The rhetoric of freedom in Lorraine Hansberry’s play

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Abstract: Lorraine Hansberry’s The Drinking Gourd has been subjected to systematic censorship and silencing after it was written for NBC. Being politically suggestive of system disruption, it is regarded as a challenge to the political life of America in the 1960s. It, however, is more than political content. It enacts an aesthetics that sets in motion content and language. Not only is it interventionist and disruptive on the level of content but this content is strengthened by the collaborative function of its form. Therefore, it employs rhetorical mechanisms while at the same time turns into the very mechanisms it is making use of. The rhetorical mechanisms the writers of this article intend to explore in the text of this play are a part of Henry Louise Gates’ notion of signifyin(g) that appears in the form of speakerly text and talking text. The article probes into scenes of confrontation between master and slave to explore moments of signifyin(g) in the two rhetorical modes named, and reveals how the identity of the master is constructed by the identity of the slave in a cultural continuum that can be disrupted when consciousness of the slaves rises about their human worth and sociopolitical identity. It transcends mere rhetorical play and through the embodiment of a vernacular structure turns into the drinking gourd itself in texture and form. Therefore, the writers of this article suggest, it is interventionist for it both suggests and practices dismantling of identity construction in the system of slavery through raising consciousness.

Subjects: Post-Colonial Studies; Women; s Literature; Literary/Critical Theory

Keywords: Lorraine Hansberry; Henry Louis Gates; speakerly text; talking text; signifyin(g); consciousness; identity

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Are you enthusiastic to know the denotative and connotative meaning of the “drinking gourd”? Do you like to be familiar with the less known and read plays? Are you interested in African-American literature? Do you like female playwrights? If your answers to all the questions are yes, we suggest you read this article. Indeed, African-American literature can be regarded as an educational tool which is deployed in America by women of African descent such as Lorraine Hansberry who made her best effort to utilize this platform to speak out on her opinion. The Drinking Gourd is a simultaneous gorgeous bitter depiction of slavery, racism and social injustice.
1. Introduction

The Drinking Gourd (1960) is Lorraine Hansberry’s second play and initially was written to be a television drama. Although it was written to commemorate the Centennial of the Civil War in America, it was soon forgotten and did not find its way to the stage; Hansberry died before she could adapt it for theater; however, Robert Nemiroff published the play posthumously in 1972. The play is an explicit dramatic objection to the Americans’ seeking cheap labor and their system of slavery. It depicts atrocities of the slavery system in the plantations of Southern America and frankly proposes that the foundation of the country’s capitalist economy is slavery. The play also portrays the destructive psychological and physical effects of slavery on both masters and slaves, while exploring slave psychology through incorporation of folk songs and traditions. In spite of its controversial content and aesthetic value, the play has received not much critical attention. For instance, W. Edward Farrison (1972) considered it “a documentary on American plantation slavery.” He calls it, “imaginative, unified, easily documentable”, and “good dramatic literature and in the best tradition of historical dramas” (193). Although the play is aesthetically acclaimed, Elizabeth Brown-Guillory (1985) states that the politically critical content of the play explains its lack of popularity. In her view, the play reconciles art and politics, being both aesthetically valuable and politically charged (18). In a very recent study, M. Priya (2018) focuses on the notion of slave freedom and specially the “unquenchable thirst” of Hannibal for freedom. In his article, he argues that the only significant human relations are those established on reciprocal freedom, where there is neither domination nor slavery (315), and in this way reveals the sharply critical perspective of the play on the politics of its time. The censorship the play underwent, in the form of refusal to be staged or television appearance reveals its potential to provoke controversy. This controversy is often viewed as a result of Hansberry’s frankness in the depiction of horrific events on the plantations and the play’s disquieting characterization—in which the evil master can have a human soul and the motherly black figure can assist the death of the dear master. However, it is also possible to regard the language of the play as embodiment and provocative of sociopolitical consciousness and critique. According to Harold Bloom’s writing on Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, “the Aesthetic judgment on any play” must take into account “the quality of language, the power of thought, the persuasiveness of characterization” (7) as well. In this article, the authors intend to explore the language of The Drinking Gourd by recourse to Henry Louise Gates’ notions of “Signifyin(g)” and “Double-voicedness”. Being double-voiced, The Drinking Gourd benefits from hybridization of language as a linguistic apparatus for raising consciousness and thus turns language into a politically interventionist tool. So the writers of this article suggest that Hansberry’s The Drinking Gourd uses signifying in the form of “speakerly text” and “talking text” both as a rhetorical mechanism and as a framework to intervene in the way black and white identities are perceived and represented in literature. To this end, the article will explore the moments of confrontation between master and slave and tries to show how the play transcends a mere rhetorical mechanism to turn the play into a song of freedom.

2. “Signifyin(g)” and consciousness

Gates states that the black tradition is “double-voiced” and Signifyin(g) is the figure of the “double-voiced” (1988, p. xxv), which means to speak both the language of the dominant culture (Americans) and the language of the subordinated culture (African Americans). In other words, it is the assertion that African-American literature is a combination of two voices—literary and linguistic—that provides African-American literature a rich identity. While double-voicedness deals with textual relations, Signifyin(g) addresses the mechanisms of meaning-making. It highlights the difference between the “signification” of Standard English Language and that of the African-American Vernacular meaning of the words: While the standard meaning acts according to the Saussurean law of meaning-making by one signifier differentiating itself from other signifiers, the vernacular meaning is playful and manipulative of meaning-making mechanisms (Gates, 1989, p. 49–51).

The word signifying was extensively defined in various dictionaries by the time Gates took it for revision. However, the definitions were not adequate. According to Gates, Signifyin(g) is variously (mis)understood in these glossaries, primarily because few scholars have succeeded in defining it
as a full concept. He believes they (writers and critics) often have chosen, consciously or unconsciously, one of its several figures and substituted that aspect as the total meaning of the word (1989, p. 71). When he continued to examine more definitions of “Signifyin(g)” provided by H. Rap Brown, Roger D. Abrahams, Thomas Kochman, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Geneva Smitherman, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker, he found out that this second group of definitions are more practical and acceptable. Gates finally acknowledged Roger D. Abrahams' definition of “Signifyin(g)” as the most comprehensive. Abrahams in the appendix of the glossary of “Unusual Terms and Expressions,” defined “Signifyin(g)” as “to imply, goad, beg, and boast by indirect verbal or gestural means. A language of implication” (1964, p. 51-2). The term “Signifying Monkey” used by Gates captures the nuances of meaning he found lacking in the existing concept of signifyin(g). Though taken from a piece of folklore on how a monkey plays a lion, Abrahams uses this term to pinpoint a linguistic practice strongly associated with Shakespeare’s Hamlet whereby he arrives at “direction through indirection.” (1962, p. 25). Thus, “signifyin(g)” as the language of trickery, can mean any of a number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifyin(g) monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster’s ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifyin(g) to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories; it is signifyin(g) to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifyin(g) to ask for a piece of cake by saying, “my brother needs a piece of cake.” (Gates, 1988, p. 54)

Being a language of implication, Signifyin(g) both produces a layer of suggested meanings and at the same time involves its addressee in the act of meaning-making. Hence, Signifyin(g) reorganizes social positions through “redistribute[ng] the discourse of the other” (Juneja 1995, p 23). For this reason, signifyin(g) is a hybridizing act, whereby no linguistic level, whether Standard English or African vernacular, can produce meaning in isolation, but reworks its range of possible meanings through contact and pollution with its other. This possibility for hybridity is introduced early into the play when the soldier narrator, who speaks an English “free of identifiable regionalism”, makes such a comment: “Europe, Africa, the New World and cotton. They have all gotten mixed up together to make the trouble.” (Hansberry 1994, p. 4). In a space wherein “differently oriented social accents” (Juneja 1995, p 9) coexist, consciousness about one’s social and linguistic identity rises.

Henry Louis Gates studies the phenomenon of Signifyin(g) and its effect double-voicedness through different rhetorical categories. Gates points out; “double-voicedness” can be divided into four versions regarding textual relations: tropological revision, the speakerly text, the talking text, and rewriting the speakerly. Tropological revision is a trope that is repeated (and revised) from text to text. The revision of specific tropes recurs with surprising frequency in the Afro-American literary tradition. For instance, the descent underground, the vertical “ascent” from South to North, myriad figures of the double, and especially double consciousness all come readily to mind. The speakerly text is characterized by operating in the vernacular mode to speak to the reader, thereby deploying hybrid narrative voices that are not exclusively that of the narrator or the protagonist. The talking texts are texts that speak to each other but indicate a shift from the mimetic to the diegetic; or a shift from an effort to render life as accurately as possible to one where the narrator asserts self-conscious control over the narrative. Finally, rewriting the speakerly text refers to the reception of the Black tradition. In this thesis, the language of the plays will be investigated in light of these categories (Gates, 1988, p. xxv–xxviii). While the speakerly text deals with the textual mechanisms by which a hybridization is affected in the language of a text and the social position of the master and slave reworked, the talking text promotes any textual piece and by extension—in this specific example—the whole play into a pleated texture of intertextualities, by which quality the text seems to have acquired a human consciousness of its own, speaking and producing meanings in
an attempt to communicate with its audience. Being speakerly, *The Drinking Gourd* punctuates the language of the white colonizer or master with the dialects of the colonized or slaves, hence producing a liminal space of linguistic impurity. If language, as Michael J. Shapiro believes, is “the medium for representing selves and others” (28), distortion of a language would distort the representational practice. As a result, the speakerly text is a negotiating mechanism whereby the power of the master’s slave to fashion the identity of the master is challenged through reworking what meanings the language is capable of producing or what meanings it fails to make sense of. Thus, while the speakerly text is identifiable, in the very first instance, by having two dialects of the master and slave juxtaposed, or making one social group using the language of the other social group, it in turn provokes and turns into a talking text itself. While the motif of the talking text would initially record the amazement of the illiterate slave in experiencing the act of reading, it playfully manipulates this sense of initial amazement to trick the master about the persistent incredulity of the slaves, while they actually make their texts talk. Thus, they speak and protest their identity in front of the masters by using the potential of their language to produce meaning that the masters are incapable of decoding. All these signifying activities seem to affect a real change, however, when linguistic play is complemented by real confrontation, active resistance towards meaning-making practices of the master, and collaboration in bringing the downfall of the masters’ cultural code, which can entail ethical callousness as well as a liberating outcome. As colonization sets in motion a torrent of bestial instincts in man, decolonization provokes a counteractive dehumanization and awakening of instinct for violence that can be explained as the result of, primarily, a linguistic consciousness. It is the ironic fate of decolonizing practices that re-humanization of the slave can be affected by anger and its dehumanizing force.

### 3. “Signifyin(g)” in/as the drinking gourd

In *The Drinking Gourd*, Hansberry mirrors Africans’ anger at the brutalizing effect of both the American slavery system and Black Nationalism. Addison Gayle (1971) in his introduction to *The Black Aesthetics* states that two critical expressions had always existed in Black literature: Anger and Black Nationalism. In his view, only the descriptive terms and quantity of anger and nationalism are changed. He believes, “If the black artist in the American society creates without expressing anger, he can be considered not as a black man and artist, but as an American one” (xv–xvii). As part of the tradition of African-American Novels, anger as a liberating but de/re-humanizing force teems in a language that is “veiled” by “humor or satiric displacement” (Graham (2004), 4), where humor serves to “re-humanize” “by insisting on antitotalization” (Gysin (2004), 142). While this re-humanization through humour can be a counteractive force to the humanizing effect of anger for the slave—in the form of stereotyping the blacks—it can be managed so as to function as a disturbance to the whites and as an undermining force the slaves.

Hannibal’s—the play’s main character and a slave-language is ripe with such antitotalitarian humor. He abhors slavery and seeks education as a means of freedom. He ignores his mother’s and his fiancé’s Sarah repeated warnings on the consequences of what he wishes for and often pretends to be sick to escape plantation work so that he can spend time on educating himself. Ironically, he asks Tom, the little son of the master, to teach him how to read and write, and in return, he promises to teach the little boy how to play the banjo—an African musical instrument. Eventually, Coffin, the master’s driver, takes his revenge on him by revealing Hannibal’s secret to the master. Hannibal has been rude to Coffin in many cases and has behaved disrespectfully and so Coffin possesses a strong abhorrence and is ready to take revenge on him. Everett, who has become the master since his father is ill, Zeb, the new overseer, and Coffin spy on Hannibal while he is reading and writing. Hannibal makes attempts to evade and manipulate the catastrophe. His speech is affectedly naïve and he pretends he does not understand what the master means. His pretension is a practice of theatricality as would be expected from a trickster. That Everett calls him “monkey faced” is significant because the monkey, in Gates’ idea, is the supreme trickster who undermines the power of its superiors—the lion—through theatrics and simulated naivety. Hannibal’s theatrics is an instance of signifyin(g) that incorporates humor through pretended
incredulity while revealing the depth of his hatred and anger in the moment when he provokes them into bestial violence.

EVERETT (Holding the composition): Did you write this—?

HANNIBAL: What’s that, suh?

EVERETT (Hauling off and slapping him with all his strength. ZEB smiles a little to himself watching): THIS! ... Don’t stand there and try to deceive me, you monkey-faced idiot! Did you write this?

HANNIBAL: Nosuh, I don’t know how to write! I swear to you I don’t know how to write!

EVERETT: Tommy could print better than this when he was seven! You’ve had him teach you, haven’t you ...

HANNIBAL: Jes a few letters, suh. I figger I could be of more use to Marster if I could maybe read my letters and write, suh.

EVERETT (Truly outraged): You have used your master’s own son to commit a crime against your master. How long has this been going on? Who else have you taught, boy? Even my father wouldn’t like this, Hannibal. There is only one thing I have ever heard of that was proper for an “educated” slave. It is like anything else; when a part is corrupted by disease—

EVERETT: ... when a part is corrupted by disease—one cuts out the disease. The ability to read in a slave is a disease—

HANNIBAL (Screaming at him, at the height of defiance in the face of hopelessness): You can’t do nothing to me to get out my head what I done learned ... I kin read! And I kin write! You kin beat me and beat me ... but I kin read ... (To ZEB) I kin read and you can’t—

(Tober 1994, p. 37-38).

Unfortunately, the above-mentioned lines refer to Everett’s intention to cause Hannibal to become blind. The action was carried out by Zeb when ordered by Everett to do so. The use of “read meh letters” [emphasis added] is significant. It is both humorous and ironic. It pinpoints and questions the attempts of the masters in general to deprive the slaves of language, which is a human property. The possessive “my” emphasizes not only Hannibal’s concern for possessing language and thus a voice, but Tober’s reworking of the classical theme of African-American literature, in which the black is voiceless. Though initially in this dialogue Hannibal is presented as the stereotypically naive and frightened slave, he asserts his power through reminding them he has managed to gain something that can never be taken away from him. He has in possession that which cannot be confiscated or manipulated. He has also managed to learn reading and writing by making the young son of the master exchange his cultural possession with that of Hannibal—literacy with African music. Through this act, he has already deprived the master of reveling in the violence of punishing the teacher. Besides, Tommy’s eagerness to teach Hannibal foreshadows the desire of the future generation to reconsider his relation with those of the slaves. Hannibal’s initial pretension of incredulity by assuming a childish ignorance, therefore, soon gives in to his attestation to knowledge. Hannibal knows what he is doing and his intentions definitely to provoke the master into spasms of anger. Provoking the master into anger is the sign of Hannibal’s power, even if that power would finally afflict Hannibal himself. So humor in the language of Hannibal is only prescient to tragedy. Hannibal’s conscious rhetorical play alongside his manipulation of context is an example of speakerly text, in which the slave transforms the significance of the initial situation and reveals his own mental complexity. The speakerly practice in this moment of confrontation
between e slave Hannibal and the master Everett and his overseer Zeb signals a shift in the social position of the two groups, proving Hannibal intractable and thus in control.

As Gates argues, “voice [...] determine[s] the contours of the black face” (1993, p. 63). It seems that Gates’ belief in the power of Language in giving shape to a black identity is similar to the way culture is currently perceived: “as a complicated strategic articulation of diverse and mutually contradictory elements” (Olanyian 35). Hence, identity is a volatile admixture that articulation can (re)fashion it. This knowledge Hannibal has learnt and therefore he is ready to move from a stable sense of identity to an open one. His act of exchange whereby he gives the knowledge and skill of playing the banjo to his master’s son and in return learns the art of reading and writing is an act of welcoming a new identity, not fashioned by the master, which is the result of consciousness about his own status he has gained. The behavior of master Hiram—who as he vehemently reiterated in the play, believe in the system of slavery, yet tried not to mistreat the slaves much and controlled his whimsical anger, has definitely contributed to Hannibal’s growing sense of human and social consciousness, later on reconciled with political consciousness as well. This consciousness results in an awakened imaginative power in Hannibal, where he can see himself possessing language if not a plantation of his own.

If African music is the authentic expression of Africans’ collective existence, and their means of communal communication, teaching it to a white would mean endowing a part of one’s sense of cultural identity to an Other. Therefore, learning how to read and write is not succumbing to the standards of the whites—the way often the desire to read and write and the emancipatory quality assigned to it appears in critical discourses—but an act of cultural exchange that could only become possible when Hannibal had acquired a sense of trust in his imaginative powers. As Christopher Mulvey talks of the shift in the tradition of African-American fiction from a penchant to depict “life” to a desire to express “imagination” (18), Hannibal moves away from a concern with the present situation to an enthusiasm for the imagined. When he reminds his master that they can never dispossess him of what he has acquired, he is using a philosophical argument that regards the human mind as the unassailable domain of privacy.

This emphasis on his subjective achievement, however, is modified by the sociocultural ramifications of his newly attained knowledge. When Hannibal admits of having learned how to read and write, he celebrates, metaphorically, the moment of his triumph by reminding them that what is learnt cannot be unlearnt. According to Gates for a long time it was still believed that “Slave education, learning to read, was a decisive political act; learning to write, as measured by an eighteenth–century scale of culture and society, was an irresistible step away from the cotton field toward a freedom even larger than physical manumission” (1989, p. 45) and Hannibal was abusing a white child to help him take the very first step towards freedom. By educating himself, Hannibal violated the horrible plantation laws. When the news reached Everett Sweet, he shouted angrily at Hannibal and ordered Zeb Dudley to put his eyes out. Becoming blind, Hannibal grows more desirous of freedom. His inability to see does not abate his desire for freedom. Not only is his imagination not incapacitated but also reinvigorated. The last glimpse of Hannibal we have after he is made blind is when he is following the drinking gourd into freedom. Since the slaves believed if they follow the drinking gourd or the Big Dipper they could find their path to freedom. A spiritual poem with this name is repeatedly recited in the play by the slaves implying the slaves clandestine strong desire for emancipation. His subjective act of possessing language, therefore, reconciles a sociopolitical undertaking with an imaginative act.

Hannibal is also consciously playing with language, tricking his master into an act of violence, only to laugh at them by reminding them of their historically inerasable acts. He shouts in the face of Zeb that, “I kin read and you can’t—”, (38) while initially, he refused to acknowledge that he knew what the writing in the hands of Everett was, and then immediately accepted he had just learned a few words so that he would not be a burden to young master Tommy. This trickery and language play demonstrates that Hannibal is conscious that his actions are an imaginative text he is writing in the
book of history, as his piece of writing commissioned by little Tommy was a piece of imaginative writing and not a story with a beginning and an end. Tommy asked Hannibal to write a story, but he, against the grain of African writers, instead of writing the history of the black, wrote an imaginatively daring text on his own personal experiences. Hannibal’s actions as well as his writing, therefore, share a quality, and that is their embodiment of the drinking gourd, or better says a path to freedom. As a result, they are instances of a talking text, shouting Hannibal’s desire for freedom.

That he is writing his actions and thus negotiating his identity is corroborated by the “vernacular structure” of the play. The theme of escape and its correlative motif of ascent from South to North are repeated in this play as part of its “vernacular structure”, which Page believes is basically founded on “repetition and revision” (2011, p. 92). At the beginning of the play, we hear about Rissa’s remarks about the coming of the white horse. She is the most loyal slave of the plantation, the cook and Hannibal’s mother. Indeed she is one of the slaves Hiram brought to the plantation when he commenced his job. She tells Hiram, “you sittin’ there now, white as cotton, sweatin’ like you seen the horseman comin’.” (Hansberry 1994, p. 18). Hiram later on says “saw him that time ... old horseman ... riding out the swamps ... he was smiling at me.” (Hansberry 1994, p 22). Indeed, they have a mutual perception of this concept which implies death. When we first encounter these words we take them as signifying the same meaning; both could possibly mean death. But in light of what both Hiram and Rissa reveal about their own minds, it becomes clear that the horseman represents different things for these people.

Hiram is the only person who is truly sad about the inception of the war in the south. He believes this war will turn into an antislavery war, and he who firmly believes in slavery will no more be the master he used to be. For him, the war is the end of a way of life.

HIRAM: Don’t you know that whoever that idiot was who fired on Sumter set the slaves free? Well, get out the liquor, gentlemen, it’s all over. (Pause) A way of life is over. The end is here and we might as well drink to what it was. (Hansberry 1994, p. 40)

Therefore, Hiram, the good master, expresses his wish for the continuation of the system of slavery. Hiram’s desire is, hence, in contrast with that of Hannibal and later on, even that of Rissa, the Big Mama of the story. After Hannibal is made blind, the play leaves him just to recover him once again at the fringe of escape. In his absence, Big Mama becomes central to the play. Trudier Harris (1995) states that a host of writers create matriarchal stereotypical figures and most of these women are either caretakers with mean jobs or superhuman (110). Rissa initially seems to fit properly in these categories. She is the cook in the master’s household, and is caring towards both the master Hiram and the slaves she feeds every day. Also, her final act of letting Hiram die and stealing his gun to help Hannibal escape the plantation life with Sarah takes her from the first stereotype to the heroic one. This heroism of course is not one of the superhuman power to tolerate pain and suffering, but to overcome motherly feelings she supposedly has for Hiram and to let him die. Rissa’s behavior towards her son is also far from sentimental. Rissa does not worry about Hannibal being hungry, because she thinks he has grown up and should take care of himself. So against the grain of literary and nonliterary picturing of African-American matriarchs, in The Drinking Gourd Lorraine Hansberry has created Rissa, the matriarchal figure, as a deviation from the normal representation of matriarch figures. Or in other words, Hansberry signifies on stereotypical matriarch figure.

Later in the play, Rissa’s language changes. She is not an obedient servant anymore. She criticizes her “master” severely and sarcastically. Rissa mistreats Hiram so seriously at the end of the play that it leads to his death. In light of what Rissa does, or what she refuses to do—helping Hiram who is calling for help—her way of talking to Hiram changes from one of friendly caregiving to one of hostility. Throughout the play, Hiram and Rissa seem to share a care for one another and an understanding that was a result of their joint endeavor in the past to set up the plantation. Rissa and three other slaves helped Hiram to grow into a real master. On this account, Hiram spoke with Rissa on very friendly terms in their private encounters.
HIRAM: Took a stubborn man to do the things I had to. To come into the wilderness and make a plantation. Came here with four slaves and fifty dollars and made one of the finest plantations in this district.

RISSA (Attending to him, gently, patiently, mopping his brow as she stands behind his chair) Yessah. Jes you and me and old Ezra and Zekial who run off and poor old Leo who died last year.

However, Rissa is not always on friendly terms with Hiram. Like the rest of the slaves who are constantly nagging while they are at work, Rissa nags when Hiram asks her to do things. When she is asked to bring Hiram’s old gun she reacts, “I knew it! Every time you get to thinkin’ ’bout them days I have to get out that old gun so’s you kin look at it (Hansberry 1994, p. 19).” Rissa’s true desire reveals itself when she actively ignores Hiram’s supplications and leaves him to die.

She lifts her eyes and looks out the window to see the figure of the man she can distinctly hear crying for help. […] We come down on her face as she starts to rock back and forth as HIRAM’s cries completely cease. (Hansberry 1994, p. 42)

In light of what happens here, Rissa is capable of manipulating the situation to turn it into her own favor. For Rissa, the death of the master is ideal, but this ideal cannot be achieved without some compromise formations. When the time is ripe, and there comes the news of the uprising and war, she steals Hiram’s gun herself and sends Hannibal, Joshua, her granddaughter, and Sarah out into the wilderness. Her behavior towards the master was mostly a mechanism by which she guaranteed the well-being of her family members and people. For her, the death of the master means freedom and she welcomes it. So when she tells Hiram as if he has seen the horseman, she is implying his death as well as their own freedom. The horse signifies death for Hiram, but quite meaningfully it stands for their freedom. When these two coincide, the time is ripe for escape and Rissa recognizes this. So she is not willing at the beginning to speed up Hiram’s death—she controls the amount salt in Hiram’s food for his heart condition—because she knows well that no master would treat them as Hiram has, but at the end of the play she is more than willing to let him go. For all the consciousness that uprisings, lack of slaves and the expense they impose on people who want to buy them have created, Rissa can see that more than ever her notion of the horseman coincides with that of Hiram.

This vernacular structural is also reverberated in the repetition of number four as leitmotif in the play. Hannibal counts only four stars to find the Big Dipper. Hiram had four slaves when he started his plantation. Number four also appears in the brief torture scene where a slave is “strung by all four limbs between two sapplings” (Hansberry 1994, p. 39) and the doctor also insists that Hiram must take his medicine four times a day. Four is repeated in derivative forms as well. The number of slaves in the south is repeatedly reported to be four million. Sarah’s age is fourteen when she is leaving the plantation; gun in hand, with Hannibal. Hiram himself was fourteen when he inherited the gun from his father. It seems that in all these instances four is associated with the possibility of making a new life or freedom, both for the master and the slave. It is evident that this repetition is more than a motif, and turns into a talking text, and reminding the audience that four establishes slavery as it grants freedom. So, slave and master require one another for their existence.

The drinking gourd, the ultimate symbol of freedom, is constantly song in the play. As the play opens people are singing, when at work they keep singing and at the play’s end still there is a song heard. The whole play, therefore, functions very much like a song, repetitions making it structurally parallel to the repetitive folk songs of plantation slaves. And are those songs the songs of freedom or death of master, this play is also the drinking gourd itself textualized.

This vernacular structure afflicts the language of the masters in general as well, and this is where talking text provokes speakerly text. In The Drinking Gourd, the language of some of the
white masters (Hiram and Everett) is punctuated with a vernacular mode of speech making what Gates terms “speakerly text”. For instance, Zeb, a white overseer, says to his wife, Elizabeth, “That ain’t corn … Ain’t nobody going to buy that” (Hansberry 1994, p. 23). In various other occasions, Zeb deploys “clearin’”, “lotta”, “pullin’”, “gottin’”, “bott”, “runnin’”, “lookin’”, “mebbe”, “kin”, “plantin’”, “eatin’”, “low”, “figger”, “yourn”, “t’ward”, etc. (Hansberry 1994, p. 23–4). Zeb, the overseer, Elizabeth, his wife and the preacher all use this vernacular mode of speech. The “speakerly text” uses the vernacular mode for speaking to the readers, and as a result creates a hybrid narrative voice that does not totally belong either to the narrator of the play or the protagonist. As a result, some writers signify on written traditions by drawing the reader’s attention to oral shapes of communication. By infusing their vernacular identity in the Standard English of the masters, the slaves make the masters’ sense of identity protean and penetrable. By vitiating the robust wall of “linguistic differences”, the slaves negotiated with their masters about the possibilities of redefining “facts of social life” (Errington 2008, p. 10).

All in all, the vernacular or folkloric quality of the play opens the play to possibilities of making and remaking human relations. As is indicated by the changing behavior of Hiram and Rissa regarding slavery, the play makes it possible to see, at least in a folkloric space, a master who believes in slavery treating his slaves more humanly: “I believed in slavery. But I understood it; it never fooled me.” (Hansberry 1994, p. 13) Hiram is consciously playing a game of human affections and bonding to keep the slaves as slaves. But if Rissa is taken as a signifying monkey, then it is possible to see her as playing with the lion master up to the moment when he finally undermines himself. Rissa’s giving in to the game of Hiram leads to his journeying into the slave cabins late at night and ends up with his death. So both Rissa and Hiram, though they share a past and memories of lifestyle, also share with one another a conscious mistrust of each other, each playing the other and waiting for a chance to win. What Hannibal does, making Tommy teach him how to read and write, is what the war brings on: White abolitionists will bring the downfall of the Southern masters and therefore, possibly, mastery of the whites.

Abolition of slavery is the promise of erasing borders that used to separate the master from the slave or the primitive from the civilized. Self-consciousness about social status reveals itself in Everett’s anger at his father mentioning his humble background:

EVERETT (Turning on him savagely as soon as the man is out of sight): Papa, why must you insist upon eternally bringing up your “humble beginnings”—(Hansberry 1994, p. 18)

Everett tries to practice his mastery over the slaves by employing an overseer, Zeb. Their violence is supposed to make absolute the distance they desire to assert between themselves and the slaves. This violence is initially often verbal, but at the end of the play, it becomes physical. Insult, therefore, is supposed to signify on social status and besides expressing desires of people, speaks of what they lack which motivates that desire in the first place. For Hannibal, it is the freedom to have a land, a house of his own and a family. So on one occasion, when Coffin, the master’s driver, confronts him and starts to insult him, he sarcastically reminds Coffin of their dispossession, suggesting that Coffin must be an idiot who cannot see this:

Get out this cabin ‘fore you get smacked upside your head … how you get so mixed up in your head? Them ain’t my fields yonder, man! Ain’t none of it my cotton what’ll rot if I leaves it half-picked. They ain’t my tools what I drops and breaks and loses every time I gets a chance. None of it mine. (Hansberry 1994, pp. 29–30)

In this moment of confrontation between a slave who rages against the identity, master has defined for him and a slave who is satisfied with that identity, a tricking act of undermining social positions also takes place. Although Hannibal is being right in a literal sense, metaphorically he is laughing at the mistake in the judgment Coffin has made, taking the slave Hannibal as the landowner. So he ironically asks, “how you get so mixed up in your head?” the mixing up is at
the same time linguistic as well as social. As the speakerly text highlights the mixing up of “orality and literacy”, so it mingles what each stands for, “primitive and civilized” (Heller & McElhinny 2017, p. 69). Therefore, speakerly text is the rhetorical mechanism by which borders are blunted and hybridity emphasized.

Being regarded as primitive and thus silenced into subservience, the African-American laborers are constantly humbled and dehumanized. At the beginning of the play when the soldier narrator starts his account of life in the plantations, the slaves are depicted as a silent mass invading their huts after working time is over. They are even incapable of communicating with one another because they come from very different cultural backgrounds. Their silence is in sharp contrast with the volubility of the soldier narrator. The initial images of the slaves reduce them to a lifeless, voiceless painting, and when they start to chatter, the play emphasizes, a sense of life and rigor starts to permeate the play; As if language is their survival and guarantees life. The Soldier, however, treats them as objects. He walks among their huts, drinks from their plates and acts the observer in a zoo. Later on in the play, he speaks of the workers as substitutable objects: “…labor was so plentiful that it was cheaper to work a man to death and buy another one than to work the first one less harshly” (Hansberry 1994, p. 5). They are also reduced through the use of synecdoche. In a scene when Zeb, the new overseer, intends to describe the new times of working in the cotton field, he tells the hands are to be in the fields an hour and a half before regular time. He says, “The hands are to be in the fields an hour and a half before regular time and we’re cuttin’ the noon break in half and we’ll hold’em an hour and a half longer than the usual night quittin’ time.” “And any hand who donot learn fast enough will learn it fast enough when I get through with’em” (Hansberry 1994, p. 33). In both examples, the slave is ostracized from a human world: by being denied rest, his body turns into a machine and with the use of the synecdoche “hand”, he is reduced to an aspect of his bodily existence. In both cases, therefore, the language of the master is the performance of violence to which the slave answers through indirection and irony. The linguistic violence of the master, however, turns easily into real physical threat, while the slave has only recourse to his slyness and trickery as the text has irony and sarcasm available to it. The faithful Big Mama turning her back to her master and procuring Hannibal and his fiancée with a gun to escape, their success in escaping the plantation and the fact that Hannibal is still alive at the end of the play, are all so mythical that it seems the story comes from the optimistic imagination of a folk rather than from real history. This mythical folkloric quality distances the play from an expected real-life conclusion: defeat of the escapee or his heroic escape. Neither of these occurs. Hannibal is blind and it seems unlikely that he would survive.

The value of signifying is in its transformative power. Old words and expressions are given new fresh meanings not only to persuade or cajole, or even to amuse, but to plan a toppling down of the system of slavery or an escape into freedom. Many slave spirituals (religious songs) deployed signifying “as a type of connotative manipulation that implemented clever mental processes” (Bradford 1886, p. 95) when performing any physically violent action against their masters was unfeasible. In fact, they treated the speaker with both indirection and implication. In this play, the slaves recite a poem called “The Drinking Gourd” which contains a hidden secret message for escape. Songs like “Follow the Drinking Gourd” and “Steal Away to Jesus” were smartly prepared examples of songs exploited by the slaves to send and imply clandestine messages and double meanings covered in it.

“For the old man is a-waitin’
For to carry you to freedom
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.

or

Steal away, steal away home-
I ain’t got long to stay here.
My Lord he calls me, (Parks, 1928, p. 18)
On an occasion in the play a number of children and youngsters recite a meaningful song:

**Joshua:** “My old marster promise me
Mmm Mmm Mmm
That when he died he gona set me free
Mmm Mmm Mmm
Well, he live so long ‘til his head got bald
Mmm Mmm Mmm
Then he gave up the notion of dying at all!” *(Hansberry 1994, p. 28–29).*

While reading the above poem, Sarah, Hannibal’s fiancée, makes gestures naughtily and helps and leads “Mistress”, as if Hiram’s wife, to her grave with a weaving movement of her hands and in this way not only chorally and orally but also with mimicry and gestures they criticize their unpleasant situation. Everybody recites this poem in his or her turn and so the chorus is repeated by all *(Hansberry 1994, p. 28).* They pretend cleverly and innocently that they are not aware of the real meaning of their poem; especially when Rissa reacts to the grumbling of Coffin who enters the scene and disrupts the song on the pretext of the content, she only remarks,

**RISSA:** H’I’m supposed to stop folks from openin’ and closin’ they mouths, man?

**COFFIN:** This here your cabin.

**RISSA:** But it’s they mouths. *(Hansberry 1994, p. 29)*

In spite of the fact that African Americans lived in America for a long time, they continue to exploit this art of language play in their traditions in different religious spiritual songs, in rhymes, in myths, in ballads, preaching, spirituals, work songs, rap and blues. African Americans have become masters of connotative meanings incorporating metaphorical, symbolic and hidden meaning with the contribution of these verbal traditions.

### 4. Conclusion

Lorain Hansberry’s *The Drinking Gourd* incorporates the rhetorical mechanism of talking text and speakerly text to raise consciousness of its characters as well as its audience to the constructed-ness of human identity. By juxtaposing the voice of the master with that of the slave and showing the possibility of pollution and mixture of voices, the play provokes a sense of protean linguistic identity that sets in motion the desire for change in the cultural constructs of human world, based on which the system of slavery is functioning and maintain itself. The way Hiram has been managing the slaves has, ironically, produced this self-consciousness in the new generation of the slaves that their identity is made and thus can be reconstructed. Hannibal refuses to satisfy himself with the leftovers of the whites, like clothes they do not wish to wear anymore, or housework instead of work on the plantation that the master would offer him because of Rissa’s request. He also refuses to work on a land that is not his. He shows his contempt for this cultural practice by making himself absent from work and inciting the anger of the master and forcing him into violence. Hannibal’s repeated act of escape from work is a constant reminder to the master that the slaves are capable of plunging into bestial violence, and therefore they can turn to the very savage they believe the slaves are. This act of Hannibal is always accompanied by a rhetorical game, in which he pretends incredulity first and plays the master into bad temper and violence, thus turning the idea of the monkey-faced black as inferior to general humanity into monkey as trickster who can finally bring the downfall of the lion master.

The play, however, transcends the mechanism s of speakerly and talking text as mere rhetorical contrivance and turns the play into an embodiment of signifying, whereby the ultimate objective of it is
to reconcile textual practices with real-life politics. The vernacular structure of the play that functions based on repetition and revision and the constant singing that is going on in the play make the text of the play a talking text, singing of freedom. The play becomes, in its perpetual revocation of the number four as the numerical basis of slavery and its antidote, the embodiment and enactment of the desire of the black for freedom while bringing into daylight the same system that gives rise to the desire as the ultimate cause of slavery. When this system, represented by Hiram, gives in to excessive violence, it is possible to see its end and the signifyin(g) acts of Hannibal are intended to hasten this process. Hence, the play is more than a rhetorical game of its characters, but uses the mechanisms of talking text and speakerly text as a framework and a texture, itself becoming the drinking gourd, a path to freedom or a sign of emancipation or the slaves’ unquenchable desire for freedom. In this way, that which is textual desire as a piece of imaginative writing transforms into practice when the founders of the cultural system of slavery, like Rissa, revolt against their own construction.

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Note
1. Clarence Major’s Dictionary of African-American Slang, Hermene E. Roberts’ The Third Ear: A Black Glossary, Mezz Mezzrow’s glossary of his autobiography Really the Blues, J. L. Dillard’s definition, Jim Haskins and Hugh F. Butts’ The Psychology of Black Language, and Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner’s The Dictionary of American Slang.

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