight the law that prevented him from living in the neighborhood. The trial court that was handling *Hansberry v. Lee* ruled that the decision from *Burke v. Kleiman* applied to *Hansberry v. Lee*'s case, so they dismissed the case even though *res judicata* only applies to members who were apart of the other case, which Carl Hansberry and his party were not. The Illinois Supreme Court affirmed the trial court's ruling, so Hansberry and the others in his suit (20 members of the NAACP) took the matter to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court overturned the lower court's decision, stating that *Burke v. Kleiman* did not apply to any of the parties in *Hansberry v. Lee* and that African Americans could live in the area stated within the case.

Despite Hansberry's win, it was costly for him. Along with the large amount of money, time and effort spent on the case, the Hansberry family experienced a lot of racism in the form of mobs, threats, and other hateful actions. Lorraine Hansberry, 10 at the time, remembers her family staying in their house fortified from the mobs outside after receiving threats of arson and bricks being thrown through their windows. Even after the case was won, the neighborhood was racist and demeaning towards the family and they never really were free to live in their home.

This had great effect on Lorraine, as growing up experiencing racism shaped her, and her father, after "defeating" racism in court, sought to move the family to a more free area. Six years after the case, Carl was in Mexico looking for a new place for his family to live where he had a fatal cerebral hemorrhage. Lorraine's real-world experience is seen within the play as the Younger family is getting a taste of the racism

they will experience in the neighborhood they are moving to, most likely after segregation in those communities was legally removed.

Works Cited

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