

**Racism in Bruce Norris's
Clybourne Park
A Research
Submitted**

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BRUCE NORRIS'S *CLYBOURNE PARK*

In Norris's *Clybourne Park* – being inspired by Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun* – a battle over race and real estate rages across two generations in a suburban Chicago neighborhood. With a modern twist on issues of race, class, property ownership and community, *Clybourne Park* revolves around discrimination, gentrification and political correctness. The idea of the play came to Norris when he was a child. He said that the first play he saw at school was Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. In an interview with Beatrice Basso (2011), he speaks about the play and says:

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. 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. 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.

Bruce Norris is an American actor and playwright. He graduated from Chicago's Northwestern University in 1982. He began his career as an actor. He performed at many theatres like Victory Gardens Theatre and Goodman Theatre. In 1997 he moved to Brooklyn, New York, where he currently lives. His major film appearances include *A Civil Action*, *The Sixth Sense* and *All Good Things*. His play *Clybourne Park* premiered at Playwrights Horizons in New York in January 2010 and received its UK premiere at London's Royal Court Theatre in 2011. The play also won Olivier Award for Best New Play and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Reviewing the play in his article in *The Column*, Jeremy William Osborne said that the Pulitzer Prize committee citation described *Clybourne Park* as "a powerful work whose memorable characters speak in witty and perceptive ways to America's sometimes toxic struggle with race and class consciousness." Bruce Norris's other plays have received their world premieres at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre. These include: *The Infidel* (2000) *Purple Heart* (2002) *We All Went Down to Amsterdam* (2003, Joseph Jefferson Award for Best New Work) *The Pain and the Itch* (2004, Joseph Jefferson Award for Best New Work) *The Unmentionables* (2006) *A Parallelogram* (2010).

Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park* describes the same house in Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* in the predominantly white neighborhood where the Younger family, a black family, intends to live. The same house is described in the second Act fifty years later where a white family intends to move to, but this time the neighborhood has become predominantly black. *Clybourne Park* has

received a lot of attention in the media, especially in light of recent racial issues in America. Ben Brantley makes two very interesting claims in his review of *Clybourne Park*, "Slashing the Tires on the Welcome Wagon." He claims that Bruce Norris "efficiently dashes the cautious hopes" of the family in *A Raisin in the Sun*, so one would imagine they play to be a "downer. While communication between blacks and whites improves throughout the two acts of the play, dialogue is strained. Conversations are full of political references, and there are a lot of pain behind every sentence said. Dialogue are offensive and without progress. Although there is fifty years between the two Acts, the lack of communication proves to be a essential problem in the house. On the surface, communications seem to be much better, but in reality conversation is very unpleasant as it was fifty years earlier. *Clybourne Park* is ultimately a play that focuses on racial issues that have not improved yet. Bruce Norris claims that the same fundamental problems will always exist, and communication must improve to make any progress. He believes that a lot of superficial changes have happened like in laws, the public services, and education. However, our nature refuses to change accordingly. Legislations and laws cannot change our feelings towards each other.

The play is set in Clybourne Park neighborhood. It consists of two Acts. The first one is set in 1959 and the neighborhood is mostly white, while the second Act is set in 2009 and the neighborhood changes to be predominantly African American. Norris uses the same house in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* -the house which the Youngers decided to move to after leaving their slum - as a start to his play. The play opens with Bev and Russ Stoller, two white characters, packing their things because they want to move out from Clybourne Park. They had a son called Kenneth who committed a suicide because the community accused him of killing innocent people during the Korean War. The couple can't tolerate the community's behavior towards their son and they think that their attitude was the main reason why Kenneth committed suicide. As a result, they decided to leave this neighborhood. Another couple is Francine and Albert who are black. Francine is a servant at the Stoller's. She is always targeted by questions from Karl Linder and Jim. Karl Linder is a recurrent character. He appeared in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* as the white

character who tries to convince the Youngers not to move to Clybourne Park. Norris uses the same character in his play. Karl appears in the first Act trying to persuade Bev and Russ not to sell their house to a black family. He is married to Betsy who happens to be deaf and pregnant. Jim is a minister who appears in the first Act because he has been asked by Bev to talk to Russ about his nonstop mourning of his son's suicide. The action is reversed in the second Act. A white couple, Steve and Lindsey, wants to buy the same house portrayed from Act one. They want to renovate it and demolish most of the original structure, but Lena and Keven, a black couple who represents the Home Owner's Association, tries to explain the historical importance of this house to them and that whether the new house to be built at 406 Clybourne Street conforms to the specifications of the Community Association. Later in this Act, one knows that Kathy, the lawyer of Steve and Lindsey, is the daughter of Karl and Betsy. Also, Lena's great aunt lived in this house after the Stoller's. Kevin and Lena tell Steve and Lindsey about what happened in this house 50 years ago. Lindsey can't live with the fact that Kenneth hung himself in this house. Tom, a real estate lawyer, is another character who leads the discussion among the characters and represents the interests of Lena and Kevin . Dan is a contractor who discovers a mysterious box in the yard.

Norris's aim to set the first Act in 1959 and the second in 2009 is to portray the society where racism was an explicit issue in 1959 and everybody in Act One speaks about it in a direct way; despite fifty years, racism has still been an issue. The only difference is that racism in 2009 is implicitly expressed and everybody in Act Two is embarrassed when the issue comes up to the surface. In the play, time has stood still. Nothing changes over 50 years except for the physical appearance of the house. In the first Act the house is nice and well-kept while in Act 2 it erodes and deteriorated. When Emily Hoffman interviewed the Scenic Designer Ralph Funicello and asked him about the challenges of designing Chicago bungalows, he said:

They're primarily brick Craftsman houses that have a lot of oak. When they were originally built they had a lot of plain, square oak detailing inside, very much the kind of thing that [playwright] Bruce [Norris] describes in the

play: the built-in sideboard and the paneling and plate rack in the dining room. The problem is that we have to make the house look fairly deteriorated for the second act, so that really necessitated our not doing oak-finished woodwork. But if you figure that in 1959 this house was already 50 years old, it's quite possible that the woodwork was painted.

The second Act mirrors the first Act. One can also notice that there are family ties among the characters. By doing this, Norris wants to attract the attention that different generations inherit the same racial feelings and attitudes. Ben Brantely writes in *New York Times* review of the play (2010) about how "the emptiness of most human communication" is evident in all the characters' interactions. Indeed, much of the stage time is taken up with trivia, small talk, and niceties. Although moments of true connection between characters are rare, the play seems to urge its readers to be patient and learn to listen in order to communicate successfully.

Symbolism in the play can't be ignored. Norris uses it to deliver many messages. One can find symbolism in the characters' actions and in objects. Bev and Betsy in the first Act are housewives. Bev is doing the housework while Russ is sitting in his chair all the time. Betsy is a deaf woman who only hears what her husband tells her. Both characters symbolize the role of women in 1959. Fast forward to the twenty first century, Lindsey is seen as a wife who argues with her husband and she doesn't allow anybody to filter information for her. Francine, in the first Act is seen as a maid in Russ's house, while Lena in the second Act, is seen as a lawyer who defends the rights of the Blacks to keep their culture. Here symbolism is used to emphasize the big change that has happened between generations in the two acts.

Symbolism is not limited to characters; it is employed by objects too. Bev and Russ are seen in the first Act arguing over who would carry a trunk that is too heavy and its contents are hidden from the audience until the end. The trunk seems to symbolize the burden that Bev and Russ have carried since their son, a Korean War veteran, committed suicide after struggling with having killed innocent citizens. Bev reminds Russ about carrying the trunk, but he replies

that it is a “two person job,” implying that he cannot carry the burden on his own. Instead of volunteering to help, Bev indirectly asks Lena and her husband Albert, to bring down the trunk. Even though Russ was not eager to carry the trunk by himself, he is angry when he sees other people carrying the load for him. In this way, Bruce Norris uses the trunk to represent Russ’ struggle between pain and pride. Because of this pain, Russ doesn’t mind selling his house to a black family. It is his way of revenging himself on his neighbors who failed to accept his son. Unlike Karl, the only thing he wants is to leave this neighborhood. In Act One Russ says to Karl:

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? (1.1)

Many similarities can be found between the characters in Act One and in Act Two. In the First Act, Karl Linder is the racist. He is the one who is concerned about the moving of a black family to Clybourne Park. First, he doesn’t bother to know Francine’s name, the only black character in the play. He asks, " Uh, Francine, is it?"(*Clybourne Park*, 1). Karl always showers Francine, the house keeper, with questions to prove that the black and the white can’t live together:

KARL: Francine, may I ask? Do you ski?

FRANCINE: Ski?

KARL: Downhill skiing?

FRANCINE: We don't ski, no.

KARL: And this is my point. The children who attend St. Stanislaus. Once a year we take the middle schoolers up to Indianhead Mountain, and I can tell you, in the time I've been there, I have not once seen a *colored family on those slopes*. Now, what accounts for that? Certainly not any deficit in ability, so what I have to conclude is that for some reason, there is just something about the pastime of skiing that doesn't appeal to the Negro community. And feel free to prove me wrong... But you'll have to show me where to find the skiing Negroes. (1.1)

In this conversation, Karl wants to clarify that some sports like skiing are not interesting to the blacks. This reminds us of August Wilson's *Radio Golf*, where golf is the symbol of a sport played only by the white rich people. Karl continues to ask Francine: "I think that you'd agree, I'm assuming, that in the world, there exist certain differences. Agreed?" (1.1). 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* (1.1).

In this exchange he tries to justify his racism by giving an example of a food that his wife likes while he doesn't find it delicious because she is Scandinavian and he is not. Food and taste are employed by Norris to show that they are manifestations of the competition that's going on with all people all the time. Every ethnic group tries to express themselves through insignificant things like taste or kinds of clothes. For example, the rich people in a city would

demonstrate their richness by buying expensive clothes and eating expensive food. In his interview with Basso, Norris states " at any given moment, you know that even something as insignificant as taste—"I like this house better than that house, it's prettier"—identifies us as part of a group that looks at another group skeptically or critically."

Jim, the minister, continues to offer more cultural differences by speaking about the musical instruments that each team use in churches. He says,

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*. (1.1)

Throughout the conversation Karl and Jim always try to interrupt Francine giving her no chance to state her opinion because they want her to say what they want to hear. When they ask her if she would enjoy living in Clybourne Park, Francine says, " It's a *very lovely* neighbor— " , but is interrupted by Jim asking her to be honest (*Clybourne Park* ,1). In their conversation with Francine, Karl and Jim show that the Blacks are inferior and deal with them as second class persons. They don't have the right to live where the Whites live or eat what the Whites eat.

In Act Two, Steve is the racist. He tells offensive jokes about race and class. Everybody in Act two is trying to be politically correct regarding race and class. They speak about these issues implicitly, except for Steve who can engage himself in discussions about race without paying attention of what he is saying. When Lena starts a discussion about the hidden interests behind gentrification and how some of these interests are not economic, she immediately realizes that she has to stop talking about this and she tries to avoid answering

Steve's question "which group?" (2.1). Steve, on the other hand, speaks explicitly and says

– Okay Okay. If you really want to – It's ...
...it's race. Isn't it? You're trying to tell me that
that ... That implicit in what you said – That this
entire conversation ...isn't at least partly
informed –am I right? By the issue of ... of
racism?. (2.1)

There is also a similarity between Bev in the first Act and Lindsey in the second Act. Both of them seem to reject the idea of grouping people according to the color of their skin but in depth they fail sometimes to keep themselves from being racist. Bev, in the First Act for example, tries to give Francine, her maid, and her husband ,Albert, a chafing dish. She thinks that ,as a black couple, they might not have something like that . She says:

Bev: Do you own one of these
yourself?

Francine: No, I sure don't.

Albert and Francine politely
refused the chafing dish .

Albert: Well, we got plenty of
dish-

Bev: Not one of these. Francine
told me.

Albert: Well, that's very kind of
you, but –

Bev: She said you didn't have
one and somebody should take
it and –

Albert: But we don't *need* it,
ma'am. (1.1)

Although Francine is Bev's maid for a long time, she forgets how many children Francine has. Bev says she would be " So honored " to have Albert and Francine and their two children as her neighbors (1.1). Albert has corrected her by saying that they have three children.

Bev assumes that she cares for Francine and her family, but her actions prove the opposite. For her, they are only a poor couple who she tries to help by giving money or house ware. At the end of Act one, Bev tries to offer Albert some money for helping her. She says, " Well, here, then. Let me at least give you fifty cents ", but Albert refuses to take the money and he says, " No, now you keep your money." (1.1). Then Bev explains that the only solution to this situation is that the black couple should know what the others eat to be able to sit down together . Albert ignores her conversation and leaves with Francine.

In Act two , Lindsey mirrors Bev. She also pretends not to be a racist but sometimes she fails. She always tries to choose her words and to be politically correct. When she explains to Lena why she wants to live in Clybourne Park, she says:

LINDSEY: And I totally admit, I'm the one who was resistant, especially with the schools and everything, but once I stopped seeing the neighborhood the way it used to be, and could see what it is now, and its potential? (2.1)

Here Lindsey is referring to the neighborhood when it was predominantly black and " the way it used to be " as an area full of crime and drugs. Lindsey realizes that she has said something about race. Steve tries to help her by completing her sentence and says:

STEVE: (*Helpfully, to Lena*) What you said.

About the history of—?

LINDSEY: Historically. The changing, you

know, demographic—?

STEVE: Although originally—(*To Lindsey*) wasn't it German, predominantly? (2.1)

Lindsey doesn't want to appear a racist. She always tries to be politically correct. This what Bruce Norris wants the audience to think about. He wants to say that in 2009 speech is more important than action. . In an interview with Beatrice Basso, Norris comments on the

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characters' interactions: " Everyone holds their tongue, because we live in a society where speech is much more dangerous than activity—than action No one knows that they should be embarrassed in the first act; everyone knows they should in the second act. We're embarrassed about everything" . When Steve, Lindsey and Kathy want to speak about how Clybourne Park was suffering in the sixties and seventies, they try to choose their words carefully:

STEVE: – of the neighborhood and how in the seventies, eighties, how that was followed by a period of – of – of – of – of rapid –

KATHY: Decline.

LINDSEY: *No*–Not–No

STEVE: Of *growth*. Of *growing* –

KATHY: I don't mean *decline* –

KATHY: – I mean there was *trouble*.

LINDSEY: Not *trouble*, she didn't mean –

KEVIN: There was trouble.

LINDSEY: *Economic* trouble. (2.1)

Also, Lena tries to be politically correct. Sometimes she uses a coded language instead of speaking explicitly. She talks about the historical significant of that house and the neighborhood to her and how she had memories that connect her to the area but she wants actually to tell the white couple to go away and leave the neighborhood.

Not only can similarities among characters be found but also parallelism in discussions between Act one and two. Act one opens with a discussion between Bev and Russ about names of cities and nationalities. They talk about the origin of the word Neapolitan and then about what people who live in various cities are called. Also, in Act two, the white and black couples engage in a discussion about countries and places they visited like Morocco and Spain. Bruce Norris sends a message that a territory is very important to the human being and that owning a physical place might be the reason for a racial conflict. This is why he manages to open both acts with a discussion about countries and cities.

The theory of symbolic racism by Sears is very clear in Norris's play. In the First Act, Karl tries explicitly to push the black

family from the white neighborhood as he is still affected by Jim Crow segregation laws. While in the Second Act, Steve and Bev try implicitly to push the black couples from the black neighborhood under the name of gentrification. In the First Act, there is the old Jim Crow. In the second Act there is the New Jim Crow. Reviewing the play, Alex Brown writes in *Seven Days*, “*Clybourne Park* is a clever time capsule, satirizing the polite bigotry of the '60s by contrasting it with today's earnest avoidance of the political and psychological force of race and class” (Brown, 2018).

Bruce Norris wants to confront the comfortable audience with things they would rather avoid. His play becomes a pressure to make the audience think about how in the post racial era, there are black families thrown in the face of gentrification. He mentions in his interview with Beatrice Basso that racism is another version of the same thing that leads to wars. It is not only about the Blacks and the Whites but it is about the human kind. The surface issue in Act Two is whether the house to be built in Clybourne Park conforms to the specifications of the community or not, but deeply, Norris wants to show how place and human identity are linked. Lena focuses on this by saying :

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. (2.1)

Lena is trying to summarize the negative effects of gentrification on the black people. She explains that it is not only about houses made of bricks and cement, but it is about memories and history and a whole culture stored in such structures. If they are going to gentrify those building, they are going to remove all the connections to this history and this culture. [Lisa Mckenzie](#) describes gentrification as a violent process, “It’s not about cupcakes and cereal cafes, it’s about people being literally ripped out of their homes and their communities” (qtd.in Poppy Noor, 2018). She suggests that gentrifiers harness their guilt by campaigning for the local services that become neglected in an area when wealthier residents move in

To conclude, Bruce Norris desires to draw the attention that racial practices are still produced, and the American society needs to understand that these practices work differently. So, the Americans have to do efforts to change these practices. It is not enough to have a black face in the White House like Barack Obama to prove the end of racism, but the African Americans’ lives have to be improved economically, educationally, and socially.

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