

## Lorraine Hansberry "The Black Revolution and the White Backlash"

How do you talk about 300 years in four minutes? [*sighs, laughter, applause*] Was it ever so apparent we need this dialogue? [*laughter, applause*]

I wrote a letter to the New York Times recently which didn't get printed, which is getting to be my rapport with the New York Times. They said that it was too personal. What it concerned itself with was, I was in a bit of a stew over the stall-in, because when the stall-in was first announced, I said, "Oh, My God, now everybody's gone crazy, you know, tying up traffic. What's the matter with them? You know. Who needs it?" And then I noticed the reaction, starting in Washington and coming on up to New York among what we are all here calling the white liberal circles which was something like, you know, "You Negroes act right or you're going to ruin everything we're trying to do." [*laughter*] And that got me to thinking more seriously about the strategy and the tactic that the stall-in intended to accomplish.

And so I sat down and wrote a letter to the New York Times about the fact that I am of a generation of Negroes that comes after a whole lot of other generations and my father, for instance, who was, you know, real "American" type American: successful businessman, very civic-minded and so forth; was the sort of American who put a great deal of money, a great deal of his really extraordinary talents and a great deal of passion into everything that we say is the American way of going after goals. That is to say that he moved his family into a restricted area where no Negroes were supposed to live and then proceeded to fight the case in the courts all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States. And this cost a great deal of money. It involved the assistance of NAACP attorneys and so on and this is the way of struggling that everyone says is the proper way to do and it eventually resulted in a decision against restrictive covenants which is very famous, *Hansberry v. Lee*. And that was very much applauded.

But the problem is that Negroes are just as segregated in the city of Chicago now as they were then [*laughter*] and my father died a disillusioned exile in another country. That is the reality that I'm faced with when I get up and I read that some Negroes my own age and younger say that we must now lie down in the streets, tie up traffic, stop ambulances, do whatever we can, take to the hills if necessary with some guns and fight back, you see. This is the difference.

And I wrote to the Times and said, you know, "Can't you understand that this is the perspective from which we are now speaking? It isn't as if we got up today and said, you know, 'what can we do to irritate America?' " [*laughter*] you know. It's because that since 1619, Negroes have tried every method of communication, of transformation of their situation from petition to the vote, everything. We've tried it all. There isn't anything that

hasn't been exhausted. Isn't it rather remarkable that we can talk about a people who were publishing newspapers while they were still in slavery in 1827, you see? We've been doing everything, writing editorials, Mr. Wechsler, for a long time, you know. *[applause]*

And now the charge of impatience is simply unbearable. I would like to submit that the problem is that, yes, there is a problem about white liberals. I think there's something horrible that Norman Podhoretz, for instance, can sit down and write the kind of trash that he did at this hour. *[applause]* That is to say that a distinguished American thinker can literally say that he is more disturbed at the sight of a mixed couple or that anti-Semitism from Negroes – and anti-Semitism from anybody is horrible and disgusting and I don't care where it comes from – but anti-Semitism, somehow, from a Negro apparently upsets him more than it would from a German fascist, you see. This was the implication of what really gets to him. *[applause]* Well, you have to understand that when we are confronted with that, we wonder who we are talking to and how far we are going to go.

The problem is we have to find some way with these dialogues to show and to encourage the white liberal to stop being a liberal and become an American radical. *[applause]* I think that then it wouldn't – when that becomes true, some of the really eloquent things that were said before about the basic fabric of our society, which after all, is the thing which must be changed, you know, *[applause]* to really solve the problem, you know. The basic organization of American society is the thing that has Negroes in the situation that they are in and never let us lose sight of it.

When we then talk with that understanding, it won't be so difficult for people like Mr. Wechsler, whose sincerity I wouldn't dream of challenging, when I say to him *[laughter]* – his sincerity is one thing, I don't have to agree with his position. But it wouldn't be so difficult for me to say, well, now, when someone uses the term "cold war liberal" that it is entirely different, you see, the way that you would assess the Vietnamese war and the way that I would because I can't believe ... *[applause]* I can't believe that anyone who is given what an American Negro is given – you know, our viewpoint – can believe that a government which has at its disposal a Federal Bureau of Investigation which cannot ever find the murderers of Negroes and by that method... *[applause]* and shows that it cares really very little about American citizens who are black, really are over somewhere fighting a war for a bunch of other colored people, you know, *[laughter]* several thousand miles – you just have a different viewpoint.

This is why we want the dialogue, to explain that to you, you see. It isn't a question of patriotism and loyalty. My brother fought for this country, my grandfather before that and so on and that's all a lot of nonsense when we criticize. The point is that we have a different viewpoint because, you know, we've been kicked in the face so often and the

vantage point of Negroes is entirely different and these are some of the things we're trying to say. I don't want to go past my time. Thank you. *[applause]*