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"Somewhat like War": The Aesthetics of Segregation, Black Liberation, and "A Raisin in the Sun"

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“Somewhat Like War”: The Aesthetics of Segregation, Black Liberation, and *A Raisin in the Sun*

... We must come out of the ghettos of America, because the ghettos are killing us; not only our dreams, as Mama says, but our very bodies. It is not an abstraction to us that the average American Negro has a life expectancy of five to ten years less than the average white. You see, Miss Oehler, that is murder, and a Negro writer cannot be expected to share the placid view of the situation that might be the case with a white writer.

As for changing “the hearts of individuals” —I am glad the American nation did not wait for the hearts of individual slave owners to abolish the slave system—for I suspect that I should still be running around on a plantation as a slave. And that really would not do.

Sincerely,
Lorraine Hansberry (*To Be Young* 117)

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In early summer of 1937, a mob arrived at 6140 Rhodes Avenue to convince the Hansberrys of Chicago to abandon their new home. The Hansberrys instead convinced their new white neighbors to disperse, with a shotgun. As expected, the neighborhood “improvement association” sought an injunction against the Hansberrys, on the grounds that blacks legally could not occupy any residence in any neighborhood covered by a “race restrictive covenant.” In their attempt to combat legal segregation in the North, and to open up desperately needed housing around Chicago's Black Belt, the Hansberrys and local NAACP attorneys took their case before the US Supreme Court. Lorraine Hansberry later recalled her “desperate and courageous mother, patrolling [the] house all night with a loaded German luger, doggedly guarding her four children, while [her] father fought the respectable part of the battle in the Washington court” (*To Be Young* 20). In its 1940 decision on *Hansberry v. Lee*, the Supreme Court ruled in Carl Hansberry's favor on a technicality, while declining to address the constitutionality of the covenants themselves. It would not be until 1948, in *Shelley v. Kramer*, that the North's legal bulwark of racial segregation—the race restrictive covenant—was declared unconstitutional.¹

Coming of age amid the tensions and violence surrounding Chicago's “series of Mason-Dixon lines” fundamentally shaped Lorraine Hansberry's self-consciousness, radical politics, and revolutionary art. As a young playwright, Hansberry shaped her aesthetic practices to respond to the urban segregation her family had fought for so long, and, in the midst of the Cold War, the capitalist systems from which segregation grew. Her first play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), directly engages segregation struggles in Chicago as a penultimate symbol of black oppression and resistance. In doing so, she brought local, individual struggles of African Americans—against segregation, ghettoization, and

capitalist exploitation—to the national stage. “Our Southside,” she once wrote, “is a place apart. Each piece of our living is a protest” (*To Be Young* 17).

Set in that South Side “sometime between World War II and the present” (*Raisin* 22), *Raisin* unfolds in a two-bedroom apartment in an over-crowded black ghetto, the borders of which had shifted little since *Hansberry v. Lee*.² In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry offers an “aesthetics of segregation” to generate public testimony about urban black life, to represent her radically expansive notion of the real, and to provide a prophetic framework for anti-racist, anti-

Alluding to “Negro invasions” and “them bombs and things [whites] keep setting off,” *A Raisin in the Sun* engages both the rhetoric and violence of Chicago’s housing battle.

colonialist movements gaining force in the US and the world. Within the competing realities of black and white life, she dramatizes Chicago’s white supremacist social order, and exposes its connections to the Jim Crow South, capitalist enterprise, and colonialism. Acutely aware of the social organization and violence at the center of Chicago’s near-absolute segregation, Hansberry stages a revolutionary intervention into the cyclical systems of ghettoization, proffering *Raisin* as a dramatic prelude and challenge to the racialized rituals of ghettoization, desegregation, and organized white resistance.

Raisin’s forthright engagement with Chicago segregation at the grass roots exposes and denaturalizes the workings of mid-century urban segregation and massive white resistance to black self-determination. Like other influential black urban writers—including Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, and Langston Hughes—Hansberry deploys her aesthetics of segregation to uncover “not only the results of [segregation], but also the true and inescapable cause of it—which of course is the present organization of American society” (“Scars” 55). Anticipating the limits of traditional freedom movement emphasis on legal segregation, Hansberry does not offer desegregation as the ultimate answer to segregation, but rather as a necessary step toward what she envisioned as “a socialist organization of society as the next great and dearly won universal condition of mankind” (“Tribute” 17). To these ends, *A Raisin in the Sun* insists on local and global black revolution, contests the underpinnings of US segregation, and asserts that civil disobedience, armed struggle, and ideological and economic transformation are imperatives for achieving social justice.

By explicitly confronting segregation in Chicago, Hansberry’s anti-racist aesthetic gives shape to a pragmatic social vision and a “genuine realism.” Genuine realism, Hansberry explained, imposes on a work “not only what *is*, but what is *possible* . . . because that is part of reality too. So that you get a much larger potential of what man can do” (*To Be Young* 228). Her conception of genuine realism renders human beings as active agents—in their own liberation as well as in the oppression of others—and opens a cultural space in which to imagine alternatives to a truthfully represented repressive social reality. Equally concerned with present truth and future possibility, Hansberry’s genuine realism rejects the deterministic impulses of naturalism; her genuine realism relies instead on what she considered an imperative, but in no way naive, idealism. For instance, Hansberry uses Beneatha’s Nigerian suitor, Asagai, to challenge dominant understandings of both realism and idealism: “it is very odd,” he muses, “but those who see the changes—who dream, who will not give up—are called idealists . . . and those who see only the circle we call *them* the ‘realists!’” (*Raisin* 3.1).

Believing that art possesses the spiritual and intellectual "energy that can change things," Hansberry developed an aesthetic that is distinctly black, egalitarian, and radical. In the words of Amiri Baraka, she places "real life under the lights and speak[s] with the sharp eruptive force of black everyday everywhere" (Baldwin xx; Baraka "Sweet Lorraine" 526). Her art reflects her own "sense of tactical reality" and her firm belief that "the world is political and that political power, in one form or another, will be the ultimate key to the liberation of American Negroes and, indeed, black folk throughout the world" (*To Be Young* 212, 213). Baraka explains that in

Hansberry we heard . . . the voice of the people . . . describing, analyzing, recreating the world and demanding change. Demanding Democracy, Self Determination. Even revolution and educating themselves and ourselves as to why and how . . . with a thrilling language of ideas from the mouths of Black people. . . . Ideology as real life. So that what she said was a thrill of meaning and music. Of explosive revelational image. ("Sweet Lorraine" 525, 527)

Anchored in the traditions of radical black American art, activism, and thought, Hansberry's "explosive revelational image[s]" provide not only instructive social critique but also prophetic inquiry. This prophetic inquiry operates as an integral part of her genuine realism, urging her audience, as the title *A Raisin in the Sun* suggests, to consider seriously both what happens to millions of dreams deferred, and the trials that those who fight for independence face.

Locating the Younger family in Chicago's South Side, Hansberry directly engages crises produced by ghetto economies and dehumanizing living conditions, restricted educational access, and explosive encounters along urban color lines. Hansberry understood that residential segregation, and the violence that undergirded it, provided the backbone for racial inequality in the urban North. "This is the ghetto of Chicago," she clarified in the unfiled screenplay. "Not indolence, not indifference, and certainly not lack of ambition imprisons [the Youngers], but various enormous questions of the social organization around them" (5). By mid-century, Chicago's South Side had become one of the most densely crowded ghettos in the US, where two generations of Hansberrys had waged, with lawyers and guns, local and national campaigns against racial segregation, terrorism, and injustice. Like the Youngers, 64% of black women and 34% of black men in the city worked as domestic servants. Like Mama Younger, some 80% of Bronzeville's interwar residents had migrated to Chicago from the South, seeking employment, education, the vote, and freedom from anti-black violence (Drake and Cayton 99, 227). But black unemployment in the city doubled that of whites; the majority of black taxpayers' children, like Hansberry herself, attended overcrowded, under-funded schools on half-day shifts; and black voters found themselves caught within Chicago's far-reaching Democratic Machine.³

The most violently and residentially segregated metropolis in the nation, post-World War II Chicago rocked with more bombs in and around black homes and businesses than even Birmingham, Alabama. Hysterical anti-integration mobs of up to 10,000 whites faced down the National Guard in city streets, and some black families required police escorts of 1,000 or more on moving day into all-white blocks or housing projects (Meyer 115-21; Hirsch "Massive Resistance" 529). As Chicago housing historian Arnold Hirsch explains, more "than mere examples of anti-Black animus," these ritualized campaigns of violence and "sophisticated psychological war" around segregated housing reveal the practical, ideological, and political limits of mid-century African American movements for equality ("Massive Resistance" 523).⁴

Most of *Raisin's* black audiences and critics readily recognized Hansberry's use of Chicago ghettoization as indicative of democracy's national failures. Important Hansberry scholars such as Margaret Wilkerson and Steven Carter have explored the relationships between Hansberry's anti-racist politics and art; this study continues that line of inquiry into her representations of segregation specifically in Chicago. Critics have not yet fully engaged the dynamics of segregation—around which Hansberry structures the entire play—and therefore have not yet fully recognized *Raisin's* aesthetics of segregation as a form of social protest. J. Charles Washington maintains, for instance, that “Walter's dream remains only that not because of defects in the American system but because of basic flaws in his own character” (120). Similarly, Lee A. Jacobus generalizes the play's social analysis: “This play illustrates the American dream as it is felt not just by African Americans but by all Americans: If you work hard and save your money, if you hold to the proper values and hope, then you can buy your own home and have the kind of space and privacy that permit people to live in dignity” (1214). Though the Youngers have worked hard all of their lives, and for two generations in Chicago, they cannot afford suitable housing—until Walter Sr.'s death brings a \$10,000 life insurance check. Hansberry turns again to Asagai to confront fundamental questions of the play: “isn't there something wrong in a house—in a world—where all dreams, good or bad, must depend on the death of a man” (3.1)? Here, Asagai brings the local and global together, suggesting that not only should the Youngers question the material aspects of their individual ambitions and values, but that we all should interrogate the capitalist principles on which modern society is structured.

Like Jacobus, numerous critics have measured the play's “universality” against its racial or cultural specificity, creating what Robin Bernstein describes as an illusory paradox that ultimately divorces the particulars of black life from the realm of “universal”—or human—experience. This willful marginalization of black realities emerged in the enduring and widespread evaluations of *A Raisin in the Sun* as “not really a Negro play . . . [but] a play about people!”⁵ In an interview with Studs Terkel, Hansberry rebutted such critiques: “Well, I hadn't noticed the contradiction because I'd always been under the impression that Negroes *are* people” (*To Be Young* 113; original italics). In her work on white supremacist responses to *Raisin*, Bernstein suggests that white critics employed this universality-particularity paradox to neutralize the play's confrontations with America's Jim Crow order, refusing “to engage with—or even recognize—the politics of the play” “in order to stabilize both whiteness and [racial] segregation . . . and thus to produce and enhance white power” (20, 22). James Baldwin similarly speculated on the critical silence surrounding Hansberry's artistic treatment of social protest and black experience, pointing to her “unmistakable power of turning the viewer's judgment in on himself”: “*Is all this true or not true?* [Hansberry's] play rudely demands. . . . One cannot quite answer negatively, one risks being caught in a lie. But an affirmative answer imposes a new level of responsibility, both for one's conduct and for the fortunes of the American state, and one risks, therefore, the disagreeable necessity of becoming ‘an insurgent again’ ” (xix-xx; original italics).

Both white and black critics misconstrued—or ignored—the play's racialized and gendered class politics. Famously denouncing the play as a “glorified soap opera,” for instance, Harold Cruse accused Hansberry of re-inscribing America's repressive class politics both in Chicago's ghetto and on the stage. Cruse falsely charged that Hansberry and her family owned some 13 slum properties in the South Side, and deemed “obsequious” and “embarrassing” her “mimicry of the critical standards of white Communists” and her play's “assumption that she knew all about the Negro working class, of which she was not even remotely a member” (268-70).

Contrary to Cruse's claims, Hansberry proved acutely aware of her ghetto's class divisions and tensions. Indeed, Bronzeville's working-class youth—particularly their willingness to fight for themselves—profoundly influenced her life and art (*To Be Young* 36, 38, 45-46). Hansberry explained that, in *A Raisin in the Sun*, she created the Youngers as a working-class black family, as opposed to a middle-class family like her own, because she believed the world's coming freedom movements would emerge most forcefully from its laboring classes (*Speaks Out*). In fact, the play treats Chicago's black elite classes—"the only people in the world who are more snobbish than rich white people are rich colored people"—rather unkindly so that wealthy George Murchison's interactions with the Youngers dramatize cross-class tensions, gender conflicts, and relationships between race pride and impulses towards assimilation (1.1). In a 1979 *Freedomways* special issue dedicated to Hansberry, Lerone Bennett, Jr., and Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs evaluate the influence of Chicago's racial geography on Hansberry's art and politics:

Burroughs: How do you account for the fact that a young woman comes out of what's called a black bourgeois background and yet develops a deep understanding of the problems of working people? Is that something that's peculiar to Chicago, or what? A number of people have come out of Chicago: Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, Charlie White, Gwendolyn Brooks. . . . What is it about this town?

Bennett: Well, first of all, Chicago is a very brutal city. It's a very raw city. Chicago will destroy anybody, particularly a black person if that person hasn't steeled him- or herself to resist. . . . Another element . . . is that despite, or perhaps because of, the raw, brutal oppression of black people in this city, there has been and still is a sort of *community* here. (227)

In light of his own early dismissal of *A Raisin in the Sun* as a black bourgeois play about integration, Amiri Baraka reconsidered the implications of Hansberry's drama a quarter century after its debut. He acknowledges his previously underdeveloped understanding of Hansberry's class concerns and her emphasis on the social construction of segregation:

We thought Hansberry's play was "middle class," in that its focus seemed to be on "moving into white folks' neighborhoods" when most blacks were just trying to pay their rent in ghetto shacks. . . . The Younger family is part of the black majority, and the concerns I once dismissed as "middle class" . . . are actually reflective of the essence of black people's striving to defeat segregation, discrimination and national oppression. There is no such thing as a "white folks' neighborhood" except to racists and those submitting to racism. ("A Wiser Play" 41)

Part of what the younger Baraka failed to understand was the almost absolute system of residential segregation in Chicago. Unlike blacks in the New York in which Baraka lived, very few black people lived outside Chicago's ghetto borders—although, until 1948, restrictive covenants had made exceptions for "janitors' or Chauffeurs' quarters in the basement or in a barn or garage in the rear"—and it often cost more to "rent in ghetto shacks" than to reside outside the Black Belt (*Lee v. Hansberry*). While a white family could rent a five-room apartment for \$60 a month in Cicero, for example, a black South Side family of four could pay \$56 per month to live in *one half* of a two-room flat, infested with rats and roaches, and even well into the 1960s, without electricity or hot water (Meyer 118; "45 ADC Mothers").

In an unpublished 1964 letter to the *New York Times*, Hansberry renders the repeated failures of integration and democracy as deeply personal—and national—tragedies manifest in the segregated, exploitive world of the South Side. Pitting personal experience against public narratives of racial advancement, she describes her family's experiences with residential integration as

formative in her developing radical consciousness, class critique, and vision for social change. Hansberry writes, "My father was typical of a generation of Negroes who believed that the 'American way' could successfully be made to . . . democratize the United States. Thus, twenty-five years ago, he spent a small personal fortune, his considerable talents, and many years of his life fighting, in association with NAACP attorneys, Chicago's 'restrictive covenants' in one of the nation's ugliest ghettos" (*To Be Young* 20). The letter demonstrates the "process of representational transformation" at work in Hansberry's cultural politics, which historian Ben Keppel defines as "the processes of public contest and debate by which the members of a culture rearrange and reconstruct the key words, symbols, and icons that constitute its brick and mortar" (2). Throughout the letter, Hansberry employs quotation marks to call into question tools and ideologies of the nation's oppressive social order—"American way," "restrictive covenants," "white neighborhood." She places these contested terms at the heart of the tremendous racial divide in the US and the highly profitable systems of white supremacy.

Hansberry denaturalizes the coded language of the US social order and suggests that alternative realities and possibilities do exist. As in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry's letter questions dominant social narratives of reality and "progress":

The fact that my father and the NAACP "won" a Supreme Court decision . . . is—ironically—the sort of "progress" our satisfied friends allude to when they presume to deride the more radical means of struggle. The cost, in emotional turmoil, time and money, which led to my father's early death as a permanently embittered exile in a foreign country when he saw that after such sacrificial efforts the Negroes of Chicago were as ghetto-locked as ever, does not seem to figure in their calculations.

That is the reality that I am faced with when I now read that some Negroes my own age and younger say that we must now lie down in the streets, tie up traffic, do whatever we can—take to the hills with guns if necessary—and fight back. Fatuous people remark these days on our "bitterness." Why, of course we are bitter. (*To Be Young* 20-21)

Here, Hansberry frames white imperviousness to black rage as a significant obstacle to social change. She then closes the letter by quoting Langston Hughes's "mighty poem," "Harlem." In *Raisin*, she prophetically gives voice to African Americans' "bitterness" through Walter Lee (described by one critic as "an angry young man who happens to be a Negro"): "Bitter? Man, I'm a volcano" (Bernstein 16; 2.1).

The Aesthetics of Segregation: Realism and Revolution in Chicago, or "A Rat Done Bit My Sister Nell . . . and Whitey's on the Moon" (Heron, "Whitey")

Hansberry's revolutionary combination of reality and future possibility profoundly shapes her aesthetics of segregation. "Aesthetics of segregation" broadly describes a consciously black artistic approach to black experience under Jim Crow in the post-Depression US. This aesthetic appears in myriad forms, from drama to poetry, fiction, essay and spoken word, and in urban texts, such as Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), from which Hansberry took the title of her play, and Gwendolyn Brooks's *In the Mecca* (1968). Black artists' aesthetics of segregation share four primary attributes: evidence of systemic exploitation and its human costs; prophecy of explosive black rage; demonstration of black resistance to the dehumanizing effects of segregation; and the presence or awareness of the violence that maintains color lines and social inequality.

Hansberry's aesthetic both represents segregation's materiality and depicts various forms of black resistance across space and time. Because individuals cannot fight against that which they do not understand, her art renders visible the compound systems of black oppression in the urban North, which often appear distinctly different from those of the Jim Crow South. What she presents as the "*indestructible contradictions to this state of being*" — the rats, roaches, worn furniture, over-crowded conditions, and anti-integration bombs—therefore not only set the stage for the dramatic action in *A Raisin in the Sun*, but also serve as evidence of Chicago's political and economic infrastructures of deliberate segregation (1.1). Rats and roaches, in fact, constitute an important element of the urban aesthetics of segregation for many urban black artists. For instance, in the opening scene of *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas kills a black rat "over a foot long" in his family's South Side kitchenette apartment (Wright 10). So, too, Hansberry uses the bloody demise of a "rat. . . Big as a cat, honest!" to establish a pervasive reality of ghetto life early in the play (*Raisin* 1.2). Where there is little or no municipal sanitation service or landlord upkeep, rats and roaches thrive. Such implications run counter to dominant myths propping up pro-segregation institutions and individuals. When a black South Side infant died of a rat bite, for instance, the landlord denied culpability, saying, "well, they don't pick up their garbage. Anyway it was a nigger baby and they have a new one every year, so what does it matter?" (Carawan and Carawan 283). Like Gil Scott Heron's song "Whitey on the Moon" and Chicago Freedom Movement songwriter Jimmy Collier's "Rent Strike Blues," the rat in *A Raisin in the Sun* addresses this callous neglect and economic exploitation of ghettoized communities. Such substandard living conditions and negligence, the artists suggest, are criminal, particularly in their endangerment of ghettoized children, who remain the most likely victims of such environmental hazards, including rat bites (Hirschhorn and Hodge e35).

With Beneatha "*on her knees spraying [pesticide] under sofa with behind upraised,*" Ruth's tortured response to Travis's encounter with the rodent signals the moral crises faced by parents who raise their children in US ghettos (1.2). Later, when Mama announces she has bought a house in Clybourne Park, in spite of Ruth's distress at the prospect of living amid Chicago's hostile whites, she "laughs joyously" and puts her hands over her stomach, "*aware for the first time perhaps that the life therein pulses with happiness and not despair*" (2.1). Weighing the dangers of the ghetto against those posed by anti-black terrorism, Ruth determines that she will "scrub all the floors in America . . . if I have to—but we got to MOVE! We got to get OUT OF HERE!" (3.1). The imperative to move refers to both the Younger family's physical departure from Chicago's ghetto and to what Hansberry saw as necessary mass movement to reconstruct the social order. When Beneatha suggests that the "only" way to rid themselves of the roaches and rats they battle in their apartment is to "Set fire to this building," Hansberry rejects not only superficial remedies to inadequate housing conditions, but any form of exceptionalism that allows only a small percentage of black families to escape American ghettos (1.2).

For Hansberry, the economic exploitation, anti-integration bombs, and organizing activities of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association are absolutely central to the project of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Throughout the play, the Youngers exhibit more than what one critic describes as "sensitivity" to the "economic pressures" of ghetto life, or a deficient understanding "that they are engaged in a sociological race war" (Lewis 35). In buying the house in Clybourne Park, Mama asserts her family's right to refute the economic exploitation of Chicago segregation. When the family learns where their new home is, no one is eager to court the wrath of Chicago's white homeowners:

RUTH Where is it?

MAMA *Frightened at this telling* Well—well—it's out there in Clybourne Park— . . .

RUTH Clybourne Park? Mama, there ain't no colored people living in Clybourne Park.

MAMA (*Almost idiotically*) Well, I guess there's going to be some now. . . . (*Raising her eyes to meet [Walter's] finally*) Son—I just tried to find the nicest place for the least amount of money for my family.

RUTH (*Trying to recover from the shock*) Well—well—'course I ain't one never been 'fraid of no crackers, mind you—but—well, wasn't there no other houses nowhere?

MAMA Them houses they put up for colored in them areas way out all seem to cost twice as much as other houses. I did the best I could. (2.1)

Acknowledging the central role violence plays in maintaining Chicago's racial geography, Hansberry deploys an aesthetics of segregation that explicitly connects these northern experiences to the Jim Crow South. In a scene cut from the stage and first published version of the play, Hansberry brings the Youngers' neighbor, Mrs. Johnson, to report the latest anti-integration bombing in Clybourne Park:

JOHNSON You mean you ain't read 'bout them colored people that was bombed out their place out there? . . . Ain't it something how bad these here white folks is getting here in Chicago! Lord, getting so you think you right down in Mississippi! (*with a tremendous and rather insincere sense of melodrama*) 'Course I think it's wonderful how our folks keeps on pushing out. . . . 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!"

MAMA We ain't exactly moving out there to get bombed.

JOHNSON But you have to think of life like it is—and these here Chicago peckerwoods is some baaad peckerwoods.

MAMA (*wearily*) We done thought about all that, Mis' Johnson. (2.2)

Here, Hansberry employs an aesthetics of segregation to foment social change: she exposes the oppressors, as well as the effects of their oppression, systems, and tools. Emphasizing place—"here in Chicago"—four years after the brutal murder of young Emmett Till in Mississippi, Hansberry's treatment of anti-black violence in Chicago operates as an instructive rhetorical maneuver. By offering such stark parallels to the violence of southern Jim Crow, these comparisons work to demystify Chicago's complex racist power structures. Collapsing the distinctions between racial oppression in the North and South—while attending to the specifics of the local—Hansberry poses the potential for a more unified, national black struggle. Black Chicago activists themselves employed similar rhetorical tactics in their 1960's grassroots campaigns against the city's segregated schools and neighborhoods. Black southerners, too, recognized important connections between African Americans' struggles in Chicago and emerging movements throughout the South: "Black Chicago," Southern Christian Leadership Conference leader James Bevel declared, "is Mississippi moved a few hundred miles north" (Werner 64).

A Raisin in the Sun also directly engages the array of racist discourses in the urban North, which functioned in tandem publicly to defend and lobby for residential segregation by threatening violence, miscegenation, venereal disease, and financial ruin. While whites used blatantly racist language at the grassroots—children sang in Mayor Daley's neighborhood, for instance, to the Oscar Meyer wiener tune, "Oh, I wish I was an Alabama trooper . . . then I could kill

niggers legally”—they publicly relied on a coded discourse of civic politics from which race becomes conspicuously marginalized or absent (Bontemps and Conroy 335-36; Werner 65). So, Chicago politicians and school board officials used seemingly race-less language to safeguard the city’s systems of segregation. Hansberry recognized that piercing this rhetoric—confirming, in effect, that racism was deliberate and systemic in Chicago—would prove to be half of the civil rights battle there.

Hansberry employs Mr. Linder, the chairman of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association “Neighborhood Orientation Committee,” to demonstrate the seemingly benign ways that northern whites deny racial discrimination, romanticize their own paternalism, and repudiate black self-determination. To dissuade the Youngers from moving into Clybourne Park, Mr. Linder draws on a paternalistic language of rights to protect the “hard-working, honest people who don’t really have much but those little homes and a dream of the kind of community they want to raise their children in”:

[Y]ou’ve got to admit that a man . . . has the right to want to have the neighborhood he lives in a certain kind of way. . . . I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn’t enter into it. It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing . . . that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their *own* communities. (2.3; original italics)

Mr. Linder’s speech represents only one rhetorical maneuver by which improvement associations defended segregation in the urban North. Their paternalism was accompanied by two other rhetorical strategies: a battle language of victimization and terrorism, on the one hand, and a language of miscegenation and degeneration, on the other hand. With its talk of “Negro invasions” and “them bombs and things [whites] keep setting off,” *A Raisin in the Sun* engages both the language and the violence of Chicago’s housing battle (2.2). Improvement associations in urban centers organized around ideas of “invasions,” “battlegrounds,” “resistance,” and “hold[ing] the line.” Further, their militancy functioned beyond the metaphoric: as one former race relations official explained of the postwar years, cities like Chicago and Detroit “did a lot of fire-fighting in those days” (Sugrue 560; Meyer 89).

Improvement associations combined their battle language of patriotic rights with an emotive rhetoric of “forced mongrelization” (Hirsch “Massive Resistance” 544). Hansberry understood that, in the North, in spite of its language of property rights and patriotic militarism, “Neighborhood defense became more than a struggle for turf. It was a battle for the preservation of white womanhood” (Sugrue 562). While Walter, Ruth, and Beneatha discuss Mr. Linder’s visit, Hansberry cuts to the heart of white Americans’ fear of integration:

BENEATHA What they think we going to do—eat ‘em?

RUTH No, honey, marry ‘em. (2.3)

Hansberry and Ruth understand that the specter of miscegenation activates a matrix of violence and anxiety. Much like their southern counterparts, northern white supremacists wielded a language of black barbarism and absolute separation to impose the terror of miscegenation: “it won’t be long now,” workers claimed in Chicago taverns in the wake of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, “and negroes and whites inter-marrying will be a common thing and the white race will go downhill” (Hirsch “Massive Resistance” 533).

"Write about the World As It Is and As You Think It *Ought* to Be and Must Be" (*To Be Young* 257)

Intended to denaturalize segregation and provide imagined alternatives to the existing social order, Hansberry's genuine realism profoundly shaped her revision of the final scenes of *A Raisin in the Sun*. In its original conclusion, the Younger family sat silently in their new living room in Clybourne Park, in the dark, armed and waiting for the white mob to come (Carter 41; Wilkerson 130). While Hansberry made several revisions to her manuscript to "sanitize" the play for producers and reduce the play's length, this change is perhaps the most significant revision she never restored to the script.⁶ Rather than altering the ending to promote assimilation or provide a reassuring sense of inevitable racial "progress," this change in fact proves crucial to maintaining the revolutionary potential of the drama: Ending the action prior to the Youngers' arrival in Clybourne Park supplies Hansberry with the only prospect of keeping it real, so to speak, while breaking the cycles of desegregation and ritualized white violence.

While this revision ultimately invited the widespread celebration of *Raisin's* "transcendent" conclusion, Hansberry's literary executor Robert Nemiroff points out that even this revised ending "leaves the Youngers on the brink of what will surely be . . . at best a nightmare of uncertainty" (*Raisin* 10-11; original italics). Frustrated with yet another critic's praise of the play's "accepted and ever popular upbeat ending," Hansberry once huffed in an interview, "If he thinks that's a happy ending, I invite him to come live in one of the communities where the Youngers are going!" (Wilkerson 130; *Raisin* 11) Misreadings of the play's conclusion, especially those that interpret the Youngers' decision to move beyond Chicago's ghetto as "apolitical," distort Hansberry's fundamental point of protest (Wilkerson 122). Directly engaged in an organized movement for black liberation or not, the Youngers remain fully aware that their breach of Chicago's color line will trigger hostility and likely terrorism: as Mama herself explains to the Booker T. Washington-quoting Mrs. Johnson, "we done thought about all that" (2.2).

In the final scene of *Raisin*, Walter Lee rejects the Clybourne Park Improvement Association's offer to buy back the Youngers' house, and the family strikes out for Chicago's embattled racial frontier. But before these events unfold, Asagai insists that this advance is not the end of the drama. His impassioned speech to Beneatha serves as an answer to the allegedly moderate Mr. Linder's menacing last words: "I hope you people know what you are getting into" (3.1). Representative of the enlightened revolutionary intellectual, and creating a crucial link between Chicago's ghettoized blacks and social movements throughout the so-called Third World, Asagai exhibits no illusions about the processes or costs of social change. "End?" he asks Beneatha, "Who ever spoke of an end?" His use of the future tense enlarges the capacity of Hansberry's genuine realism, and emphasizes the profoundly prophetic quality of her social vision:

At times it will seem that nothing changes at all—and then again—the sudden dramatic events which make history leap into the future. And then quiet again. Retrogression, even. Guns, murder, revolution. And I even will have moments when I wonder if the quiet was not better than all that death and hatred. But I will look about my village at the illiteracy and disease and ignorance and I will not wonder long. (3.1)

Asagai's pragmatic prediction reflects much of the turmoil that would plague African and New World battles for self-determination and social justice in the decades to come. Much as Hansberry had attempted in *Raisin*, the Chicago Freedom Movement of the 1960s endeavored to "stage a crisis" around

Chicago's segregated housing and schools, thereby forcing public dialogue, negotiation, and change. But in the face of Mayor Richard J. Daley's Democratic Machine and its loyal black politicians, police brutality, FBI counter-intelligence operations, the real estate industry, white mobs, and the powerful improvement associations, the movements—Freedom School boycotts, Unions to End Slums, and open-housing campaigns—collapsed amid repression, assassinations, and fiery ghetto uprisings. The protracted struggle over segregated housing in Chicago was, one movement veteran recalled, “somewhat like war” (Hampton and Fayer 314).⁷

Ultimately, US residential segregation and white flight exposed, in the words of Arnold Hirsch, “the shoals upon which the postwar movement for racial equality would founder” (“Massive Resistance” 523). The 1960's rebellions in Chicago and other black ghettos dangerously expressed African American rage against segregation and white indifference, much as Hansberry had forecast. As the decade passed, Chicago's residential color lines became increasingly stabilized, with the construction of new schools within pre-1950 Black Belt borders (an alternative to allowing black children into less-crowded white schools), continued expansion of the black West Side ghetto, and high-rise public housing like Daley's Robert Taylor Homes extending the ghetto vertically. Between 1960 and 1990, Chicago's white population decreased by 800,000, its white suburbs grew by nearly two million, and more than one-fourth of the city's factories closed. By the 1990s, black unemployment approached 23%, and the South Side contained the greatest concentration of public housing in the nation, with upwards of 92% of black families living on government assistance.⁸ “Perhaps it is just as well,” Baldwin mused, “that [Hansberry] did not live to see with the outward eye what she saw so clearly with the inward one. . . . [T]he horses and tanks are indeed upon us, and the end is not in sight. . . . And it is not at all farfetched to suspect that what she saw contributed to the strain which killed her, for the effort to which Lorraine was dedicated is more than enough to kill a [wo]man” (xx).

This article is dedicated to the memory of Nellie Y. McKay who helped me to begin this work.

Notes

1. See Kamp; Drake and Cayton 182-90; Carter 40-41; Meyer 56-57; Graettinger; Plotkin; and Keppel 24.
2. In his chapter on housing segregation in the urban North, entitled “A Raisin in the Sun,” Meyer identifies this period, from World War II to roughly 1960, as America's most intensely violent period of upheaval over race and housing. Chicago, Meyer and other scholars note, was the most violent city of all (115-32). See also Hirsch (“Massive Resistance”) and Mohl 16-23.
3. Except where otherwise noted, throughout this article *Raisin* refers to the 1959 text of Hansberry's play.
4. In one of her last public appearances, Hansberry spoke of segregation's debilitating effects in personal and broad sociopolitical terms: “I was given, during the grade school years, one-half the amount of education prescribed by the Board of Education of my city. . . . I am a product of [Chicago's segregated school] system and one result is that—to this day—I cannot count properly . . . [or] make even simple change in a grocery store. . . . This is what is meant when we speak of the scars, the marks that the ghettoized child carries through life. To be imprisoned in the ghetto is to be forgotten—or deliberately cheated of one's birthright—at best” (“Scars” 54).
5. On the “moving day” desegregation experience, see Brown 24-59 and Meyer 119. Published the same year as *Raisin*'s Broadway debut, Frank London Brown's only novel, *Trumbull Park*, picks up Chicago's desegregation story where *Raisin* ends, and details complex intersections of race, class, gender and violence in Chicago's most violently integrated housing project. See Avilez in this issue.
6. See Kaiser and Nemiroff 286-87; Bernstein 22-23; Keppel 177-83.
7. On the restoration of scenes, see Wilkerson 123-30.
8. Hansberry more deeply explored the relationships between African and black American freedom struggles in *Les Blancs* (1970). See Abell. On Chicago movements of the 1960s, see Rice; Churchill and Wall 64-77; Anderson and Pickering 208-340; Hampton and Fayer 297-319, 521-38; Meyer 183-88; Werner 122-24; Ralph; and Garrow.
9. See Hunt 96-97; Rury 121-23; Cohen and Taylor; Hirsch *Making*; and Werner 145-46.

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Discography