The Unfinishedness & Untimeliness of *A Raisin in the Sun*

Benjamin Schwartz

Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Volume 64, Number 4,
Winter 2022, pp. 396-415 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

The Unfinishedness & Untimeliness of *A Raisin in the Sun*

BENJAMIN SCHWARTZ

Various versions of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* have been haunted by the label "definitive." In 2014, *Time* dubbed *Raisin* "the definitive depiction of the black experience in mid-century America" (Zoglin). Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry's husband and literary executor, describes the American Playhouse version, first performed in 1984 and released on TV and home video in 1988, as the play's "definitive realization" (Nemiroff 12). A review of the 2014 Broadway rendition claimed, "Even if you think you have seen *A Raisin in the Sun* before, this is the definitive production for our time" (Gluck). As recently as 2021, a Bloomsbury reprint of the play touted "a new, updated edition" that "includes the full, definitive text." "Definitiveness" functions in the critical discourse surrounding *Raisin* primarily as an economic strategy: by defining any single version as the "definitive" one, critics sell their reviews to readers, and producers sell tickets to audiences.

KEYWORDS: *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry, editions, American theater

ABSTRACT: Building on recent studies by Imani Perry and Soyica Diggs Colbert, as well as new work by Julius Fleming, this article argues that the various editions of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* are invested in a politics of untimeliness and unfinishedness that complicates common understandings of the play's meaning. By attending to the dialogue among the various versions of *Raisin*, readers are able to recognize the importance of untimeliness and unfinishedness to *Raisin*'s "radical vision."

Texas Studies in Literature and Language, vol. 64, no. 4, winter 2022

DOI: 10.7560/TSLL64403

But the assertion of "definitiveness" also has implications for understandings of *Raisin*'s meaning. By promoting a singular version of the story, such claims reify one version of *Raisin* rather than asking audiences to engage with *Raisin* as necessarily in process.

The prevalent discourse of "definitiveness" runs contrary to the sensibility that Hansberry articulates in *Raisin* and in her interviews and notes about the work, which I characterize as a politics of untimeliness and unfinishedness. Despite claims to the contrary that appear in reviews or in the paratextual materials accompanying the various editions of *Raisin* that I examine, no one version or production of the Youngers' story can adequately convey the complexity and depth of Hansberry's extraordinary work. Instead, understanding *Raisin*'s commitment to an untimely, unfinished liberation requires reading its various versions with and against each other.

The ground for seriously attending to Hansberry's various visions for *Raisin* has been cleared by Soyica Diggs Colbert's recent *Radical Vision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry* (2021) and Imani Perry's equally excellent *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (2018). Both texts depict Hansberry as a profound thinker whose work articulates an understanding of social transformation that is markedly different from the liberal readings of *Raisin* that have dominated the critical discourse surrounding the play since its debut. The Hansberry that Perry and Colbert present is particularly interested in the ways that changes in consciousness move everyday people to come together, make meaning, and struggle for freedom outside of formal political structures. At the same time, Hansberry was deeply invested in collective organizing and worked doggedly to forge coalitions with those who advocated on behalf of the poor, women, African Americans, gays and lesbians, and the world's colonized peoples. Hansberry recognized Black emancipation—which for her was inseparable from the emancipation of women, queer people, and the poor—not as something only given by a legislature or a court but as something that communities negotiated and discovered through the praxis of struggle. As Perry and Colbert make clear, Hansberry refused to wait for the appropriate time to voice her opinions on the multiple issues that deeply concerned her, eschewing the calls for "Black patience" that Julius Fleming identifies as an enduring tool of racial capitalism. Instead, she insisted on fighting for freedom on all fronts simultaneously, even if this confounded would-be allies who felt that their particular struggle must take precedence.

In light of Hansberry's conception of freedom as an ongoing project rather than a finite object, Colbert argues for considering Hansberry's writerly

practice "as a process rather than a destination" (6). To this end, Colbert makes the case for reading Hansberry's unpublished material as part of her canon, arguing that "only attending to the published writing constricts [Hansberry's] aesthetic and political vision" (10). Though I focus my comparative analysis on published versions of *Raisin*, analyzing the way that Hansberry's vision changes in subtle ways as the play migrates across stage, page, and screen, I take inspiration from Colbert's framing of *Raisin* and Hansberry's work in general as a series of revisions, where one draft is not necessarily more authentic or definitive than another. Because of COVID-19 travel restrictions, I have not been able to make use of the rich archive of Hansberry's unpublished work that Colbert draws upon, but I hope to extend Colbert's project of seriously considering Hansberry's larger archive to explicate her radical vision and explore how that vision is made manifest in her most extraordinary and renowned project. While the intellectual dynamism that Perry and Colbert describe can be appreciated through a reading of any edition of *Raisin*, the complexity and depth of Hansberry's vision is best understood by an engagement with all of the versions of the Youngers' story simultaneously.

As of late 2020, there are four versions of this story in print that can be traced more or less directly to Hansberry's authorship. The first in order of publication is the original Broadway version of *A Raisin in the Sun*, first performed in 1959. Second is the musical *Raisin*, adapted by Nemiroff and collaborator Charlotte Zaltzberg from the stage play and first performed in 1974. Despite the fact that Hansberry passed away before the musical came to be, I argue that the musical *Raisin* presents an interesting opportunity to engage with Hansberry's "radical vision" that merits more thoughtful attention than it has been given. Third is the twenty-fifth-anniversary edition of the play, which adds several scenes not present in the original Broadway version. This edition was first brought to print by Nemiroff in 1984 and reprinted posthumously with his introduction in 1994. Finally, there is the screenplay, ushered into print by Nemiroff's second wife, Jewell Handy-Gresham Nemiroff, and also released in 1994.

Seriously considering these competing versions of *Raisin* as equally legitimate imaginings of the Youngers' story unsettles the notion of a "definitive" *Raisin*, as well as the related discourse of *Raisin*'s "timeliness." Like "definitiveness," a focus on "timeliness" has surfaced as a recurring motif in recent reviews of the play, with the phrase appearing in scores of articles in a diverse range of publications across the United States since the year 2000 (see, e.g., UCCS Presents; Hurwitt; Wilson). The discourse of "timeliness" dovetails with the discourse of "definitiveness" in that both terms attempt

to arrest *Raisin*'s essence within a singular temporal locus. Interestingly, some recent appraisals of *Raisin*, including one in *The Oxford Handbook of American Drama*, have described the play paradoxically as both "timely and timeless" (see, e.g., Aucoin; Guay; Elam 379). While the second adjective, "timeless," might seem more useful, I am suspicious of the ways that this word has historically been yoked to claims of the play's universality that veer toward color blindness, as in a *New York Times* review of a production from 1985 that celebrates the play as a vehicle "to unite us all" while ignoring the enduring presence of white supremacy that constitutes one of *Raisin*'s major themes (Klein). A framing of *Raisin* as "timeless" can threaten to erase the way that the story responds to a specific historical moment, just as Hansberry argued that framing the play as "universal" threatens to neuter its insistent concern with the specific intersectional formations of Blackness in the mid-century United States (Perry; Colbert).

A more productive formulation, I argue, is to characterize the play as unfinished and untimely: perennially relevant at the same time that it speaks to a particular past; prophetic at the same time that it reacts to a specific set of historical concerns; always out of chronological fixity and in evolution; demanding freedom now while recognizing the unending nature of emancipatory struggle; responding to the discourse surrounding previous versions while simultaneously anticipating a trajectory most critics could never envision. While themes of unfinishedness and untimeliness appear in each iteration of the story, these themes are best appreciated by considering the various versions in dialogue. In other words, reading across the four versions that I examine helps to better one's understanding of how untimeliness and unfinishedness appear as major themes within each version of *Raisin*, as well as how these themes affirm Hansberry's long-standing conception of liberation as an urgent, ongoing, and necessarily unfinished struggle.

Though not typically associated with writings about *Raisin*, "untimely" is a word that is familiar to profiles of Hansberry herself, who died at age thirty-four in 1965. In his encomium "Sweet Lorraine," James Baldwin writes,

> We had respect for each other which perhaps is only felt by people on the same side of the barricades, listening to the accumulating thunder of the hooves of horses and the heads of tanks. . . . When so bright a light goes out so early, when so gifted an artist goes so soon, we are left with sorrow and wonder which speculation cannot assuage. One's filled for a long time with a sense of injustice as futile as it is powerful. And the vanished person fills the mind, in this or that attitude, doing this or that. (445)

Raisin, like Hansberry's passing, fills its audience with a sense of injustice—futile, perhaps, but paradoxically powerful nonetheless. Like Hansberry's astonishing and all-too-brief life, the Youngers' journey does not reach the fruition the audience is invited to dare imagine. But though they do not leave the play with victory firmly in hand, their story leaves us, as Hansberry's legacy does Baldwin, with a lingering presence that affirms an artistic and political project dedicated to the pursuit of emancipation. Hansberry's untimely passing is related to *Raisin*'s untimeliness in that Hansberry's death created a vacuum where various versions of the play attempt to authenticate themselves by insisting that they embody the truest version of her vision. As Colbert and Perry demonstrate, however, Hansberry was less interested in creating a definitive version of her work than in understanding the individual and collective trajectories of becoming upon which her characters so richly embark.

The play's focus on untimeliness and unfinishedness is important to recognize today because, despite Hansberry's protests, *Raisin* continues to be read as supporting a liberal, assimilationist vision of political change that conceives of progress as a linear trajectory punctuated by discrete legal instances. Unsettling this conception of how change happens is pressing in the contemporary United States, as scholars increasingly call attention to the inadequacy of a teleological narrative of racial progress for making sense of the ongoing centrality of racism in US social, political, and economic life. Rather than a struggle with a distinct end point, theorists of Black studies have urgently articulated a conception of emancipation, as Hortense Spillers puts it, as a "project" that "must be radically addressed as the *moment of departure* that never ceases. Now that we are there, at that point, what next?" (35). Building upon Spillers's understanding of the unfinished project of Black emancipation, Saidiya Hartman and others maintain that the social and political institutions of slavery were not ended by interventions such as the Thirteenth Amendment but were instead transposed and disguised by emerging technologies of racial capitalism. In wake of the interventions that Spillers, Hartman, and other theorists have made in the historiography of the Black freedom struggle and its representation in literature, it is imperative to recognize the politics of untimeliness and unfinishedness in Hansberry's works, which anticipate recent scholarship on the imperfectability of US democracy.

Hansberry's emphasis on unfinishedness should not be confused with a willingness to wait for freedom to be bestowed. Rather, Fleming argues, Hansberry's project in *Raisin* is an example of what he calls "Afro-presentism," a representational strategy that "imagines, crafts, and accounts for the aesthetic, experiential, and political strategies that black people use to embrace

the possibilities of the present while continuing to engage in the necessary practice of black freedom dreaming; of spying the horizon; of pursuing the not-yet-here" (28). The Youngers' move to Clybourne Park is an endorsement of immediate action in the face of the restrictive discourse of Black patience, asserting the ability of everyday people not only to demand but to create a measure of "freedom now." Nonetheless, *Raisin* refuses to declare victory, insisting on the necessity of continuing to imagine a future of total emancipation that serves as the ethical touchstone for ongoing practices of freedom in the present. By calling for present actions at the same time that it gestures toward expansive future visions, *Raisin* conceives of a timeline of liberation as both urgent and unending.

Somewhat counterintuitively, it is the specific moment to which *Raisin* responds that informs its themes of untimeliness. The struggles of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the play was primarily being written and revised, dramatized the tenacity of racial capitalist violence, even as flickers of progress dared activists such as Hansberry to imagine new possibilities for Black freedom. Early drafts of *Raisin* were finished in 1957, the same year that Ghana became the first African nation to achieve its independence after a long anticolonial struggle (Perry). It was one year after the successful conclusion of the Montgomery bus boycott and one year before Martin Luther King, Jr., first asserted, after Theodore Parker, that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Hansberry, who was deeply involved in the long civil rights movement and strongly influenced by Marxist critiques of capitalism and colonialism, understood the upheaval of the 1950s and early 1960s as a corkscrew of dialectical contradiction, not a march toward inevitable progress. Unlike King, she did not necessarily believe that a higher power would ordain the success of the Black freedom struggle. Nonetheless, *Raisin* reflects a similar understanding of time to the one King articulates, implicitly arguing that while we may never reach the "end" of the universe's moral arc, we persevere in the knowledge that the seemingly straight line of human history can be bent ever so slightly by our collective praxis of freedom here and now. In *Raisin*, freedom is never realized as a definitive victory, but rather, as Colbert puts it, a series of "ongoing unfolding intervals" (15). Liberation, in Hansberry's conception, in other words, is less a moment or a space that we can reach than an ethic of mutual care that we aspire to live by, one that gains deeper meaning when it is contextualized within communal dialogue and collective struggle.

Raisin's varied chronological settings reflect its investment in untimeliness. While the original stage play and the musical both describe the story

as taking place in the "early 1950s," the twenty-fifth-anniversary edition is set "sometime between World War Two and the present" (11, 23). (This in turn prompts the question, the "present" as in when this version was written, when it was first published, or the reader's present?) The American Playhouse performance, based on the 1984 edition—the one Nemiroff describes as "definitive"—sets the play firmly in 1956. The screenplay, meanwhile, gives no starting date at all. Also unclear is the amount of time during which the events of the play unfold. Both stage versions note that "a few weeks" take place during the course of action (Original Broadway 88; 25th Anniversary 97). The screenplay, however, includes no notes as to how much time has passed, leaving it entirely to the interpretation of the reader or viewer.

One sees the theme of untimeliness, too, in the production and publication history of the various editions of *Raisin*. As Colbert's and other scholars' archival research demonstrates, it took many years for some of Hansberry's key ideas to be realized onstage or onscreen because they were originally deemed too politically radical to be commercially marketable. Margaret Wilkerson describes several crucial excisions made to the original Broadway script: an exchange where Lena directly critiques the politics of Booker T. Washington was removed, for example, as was a conversation about bombings of Black households in Chicago that likened the racial atmosphere there to that of Mississippi. Beneatha's decision to get a natural haircut was also cut. So were key moments of dialogue between Walter and Travis and additional references to African politics and culture (Wilkerson, "American Classic"). These cuts, Wilkerson argues, were designed to fit the play more neatly into a liberal narrative of American assimilation. The twenty-fifth-anniversary version of the play restores these scenes, and the televised performance of this *Raisin* by American Playhouse renders many—though not all—of them onstage. But though it purports to be the "definitive" text, the 1984 version, published nearly twenty years after Hansberry's death, omits certain other ideas that were present at different points in the play's drafts. Some of these would appear in some form in the musical, some in the screenplay, and others only in the archive of Hansberry's unpublished material.

One important continuity between all four editions of *Raisin*, however, is that in none of them does the Youngers' collective quest for a freer life reach a neat conclusion. In each version, the story ends with the family in solidarity, such that Lena (who is named "Lena" in the screenplay, rather than "Mama," as she is in the stage plays, in what I interpret as Hansberry's response to audiences' perceptions that Lena is *only* a mother—that is, only an aid to others' self-formation, and not an individual with her own trajectory) can finally claim

Walter and Beneatha as "my children" (Original Broadway 137; 25th Anniversary 150; Screenplay 205). Together, they are ready to move into a new and better home, where Lena's plant will finally have enough sunlight to grow. But as Fleming notes of the original stage play, each version of *Raisin* concludes with the Youngers packed for their move but not yet arrived in their new house, situating them, as Fleming puts it, forever "betwixt and between" (56).

In an interview with Studs Terkel, Hansberry elaborates on the significance of this suspension, arguing that, contrary to many critics' interpretations, the story has not neatly wrapped up:

> We had one letter in The New York Times from—you could tell by the tone and quality of the letter—from a very sophisticated young man sitting somewhere who said that he regarded it as soap opera, you know, which amused me. . . . I don't think it qualifies as melodrama. I think it's a legitimate drama. Or a happy ending; if he thinks that's a happy ending I invite him to come [out?]. . . . Go live in one of those communities where these people are [going?]. (Hansberry, Interview)

As a young woman, Hansberry herself had been a victim of racial violence that caused her own family to lose their home and nearly their lives after moving into a segregated white neighborhood (Perry 17). That attack permanently disillusioned her father about the American possibility in which he had steadfastly believed. The tension in the 1959 ending is best understood when considered in concert with an unpublished ending that was significantly darker. Wilkerson notes:

> In an earlier version of the script, Hansberry wrote a more somber ending in which the family is shown sitting in the darkened living room of their new house, armed and awaiting an attack by their white neighbors. The accepted and ever popular upbeat ending, which shows a jubilant family moving to their new home, was no less true than the other ending. This more positive view did, however, emphasize the Youngers' evolution and progress rather than the violent, retrogressive attitudes of the racists who awaited them. ("American Classic" 452)

The decision to place the accent on the Youngers' agency rather than the inevitable racist backlash is a powerful endorsement of the political power of Black hope and resolve. Hansberry's decision to do so, however, in no way implies that backlash is not coming, or that it will not be devastating. The screenplay

takes more care to emphasize the difficulties ahead, with Lena's last line reading, "Well, I was just thinking the other day that I didn't like not working much as I thought I did. . . . I guess I call Mrs. Holiday in the morning—see if they got somebody else yet . . ." (206). In this revised version, Hansberry foregrounds the economic hardship the family will face going forward—with a significant amount of the burden falling, as it always has, on Lena.

The individual members of the Younger family undergo journeys of self-discovery that are similarly incomplete, though promising nevertheless. At the end of the play, Walter famously "comes into his manhood, like a rainbow after the rain" (Original Broadway 137; 25th Anniversary 151; Screenplay 205). In the screenplay and the musical, this is reinforced when Walter helps care for the plant that signifies the Youngers' attempts to grow and thrive within a hostile environment. The final directions in the screenplay read, "[Walter and Lena] suddenly look at each other in a flash of remembrance, and Walter turns and goes to the window and gets the plant and comes back and puts it in his mother's hands, and they go out and down the steps . . ." (206). Similarly, in the musical, Walter "picks up the plant and brings it to [Lena], kisses her, and leads her out" (100). Walter's role in maintaining this symbolic object figures him as a more self-aware, accountable member of the family than he is at the beginning of the story. His retrieving the plant demonstrates that he is ready to take some of the responsibility for their collective well-being off his mother's shoulders. Yet the screenplay makes clear that Walter has not fully liberated himself in the way audiences might expect: "their conversation about the nature of the future going on: Walter suggesting that Charlie Atkins might someday want a partner if he can get the capital together . . . FADE OUT . . . THE END" (206). Walter's last words show him contemplating another business deal akin to the one that nearly torpedoed his family's dreams. The screenplay ends with an indication of Walter's growth while simultaneously reminding us that his journey toward empathy, wisdom, and self-awareness, and away from a patriarchal conception of his masculine prerogative, is by no means finished. The direction that the shot should fade out, rather than ending with a hard cut to end titles, emphasizes the lack of finite resolution for his character and the family's collective journey as a whole. Walter's continued growth will require more work and care, both on his own part and on the part of his family.

Beneatha, Walter's younger sister, serves as another example of a character who demonstrates the untimely and unfinished nature of political change. Defying calls from her family to curb her political ambitions, Beneatha refuses the invocations to perform patience often demanded of younger Black women activists in particular, as Hansberry well knew. By the end of *Raisin*, Beneatha

moves toward—but does not fully achieve—a realization of what gives her purpose by claiming her place in a global freedom struggle. "Mama," she says in both the original and the 1984 versions of the play, "Asagai asked me to marry him today and go to Africa. . . . To go to Africa, Mama—be a doctor in Africa . . ." (Original Broadway 136; 25th Anniversary 149–50). In the screenplay, however, Hansberry adds an additional level of radicality to Beneatha's vision. The dialogue reads, "Mama, do you know what I think I'll do? . . . I think—yes—I think I shall marry Asagai and go live in Africa someday!" (204). In this version, Beneatha's choice is not figured as a reaction to a man's initiating action, as Asagai never proposes marriage.

Like the Youngers' move, however, the story leaves Beneatha at the threshold, betwixt and between. The deferral implied in the screenplay by the word "someday" gestures toward the aspirational nature of Beneatha's personal and political project, pointing toward its ultimate unfinishedness. In an additional subtlety, the screenplay notes that during this statement, Beneatha "gets out her guitar case," which earlier in the story serves as a symbol of her impulsiveness and naivete: Beneatha's newfound interest in the guitar, Lena and Ruth note in act 1, is just one of a string of expensive pursuits, such as horseback riding and photography, that she has turned to in her search for a unique identity. It is left unclear in the final scene of the screenplay whether Beneatha's guitar is being refigured as an instrument of freedom and independence or whether her dramatic pronouncement is being deliberately undercut by a reminder of her youthfulness. The ambiguity surrounding Beneatha's personal climax is an example of how the play's multiple versions allow the politics and identities of its characters to signify differently and are best understood through an appreciation of the complexity of the whole.

But the unfinished nature of Beneatha's personal and political struggle, as Spillers argues about the "project of emancipation" more generally, need not be taken as an indication of failure. Indeed, the generative capacity of a politics of untimeliness and unfinishedness is articulated by Asagai and Beneatha earlier in the same scene, in an exchange that Hansberry frames in her interview with Terkel as perhaps the most important of the play. In the conversation, Beneatha responds to Asagai's announcement that he will return to Nigeria to fight for his country's independence:

> BENEATHA: Independence *and then what*? What about all the crooks and thieves and just plain idiots who will come to power and steal and plunder the same as before—only now they will be black and do it in the name of the new Independence—WHAT ABOUT THEM?!

Asagai: That's a problem for another time. First we must get there.
Beneatha: And where does it end?
Asagai: End? Who even spoke of an end? To life? To living?
Beneatha: An end to misery! To stupidity! Don't you see there isn't any real progress, Asagai, there is only one large circle that we march in, around and around, each of us with our own little picture in front of us—our own little mirage that we think is the future.
Asagai: That is the mistake.
Beneatha: What?
Asagai: What you said about the circle. It isn't a circle—*it is simply a long line—as in geometry, you know, one that reaches into infinity*. And because we cannot see the end—we also cannot see how it changes. (Original Broadway 119–20; 25th Anniversary 133–34; Screenplay 184–85; emphasis added)

This dialogue is one of the few prolonged exchanges that is identical in both editions of the stage play and in the screenplay, a clear indication of its importance to Hansberry's vision (it is cut from the musical, one place where that version of *Raisin* falls well short of Hansberry's complex vision for the show). Afterward, Asagai adds,

> I'm trying to tell you, Alaiyo: Perhaps the things I believe now for my country will be wrong and outmoded, and I will not understand and do terrible things to have things my way or merely to keep my power. Don't you see that there will be young men and women—not British soldiers then, but my own black countrymen—to step out of the shadows some evening and slit my throat? Don't you see they have always been there . . . that they always will be[?] And that such a thing as my own death will be an advance? They who might kill me . . . actually replenish all that I was. (Original Broadway 121; 25th Anniversary 136; Screenplay 188)

Speaking with Terkel, Hansberry credits Asagai in this exchange as the ethical voice of the narrative: "He's my favorite character. . . . In fact, in one sense, he gives the statement of the play, you know? I don't know how many people get it but he does" (Hansberry, Interview). Asagai's abiding faith in the unseen possibilities for change that our present actions create flies in the face of the invocations to wait that Fleming argues defined the discourse of Black patience as mobilized by white stewards of racial capitalism. Instead, like the nonviolent activists of the 1950s and 1960s whose determined patience

Fleming celebrates, Asagai affirms a faith in the future while acting decisively in the present. The "infinite line" of personal and political progress he describes is perhaps best conceptualized as what geometricians call a "spiral line" rather than a straight one (Glaeser and Stachel 270). Though it regresses and redoubles on itself, it nonetheless moves forward infinitely, similar to King's "moral arc." Asagai suggests that it is possible for those who have affirmed the project of emancipation to play a role in advancing that project even if at first they appear unsuccessful, or if their lives are taken too soon. In this key exchange, he marries a decision to undertake immediate direct action with the recognition that the struggle for emancipation must continue beyond any singular political objective. A recognition of the struggle's unfinished nature thus becomes the impetus for continued action in a myriad of unfolding intervals.

The screenplay that emphasizes Beneatha's agency in deciding to partake in the struggle against colonialism, like that struggle itself, is in a very real sense unrealized to this day. As multiple scholars have argued, this revised version of *Raisin* was designed to rebut liberal interpretations of the play that dominated coverage of its original Broadway run, putting forward changes that emphasize the more radical aspects of the play's politics (Lipari; Wilkerson, Introduction). When the screenplay was produced by Columbia Pictures in 1961, however, many of these additions were not shot or were left on the cutting-room floor in what critics have argued was an attempt by the studio to "soften [Hansberry's] too defiant black voice" (Lee xlvi).

Such assertions become problematic, however, when they frame the 1994 text alone as the sole location where the truth of this "defiant black voice" can be found. Lee's claim in this regard is echoed by the screenplay's presentation and marketing. The back cover reads, "This premier Signet edition restores all deletions and brings readers the screenplay that is true to Hansberry's vision: a film of *A Raisin in the Sun* that reveals . . . a profound truth about the African-American experience no one will want to miss." Underneath this summary comes a blurb from none other than King himself, made to play his traditional role as the definitive spokesperson for what the synopsis calls "*the* African-American experience" (emphasis added). The screenplay's front cover also reflects its investment in definitiveness. On it, Hansberry's disembodied face looks up toward us, staring out of a black backdrop. Though her body is now gone, the screenplay promises us her "head," a kind of authentic interiority into the author's racialized soul.

But the claim that this text represents a more true version of Hansberry's vision is complicated by the fact that the first framing voice in this edition belongs to Jewel Handy Gresham-Nemiroff, the second wife of Robert Nemiroff,

who authorized the release of the screenplay after Nemiroff's death and who uses her introduction largely to celebrate his vision, not Hansberry's. Gresham-Nemiroff even displaces Hansberry's words on the dedication page: while the stage play is dedicated "[t]o Mama—in gratitude for the dream," the screenplay's dedication reads, "In memoriam ROBERT NEMIROFF 1929–1991." While I agree that the screenplay presents fascinating interventions in the stage scripts, to characterize it as the definitive or authentic version of Hansberry's voice ignores the way that the screenplay is, like all versions of *Raisin*, a contested site of various authors and agendas. With this nuance in mind, one can return to the cover of the screenplay and notice that Hansberry is, in reality, *not quite* meeting the reader's gaze. Upon closer examination, she looks slightly beyond us, pointing us back toward something we cannot see. Our imperative as readers, then, is not to meet Hansberry's gaze and find within it some essential truth but to follow it, attempting to imagine what we cannot yet make out because of the limitations imposed on our vision by the astigmatisms of our own time.

The playbill and cover for the original cast recording of the musical, on the other hand, market a far different understanding of *Raisin* than the screenplay does. Hansberry herself is nowhere to be found, and instead Walter is depicted somersaulting across the city of Chicago, riding on a rainbow. Saccharine self-promotion and all, the musical *Raisin* is usually either left out of the conversation by scholars or framed as a kind of embarrassing accident. Nonetheless, the musical would ultimately spend more time on Broadway than any other version of *Raisin*, even winning the Tony Award for Best Musical in 1974 (Galella, "Playing"). Though relatively little has been written about the musical's creative process relative to the other editions, we do know that Nemiroff thought of the musical as a critically important move in securing the play's—and his wife's—legacy (Galella, *America* 130; Gresham-Nemiroff xx).

Raisin the musical was the culmination of an eight-year process stewarded by Nemiroff, who began the project of adapting the story the same year that Hansberry passed away. The book consists of Hansberry's original dialogue, edited by Nemiroff and Charlotte Zaltzberg to accommodate seventeen musical numbers written by Judd Woldin and Robert Brittan. Despite its flaws, the musical can be a useful resource in enriching one's understanding of *Raisin*'s untimely significance. Indeed, the truth of Asagai's assertion that a compromised or incomplete legacy can still contribute to advancing the "infinite line" is reflected in the nature of the musical itself.

For Donatella Galella, the most attentive critic of the musical *Raisin*, the predominant silence around the musical is due in part to the fact that *Raisin* "translates and tames the play into and through musical theatre"

("Playing"). Many reviewers of the musical have agreed, with the *Washington Post*'s assessment of one production headlined, "'Raisin' Never Ripens." What the headline's metaphor misses, however, is that a raisin is not supposed to ripen. To expect it to do so is to ignore its key affordance—portability—and to look instead for only a kind of timeliness, expecting to find an optimal moment at which it should be consumed. Though Galella makes excellent points about the important ways in which the musical fails to convey the complex politics of the original production, her implication that translating *Raisin* into the medium of musical theater necessarily "tames" Hansberry's vision ignores the fact that *Raisin* has always been shaped by the tensions between the various mediums it has been presented in and the various artists collaborating to produce its story. The musical is not necessarily more different from the original Broadway script than the screenplay, which Nemiroff claimed contains a text "at least forty percent" different from the 1959 Broadway production (qtd. in Gresham-Nemiroff xvii). To imagine a "tame" (or, by implication, a more authentically "wild") *Raisin* ignores the way that *Raisin* has always been in progress and has never been fully free of outside influence or mediating voices.

In fact, some of the very things that scholars identify as politically motivated omissions in the screenplay's transition to film in 1961 do appear for the first time in the musical, suggesting it may convey more elements of Hansberry's radical vision than critics have typically given it credit for. For example, Lipari writes that Hansberry wanted the filmic version to demonstrate a more complex relationship between the Youngers and their spatial environment in order to show the numerous ways that racism inflects their day-to-day life. The studio cut the footage that would have done so, allegedly because the minute or two that Hansberry's new opening necessitated took too much time. Lipari notes:

> Interestingly, the opening shots of the movie version of *West Side Story*, another Broadway hit of the late 1950s that was made into an academy award–winning film in 1961, illustrates the kind of opening Hansberry seemed to have in mind—panoramic views of the city that eventually narrow to the ghetto neighborhood where the action begins, an opening sequence that requires about three minutes. (110n57)

The musical is one place where this vision is in some way recuperated. Galella writes of *Raisin*'s opening number, "The dance-drama by black director-choreographer Donald McKayle suggests the higher brow emulation of *West*

Side Story, along with attendant severity and seediness . . . to establish the setting an exceptional and aspirational black family like the Youngers would want to leave" ("Playing"). In this opening scene, the musical takes up some of the unfinished business of Hansberry's original screenplay, bringing to life aspects of her vision that Lipari, Wilkerson, and Lee argue were too untimely (in the sense of both demanding too much time and being politically ahead of its time) to be produced in a commercial film in 1961.

Raisin the musical also restores Hansberry's early idea that music would be a key element in telling the Youngers' story. Hansberry notes in her interview with Terkel that she originally conceived of *Raisin* as told at least partially through ballet or modern dance. Though musicals and ballet are vastly different media, they share a sense of meaning as conveyed through the combination of movement and song. Creating a space within *Raisin* for music allows for a particular kind of meaning making that, at least during an important period in the play's development, Hansberry considered to be significant. Live music, as Nathaniel Mackey claims, allows for a unique relationship to time versus other kinds of performance, creating moments "outside of ordinary time" that encourage suspended states to contemplate possibilities unseen (qtd. in Jones). The use of music in combination with Hansberry's dialogue allows for a different manner of engagement with *Raisin*'s themes of untimeliness than the work's other iterations.

The use of music to accentuate the political vision of *Raisin* appears at its most powerful in the climactic "Measure the Valleys," in which Lena's claim in act 3 that "there is always something left to love" in Walter is presented in a ballad that implores Beneatha to consider the totality of Walter's being before renouncing his membership in the family—to "measure the valleys, measure the hills." The song takes its name from Lena's direction in the stage scripts and screenplay to "measure [Walter] right. . . . Make sure you take into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is" (Original Broadway 131; 25th Anniversary 145; Screenplay 198). This recognition of Walter as more than his worst moments is what George Lipsitz singles out as the most radical aspect of *Raisin*'s politics. As Lipsitz argues, Lena believes that to condemn Walter for his mistakes is to "accept the social death to which white society has consigned him." Because she recognizes Walter's fate as inextricable from the fate of the larger whole of the family, and of an imagined Black community, she works to forgive Walter, "[creating] the possibility for her son to return to the fold, to save himself and serve his family" (Lipsitz 208). Lena's refusal to let Beneatha "[write] Walter's epitaph" (Original Broadway 130; 25th Anniversary 145; Screenplay 95) in "Measure the

Valleys" is a moment when the affordances of musical theater can expand rather than constrict the audience's engagement with *Raisin*'s vision.

Whether delivered as a speech or a song, Lena's testimony to Walter's worth is a critical moment in articulating *Raisin*'s politics of unfinishedness. Like the mother to whom Hansberry dedicates the play, Lena bequeaths to her children a refusal to abandon the deferred dream. In contrast to Beneatha, Lena does not vociferously declaim her desire for revolution or have explicit discussions analyzing how to dismantle global white supremacy. What she does do is foster a value system that directly contradicts every message the dominant culture propagates about herself and her family. By refusing to let her children forget that they have intrinsic dignity, Lena is a politically significant actor, despite the fact that she abstains from the public sphere of organized politics. Lipsitz argues that the lesson of what he calls the "Black spatial imaginary," the space of creativity and figuration that African American art implicitly posits as an alternative to the privatized spatial mapping of racial capitalism, exists in the quotidian practices that sustain dignity and imagination in the face of genocidal conditions. Maintaining this psychic space is the kind of work Lena encourages her family to continue and that Hansberry consistently valued in her art and her political life.

The afterlife of "Measure the Valleys" shows how the addition of a musical score has allowed for the amplification of Hansberry's (re)vision over time. The most popular version of the song on digital streaming platforms is a cover performed by Miriam Makeba, human rights activist and wife of Kwame Ture. In Makeba's making the song her own, one hears another example of *Raisin*'s portability, witnessing the way that the various versions of *Raisin* have all in different ways been generative of subsequent works of Black political thought and expression. The recording of Makeba's stirring studio rendition, which ends with her melisma slowly fading out in the background, suggests an unfinishedness to the song, which is always going but not quite gone. Though a more careful analysis of the musical's legacy and its relationship to *Raisin*'s politics is outside the scope of this project, it would be exciting to see future readings of the musical that explore how the form's affordances further *Raisin*'s radical vision, as well as how Nemiroff and Zaltzberg's adaptations at times fall short.

Interestingly, in the screenplay of *Raisin*, it is Ruth, not Lena, who tells Beneatha that "there is always something left to love" (198). The fact that Hansberry revises the dialogue in this edition so that Ruth, treated so poorly by her husband for much of the script, can show the same unconditional love for Walter that Lena does gives this moment of faith and affirmation another layer of pathos. The direction for Ruth's line in the screenplay says that it is to

be delivered "quietly . . . but without a drop of uncertainty in her voice" (198). While the travails of her life might have quieted her, Ruth is not silenced, nor is she shaken from a belief in human dignity. Giving the line to Ruth forges a cross-generational link between the characters, emphasizing that Lena's beliefs about her family's inherent worth can and must travel through time.

By acknowledging the place of the screenplay and the musical as legitimate parts of the *Raisin* canon, one can better see how all versions of the story complicate and nuance Hansberry's vision. Each version can be seen, in different respects, as more or less politically ambitious than its counterparts, even without taking into account how this can vary from reading to reading or performance to performance. The critic and Chicago theater historian Chris Jones critiques the original Broadway version of the musical, for example, as "highly choreographed" and of "middling authenticity," but he credits a more minimalist production of the musical performed in 2006 with "expanding on the civil rights themes" of the original play, adding that "[i]n places, it's a powerful amplification" of Hansberry's politics. Though I would call into question Jones's attempt to speak for Hansberry in his review (he adds that "she'd have liked" the musical version he saw), he nevertheless makes an important point about the possibilities of what one might see when one looks at different versions, including the musical, comparatively.

Indeed, even in its most seemingly incongruous moments, the musical can add to or amplify *Raisin*'s themes, including its understanding of how racist logics and practices change, rather than dissipate, in response to changing economic and political circumstances. Galella describes one production of one of the musical's sharpest songs, "Not Anymore," as follows:

> The [family] act like they are the Clybourne Park welcoming committee by whiting up. Walter in particular adopts a nasally voice and affected, upper-class gestures. In this intensely ironic number, the characters sing about all of the racist things they do not do anymore ("We didn't bring no rope!"), though the mock-hymn, vaudeville-style music, and exaggerated movements act as punchlines suggesting lynchings continue ("The three hang themselves—one arm up taut, the other at the neck, head dangling limp"). ("Playing")

This explicit representation of the fact that racist violence has not ended, no matter the polite facade the welcoming committee presents, does not appear in other versions of *Raisin*. It serves as an important reminder that the story's eventual ending, while optimistic, is not a neat or peaceful conclusion to the

various forms of racial violence that have shadowed the Youngers and continue to dominate US social and political life to this day.

In recent years, the *Raisin* canon continues to expand, with celebrated reimaginings of the Youngers' story such as Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park* (2010) and Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Beneatha's Place* (2013). Rebecca Ann Rugg and Harvey Young have anthologized four twenty-first-century plays that are in conversation with *Raisin* in order to encourage an ongoing dialogue between these works and the original text (Rugg and Young xxvi). Two of these works, *Clybourne Park* and Robert O'Hara's *The Etiquette of Vigilance*, are explicitly intertextual, continuing the stories of the Younger family in their new neighborhood, while the other two, Gloria Bond Clunie's *Living Green* and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *Neighbors*, are selected because of their political and aesthetic resonance with *Raisin*. In an unusual move, the editors explicitly encourage a variety of reading strategies—forward and backward; from the middle; beginning with the commentaries, then moving to the primary works; and so forth (Rugg and Young xxxviii). This suggests that their aim is to engender an unending rereading of these plays with and against each other, the original, and whatever else might follow. These revisions of *Raisin* demonstrate its enduring unfinishedness and untimeliness, as well as the determination of some critics to refuse a final interpretation of the Youngers' story. They serve as a testament to the ways in which *A Raisin in the Sun* continues to evolve and expand with each reading and retelling, as it urges each of us to continue following its ongoing, "infinite line."

Vanderbilt University
Nashville, Tennessee

WORKS CITED

Aucoin, Dan. "Timely and Timeless Qualities of 'A Raisin in the Sun' Come Through in Williamstown Production." *Boston Globe*, 8 July 2019.

Baldwin, James. "Sweet Lorraine." *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985*, St. Martin's Press, 1985, pp. 443–47.

Colbert, Soyica Diggs. *Radical Vision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry*. Yale UP, 2021.

Elam, Harry J., Jr. "Post–World War II African American Theatre." *The Oxford Handbook of American Drama*, edited by Jeffrey H. Richards and Heather S. Nathans, Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 375–92.

Fleming, Julius B., Jr. *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation*. New York UP, 2022.
Galella, Donatella. *America in the Round: Capital, Race, and Nation at Washington DC's Arena Stage*. U of Iowa P, 2019.
———. "Playing in the Dark: Musicalizing *A Raisin in the Sun*." *Continuum*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015.
Glaeser, Georg, and Hellmuth Stachel. *Open Geometry: OpenGL + Advanced Geometry*. Springer, 1999.
Gluck, Victor. "A Raisin in the Sun." *TheaterScene.Net*, 1 Apr. 2014, http://www.theaterscene.net/plays/a-raisin-in-the-sun/victor-gluck/.
Gresham-Nemiroff, Jewell Handy. Foreword. *A Raisin in the Sun: The Unfilmed Original Screenplay*, by Lorraine Hansberry, Signet Books, 1994, pp. ix–xxii.
Guay, Amy. "Arena Stage's *A Raisin in the Sun* Captivates All Around." *Georgetown Voice*, 26 Apr. 2017.
Hansberry, Lorraine. Interview by Studs Terkel. *Studs Terkel Radio Archive*, 1971.
———. *A Raisin in the Sun*. Original Broadway ed., Samuel French, 1987.
———. *A Raisin in the Sun*. 25th Anniversary ed., Vintage Books, 1994.
———. *A Raisin in the Sun: The Unfilmed Original Screenplay*. Signet Books, 1994.
Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford UP, 1997.
Hurwitt, Robert. "'A Raisin in the Sun' as Timely as Ever." *SFGATE*, 10 Mar. 2009.
Jones, Alison. "Nathaniel Mackey's Long Song." *Taking Note: Conversations with Duke Humanities Faculty*, *Duke Today*, Duke University, 2015.
Jones, Chris. "Musical 'Raisin' Keeps Play's Power." *Chicago Tribune*, 26 Sept. 2006.
Klein, Alvin. "THEATER: A 'Raisin in the Sun' That's Still Rousing." *New York Times*, 22 Jan. 1985.
Lee, Spike. "Commentary: Thoughts on the Screenplay." *A Raisin in the Sun: The Unfilmed Original Screenplay*, by Lorraine Hansberry, Signet Books, 1994, pp. xlv–xlvii.
Lipari, Lisbeth. "'Fearful of the Written Word': White Fear, Black Writing, and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* Screenplay." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 90, no. 1, 2004, pp. 81–102.
Lipsitz, George. *How Racism Takes Place*. Temple UP, 2011.
"Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*." *American Playhouse*, written by Lorraine Hansberry, directed by Harold Scott and Bill Duke, 1988.
Makeba, Miriam. "Measure the Valleys." *Keep Me in Mind*, Reprise Records, 1970.
Nemiroff, Robert. "Introduction." *A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry, Vintage Books, 1994, pp. 5–14.

Nemiroff, Robert, et al. *Raisin*. Samuel French, 1978.
Perry, Imani. *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry*. Beacon Press, 2018.
Raisin. Directed by Donald McKayle, performances by Virginia Capers, Ernestine Jackson, Joe Morton, and Debbie Allen, Sony BMG Music Entertainment, 1973.
Rugg, Rebecca Ann, and Harvey Young. *Reimagining A Raisin in the Sun: Four New Plays*. Northwest UP, 2012.
Spillers, Hortense J. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. U of Chicago P, 2003.
UCCS Presents. "Theatreworks: A Raisin in the Sun." 2018, http://uccspresents.org/events/2018-19/raisin-in-the-sun.
Wilkerson, Margaret. Introduction. *A Raisin in the Sun: The Unfilmed Original Screenplay*, by Lorraine Hansberry, 1994, Signet Books, pp. xxix–xliv.
———. "'A Raisin in the Sun': Anniversary of an American Classic." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 38, no. 4, 1986, pp. 441–52.
Wilson, Calvin. "A Work for the Ages." *KC Studio*, 1 Mar. 2017, https://kcstudio.org/a-work-for-the-ages-raisin-in-the-sun/.
Zoglin, Richard. "Stars and Warhorses: James Franco and Denzel Washington on Broadway." *Time*, 17 Apr. 2014.