

---

# Staging Gendered Radicalism at the Height of the US Cold War: *A Raisin in the Sun* and Lorraine Hansberry's Vision of Freedom

Erin D. Chapman

---

And, as of today, if I am asked abroad if I am a free citizen in the United States of America, I must say only what is true: *No*. If I am asked if my people enjoy equal opportunity in the most basic aspects of American life, housing, employment, franchise – I must and will say: *No*. And, shame of shames, under a government that wept for Hungary and sent troops to Korea, when I am asked if that most primitive, savage and intolerable custom of all – lynching – still persists in the United States of America, I will say what every mother's child of us knows: that they are still murdering Negroes in this country, with *and without* rope and faggot, in all the old ways and many new ones.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking in New York City to the 1959 American Society of African Culture conference, which was full of her fellow African American writers – and likely also several planted Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation observers – playwright Lorraine Hansberry adamantly affirmed her commitment to expose to the world the truth of US white supremacy.<sup>2</sup> In declaring her willingness to denounce her nation's ongoing oppression of black people, moreover, Hansberry implied a rebuke of those prominent African Americans, such as Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche, baseball player Jackie Robinson and tennis champion Althea Gibson, who travelled the world proclaiming the benefits of US democracy in accordance with State Department directives.<sup>3</sup> At the height of the Cold War and in defiance of federal persecution of anti-racist and anti-imperialist US activists as disloyal and un-American, Hansberry challenged her fellow writers to create socially conscious art that would point the way toward black liberation, and to align themselves with the people of colour all over the world who were rising in organised protest and revolt against US and European imperialism and white supremacy. In her famous play *A Raisin in the Sun*, and through the political and social prominence its success afforded her, Hansberry advocated a radical politics of black freedom and self-determination informed by her communism, feminism and black nationalism.

As Hansberry pursued her writing career and joined New York City's Leftist and artistic circles in the 1950s, the decolonisation of American, Asian and African polities proceeded through a combination of violent insurgence and concerted political wrangling. As they waged the Cold War, which erupted into a 'hot war' in Korea from

1950 to 1953, the USA and the USSR competed for the allegiance of these emerging new nations. This competition between the two superpowers motivated representatives from West African, North African, East African, Middle Eastern, South Asian and East Asian nations and colonies to come together in the Bandung Conference of 1955 to form an alliance confirming their commitment to the United Nations resolutions of humanitarianism and national self-determination. Ghana thrilled both liberal and radical black nationalists around the globe as it celebrated its independence from the British Empire in 1957. The nation's festivities attracted a range of black activists, including Martin Luther King, Jr., C. L. R. James, Ralph Bunche and A. Philip Randolph along with US dignitaries such as Vice President Richard Nixon and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the Cuban Revolution raged, culminating in the rebels' victory and the ascendance of communist Fidel Castro in 1959. In the British colony of Kenya, the Kikuyu Mau Mau warriors formed the militant vanguard of a revolutionary nationalism fighting for Kenyan independence throughout the decade. The British countered with military action, mass Kikuyu imprisonments and sporadic reconciliation attempts before finally conceding defeat in 1963. In apartheid South Africa, a federation of organisations under the leadership of the African National Congress launched its Defiance Campaign against Unjust Laws, a series of civil disobedience initiatives and protests resulting in the imprisonment of some 8,500 activists in 1952. The African National Congress and its allies continued their insurgent activism for the rest of the decade and beyond.

Within the United States, the Cold War generated a struggle over the meaning of patriotism and the right to freedom of speech. Confounding constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties to define loyalty as uncritical support for the contemporary US capitalist status quo, McCarthyism suppressed (without fully eliminating) the more radical elements of the black freedom movement, especially the critique of racial capitalism, or the intersection of capitalism and white supremacy.<sup>5</sup> In spite of this suppression, the civil rights phase of the black freedom movement proceeded, using the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* as a basis for the liberal aim of integrating schools and other institutions. This movement generated a number of struggles, including the media spectacles of the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott in 1955 and 1956 and the crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas in which white crowds supported by Governor Orval Faubus and the Arkansas National Guard gathered to taunt and assault black students seeking to integrate Central High School in 1957.

The liberal turn in the black freedom movement also opened the way for a theory of black matriarchy to garner political steam in the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>6</sup> In popular media as well as scholarly publications, social scientists and journalists had begun to blame black women's participation in the workforce and their rare professional successes for black people's ongoing socioeconomic oppression and familial 'deviance'. Not yet defining the black family as 'pathological' for its supposed matriarchal structure, commentators nevertheless used black working mothers as scapegoats. In doing so, such commentators attributed black people's degraded status at the bottom of US socioeconomic structures to black women's work and familial leadership rather than to systemic racial capitalism.

Having worked as a staff writer and eventually an associate editor of the black Leftist periodical *Freedom* before McCarthyism forced its closure in 1955, Lorraine Hansberry closely followed these and many more international and domestic

developments. At the end of the decade, she incorporated her view of black freedom into her play *A Raisin in the Sun*, which premiered on Broadway in March 1959, was nominated for four Tony Awards and was named the year's best play by the New York Drama Critics' Circle. Although the play was most often celebrated as a dramatic rendering of African American integration in simplistic, feel-good terms, Hansberry understood *A Raisin in the Sun* as a critique of the liberal, patriarchal vision of the contemporary civil rights movement. In the course of her most famous play, Hansberry used her characters Lena Younger, her son Walter Lee and her daughter Beneatha to advance an interrogation of bourgeois 'money values', black patriarchal aspiration and black matriarchy theory. As the play and its playwright rose to prominence, moreover, Hansberry amplified her critiques in speeches, interviews and publications, insisting that the black freedom movement reach for a more egalitarian, profound liberation. This article will utilise the play alongside Hansberry's 1959 speech 'The Negro Writer and His Roots' and Hansberry's most prominent interviews and publications in 1959–61 to define Hansberry's vision of a fundamental, feminist liberation for black people, and all people, as the civil rights movement gained momentum.

Since its celebrated premiere, critics, activists and scholars have debated the gender and class politics communicated through *A Raisin in the Sun*. Some at first saw it as a romantic capitulation to the bourgeois American dream, an affirmation of the all-American ethos of success through pluck, hard work and determination. For instance, Black Arts Movement leader and black power activist Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) wrote that he and many members of his generation of black artist activists 'missed the essence of the work', dismissing it as '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'.<sup>7</sup>

In the ensuing years, many scholars have recognised the breadth of Hansberry's radicalism and its expression in her various written works. As late-twentieth-century feminism coalesced, critics such as scholar Margaret Wilkerson and author-activist Adrienne Rich heartily disagreed as to the feminist import of the interactions among Hansberry's characters. Wilkerson argued that Hansberry set up the character Lena Younger as a matriarchal figure who is critiqued and learns to relinquish her unduly powerful familial role over the course of the play. As Lena Younger undergoes this transition, Wilkerson argued, she makes way for the affirmation of her son Walter Lee's patriarchal aspiration. Thus, Wilkerson posited Hansberry as an advocate of patriarchal black male leadership. Although Wilkerson labelled Hansberry 'the complete feminist', her argument praises Hansberry for the opposite. In contrast, Adrienne Rich recognised the complexity of Hansberry's gender politics as they are expressed in the play. She did not necessarily read the play as feminist but understood Hansberry to have been a feminist from her other writings and interviews. Rich wondered whether Hansberry muted her feminism in *Raisin* in response to patriarchal and economic pressure. In the context of 1970s black and mainstream feminism, then, Hansberry's first play did not necessarily read as a feminist text, leaving her political priorities open to widely varying interpretations.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, scholars such as Kevin Gaines, Cheryl Higashida and Lawrence Jackson have affirmed Hansberry's communism, black nationalism and feminism.<sup>9</sup> Although they do not understand *Raisin* as a radical text, all of these scholars emphasise Hansberry's radical commitment to black freedom both in the United States

and around the world. Rebecca Welch focuses on Hansberry's nonfiction publications and interviews in the 1950s and 60s to highlight her savvy ability to insert anti-imperialist, black nationalist and feminist comments, asides and criticisms in articles and interviews ostensibly addressing much less controversial topics. In this way, Hansberry was able to use the media attention her fame brought her to serve as a conscientious racial spokeswoman for the ideologies of interracial Popular Front and black Left circles only partially disciplined by McCarthyism.<sup>10</sup> Critic Mary Helen Washington characterises Hansberry as a 'militantly left-wing, anti-racist, anti-colonialist, socialist feminist, whose activities in the 1950s earned her a three-binder FBI file'.<sup>11</sup> In the midst of the Cold War's domestic political repression, Hansberry was a leading member of the cadre of black activist artists who found ways to continue to evince radical interventions.

This article extends this scholarly affirmation of Hansberry's radicalism, citing *A Raisin in the Sun* itself as expressive of the playwright's communism, black nationalism and feminism. An analysis of the play through the politics outlined in her speech 'The Negro Writer and His Roots' reveals the concerted radical critique Hansberry meant the play to express. Furthermore, Hansberry elaborated her feminism in her publications and interviews after the play's success. Especially in her 1960 *Ebony* article, Hansberry combated the theory of black matriarchy, a black masculinist politics of racist misogyny that was shaping the gender dynamics of the black freedom struggle well before the late-1960s black power era with which it is typically associated.

Born the youngest child in a politically active, black middle-class Chicago family in 1930, Hansberry came to espouse an incisive critique of Western imperialism and US white supremacist patriarchy. President of the campus chapter of the Young Progressives of America, a communist organisation, during her sophomore year at the University of Wisconsin in 1949, Hansberry sharpened her radicalism during her subsequent years at *Freedom*.<sup>12</sup> Her work there brought her into regular contact with black communists and activist artists such as Claudia Jones, William Patterson, Paul and Eslanda Robeson, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, and Alice Childress, and she maintained those alliances throughout her life.

As a communist, Hansberry criticised capitalism as an exploitative economic system that intersected with white supremacy to deny black people necessities such as affordable housing, employment opportunities and healthy environments. Through her black nationalism, Hansberry rejected all forms of imperialism, including those practiced by the United States through its Cold War priorities and alliances with European nations, and affirmed the right of all peoples to determine their own destinies. She supported the nationalist movements burgeoning in Africa, Asia and South America throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and among African Americans, she sought to foster familial, communal and personal forms of self-determination. Furthermore, attracted to feminist politics such as that articulated in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Hansberry firmly believed in women's right and responsibility to determine their own destinies in terms of their career aspirations, familial relationships, sexuality, reproduction and political activism. She considered sexism as significant a form of oppression as racism and, as this article will demonstrate, endeavoured to define an anti-racist feminism within a black freedom movement that was increasingly invested in black masculinist perspectives and priorities.

In seeming contrast to her political commitments, contemporaries described Hansberry as unfailingly polite, sweet, pretty, even 'pixyish' and 'like a coed' who 'look[ed] even younger than her 28 years' at the time of her play's first production.<sup>13</sup> Publicly, much like her radical contemporaries Rosa Parks and Ella Baker, Hansberry neither spoke nor wrote in the tones of a militant firebrand of any political persuasion.<sup>14</sup> However, as Hansberry's friend and fellow writer Julian Mayfield observed, Hansberry was also very 'serious and to the point' and 'was always trying to think things through', which, to his mind, belied her feminine sweetness.<sup>15</sup> Her public words were calm, measured and thoughtful, but also incisive. Delivered just before the opening of *Raisin* on Broadway, but after the play had enjoyed successful pre-Broadway runs in Philadelphia and New Haven, Connecticut, Hansberry's speech 'The Negro Writer and His Roots' reflects her characteristically considered public voice as well as her sharp sociocultural criticism.

Hansberry delivered the speech as the keynote address at the illustrious conference of black writers organised by the American Society of African Culture on 1 March 1959. It is perhaps Hansberry's most complete and coherent statement of her political beliefs and of the political efficacy of art. In fact, Washington speculates that the speech's radicalism motivated the conference organisers, beholden to covert CIA funding, to exclude it from the official commemorative conference book.<sup>16</sup> It is from 'The Negro Writer and His Roots' that one can most readily cull the vision of freedom Hansberry sought to bring to fruition in *Raisin*. That vision demanded the dismantling of oppression through a total, egalitarian restructuring of society and its institutions. It exceeded the bounds of the established political order in its radicalism.<sup>17</sup> In this article, I first read 'The Negro Writer and His Roots' alongside *A Raisin in the Sun* to build a holistic understanding of Hansberry's gendered dream of radical liberation. I then show how Hansberry battled intra-racial sexism in the pages of *Ebony* magazine, elaborating her critique of the theory of black matriarchy and ultimately calling for a feminist vision of egalitarian emancipation.

### The illusion of money values

Among her younger artist peers, such as Mayfield, as well as the luminaries, like Langston Hughes, who attended the American Society of African Culture conference, Hansberry spoke with the authority of a successful writer, the first black woman playwright to have a play produced on Broadway. Hers was the culminating speech of the three-day conference. In it, Hansberry averred that the African American writer had a crucial sociopolitical role to play in the ongoing movement for black freedom. Principally, the imperative of the black artist/writer was to wage 'war against the illusions of one's time and culture', deconstructing and debunking the myths and stereotypes that upheld the Western white supremacist patriarchal status quo.<sup>18</sup>

Noting that the 'most fundamental illusion of all' in need of debunking was 'the notion . . . that art is not, *should* not, and when it is at its best, CANNOT possibly be "social"', Hansberry began with a list of social perceptions that contemporary popular culture, especially movies, television, novels and 'the legitimate stage', continued to advance without acknowledging them as politically charged. These aspects of mid-century sociopolitical discourse included the common sense, sexist and racist notions that 'women are idiots', 'people are white' and 'Negroes do not

exist'. Furthermore, contemporary cultural expression taught its viewers and readers to dismiss the possibility of revolution since 'the present social order is here forever and this is the best of all possible worlds'; 'businessmen are hard-headed if slightly adorable realists who are also the supreme moralists of our culture who work like fury keeping the world going'; and 'radicals are infantile, adolescent, or senile. Any form of radicalism (except conservatism) is latent protest against Mom, toilet-training, or heterosexuality'. Any deviation from the hetero-patriarchal social order was threatening as 'women long to castrate men and are doing so and taking the "man's place" in society and thereby causing a national neurosis'. At its core, Hansberry asserted, mid-century popular culture taught that 'the Supreme Good, the ultimate achievement, is – "balls"'.<sup>19</sup> Tongue partially in cheek, Hansberry offered an anti-racist, feminist criticism of the American obsession with hetero-patriarchal masculine leadership, heroism and conformity. Adroitly, she argued that these gleanings from the popular culture surrounding her and her audience 'offer[ed] profoundly social points of view – and deeply controversial ones insofar as I for one would beg to differ with all or most of them'.

Her point, of course, was that 'all art is ultimately social' and that the 'question' before her community of black writers was 'not whether one will make a social statement in one's work – but only *what* the statement will say'.<sup>20</sup> Like W. E. B. Du Bois a generation before her, Hansberry affirmed the obligation of the black artist to create sociopolitically engaged art to aid the work of racial advancement and the amelioration of the condition of mankind worldwide.<sup>21</sup> In her case, however, this was not so much a call for propaganda as it was a renunciation of the adolescent apathy she saw in the Beat culture of her own generation and her defiance of the Cold War-era prohibition on 'a leftist aesthetic and politics'.<sup>22</sup>

Of particular importance to Hansberry beyond the first illusion that ideal art was apolitical were 'illusions' about economics, class struggles, race struggles and what she called 'money values'. She lamented the popular assumption or 'illusion' that 'our country is made up of one huge sprawling middle class whose problems, valid though they are as subject matter, are considered to represent the problems of the entire nation and whose values are thought not only to be the values of the nation but, significantly enough, of the whole world!'<sup>23</sup> In the midst of the Cold War competition for the allegiance of rising new nations, she reminded her audience of the myriad points of view around the world and that many neither looked to the United States as the greatest model nor sought to emulate 'our particular form of organization of industrial society'. She further admonished, 'It is idle to argue the patriotism of those who call this question to our attention'. She thus both linked her statements to the perspectives of people of colour struggling for decolonisation around the world and defended Leftist friends and allies whose politics had criminalised their social and legal status under McCarthyism. She finally sought to debunk 'the all-important illusion in America that there exists an inexhaustible period of time during which we as a nation may leisurely resurrect the promise of our Constitution and begin to institute the equality of man within the frontiers of this land'.<sup>24</sup> Anticipating the astute observation that would be elaborated by her friend James Baldwin, Hansberry warned of 'the fire next time'.<sup>25</sup>

Although concerned with the full realisation of US democracy and African American citizenship, Hansberry displayed her black nationalism in firmly linking

African American freedom to the freedom of black people around the world. She proclaimed:

I for one, as a black woman in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, feel that I am more typical of the present temperament of my people than not, when I say that I cannot allow the devious purposes of white supremacy to lead me to any conclusion other than what may be the most robust and important one of our time: that the ultimate destiny and aspirations of the African people and twenty million American Negroes are inextricably and magnificently bound up together forever.<sup>26</sup>

In the rest of the speech, as in her play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry would focus on those twenty million African Americans yet continually emphasise the common necessity of black self-determination.

In further delineating the task of the black writer in combating illusions, Hansberry called upon her audience to 'dispel the romance of the black bourgeoisie'.<sup>27</sup> Rather than shy away from the language, deportment and expression of the black working classes as if 'any reminder of the slave past or the sharecropper and ghetto present is an affront to every Negro who wears a shirt and tie', Hansberry advocated that black writers commit themselves to 'the vast task of historical and cultural reclamation – to reclaim the past if we would claim the future'.<sup>28</sup> Yet, such literary works that would represent black people 'with unassailable dimensionality, with the complexity of man and not [as] symbolic figures that can speak only to the already persuaded', must also reveal 'the sores within our people'.

First among these 'sores', by which Hansberry meant failings or unexamined, stifling aspirations, was 'money values' or 'acquisition for the sake of acquisition' – greed. According to Hansberry, avarice and the illusion that money in itself was a solution rather than a tool was in danger of overwhelming the quest for freedom. Hansberry lamented that 'the desire for the possession of things has rapidly replaced among too many of us the impulse for the possession of ourselves, for freedom'.<sup>29</sup>

In this vein, Hansberry recommended the literary exploration of African American 'babbitry' or bourgeois complacency, small-mindedness, smugness and over-emphasis on respectability. In *Raisin*, Hansberry embarked on such an exploration through her character George Murchison, younger sister Beneatha's bourgeois suitor. The son of a well-to-do black Chicago realtor, he disapproves of the Yoruba garb she adopts in the middle of the plot, is snobbishly dismissive of her brother Walter Lee's invitations to friendship and sneers at Beneatha's desire to think expansively. Disappointed that Beneatha would rather converse about world politics than kiss on the couch after their date, George advises her to 'forget the atmosphere. Guys aren't going to go for the atmosphere'. He states outright that he does not want 'to hear all about [her] thoughts'. It is enough that she is 'a nice-looking girl'. When Beneatha, exasperated, asks him why he bothers to attend college, he replies, 'It's simple. You read books – to learn facts – to get grades – to pass the course – to get a degree. That's all – it has nothing to do with thoughts'.<sup>30</sup>

Through this character, whom Beneatha ultimately pronounces 'a fool', Hansberry ridiculed the shallow outlook and unearned complacency of the mid-century black middle class. However, in her speech, she emphasised that African Americans were not the sole population in which such empty self-satisfaction and greed were to be critiqued, nor was their expression of such values to be lampooned as a racially

specific buffoonery. Rather, 'these values have their root in an *American* perversion and no place else'.<sup>31</sup>

Impugning American 'babbitry' and 'money values', Hansberry affirmed that freedom was not to be sought through black bourgeois aspiration or mere access to the wealth of a prosperous nation. Hansberry was thus unimpressed by the quest to integrate the contemporary US status quo. Along with E. Franklin Frazier, Paul Robeson and other black radicals, Hansberry evinced 'an oppositional black politics skeptical of integration and animated by anticolonialism' and thus saw the effort toward integration as too limited.<sup>32</sup> 'Obsessive over-reliance upon the courts, legalistic pursuit of the already guaranteed aspects of our Constitution (if that is, there were but the will to enforce them) preoccupies us at the expense of more potent political concepts', she asserted.<sup>33</sup> Instead, she emphasised the vote, which the national civil rights movement had yet to prioritise, and sought a fundamental transformation in US political economy. 'Equality', she argued, 'which above all must mean equal job opportunity, the most basic right of all men in all societies anywhere in the world – implies vast economic transformations far greater than any of our leaders have dared to envision'.<sup>34</sup> She advocated a total dismantling of racial capitalism in favour of a fundamental socioeconomic equality. For Hansberry, freedom was 'possession of the self', and 'money values' was its opposite. On behalf of black America and black people the world over, she did not seek integration into the American dream of bourgeois prosperity but the right and the means to claim and create a future of their own fashioning.

### **A real base of good life and good living**

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry created a drama in which her characters enacted her freedom vision. At the outset of the play, Lena Younger, her daughter Beneatha, her son Walter Lee, his wife Ruth and their son Travis eagerly await the delivery of a cheque paying out the life insurance policy on Lena's deceased husband, Walter senior. In the course of the plot, hoping to alleviate the familial rancour and ghetto malaise that threaten their well-being in the roach-infested, cramped apartment they inhabit, Lena uses a portion of the funds to purchase a house, the only one she can afford, in the white suburb of Clybourne Park. After some dispute, Lena entrusts the remaining insurance money to Walter Lee for investment in his dream of becoming a successful businessman, with the understanding that he will retain and deposit the portion necessary for Beneatha's ongoing college education. As the family begins to pack for the move to the suburbs, a representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association comes awkwardly to ask the family to relinquish the title to their house for a cash payout. The representative, the only white character in the play, Karl Lindner, explains that the hardworking white people of Clybourne Park do not wish their neighbourhood to be integrated. Recognising and ridiculing the white supremacy it represents, the family roundly rejects the Clybourne Park offer. However, Walter Lee soon confesses that he has been duped in his business deal and has lost all the insurance funds, including Beneatha's tuition money. Still determined to realise his dream of entrepreneurial success and social ascent, he announces his decision to accept the Clybourne Park buyout offer. The devastated family argues painfully, alternately remonstrating with Walter Lee and reproving one another's failings, real and imagined. In the culminating scene, when the Clybourne Park representative appears with the payment, Walter Lee

summons the strength to reject it, and the family optimistically proceeds with the move out of their decrepit ghetto apartment. Thus, the Younger family learns to renounce money values, to maintain faith in one another, and to reach for 'a real base of good life and good living'. Although it is often read as a play advocating integration, a closer examination reveals that black inclusion in white neighbourhoods and institutions is not the thematic point of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Although Hansberry always averred that she saw Walter Lee as the play's absolute protagonist, she put him at the forefront of the drama to critique him as a symbol of superficial American materialism and the civil rights movement's most simplistically liberal aspects. In one of two interviews in which she explicitly articulated the politics she sought to affirm through *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry described her characters as 'people who are still trying to guarantee just the basic things of life'. That is, the members of the Younger family are poor, working-class people whose access to suitable housing, steady work and a sure future are all precarious. But Walter Lee is not simply a prototypical hero battling adversity on behalf of salt-of-the-earth folk. Hansberry asserted:

... the complication of the play is that I don't want the hero of the play to get lost, the young man who thinks that he wants yachts and pearls because this is what he sees all around him; that the people who seem to command his world, to be in charge of it, are full of yachts and pearls in their lives. I don't want him to get confused about the reality of the one thing he really does need for his family with the other. One is paraphernalia, one is fluff and the other is a real base of good life and good living, and he is confused.<sup>35</sup>

Here, Hansberry referenced Walter Lee's dream of making himself a rich business mogul. She detailed this dream in the scene of *Raisin* in which Walter Lee confides his hopes and motives to his son Travis. Walter Lee says that, after putting Travis to bed, he will go to make 'a business transaction' using the family's insurance money to open a liquor store. Walter Lee hopes this small business will form the foundation of an enterprise that will afford him wealth, prestige and power. Heartbreaking in his naivety, he imagines it will take a mere seven years for this single transaction to grow into 'a whole lot of offices' that will 'change [their] lives'. Drawing a word picture for his son, Walter Lee describes a future in which he will work as an 'executive' whose life is made a high-powered 'hell' of 'conferences and secretaries getting things wrong the way they do', a world in which he will come home 'pretty tired' as he parks an elegantly 'plain black Chrysler' in the drive and greets the pleasingly deferential gardener on his way inside his palatial suburban home. He describes the 'sportier ... Cadillac convertible' he will buy his wife Ruth 'to do her shopping in'. Inside, Ruth will greet him with a kiss before both meander upstairs to observe their son perusing the catalogues of the world's most prestigious universities. Now raising Travis in his arms as he spins his golden tale, he exults in his imagined future power to 'hand [his son] the world!'<sup>36</sup>

Despite the sentimental beauty of the future her protagonist describes, Hansberry wanted her audiences and interview listeners to focus on Walter Lee's mistakes. He was the embodiment of several of the illusions she cautioned against in her speech 'The Negro Writer and His Roots'. Along with dominant American popular culture, Walter Lee considered 'businessmen' to be the hardest workers in society who 'work[ed] like fury keeping the world going' in the midst of idiot women, or 'secretaries getting

things wrong'.<sup>37</sup> He furthermore presumed that a patriarchal ability to provide her a beautiful house and a luxury car in which to do limitless shopping would dispel his wife Ruth's depression and thereby repair his failing marriage. Walter Lee imagined money in itself would empower him, provide his family happiness and thereby solve all his problems. This is the basic fallacy that would lead Walter Lee to initially accept the racist buyout deal offered by the Clybourne Park Improvement Association.

In the midst of the familial arguments after his acceptance of the buyout deal, Walter Lee makes plain the patriarchal aspiration at the heart of his monetary ambition. 'What's the matter with you all!' he demands thunderously. 'Hell, yes, I want me some yachts someday! Yes, I want to hang some real pearls' round my wife's neck . . . I tell you I am a *man* – and I think my wife should wear some pearls in this world'.<sup>38</sup> Walter Lee's patriarchal aspiration and 'money values' blind him to the quest for real freedom. Hansberry emphasised:

[Walter Lee] is representative of those people in our culture who are [confused] and the play makes the statement at the end that when money intrudes on those things which we know that we have to have for any kind of moral health as a people, and I mean all Americans, by heavens, let us choose for the other thing, not for the money. The focal moment of that play very much hangs on the denunciation of money values. When the mother confronts the son who is considering this betrayal of his heritage of a great people and says: 'I want what the bourgeois has'. The mother says to him from her resources as a daughter of the Negro peasantry, of the Negro slave classes: 'I come from five generations of slaves and sharecroppers and ain't nobody in my family never taken no kind of money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth'.<sup>39</sup>

So Hansberry's women characters, Lena Younger especially but also Walter's Lee's wife Ruth and his sister Beneatha, confront, challenge and push him to act from a better, finer set of values than he is wont to do. Representing American culture, the American working class, and the African Americans seeking to transform US society, Walter Lee learns to value his family's health and happiness, their greatness of spirit and ability to determine their own futures, over moribund 'money values'.

Although *Raisin* is rightly read as a play ultimately upholding the value of responsible, principled, caring male leadership of black families and communities, Hansberry did not posit black patriarchal aspiration as the route to African American freedom. Walter Lee's shallow money values are tied to his patriarchal urge to drape his wife in pearls and a Cadillac convertible. That is, Hansberry sets up Walter Lee's desire to affirm his manhood through conspicuous consumption and familial mastery as an aspect of the money values that the women characters insist he must relinquish in order to lead his family responsibly.

### The illusion of black matriarchy

As she critiqued black patriarchal aspiration as an aspect of money values, Hansberry recognised that her freedom vision was in danger of being overwhelmed not only by an insipid liberalism but also by a misogynist matriarchy theory utilising black women as scapegoats for black people's ongoing economic oppression and thus obscuring the necessity to dismantle systemic racial capitalism. Promoted by black and white social scientists such as sociologists E. Franklin Frazier and Maurice Davie and psychologists Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, the theory of black matriarchy cited black women's

steady employment and isolated incidents of black women's professional success as the source of a gendered strife within African American households and communities. While not yet explicitly labelling black families 'pathological', the black matriarchy theory of the 1940s and 1950s did posit black women's work outside the home and supposed familial domination as detrimental to the black family and demoralising to black men, especially husbands and fathers. This gender politics took for granted the premier value of hetero-patriarchal social and family structures and understood employed black women who participated in family decision-making as obstructive to black men's rightful patriarchal aspiration.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, in the contexts of the burgeoning civil rights movement and the postwar idealisation of suburban middle-class life as the indication of American capitalist triumph, black matriarchy theory implied that a successful black freedom movement would right this African American gender anomaly, that black freedom meant the achievement of patriarchal status for black men and the concomitant domestic subordination of black women.<sup>41</sup>

Disseminated in popular media like *Negro Digest* and *Ebony* magazine as well as in academic journals, black matriarchy theory thus began to shape the gendered politics of racial solidarity in the civil rights era.<sup>42</sup> It assumed full African American acceptance of middle-class, patriarchal heteronormativity as the standard of right living and the American dream. Hansberry's politics, shaped by communism and black nationalism as well as feminism and her queer sexuality, stood in complete contrast to these positions. Hansberry did not explicitly articulate a coherent black feminist critique of black women's oppression or intra-racial sexism. However, taken together, her statements in this period constitute her denunciation of sexism, both mainstream and intra-racial, and her condemnation of the theory of black matriarchy.

Prominent among the 'illusions' Hansberry listed in 'The Negro Writer and His Roots' was that 'women long to castrate men' and were actually 'doing so and taking the "man's place" in society'. Hansberry's use of quotes indicates her contestation of any notion of predestined or socially or legally defined 'places' for men and women. This is a notion she would also subtly critique in the commentary she published in *Ebony*. Hansberry did not countenance the Freudian concept of penis envy that undergirded the 'illusion' of women's longing to castrate men. She did not consider women to be anywhere close to overtaking or eclipsing men's sociopolitical and economic dominance in Western societies. Nor did she believe men held a prescribed social role upon which women ought not to impinge. This much is clear. However, it is not clear from this speech whether or how Hansberry considered the supposed 'national neurosis' around women's urge to castrate men to impact black people. *Raisin's* success afforded Hansberry the opportunity, and perhaps the obligation, to more explicitly address intra-racial gender politics.

In another forum in which Hansberry discussed *Raisin's* political import, an interview with Studs Terkel in 1959, Hansberry elaborated her representation of black women in the play, addressing the new stereotype of the black matriarch. Commenting specifically on the character Lena Younger, Hansberry said of the notion of black matriarchy:

Yes, those of us who are to any degree students of Negro history think this has something to do with slave society, of course, where [the Negro woman] was allowed a certain degree of, not ascendancy, but of at least control of her family, whereas the male was relegated to absolutely nothing, nothing at all. And this has probably been sustained by the sharecropper system in the South and on up

into even urban Negro life in the North. At least that's the theory. But I think it's a mistake to get it confused with Freudian concepts of matriarchal dominance and Philip Wylie's Momism and all that business.<sup>43</sup> It's not the same thing – not that there aren't negative things about it, and not that tyranny sometimes doesn't emerge as a part of it. But basically it's a great thing – these women have become the backbone of our people in a very necessary way . . . there was probably a necessity why among oppressed peoples the mother will assume a certain kind of role.<sup>44</sup>

Forming her historical understanding from the historiography of slavery and African American family life available to her in the 1950s, which was one of the primary spaces in which matriarchy theory took root, Hansberry located African American familial power in black women, and she upheld the contemporary popular and scholarly notion that black men were more disempowered than black women by slavery and subsequent racial oppression. Yet, she sought to distinguish this history from other matriarchy theories circulating at the time. Likewise, she was evidently uncomfortable with the implications of masculinist interpretations of the operations of racial oppression, as she hastened to defend black women from the implicit accusation that they subjugated black men and black families.

Hansberry went on to emphasise the oppression of black women, which would seem incongruous with the history of black women's near 'ascendency' and 'control' she had just sketched. 'People who are sophisticated enough to know it,' she said:

. . . say that obviously the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women, you know, obviously since women, period, are oppressed in society, and if you've got an oppressed group, they're twice oppressed. So I should imagine that they react accordingly: As oppression makes people more militant and so forth and so on, then twice milita[nt] because they are twice oppressed, so that there's an assumption of leadership historically.<sup>45</sup>

Hansberry's explanation of black female familial 'leadership' as an effect of double oppression does not quite make sense. Perhaps endeavouring to summarise Claudia Jones's insightful analysis of triple oppression via race, sex and class, Hansberry left out some crucial aspects, leaping from point to point, thus rendering her summary illogical.<sup>46</sup> She struggled to explain black women's oppression in the face of her acceptance of the idea that black women played a dominant role in black communities – a dominance black women were supposed to have exercised since slavery and in concert with black men's supposedly greater oppression. Black matriarchy theory made the explanation, let alone the analysis, of black women's oppression extraordinarily difficult.

A little over a year after Hansberry sat for her interview with Studs Terkel, sociologist and *Ebony* magazine editor Lerone Bennett, Jr published an article on the black 'matriarchate' in the nation's most illustrious black monthly. The mid-century prominence and influence of *Ebony* magazine cannot be overstated. It was the African American equivalent of *Life* magazine, the premier reflection of black middle-class aspiration, cultural acumen and potential for financial success. Even as it identified and denounced select instances of ongoing racial oppression, *Ebony* was committed to highlighting and celebrating African American success in all aspects of society.<sup>47</sup> *Ebony* editor Lerone Bennett, Jr, too, was noteworthy. A Morehouse man who had attended the leading black men's college along with Martin Luther King, Jr, Bennett would become the author of *Before the Mayflower* (1962), a work of African American history used as a resource by SNCC activists and other organisers in the civil rights

movement. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, with Bennett as one of its respected staff members, *Ebony* magazine ‘sold the race new identities, a process that encouraged imagination of a black national community, and made new notions of collective interest – and politics – possible’.<sup>48</sup> Among these new politics of black collective self-interest was a concerted black masculinism emphasising the imperative of black patriarchal aspiration.

It is useful to closely read Bennett’s article since it summarises much of the sexist illogic comprising black matriarchy theory as it coalesced in the late 1950s. It is also necessary to study Bennett’s argument in detail in order to fully discern the import of the commentary Hansberry published alongside it. Besides her art, this *Ebony* article is Hansberry’s most clear and emphatic published statement of feminist politics. She crafted her form of mid-century feminism to refute racist misogyny such as that evinced in Bennett’s article.

Opening with faint praise for ‘the Negro woman’ as ‘a unique work of art’, Bennett quickly moved into a misogynist sketch of African American history in which he quoted sociologist Maurice Davie in affirming that black women were so horribly domineering that enslaved black men ‘regarded freedom from female domination as one of the gains from Emancipation’. Likewise, Bennett built on E. Franklin Frazier’s scholarship to support his assertion that ‘female domination of the family continued after Emancipation’ and his supposition that black women’s supposed dominance was among the ‘rare combination of social and economic factors’ that ‘conspired to prevent Negro males from playing normal masculine roles’ in their families as well as in the larger society.<sup>49</sup> Bennett’s historical sketch reads as if the terrors of slavery, Reconstruction and segregation never touched black women except to make them preternaturally overbearing and thus contributory to the sociopolitical and economic oppression of black men.

In coming to his point, Bennett utilised Hansberry’s play as a passing example of a positive side of black matriarchy:

The female who becomes a Negro woman today inherits the problems and the possibilities inherent in a tradition of independence and self-reliance. The possibilities, as detailed by playwright Lorraine Hansberry, author of *A Raisin In The Sun*, are enormous. And so are the problems. Independence, as many white women have recently discovered, is not an unmixed blessing. In fact, some students claim that one result of the traditional independence of the Negro woman is that she is more in conflict with her innate biological role than the white woman. What, then, is the role of a woman? How have Negro women filled that role?<sup>50</sup>

The strange construction of the first sentence of this passage combines with Bennett’s comparison of black to white women to indicate his implicit demand that black women cease to embody the weirdly independent and domineering ‘Negro woman’ and act more like white women, supposedly so in harmony with their ‘innate biological role’. In the body of his article, Bennett did not answer the question regarding ‘the role of a woman’. He apparently considered this a rhetorical question with a common sense answer. Instead, he concentrated on the ways in which black women failed to ‘fill that role’.

Continuing under the guise of objective rationality, Bennett went on to list a range of statistics.<sup>51</sup> He emphasised that proportionately fewer black women than white women were married, that black women outnumbered black men and there was thus

greater competition for husbands among black women than among white women and that black women were slightly better educated than black men. He also emphasised black women's 'striking gains in the employment field' since 1940 with 'a strong trend away from domestic work'. However, he acknowledged that 'two out of every five [Negro women] are domestic workers' and that 'only 15.8 per cent of Negro women are in the professional, managerial, clerical and sales fields as compared to 59.1 per cent of white women'. Bennett was thus forced to concede that 'Negro women . . . are still concentrated in low-paying, unskilled jobs' and that 'the average annual wage for Negro women (\$1,019 in 1957) compares unfavorably with the annual wage of white women (\$2,240) and Negro men (\$2,436)'.<sup>52</sup> Beyond listing these figures, he failed to emphasise that black men made a bit more than white women in 1957 while black women made *less than half* of both white women and black men.

Despite the huge disparity in the income rates between black men and black women, Bennett proved amazingly dogmatic in his castigation of black women for their supposed dominance over African American economic life. 'Economic advances by Negro men, as the last figure shows, have made them influential forces in Negro families', he wrote, 'but Negro women are still undisputed powers in the home'. To support this assertion, Bennett called upon information from a market research analysis of black families in 'the \$4,000-and-over income class', an income bracket surely far above that of the majority of black families and most *Ebony* readers.<sup>53</sup> This research showed that black wives in this high income bracket had a greater role than white wives in deciding such aspects of family life as the location of the family residence, the family's vacation destinations, and their insurance coverage – all of which might reasonably be considered their purview as housewives in charge of their families' domestic lives. Nevertheless, Bennett concluded, 'This greater involvement of Negro wives in the family's economic decision has sociological overtones that are peculiar to the family life of the Negro'.<sup>54</sup>

He detailed these profound and 'peculiar' 'sociological overtones' in the next paragraph:

The emotional life of the Negro woman reflects her dominant position in the family. Her social and economic status has had profound repercussions in the sexual domain. As a result, sexual antagonisms between Negro women and Negro men run at a fever heat.<sup>55</sup>

The following paragraphs of Bennett's article detail these antagonisms and the emotional disturbance and sexual dissatisfaction plaguing black men and women. Again, Bennett called upon social scientific research to support his arguments. And once again, he found black women's dominance and irrationality to blame for both their own and black men's unhappiness. Bennett drew from Kardiner and Ovesey's *The Mark of Oppression* (1951) to make his case. He focused on their findings of black women's chastity before marriage and marital fidelity while also emphasising the 'role confusion' among black couples caused by black female economic dominance. Again, he did not substantiate this supposed economic dominance but did include quotes documenting black men's and women's anger and resentment for one another. Bennett utilised quotes from Chicago-area psychiatrist Kermit Mehlinger to further support his argument that black women engendered their own sexual dissatisfaction and emotional ill health by alienating black men, irrationally seeking to embody white beauty

standards when ‘the genes just won’t go along with them’ and evincing a tendency to ‘keep a beauty appointment before they will keep a medical appointment’.<sup>56</sup>

Ultimately, the resolution Bennett advocated for all this disorder and unhappiness was black women’s renunciation of work outside the home and their subordination to a newly invigorated and successful black patriarchy. Bennett endorsed Mehlinger’s recommendation that ‘Negro organizations and social engineers . . . address themselves to the problems of family disorganization’. They should work to improve black men’s earning power since ‘any improvement in the economic status of the masses of Negro men will lead . . . to an improvement in the Negro family and a consequent improvement in the emotional life of the Negro woman’.<sup>57</sup> Rather than organise against the economic exploitation of the whole race or to ameliorate black women’s lowly status at the bottom of the economic ladder where they earned half of black men’s and white women’s average wages, black people and organisations should further black men’s economic advantage over black women, thus increasing black women’s dependency and promoting their domestication.

In conclusion, Bennett ridiculed the views of a black woman scientist featured in a photo-spread published alongside his article. ‘Few women’, he observed, ‘believe that a woman’s place is in the home’:

Most women interviewed for this study echoed the views of Dr. Angella Ferguson, a medical research specialist, who says that the role of the American Negro woman is a family life of home and marriage *and* some outside interest. ‘Those who want a career should have the opportunity for one’, she adds, ‘Those who do not want a career outside the home, should engage in some civic or community activity in order that they may continue to grow throughout their married life’. Dr Ferguson’s statement reflects the dominant motif in the history of the Negro woman. Women, this motif insists, are people. Having proved that women are people, the Negro woman now faces a greater task. In an age when Negroes and whites, men and women, are confused about the meaning of femininity, she must prove that women are also women.<sup>58</sup>

Viewing black women as ‘already liberated’ due to their supposed economic dominance in black families despite their undisputed position at the bottom of the wage ladder, Bennett demanded that they relinquish their matriarchal status and prove they were ‘real’ women, properly subordinate to rising black patriarchs.

Wilfully deaf and dumb to the ongoing racial, sexual and economic oppression of black women and black people generally, Bennett evinced the resounding racist sexism that underpinned the black matriarchy theory ascending in racialised, liberal economic thought in both scholarly and popular circles. This black matriarchal thesis would soon be endorsed by the federal government as President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Department of Labor made it a central theme in its infamous 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Black matriarchy theory also functioned as a guiding assumption of the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty policies, which would seek to enact precisely the masculinist vision of black male economic advancement and black female domestication that Bennett favoured.<sup>59</sup> It was in the midst of this rising tide of black matriarchal discourse that Hansberry endeavoured to articulate a vision of black freedom that addressed black women as well as black men.

Alongside Bennett’s article are published several inserts, two of which are brief commentaries by E. Franklin Frazier and Lorraine Hansberry. Despite Bennett’s use of Frazier’s scholarship to buttress his own misogynistic arguments, Frazier’s commentary

was surprisingly restrained. He did characterise black women as 'independent' and 'dominant' but emphasised that they stood alongside black men in the history of the freedom struggle. Discussing the present, he lauded the student activist women going to jail alongside their 'brothers'. He concluded:

Therefore, if [the Negro woman] is true to her tradition of independence and self-assertion, she will not be satisfied with mere acceptance by white America but will join with the women of the world in the revolution which is creating a new world which will be free of colonialism, racial distinctions, and economic exploitation.<sup>60</sup>

Frazier's thoughts at that moment were on sit-ins and the hope of global socialist revolution rather than intra-racial gender politics.<sup>61</sup> In her commentary, Hansberry, too, engaged a global view of racial politics and a long view of black history.

It is not clear how much information Hansberry had about Bennett's feature article before she wrote her brief commentary, but it seems she knew enough to intend her words as a defence of black women and their self-determinative efforts. Hansberry began with the seventeenth-century arrival of 'the African woman' in the New World, reminding her readers that this was not the beginning of African peoples' history. She then sketched a history of slavery through a description of black women working throughout the Americas, not just the US south:

... for three centuries in the New World she was to cut cane, pick coffee, and chop cotton in the fields of the Indies and the plantations of Brazil and the United States. For three centuries she was to endure and wrestle against the fiercest oppression of modern history. For three centuries she moved in stealth beside and, sometimes, in advance of black men who wrought havoc against the slave system with musket, machete and petition. For three centuries she was the special victim of the lust of brutes. For three centuries she stood, poised against the landscape of the Americas, dark madonna with child, welding together family, tradition, culture and giving to a whole people a sense of survival.<sup>62</sup>

This description of black women enslaved, working, rebelling and building community alongside black men while also suffering gender-specific sexual violence stands in stark contrast to Bennett's domineering shrew so overbearing that emancipation was for black men freedom from her as much as from slavery. Hansberry thus subtly corrected the racist misogyny of Bennett's historical sketch.

Hansberry went on to describe the 'complex of womanhood' her title invoked. This was the combination of 'two grossly differing viewpoints – both romantic' notions about black womanhood. These 'viewpoints' are actually stereotypes, one the domineering harpy Bennett decried and the other the venerable black mother, the rock of her people, often celebrated in black poetry. Hansberry clearly preferred the latter notion, but she affirmed that 'put together they embrace some truths and present the complex of womanhood' that might fairly describe the multifariousness of black female character. Hansberry thus seemed to concede at least part of Bennett's critique, but it is in this paragraph that she first advanced her mockery of the notion of a woman's proper place or 'biological role'. The domineering stereotype, she wrote, 'is seen as an over-practical, unreasonable source of the destruction of all vision and totally lacking a sense of the proper "place" of womanhood'. Hansberry's use of quotes and the association of 'place' with the obviously hyper-exaggerated description of the shrew stereotype undercut the logic that assigned women, or anybody, a limited social role.<sup>63</sup>

Hansberry then linked black womanhood to African revolutionary insurgency as well as the US black freedom movement and complicated her critique of 'place'. 'And it is this complex of womanhood which now awakens', she wrote:

... with varying degrees of consciousness thus far, to find itself inextricably and joyously bound to the world's most insurgent elements: the people of Africa and Asia. For bound we are, by color, history, and lingering oppression, to braceleted and graceful Kikuyu women advancing in anger on a compound (read *concentration camp*, British style) somewhere in Kenya where African men are imprisoned for activity in behalf of freedom. At the same time in the United States, a seamstress refuses one day, simply refuses, to move from her chosen place on a bus while an equally remarkable sister of hers ushers children past bayonets in Little Rock.<sup>64</sup>

Here, as she affirms the activist initiatives of Rosa Parks and Daisy Bates, Hansberry's use of 'place' is not in quotes because Parks chose her place for herself, refusing to accept the role society prescribed for her. In addition, specifically addressing the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, Hansberry continued to broaden Bennett's narrow viewpoint beyond supposed battles for dominance between black men and women, pointing instead toward a global struggle of people of colour for 'freedom' and against imperialism and white supremacy.

Hansberry's final statement turned this global black nationalist vision toward a feminist consciousness as she more directly commented on the hyperbolic misogynist critique in Bennett's article. 'It is indeed a single march, a unified destiny, and the prize is the future', she declared:

In the ascent we shall want and need to lose some of the features of our collective personality for which we are justly ill famed; but it is also to be hoped that we shall cling just as desperately to certain others for which we are not less harshly criticized. For above all, in behalf of an ailing world which sorely needs our defiance, may we as Negroes or *women*, never accept the notion of – 'our place'.<sup>65</sup>

Whereas the collective 'we' had been black people with black women fighting among them, in the last paragraph the collective clearly became black women who were defiant in battling white supremacy and, Hansberry implied, just as defiant in rejecting Bennett's characterisation of them as domineering harpies too irrational or idiotic to know their 'place' as women was in the home subservient to men. The 'ailing world' needed black women's 'defiance' of any notion of place and of any attempt to subordinate them. Hansberry rejected the common sense view that women should occupy a secondary 'place' in society and in their families. She also subtly reproached the black masculinist impulse to impose sociopolitical limits on women, given black people's difficult contemporary struggle against parallel processes of subjugation. Substituting her recognition of an international freedom struggle fought across the Americas, Africa and Asia for Bennett's petty scapegoating of black women for black people's subjugation under racial capitalism, Hansberry advocated an expansive freedom vision that would liberate black men and women alike.

### **Be on my side for once!**

In the shocked aftermath of Walter Lee's declaration that he would accept the buyout offer from the white Clybourne Park Improvement Association, Beneatha, disgusted

with her brother, pronounces him less than a man, 'nothing but a toothless rat'. Her mother admonishes her, demanding 'You done wrote his epitaph too – like the rest of the world? Well, who give you the privilege?' Beneatha responds with her own demand: 'Be on my side for once!'<sup>66</sup> In the Kenny Leon version performed on Broadway in the spring and summer of 2014, this statement became a calmly delivered, haunting question, 'When will you be on my side?' and it dangled ominously.<sup>67</sup> Neither the demand nor the question is answered in the course of the play as written or performed. Yet it resounds through the play's conclusion and beyond, signalling Hansberry's call for a vision of freedom that would encompass Beneatha and all black women.

Alongside the main plot surrounding Walter Lee's struggle with racism, money values and the urge toward bourgeois patriarchal aspiration, Hansberry drew a subplot involving younger sister Beneatha, a character Hansberry acknowledged as much like herself. As other scholars have noted, the name 'Beneatha' signifies the character's lowly status in the play as well as black women's – especially young, childless and single black women's – lowly status in society. It is through Beneatha's plot and interactions with the other characters, including her suitors, that Hansberry explored the question of black women's particular liberation.

A college student working toward becoming a doctor, Beneatha has two suitors, the bourgeois George Murchison and a Yoruba Nigerian immigrant student named Joseph Asagai. As discussed earlier, Murchison represents the babbity aspect of the money values Hansberry deplored and that her characters learn to reject. Asagai, however, introduces Beneatha, and the play's audiences, to the hopes of black nationalism, African revolution and African diasporic unity. As well, through Beneatha's hesitation to commit to a sexual relationship and a connubial future with Asagai, Hansberry leads audiences to question hetero-patriarchal assumptions about sexual politics, the role of women in societies and women's ability to determine their futures independent of men and marriage.

Beneatha's demand fits awkwardly in the argument that occasions it. In the midst of castigating her brother and fielding her mother's reprimands, Beneatha suddenly voices a thought that we realise must have been simmering, unarticulated, in her consciousness. As the devastating impact of Walter Lee's failed patriarchal leadership reverberates, Beneatha's sense of gendered alienation within her family sharply coalesces into this critical supplication. In this moment of the drama, Hansberry made clear that Beneatha's freedom dream would not be entirely fulfilled by her brother's eventual acquiescence to his female relatives' right-thinking.

As Walter Lee 'finally come[s] into his manhood' at the play's conclusion, Beneatha's future remains in flux.<sup>68</sup> Asagai has asked Beneatha to marry him, and she wonderingly envisions herself as 'a doctor in Africa'. However, attentive readers must note that Asagai made no mention of Beneatha's role in an imagined revolutionary Africa beyond his dream of having her as his 'maiden' to be taught 'the old songs and the ways of [his] people'. Asagai hopes for a helpmeet; Beneatha dreams of collective and personal self-determination. Given Beneatha's pattern of astute assessment and feminist consciousness, we can be sure she will soon recognise this discrepancy. Will Asagai support her personal, professional and political goals, or will he, like Walter Lee, admonish her to 'go be a nurse like other women – or just get married and be quiet'?<sup>69</sup> In leaving Beneatha's plot unconcluded, Hansberry implies the hope that Beneatha will choose to build a future for herself and, whether she

marries Asagai or not, refuse to settle for the limits the men surrounding her would impose.

In her subtly incisive way, Hansberry insisted on a vision of black freedom that would not sacrifice black women's liberation. Using her play and the platform its success afforded her, she critiqued the misogyny of the black matriarchy theory rising around her, tackled the illusion that integration and bourgeois patriarchal empowerment would ameliorate the effects of white supremacy and racial capitalism, and offered instead a radically gendered vision of freedom based in affirmative self-determination for black women as well as black men. As the black freedom movement continued, Hansberry, despite her waning health, remained an active commentator and occasional participant in its northern skirmishes. Up to her death in January 1965, she urged Americans toward a complex vision of freedom that exceeded the bounds of political pragmatism and focused on the ideal of a robust, radical egalitarianism. 'And if we think' the realisation of such a fundamental equality 'isn't going to be painful', her words remind us, 'we're mistaken'.<sup>70</sup>

## Notes

1. Lorraine Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots' (1959), *The Black Scholar* (March–April 1981), pp. 2–12, here p. 10. Emphasis in original.
2. The FBI had been surveilling Hansberry since the early 1950s, and the CIA covertly funded the American Society of African Culture as a means of controlling interactions among African American and African writers. See William J. Maxwell, *F. B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), esp. pp. 101–03; Mary Helen Washington, *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) pp. 241, 246, 261; and Lawrence P. Jackson, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 462–3. Washington devotes a whole chapter to this prominent conference and its many skirmishes between 'the conservative integrationists (also known as anticommunist race liberals) and the leftist radicals' (p. 241) such as Hansberry, John O. Killens, Langston Hughes, Julian Mayfield, and Alice Childress. Lawrence Jackson, too, affirms that the American Society of African Culture 'was depoliticized in public and anticommunist in private' (p. 462) and funded by the CIA.
3. See Ashley Brown, 'Swinging for the State Department: American Women Tennis Players in Diplomatic Goodwill Tours, 1941–1959', *Journal of Sport History* 42 (2015), pp. 289–309. Brown affirms that Gibson was admirably compared to Bunche and 'widely viewed as an effective parry to ripostes of racism made by communists and their fellow travelers. "How much more good is being done for the Negro race by the well-mannered and admired deeds of Jackie Robinson in baseball and Althea Gibson in tennis than by the radical rantings of [Paul] Robeson", wrote a fan, in 1950', p. 300.
4. For an analysis of the significance of Ghana's independence for the US black freedom movement, see Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
5. On the transition, via McCarthyism, from a radically anti-imperialist, Left-leaning black freedom movement to a liberal civil rights movement, see Gerald Horne, *Black Revolutionary: William Patterson and the Globalization of the African American Freedom Struggle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). The interwar black Left was persecuted but not obliterated under McCarthyism. It survived through subtlety and guile like Hansberry's to foster the black power phase of the black freedom movement. See, for example, Dayo F. Gore, 'From Communist Politics to Black Power: The Visionary Politics and Transnational Solidarities of Victoria "Vicki" Ama Garvin', in Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard (eds), *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 71–94; and Komozi Woodard, 'Amiri Baraka, the Congress of African People, and Black

- Power Politics from the 1961 United Nations Protest to the 1972 Gary Convention', in Peniel E. Joseph (ed.), *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 55–77. For a historical analysis of racial capitalism as it manifested in real estate and black activism, see N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); and Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).
6. On black matriarchy theory as it was expressed before culminating in the 1965 Moynihan Report, see Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), esp. pp. 49–56; and Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt & Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), esp. pp. 41–55, 74–81.
  7. See Amiri Baraka, 'A Critical Reevaluation: A Raisin in the Sun's Enduring Passion', in Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun/The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, ed. and introd. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 9–20, here p. 19.
  8. See Margaret B. Wilkerson, 'Lorraine Hansberry: The Complete Feminist', *Freedomways* 19 (1979), pp. 235–45; and Adrienne Rich, 'The Problem with Lorraine Hansberry', *Freedomways* 19 (1979), pp. 247–55.
  9. Kevin Gaines, 'From Center to Margin: Internationalism and the Origins of Black Feminism', in Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (eds), *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 294–313; Cheryl Higashida, 'To Be(Come) Young, Gay, and Black: Lorraine Hansberry's Existentialist Routes to Anticolonialism', *American Quarterly* 60 (2008), pp. 899–924; Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*.
  10. Rebecca Welch, 'Spokesman of the Oppressed? Lorraine Hansberry at Work: The Challenge of Radical Politics in the Postwar Era', in Manning Marable and Elizabeth Kai Hinton (eds), *The New Black History: Revisiting the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 69–89.
  11. Mary Helen Washington, 'Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front', in Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (eds), *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 183–204, here p. 194.
  12. YPA Student Organization Annual Registration Form 1949–50, Lorraine Hansberry Papers, Manuscripts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York City (hereafter Hansberry Papers), Box 1, Folder 5.
  13. See, for example, Ted Poston, 'We Have So Much to Say', *New York Post*, 22 March 1959, M2; and Julian Mayfield quoted in Welch, 'Spokesman of the Oppressed?' p. 77.
  14. Biographers Theoharis and Ransby have deftly established both their respective subjects' commitments to varieties of radical politics and their public maintenance of demure demeanours. See Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013); and Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
  15. Julian Mayfield quoted in Welch, 'Spokesman of the Oppressed?', p. 77. Welch analyses Mayfield's words, writing that the overall effect for him 'rendered [Hansberry's] intellectualism somewhat troubling – the unexpected presence of a bold and incisive power of reason in a starkly female frame' (p. 77).
  16. Washington, *The Other Blacklist*, pp. 246, 261. Hansberry's keynote address was not published until 1981.
  17. Here, I apply Nikhil Singh's use of the term 'excessive' in his analysis of African American radicals' concepts of rights and utopic understandings of freedom that 'had a habit of exceeding the sanctioned boundaries and brokered compromises of the established political order'. Nikhil Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 4, 43.
  18. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', p. 3.
  19. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', pp. 4–5.
  20. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', p. 5. Emphasis in original.
  21. See W. E. B. Du Bois, 'Criteria of Negro Art', *Crisis* 32 (1926), pp. 290–7. Hansberry studied African history with Du Bois in Harlem in the early 1950s.
  22. Washington, *The Other Blacklist*, p. 240.
  23. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', p. 5.
  24. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', p. 6.
  25. Baldwin would publish a book under this title in 1963 and thereby become an internationally renowned spokesman for the African American civil rights movement.

26. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', p. 6.
27. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', p. 9.
28. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', pp. 9, 8.
29. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', p. 9.
30. Lorraine Hansberry, Hansberry A Raisin in the Sun/The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window, ed. and introd. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
31. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', p. 9. Emphasis in original.
32. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana*, p. 25.
33. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', pp. 9–10.
34. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', p. 10.
35. Interview with Eleanor Fischer, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, June 7, 1961, Hansberry Papers, Box 3, Folder 8. As well as a radio correspondent, Eleanor Fischer was a New York attorney focusing on civil rights and criminal law. In the 1970s, she began working for National Public Radio in New York City.
36. Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, pp. 108–09.
37. Hansberry, 'The Negro Writer and His Roots', p. 4.
38. Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 143. Emphasis in original.
39. Interview with Eleanor Fischer.
40. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, pp. 49–56; Scott, *Contempt & Pity*, pp. 74–81.
41. On the postwar idealisation of suburban family life as indicative of the success of American capitalism, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
42. For examples of this black masculinism and its effects on the twentieth-century black freedom movement, see Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*; Erin D. Chapman, *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); and Tracey Matthews, 'No One Ever Asks What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is: Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971', in Charles E. Jones (ed.), *The Black Panther Party, Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), pp. 267–304.
43. Philip Wylie was a prolific American essayist, science fiction writer, and founding member of the staff of the *New Yorker*. The term 'Momism' is derived from his vitriolic attack on a range of American hypocrisies in his 1942 collection *Generation of Vipers*. Wylie accused controlling, doting 'moms', whom he distinguished from the mass of praiseworthy women, of sapping the principled vitality and courage from their children, especially their sons, and from US society generally.
44. Hansberry interview with Studs Terkel, 'Studs Terkel Almanac' radio show on WFMT in Chicago, 12 May 1959, Hansberry Papers, Box 3, Folder 1. Studs Terkel was a Chicago disc jockey, author and radio personality who played folk music and interviewed local and national celebrities on his radio show, which eventually became simply the 'Studs Terkel Program'.
45. Hansberry interview with Studs Terkel.
46. Writing a decade before Hansberry sat for this interview, Jones had explained that capitalism and white supremacy had long converged to depress black men's wages and to necessitate black women's participation in the labour market. Racism and sexism meant that the great majority of black women worked at the very bottom of the capitalist wage scale, overwhelmingly in domestic service. As her family's primary breadwinner and often as a single mother, Jones had further explained, 'the Negro woman has had the responsibility of caring for the needs of the family, of militantly shielding it from the blows of Jim-Crow insults, of rearing children in an atmosphere of lynch terror, segregation, and police brutality, and of fighting for an education for the children. The intensified oppression of the Negro people, which has been the hallmark of the postwar reactionary offensive, cannot therefore but lead to an acceleration of the militancy of the Negro woman'. Claudia Jones, 'An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!' *Political Affairs* (1949; repr. New York: National Women's Commission, CPUSA, 1949), p. 3.
47. Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940–1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 216.
48. Green, *Selling the Race*, p. 132.
49. Lerone Bennett Jr, 'The Negro Woman: Crumbling Matriarchate Poses New Problems', *Ebony*, August 1960, p. 38. Bennett quotes Maurice R. Davie, *Negroes in American Society* (1949). Davie was a Yale University professor of sociology.
50. Bennett, 'The Negro Woman', pp. 38, 40.

51. Bennett wrote that he derived these figures from the census, but I have not been able to verify them. Therefore, I quote them only to demonstrate his analytical methods and logic.
52. Bennett, 'The Negro Woman', p. 40.
53. Bennett, 'The Negro Woman', p. 40. I speculate that Bennett utilised the market research gathered for *Ebony* or for the Johnson Publishing Company to determine the magazine's advertisement base.
54. Bennett, 'The Negro Woman', p. 40.
55. Bennett, 'The Negro Woman', p. 46.
56. Bennett, 'The Negro Woman', p. 46.
57. Bennett, 'The Negro Woman', p. 46.
58. Bennett, 'The Negro Woman', p. 46. Emphasis in original.
59. Scott, *Contempt & Pity*, pp. 150–6. Although Johnson's commitment to escalating the Vietnam War caused his War on Poverty to be underfunded and ultimately ineffectual, the masculinist policy guidelines it asserted remain influential. President Obama's 'My Brother's Keeper' initiative is a case in point.
60. E. Franklin Frazier, 'The New Role of the Negro Woman', *Ebony*, August 1960, p. 40.
61. Frazier's long association with Leftist circles and politics is well-documented. See, for example, Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris, Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919–1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
62. Lorraine Hansberry, 'This Complex of Womanhood', *Ebony*, August 1960, p. 40.
63. Hansberry, 'This Complex of Womanhood'
64. Hansberry, 'This Complex of Womanhood'.
65. Hansberry, 'This Complex of Womanhood'. Emphasis in original.
66. Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, pp. 144–5.
67. Kenny Leon, dir. *A Raisin in the Sun*, performed at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York City, 7 May 2014.
68. Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 151.
69. Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 38.
70. Hansberry quoted in transcript of the 15 June 1964 Forum at the New York City Town Hall sponsored by the Association of Artists for Freedom, published as 'Black Revolution and White Backlash: What Is the White Liberal's Role? A Report on the NY Confrontation' in the *National Guardian, the Progressive Newsweekly*, 4 July 1964, p. 8.