

The Racial Politics of Real Estate: Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park*

Dr. Ernest I. Nolan

Provost and Vice President for Academic Administration
Madonna University
36600 Schoolcraft Rd, Livonia, MI 48150, USA.

Playwright Bruce Norris was associated with the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago for more than 20 years before his award-winning play, *Clybourne Park*, propelled him from relative obscurity into the theatrical limelight, having won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2011 and the Tony Award for best play of 2012. *Clybourne Park* was the fifth of Norris's plays to be staged by Steppenwolf and, after that, went to off-Broadway and London's West End before opening on Broadway in April 2012. Drama critics have showered the play with superlatives ("best play of the year," "sharp-witted, sharp-toothed," "pulverizingly funny," and "offensively delicious and combustible," *Clybourne Park* Website at (<http://clybournepark.com/press/reviews/>), and some pundits are predicting that it will become a classic of American drama.

The genesis for the play came early in Norris's life, back when he was a pre-teen. He says that the first plays he was exposed to in middle school were Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. About Hansberry's play he explains:

I was obsessed with that play [*A Raisin in the Sun*] when I was a kid . . . I first saw the play when I was 12, right around the time that I was starting to hate authority. (Basso41)
That play has resonated all through my life because I realized that the only character I could identify with was Karl—I was a whitey in an all-white neighborhood in Houston, Texas. (4)
I really loved the play. I was always regretful that I never got to play Karl Lindner, so I thought I'll just give him some more to do [by writing him into *Clybourne Park*]. That's a way of getting to play that part indirectly. (41)

Norris uses Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* as a jumping off point for turning the issue of race inside out, showing the audience what the white family in *Clybourne Park*, the neighborhood where Hansberry's African American family plans to move, is going through. As Ben Brantley described it in his review of the off-Broadway production in February 2010,

The house in Mr. Norris's play— 406 *Clybourne* Street, to be exact—is the dream house that Hansberry built, the place her upwardly mobile Younger family was planning to inhabit. In the first act the Youngers haven't arrived yet. In the second they're long gone, and *Clybourne Park* has become a very different, predominantly black neighborhood. And it is now a white family that wants to move into an area that shows every promise of being thoroughly regentrified.

At the heart of the play is real estate: 406 *Clybourne* Street is a hot property both in 1959 and in 2009. In Hansberry's play, Karl Lindner, who represents the white owners who constitute the *Clybourne Park* Neighborhood Association, attempts to buy the house back from the Youngers, offering them a substantial profit. Then, in Norris's sequel, Lindner appeals to the white owners, Russ and Bev Stoller, to cancel the sale. Fifty years later, in 2009, the racial composition of the neighborhood has long changed because of white flight in the 1960's, and its properties have deteriorated and devalued. But again in 2009, 406 *Clybourne* Street becomes the locus of controversy. This time plans are afoot to raze the house, which Lena explains has historical and sentimental value to the neighborhood residents, and build a more spacious and gentrified home on the property. Lindsey explains why she and her husband feel that the existing house must go:

LINDSEY: We *talked* about renovation. We discussed it. Because the houses are so charming and I know it's a shame—but when you figure in the crack in the sub-floor and the cost of lead abatement— and in a market like this one? It just made sense to start from scratch. (133)

In both 1959 and 2009, the property becomes a touchstone for exposing values and attitudes about race and class in the United States, about what Americans feel free to say about race and what they think but are afraid to articulate. Literary critic Vanessa Hall has described how racial tensions underlie the conversations and interactions portrayed in contemporary American literature in the following way:

As overt racism becomes more infrequent in the United States, studies of race and racism encourage a turn from thinking about racism as an easily identifiable set of assumptions and practices, in other words as an individual pathology, and more as a complex web of cultural discourses and social and ideological systems, in which we are all embedded, that have harmful implications for nonwhite people.

Hall is saying that as Americans we live in a heightened state of sensitivity about racial issues, wanting to be open and nonchalant about race on the one hand, but fearful of saying the wrong or offensive thing on the other. Like the characters in Act 2 of Norris's play, most Americans think that they act out of a well-meaning and informed understanding about race. They think of themselves as not overtly or noxiously racist; yet racial tensions percolate under the surface, and they struggle to say the politically correct thing, even when, like Steve in the play, they eschew political correctness. In an interview with Beatrice Basso of the American Conservatory Theatre, Norris had the following to say about how political correctness inhibits open and frank conversations about race:

Tim Sanford—who runs Playwrights Horizons in New York [where *Clybourne Park* premiered in February 2010]—was referring to a critical theorist he's read, who says that tragedy is only possible in a community where everyone shares the same sense of themselves, where everyone has the same identity, and they're part of a shared community. In a modern society as fragmented and atomized as ours, that's not really possible. Interestingly, in *Clybourne Park*, the first part is a tragedy and the second part is a comedy, [because] the people in the first act all understand each other much more than the people do in the second act. In the second act, everybody makes assumptions . . . Everyone holds their tongue, because we live in a society where speech is much more dangerous than activity—than action. Look at the WikiLeaks thing. All we're talking about is that someone said out loud what we already knew *or* have been thinking, but now it's on the record. That's a terrible thing in our weirdly polite society. No one knows that they should be embarrassed in the first act; everyone knows they should be embarrassed in the second act. We're embarrassed about everything. (Basso 10)

The question emerges: How has Norris engaged a complex and subtle understanding of race relations in a contemporary play that was successful in commercial venues like Broadway? At a basic level, Norris signals to the audience that place—geographical and physical—is basic to human identity. The audience sees this in Act 1 when Bev Stoller makes the innocent observation: "That's a funny word, isn't it? Neapolitan" (3). This launches an extended conversation between Bev and Russ about place names and what people are called who live in various places. Why are people from Naples called Neapolitans? From Paris called Parisians? From Moscow, Muscovites? From Cairo, Cairenes? On a more local level, we might ask, what are the people called who live in Clybourne Park? One answer might be, "white." What are the people who live in the Youngers' neighborhood, Hamilton Park, called? "Black?" Karl Linder picks up on the question of how human difference is understood as he attempts to convince the Stollers not to sell to a black family. He asks Francine, "I think that you'd agree, I'm assuming, that in the world, there exist certain *differences*. Agreed?" (72). He says, “. . . people live differently” (72). And then he explains,

KARL: Different customs, different . . . well, different *foods*, even. And those diff—here's a funny—my wife, Betsy, now Betsy's family happens to be Scandinavian, and on holidays they eat a thing known as *lutefisk*. And this dish, which I can tell you . . . (he chuckles) . . . is *not* to my liking *at all*. It's . . . *oh* my goodness, let's just say it's *gelatinous*. (73)

Jim, the minister Bev has asked to stop by to speak to Russ about his prolonged mourning of his son's suicide, steps in to offer an additional difference in cultures by focusing on the musical accompaniment at his church in Clybourne Park as opposed to the Younger's neighborhood church in Hamilton Park. He explains,

JIM: —You do find differences in modes of *worship*. If you take First Presbyterian. Now that's a church down in Hamilton Park and I've taken fellowship there and I can tell you, the differences are notable . . . Not a *value* judgment. Apple and oranges. Just as how we have our organ here at Saint Thomas, for accompaniment, whereas at First Presbyterian they prefer a piano and, occasionally . . . (chuckles) . . . well, *tambourines*. (75)

In the context of 1959, most of the white neighbors who make up the Clybourne Park Community Association would probably accept these flimsy arguments—differences in food and musical preferences and whether or not individuals enjoy skiing—as justification for why whites should stay in their own neighborhoods and blacks in theirs. The two exceptions are Bev and Russ. Bev reacts with a, perhaps, naive assumption that human differences can be overcome when people learn about each other's customs and preferences. She says that the Younger family may be "perfectly lovely" (80) and tells Albert that she would be "So proud. So honored to have you and Francine as our neighbors" (97). She chides the assembled group saying that she is "ashamed of every one of us" (87) because of their overt intolerance of others. Russ, on the other hand, sees through the facade of community that Karl presents as an argument for cancelling the sale of the house. He says,

RUSS: If you honestly think I give a rat's ass about the goddamn— . . . what ya' mean the *community* where every time I go for a haircut, where they all sit and stare like the goddamn grim reaper walked in the barber shop door? That *community*? . . . Where Bev stops at Gelman's for a quart of milk and they look at her like she's got the goddamn plague? That the community I'm supposed to be looking out for? . . . Well, you go ahead and you tell those folks whatever you want, Karl. And while you're at it why don't you tell 'em about everything *the community* did for my son. I mean, Jesus Christ, Murray Gelman even goes and hires a goddamn *retarded* kid, but my boy? Sorry. No work for *you*, bub . . . [what were they afraid of?] He was gonna *snap*? Gonna go and kill another bunch of people? Send him off to defend the goddamn country, he does like he's *told* only to find out the kinda sons-of-bitches he's defending." (87-88)

At a deeper level, Russ's relocation from the Clybourne Park neighborhood to Glenn Meadows, a suburb where he will be six and a half minutes from his office, turns out to be an unexpected way of revenging himself on the neighbors who failed him by not accepting his son because of his war crime in Korea. Russ makes this clear when he reads from his son's suicide note about his motivation for killing himself: Russ's son writes, "You see what this is like? You see? . . . Well, I refuse to live this way any longer!" (90). One of the last things we learn in the dialogue between Russ and Bev at the end of Act 1 is that Russ will bury his son's footlocker in the backyard the next day. Perhaps this is Russ's way of finally leaving behind the pain and anger he feels about his son's death. His going to a new home in Glenn Meadows will be as much a potential act of survival and salvation as is the move of the Younger family from their decrepit apartment in Hamilton Park.

Act 2 presents a parallel discussion about foreign places, but this time the namedropping of travel destinations such as Prague, Switzerland, and Morocco and the quandary about the capitals of various countries is a way of establishing how well-traveled and sophisticated each of the characters is. But, essentially, the characters' connection to foreign places is superficial at best; they don't even take the time to learn about where they have visited. Lindsey sums up the underlying attitude of the characters about other places in the world when she says, "And who *gives* a shit, any—? . . . Steve. Steven. It's whatever you want it to be, okay?" (124). And it is ironic that in Act 2 it is the African American couple who skis, in Switzerland no less, when in Act 1 Karl Linder points to the fact that many of the white residents of Clybourne Park ski whereas blacks don't. The surface issue at stake in Act 2 is whether the new house to be built at 406 Clybourne Street conforms to the specifications of the community association and zoning regulations. But at a deeper level, the question emerges about how place and human identity are linked. Lena introduces this point in her long-anticipated statement to the assembled group. She says,

LENA: Well . . . I have no way of knowing what sort of connection you have to the neighborhood where *you* grew up? . . . And some of our concerns have to do with a particular period in history and the things that people experienced here in this community *during* that period— . . .—both good and bad. And on a personal level? I just have a lot of *respect* for the people who went through some of those experiences and still managed to carve out a life for themselves and create a community despite a whole lot of obstacles? . . . Some of which still exist. That's just part of my *history* and my *parents'* history—and honoring the *connection* to that history—and no one, myself included, likes having to dictate what you can or can't do with your own home, but there's just a lot of *pride*, and a lot of *memories* in these houses, and for some of us, that connection still has *value*, if that makes any sense? . . . For those of us who have remained. . . And *respecting* that memory, that has value, too. At least, that's what I believe. And that's what I've been wanting to say. (146-148)

The point of Lena's statement is lost, however, when Steve redefines "value" to mean "monetary value," which gentrification of the neighborhood will actually increase. What the audience grasps is that the two acts represent a reversal of fortune for the neighborhood: In Act 1, property values will decline and living conditions will deteriorate because a black family will move into the house at 406 Clybourne Street. In Act 2, property values will appreciate and living conditions will improve because a white family moves to the same property. The question arises about whether anything has changed in the fifty years from 1959 to 2009—the racial politics of real estate have remained essentially the same, despite the pervasive feeling that the Civil Rights Movement engendered progressive attitudes that redefined privilege and power in our society.

At the end of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the Younger family has achieved a personal victory, having the courage to rise out of living conditions that were not conducive to the aspirations and wellbeing of the family members. However, the audience feels uncertainty about what the family will face in their new neighborhood. A scene was cut from the original production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, in which a neighbor, Mrs. Johnson, describes the fate that might await the Youngers; Mrs. Johnson explains,

JOHNSON: I guess y'all seen the news what's all over the colored paper this week . . . You mean you ain't read 'bout them colored people that was bombed out of their place out there? . . . Lord, I bet this time next month y'all's names will have been in the papers plenty— (Holding up her hands to mark off each word of the headline she can see in front of her) "NEGROES INVADE CLYBOURNE PARK—BOMBED!" (100-102)

Subsequently, the Youngers refuse to accept Karl Linder's offer to buy the house even though they have been presented with this image of possible violence and danger.

At the end of Norris's *Clybourne Park*, the audience witnesses Steve and Lindsey as they argue about whether or not Steve is happy about Lindsey's pregnancy, and a suspicion is confirmed that their marriage is on a rocky road. We also see Dan, the construction worker who dug up the footlocker that Russ Stoller had buried in the backyard, open the footlocker and take out the Stoller son's letter to his parents explaining his reason for suicide. At the same time, a scene flashes back to a conversation between the son, Kenneth Stoller, and his mother Bev that would have transpired as he wrote the letter that explained his suicide. In effect, the audience is taken back to that moment of tragedy that precipitated all of the action of the two plays—the selling of the house, the change in the racial composition of the neighborhood, and beginnings of regentrification. This moment is emblematic of the fear, intolerance, and bigotry that seem to permeate human interaction between individuals who see themselves as different from each other. Perhaps Norris's appeal in this play is for all people to accept "the other" and recognize the similarities and commonalities that bind us all as human beings.

It is significant to note that Norris pays homage to Lorraine Hansberry not only by using *A Raisin in the Sun* as the starting off point for the action of his play but also by drawing on a similar theatrical technique to tell his story. In an interview with Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company's dramaturg, Elissa Goetschius, Norris described his technique as follows:

In the sense . . . I'm inclined to tell stories through character and behavior rather than through literary flourish or stylistic innovation. For me, it's a difficult enough task to actually express the idea that I want to express without the additional challenge of having to remake theater as we know it each time. An audience enters the theatre with a given set of tools, and it's not my task to re-educate them. I like to speak in the language a theatre audience already knows. (http://www.woollymammoth.net/performances/bruce_norrisInterview.php)

Telling stories "through character and behavior" is essentially the mantra of realistic theatre presentation. Just as Hansberry's play uses fourth-wall realistic portrayal of the Younger family in their dimly lit Hamilton Park apartment, Norris follows suit with his presentation of two eras in the Clybourne Street house. We might say that, in effect, time has stood still—theatrically and metaphorically—despite the apparent changes to the house and to society at large, because the racial politics of real estate have not changed over the fifty-year interval between acts one and two.

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