

## About This Volume

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Why, the reader might wonder, is 2023 an appropriate year for the publication of an anthology of essays on Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*? As this volume's selected Bibliography clearly reflects, the world has suffered no shortage of critical articles on this brilliant drama since its initial staging on Broadway in 1959. The most obvious rationale for this book's development derives from contemporary American history: the murder of George Floyd while in police custody in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020. One week later, Evan Hill, Ainara Tiefenthäler, Christiaan Triebert, Drew Jordan, Haley Willis, and Robin Stein published in *The New York Times* an analysis of extensive video evidence of the killing that showed "officers taking a series of actions that violated the policies of the Minneapolis Police Department and turned fatal, leaving Mr. Floyd unable to breathe, even as he and onlookers called out for help" ("How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody," *NYT*, 31 May 2020). Occurring in the shadow of other widely publicized, apparently unprovoked killings of African Americans by police officers (those of Trayvon Martin and Breonna Taylor in particular), Floyd's death galvanized a concerted protest movement that substantially raised the national profile of Black Lives Matter. Americans' heightened sensitivities to issues of race make this volume's recognition and critical reconsideration of *A Raisin in the Sun* extremely timely.

A more academic impetus for *Critical Insights: A Raisin in the Sun* is the recent publication of four Hansberry-centered books from which essay contributors to this volume have drawn both inspiration and insights. The earlier two of the three biographies are the work of true believers, of women who clearly identify deeply with the activist/playwright they are illuminating. The title of Imani Perry's *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (2018) confirms the biographer's stance toward her

- Rowan, Carl. *Broken Barriers: A Memoir*. Little, Brown, 1991.
- Schomburg, Arthur A. "The Negro Digs Up His Past." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Edited by Alain Locke, Touchstone Books, 1997, pp. 231–37.
- Shields, Charles J. *Lorraine Hansberry: The Life Behind A Raisin in the Sun*. Henry Holt, 2022.
- Simone, Nina, interview in Art Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician to Musician Interviews*. DaCapo, 1993, pp. 148–59.
- Smith, Valerie, ed. *African American Writers*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991.
- Spottswood, Ricard K. "Country Girls, Classic Blues, and Vaudeville Voices." *Nothing But the Blues: The Music and the Musicians*. Edited by Lawrence Cohn, Abbeville Press, 1993, pp. 87–106.
- Theoharis, Jeanne. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*. Beacon Press, 2013.
- Walker, Margaret. "How I Told My Children about Race." *Negro Digest*, August, 1961.
- West, Cornel. "Malcolm X and Black Rage." *Teaching Malcolm X*. Edited by Theresa Perry, Routledge, pp. 139–48.
- Whitburn, Joel. *Top R & B Singles 1942-99*. Record Research Inc., 2000.
- Wright, Richard. "High Tide in Harlem." *New Masses*, Weekly Masses, July 5, 1938, pp. 18–20.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow." *Uncle Tom's Children*. Perennial Books, 1991, pp. 1–15.

Similarly, an anonymous reviewer for Iowa's *Des Moines Tribune* called *Raisin* "that rare celluloid bird—a really good film," praising its "solid, well-told story" and "cast of excellent actors" as a "combination that gives it eloquence and vitality." This reviewer also admired the film's "well-played humor" and claimed the director's "pacing is excellent, taking into account that the latter part of the story is a shade heavy on climactic moments" (see "A Really Good Film").

### Positive Reviews in African American Periodicals

Louis Robinson, writing in *Jet*, thought the film deserved an Academy Award for "transferr[ing the play] to the motion picture screen with all of its earthy drama and humor intact—a rare feat." He wrote that the "play was wonderful; the movie is beautiful, and the rewards should be inevitable."

Steve Duncan, in Baltimore's *Afro-American*, thought *Raisin*'s transition "from an award-winning stage production to a sure-fire movie hit has been a triumph of artistic honesty. Lovers of the legitimate theatre," he wrote, "will be pleased to know that none of the dramatic impact has been prostituted" in this "super-charged" movie.

Similarly, in the *Michigan Chronicle*, an anonymous reviewer wrote that "the movie adapted the play with all its emotional turmoil intact, [and] even enhanced" (see "'Raisin' Opens"), adding that the Youngers' "dreams, ambitions and frustrations" are presented "with searching honesty, compassionate understanding and robust humor. 'A Raisin in the Sun,'" this reviewer concluded, "probably is the most eloquent and entertaining" recent picture and would "certainly . . . be remembered years from now."

Interestingly, another Black newspaper, the *New York Amsterdam News*, interviewed several "regular people" about the film (see "You Said It"), quoting Mrs. Gloria Brown as calling it "a beautiful picture with a combination of artistic and sensitive performances." Brown especially liked Poitier's "decision to be a man," saying, "I have known things like that to happen to people and this scene is really true to life." Similarly, anthropologist Dr.

a father. Young Stephen Perry, who plays Walter Lee's son, Travis Younger, comes across as vulnerable, looking up admiringly as Walter Lee refuses to take the White man's money to abandon their new home. At this point, Poitier appears ready to melt into tears, and Walter Lee's character is softened as he chooses to provide a good fatherly role model, making his son proud. The film presents this turning point with moving indirection, allowing the restrained emotional delivery of the actor to convey the suppressed anguish Walter Lee feels after years of humiliating oppression.

### ***Raisin, 1989***

In the American Playhouse version of *A Raisin in the Sun* (TV Episode 1989 [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)), directed by Bill Duke, gender-coded language and costuming offer important cues about masculinity, femininity, and social class. Like a chameleon, Beneatha (Kim Yancey) displays varied outfits that emphasize her endless potential, while they also indicate her refusal to accept the restrictions of traditional femininity. Wearing pants and a shirt at one point, resembling a teenaged tomboy, she is later inspired by her Nigerian friend, Asagai (Lou Ferguson), to wear an African costume to the theater. When George (Joseph C. Phillips), her rather prissy date, first arrives, both he and her sister-in-law, Ruth (Starletta DuPois), shame her for her clothing choice. Walter Lee, played with masculine swagger by Danny Glover, piles on and tries to criticize her, first for her short hair and then for African clothing, but he saves his strongest scorn for George, who sits on the sofa, uncomfortably waiting for Beneatha to change into an evening dress suitable for the theater.

Ruth, with a veneer of submissiveness broken only occasionally by outrage, asks George if he would like "an ice-cold beer," sounding like a popular advertisement. When he answers in a rather precious tone of voice, "No thank you, I don't care for beer," she sits down to make small talk and cover the embarrassment of Walter Lee's insult. Her body language indicates her discomfort. About to cross her legs, she decides not to, almost as if to avoid mirroring George's awkward, subtly effeminate body position. It is worthwhile to compare how treatment of Hansberry's portrayal

What is meant by a “dream deferred”? The play suggests many layers of meaning. The most frequently discussed is the American Dream and its compelling power on Walter Lee, which will be discussed in the next section.

Closely related to the American Dream is the dream of home ownership. Mama recalls that, as newlyweds, she and her husband had moved into the apartment “planning on living here no more than a year,” just till they could buy a “little place out in Morgan Park.” She goes on to reminisce about “all the dreams I had ’bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back” (44–45). But they had ended up living in their “rat trap” apartment all their married life, and Big Walter had died there without realizing their dream (44–45). But now, his death has brought home ownership within reach of the family. For many working-class families, home ownership is an important part of the American Dream. Indeed, for Mama and Ruth the two dreams seem to blend together. Mama’s dream as a new bride is one component. As for Ruth, on hearing Mama’s announcement that she has bought a house, she “radiantly” cries out, “PRAISE GOD!” (91). And she will repeat such expressions of joy again and again, revealing just how much she has silently longed for a home.

Implicit in the dreams of Mama, Big Walter, Ruth, and Walter Lee is the hope of a better life for their children. Mama says that her husband “sure loved his children”; he nearly died of grief when they lost their baby, “little Claude”; and he always wanted his children to “have something—be something.” In his reflective mood, she goes on, he used to get teary-eyed and muse, “Seem like God didn’t see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams—but He did give us children to make them dreams seem worth while” (45–46). Walter Lee, after receiving the rest of the insurance money from Mama and before leaving to hand it over to Willy Harris, has a quick talk with his son. Travis will be able to attend any of the “great schools,” he says, in America or even in the whole world; “I will hand you the world!” cries Walter Lee before rushing out (109). Each generation has struggled and endured, hoping to provide better opportunities for their children.

professional training programs” (Samuel). The demands are based on the WSYWAT document called “Principles for Building Anti-Racist Theater,” (see [www.weseeyouwat.com/](http://www.weseeyouwat.com/)). The principles elaborate the philosophical and practical concerns of the collective and include the statement, “We resist paradigms of competition and scarcity, *or the fallacy that our narratives must center on trauma*” (italics mine).

Obviously, the existence of an organization like We See You White American Theater would have been inconceivable in New York in the 1950s. When Hansberry was in her early twenties, she had been a writer for the Harlem-based magazine, *Freedom*, which was grounded in communist ideals and founded and funded by Paul Robeson (Shields 116). Over time, she became thoroughly committed to challenging racism, imperialism, colonialism, and political repression in American society. Eventually she was the first Black female winner of the New York Drama Critics Circle Award (Wilkerson 1). She was also an integral member of a thriving community of Black writers and activists in and around New York City, a community with the increasingly formidable influence of Claudia Jones, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and others. Hansberry was, in other words, thoroughly familiar with the surging potential of Black intelligentsia, activists, and artists to upend social norms and effect policy formation in various domains. But she probably could never have predicted the existence of a BIPOC organization as forthright and unwavering in its demands of U.S. theater practices and protocols as WSYWAT. If she had lived to see such a collective come to be, she might have thought it laudable or lamentable, depending on her assessment of its trajectory into existence: it formed in the summer of 2020 on the heels of the civil unrest and mass protests in the aftermath of George Floyd’s killing in Minneapolis in May of that year. In whatever light she might have viewed WSYWAT, the notion that narratives focusing on Black or indigenous people of color need not center on trauma, need not, in other words, focus on racial oppression, or relate to Jim Crow, or invoke slavery, or otherwise prompt a “sense of guilt,” as she said to Terkel, would likely have appealed to her very much. As a stated