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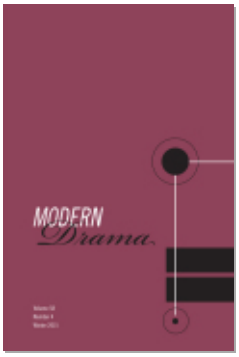

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ABSTRACT: *"Watching* A Raisin in the Sun *and Seeing Red" argues that, while anti-Communism has often been discussed by historiographers of African American theatre, Communism itself and the influence of the Communist Party U.S.A. as a positive force in black theatre history have largely been ignored. As a way of exploring the Communist influence on black theatre, the article describes specific ways in which Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play is indebted to Communist political critiques. Following the FBI's own surveillance of the play before it came to Broadway, "Watching* A Raisin in the Sun *and Seeing Red" also uses the FBI's own internal memos about the play's Communist content to reassess the play's political critique of American individualism, racism, sexism, and capitalism.*

KEYWORDS: *Lorraine Hansberry,* A Raisin in the Sun*, Communism, African American theatre, historiography, FBI*

CHARLIE: And you are something of – a Communist?
TSHEMBE: You demand respect, and then return with your own simple-minded –
CHARLIE: Don't patronize me, answer me! You have studied Marx, Lenin –
TSHEMBE: I am *of* my century, Mr. Morris!

– Lorraine Hansberry, *Les Blancs*

By the time *A Raisin in the Sun* premiered in New York City at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in March of 1959, it had already done well in Philadelphia, with "full house[s] and warm reviews" (Keppel 182). The story of the play is well known: although it was initially considered a risk, it became a Broadway hit, running for 530 performances and garnering Tony nominations for its director, Lloyd Richards, and its two lead actors, Sidney Poitier and Claudia McNeil, as well as a nomination for the year's Best Play. Less than a year after the original Broadway production closed, Columbia Pictures released a film version penned by the playwright. In 1973, the play was made into the Tony-award-winning musical *Raisin* and into a TV-movie with Esther Rolle and Danny Glover in 1989. More recently, Kenny Leon directed a 2004

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Broadway revival with Sean Combs and Phylicia Rashād, itself made into a TV-movie for ABC in 2008. Leon won a Tony for directing a third Broadway production of the play in 2014, this one starring Denzel Washington and LaTanya Richardson Jackson. Rebecca Ann Rugg and Harvey Young's recent anthology, *Reimagining A Raisin in the Sun*, is further testament to the play's enduring effect on twenty-first-century theatre in the United States. Dramatists such as George C. Wolfe, Robert O'Hara, and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins have felt it necessary to respond to *Raisin* in various ways. *A Raisin in the Sun* reverberates: it "remains one of the most-produced plays in the United States and one of the most popular with audiences of all colors" (Wilkerson 40). Frequent revivals mean that Hansberry's play is continually re-performed in the United States and, therefore, constantly reinterpreted by new audiences. The play's audiences today – just as they did at the time of its first production – ask *Raisin* to speak for its historical moment. As teachers of literature and editors of anthologies widely accept this play as representative not only of 1950s theatre but also of 1950s black America, critical assessments of the play's characters, points of view, and messages have begun to speak for black history. *A Raisin in the Sun*'s status as an exemplary representation means that how it is interpreted is crucial, and the stakes for reading *A Raisin in the Sun* are high.

What might it mean to misread the play? On 4 February 1959, a month before *Raisin* opened in New York City, the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation dispatched an agent to observe the show in an effort to discover if the play contained any Communist propaganda. Hansberry had been under surveillance by the U.S. government as early as 1952 – when the playwright was only twenty-two years old – and her Freedom of Information Act file contains FBI reports regarding her activities, whereabouts, and connections to the Communist Party throughout the 1950s; they stop only with her death in 1965. The file consists of some 370 pages, and it demonstrates that the FBI was convinced of the playwright's investment in Communist ideals: a 25 August 1958 memo described Hansberry as

> a Security Index subject of the New York Office. She attended a Communist Party (CP) section convention in 1-57 [January, 1957]; attended a CP meeting held in her home in 1956; was characterized as CP member in 1951; was active in the Labor Youth League as late as 1956; was assistant editor of official Labor Youth League publication in 1955; and has associated with and written for several communist publications. (FBI1 82)[1]

The FBI was particularly anxious about *Raisin*: the Bureau followed the reviews of the play during its trial run in New Haven, and, since no agents in Connecticut had actually seen it, the New York office requested that someone in Philadelphia attend a performance there (FBI1 108).

On 5 February 1959, the agent for the Philadelphia office reported, apparently with some relief, that "[t]he play contains no comments of any nature about Communism as such but deals essentially with negro aspirations, the problems inherent in their efforts to advance themselves, and varied attempts at arriving at solutions" (FBI1 110). This FBI agent's reading of *Raisin* has endured. His understanding of the play's content accords with other contemporary reviews of the play, and somehow, although Hansberry's journalism was considered politically dangerous because of her Communist ties, *Raisin* managed to escape scrutiny, and the play and Hansberry herself became national sensations.

But what if this anonymous surveillance agent had chosen, instead, to see red? This essay proposes a new reading of *A Raisin in the Sun*, one that takes as a starting point this anonymous agent of the U.S. government. I contend that, through his suspicious consideration of *Raisin*, he has much to teach us about a play that has been thoroughly analysed and discussed, and that attention to his reading might open up new ways of thinking about this watershed event in American theatre history.

The reading I propose takes into account the notion of double-consciousness famously described by W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903); I take as a starting point the idea that Hansberry wrote within two idioms. *Raisin* is a play for white audiences as well as black; it addresses a 1950s consciousness of both Africanness and Americanness. (One might also say queer audiences as well as straight, since Hansberry – who had romantic relationships with women and, in 1957, wrote letters to the lesbian publication the *Ladder* discussing her homosexual desire – was highly skilled in coded speech of many kinds and understood her own subjectivity as containing multiple identity positions.[2]) Most importantly, the present article pays particular critical attention to *Raisin* as a document situated within the history of American Communism. In the dangerous period of anti-Communism in the late 1940s and 1950s, artists both black and white who were sympathetic to Communist or progressive politics were forced to choose their words carefully and often spoke, using oblique language, to audiences they expected to understand it. As Albert Wertheim long ago noted in *Theatre Journal*, playwrights in the early 1950s found productive techniques for discussing their pro-Communist politics on Broadway stages. According to James Smethurst, "for various reasons the repression of the Communist Left and its sympathizers was more idiosyncratic (and much less thorough) in the theater than in many other areas of 'high' and popular culture, and so possibly theater workers felt they could take more chances" (252). Wertheim convincingly argues that playwrights such as Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman, Jerome Lawrence, and Robert E. Lee took part in encoded political discussions,

while ostensibly discussing topics altogether different. Hansberry ought to be included in this list. To name only one example, Walter Lee's singing of "All God's Children Got Wings" in *Raisin* seems a likely nod to the outspoken Communist entertainer Paul Robeson, who played the lead role in O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and mentored Hansberry, Poitier, and Ruby Dee.

I am less interested, however, in a hermeneutic exploration of *A Raisin in the Sun* that might demonstrate coded Communist messages than I am in calling attention to the ways that we have too long ignored the positive, productive influence that Communism had on politically active black theatre artists such as Hansberry. Using the FBI's own documentation of *Raisin*, the present article seeks, then, not only to excavate one of the earliest audience interpretations we have of Hansberry's play but also to expand the possibilities for examining the play's political influences, as well as to locate this important theatrical event within a larger history of African American Communism – a movement that had a significant, productive impact on the history of theatre in the United States.

COMMUNISM AND AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Lorraine Hansberry joined the Communist party at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Wilkerson 45), and from 1951 to 1953, she worked full time for Paul Robeson's weekly newspaper *Freedom*, a publication Harold Cruse once called "a Negro version of the Communist *Daily Worker*" (qtd. in Cheney 15). These years were formative for Hansberry's political thought. While working for *Freedom* she covered numerous stories about economic inequity in New York, as well as "the Communist trials in Foley Square, including . . . [the trial of] youth leader Claudia Jones"; her biographer Anne Cheney says that it was during this time that the playwright "truly became the 'intellectual revolutionary'" (18). It is important to note, however, that Communism in the United States – even in Harlem – never functioned as one single way of thinking. Numerous historians have pointed out that the history of American Communism is more a story of the Party's loose affiliations with like-minded people than it is one of Party directives executed by obedient functionaries. As Randi Storch puts it, "Communism came to matter to a wide assortment of people," but "how they experienced this particular version of American radicalism" varied from place to place and person to person (8). By 1959, Hansberry almost certainly did not adhere strictly to a Communist way of thinking, but the Party had a profound influence on her thought and on her work for the theatre.

The Communist Party's impact on black America from the 1920s to the 1950s, and particularly on black artists, is undeniable. Mark Naison noted

long ago that, during the Popular Front, "[t]he Party's success among Harlem intellectuals and professionals . . . proportionately far exceeded its impact on Harlem's working class" (193). Naison details this involvement meticulously in his ground-breaking study *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*:

> The Party's concern with black culture extended far beyond its involvement with the prominent black artists whose work normally frames the debate – Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson. It involved support for black theatre, WPA-sponsored and independent; efforts to encourage the teaching of black history in colleges and schools; the sponsorship of concerts and musical theatre aimed at winning recognition for black musicians; and campaigns to end discrimination in amateur and professional sports. Through Party organizing on the WPA arts projects and in the Harlem schools, and through the cultural activities of its own organizations, it touched the lives of hundreds of black artists and thousands of "ordinary" Harlem citizens. (203–4)

This influence on black intellectuals and artists did not stop with World War II or the end of the Popular Front. Mary Helen Washington writes that "nearly every major black writer of the 1940s and 1950s was in some way influenced by the Communist Party or other leftist organizations" (4; see also Smethurst 210). Washington details the influence of Communist political ideals – well into the 1950s – on black artists as diverse as the novelist Frank London Brown, the playwright Alice Childress, the painter Charles White, and the poet and novelist Gwendolyn Brooks.

The influence of the CPUSA has, however, largely been erased from the history of black theatre in the United States. In Errol Hill and James Hatch's seminal *History of African American Theatre*, for instance, Hatch reports that Theodore Ward's domestic drama *Big White Fog* (1938) was highly controversial and under-appreciated in its own time. Hatch's explanation for the uproar surrounding the play is that many critics "misjudged *Big White Fog* as 'propaganda for communism,' a damning accusation that plagued artists on the political left" ("Great Depression" 324). Hatch then moves away from a discussion of Communism in relation to Ward's play, turning instead to its critical reception. This assessment of the connections between Communist thinking and *Big White Fog* deliberately obfuscates the reality of the relationship between the play and its ideas. "Propaganda" might be a slight exaggeration, but the Communist argument embedded in *Big White Fog* is abundantly clear, and the fact that critics noticed should be unsurprising to anyone familiar with Ward's text. Hill and Hatch's *History*, in other words, effectively erases the Communist agenda of *Big White Fog* by noting, through a historiographical sleight of hand, that *hostile* audiences saw the play in this way.

Even more significant for the history of black theatre in the United States is the almost total absence of Communist philosophy in Hill and Hatch's historical narrative. In their history, Communism is all but non-existent in black theatre. The word "Communism" itself is mentioned just four times in *A History of African American Theatre* (312, 323–24, 391). Joseph McCarthy's attacks on the theatre, in fact, get rather more mention. According to Hill and Hatch, anti-Communist sentiment stifled black theatre, but the idea that black theatre artists themselves might have been inspired by Communist political philosophies strangely receives no comment.

Later historians have tended to defer to Hill and Hatch's silence on the subject. Communism receives short shrift in Young's *Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre* as well: the word is mentioned in only four places (111, 149, 245). Anthony Hill and Douglas Barnett's *Historical Dictionary of African American Theater* mentions the CPUSA slightly more often – five references in more than five hundred pages (41, 303, 423, 426, 521) – but the authors go to great lengths to avoid discussion of Communism. Rather than discuss, for example, the CPUSA's influence on Langston Hughes's openly propagandistic dramas *Scottsboro Limited* (1932), *Angelo Herndon Jones* (1935), and *Don't You Want to Be Free?* (1938), Hill and Barnett obliquely refer to "agitprop" techniques (234–35). Their entries on Hughes and the Harlem Suitcase Theatre omit the Party altogether. The overall attitude toward Communism in black theatre historiography might best be summed up by Bernard Peterson's *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers*: the entry on the Party in the book's index reads "Communism. *See* Anticommunism" (287).

Although historians of black theatre have sought to de-emphasize the influence of Communism on African American theatre in the first half of the twentieth century, this historiographical de-politicization reflects neither twentieth-century black cultural production nor twentieth-century black politics. As William Maxwell has argued, "The history of African-American letters cannot be unraveled from the history of American Communism without damage to both" (2). Since the early 2000s, there has been an influx of new work in the fields of literary and cultural history exploring the links between black artists and American Communism; studies of Communist influence on African American painting, poetry, blues, and the novel have all emerged in recent years. Scholarship linking the CPUSA and twentieth-century theatre artists, however, has been plagued either by conservative assertions that Communism in the United States was equivalent to anti-Americanism and pro-Soviet espionage or marked by a silence symptomatic of McCarthyism's lingering effects. But black voices on the American left were clear and frequently loud, and the impact of Communism on black theatre was profound. As

Kate Weigand argues, "[W]hether or not an individual was actually a member of the Communist Party is not particularly important. The Communist Party was the center of a large progressive movement that encompassed many organizations, and it profoundly influenced thousands of women and men" (9). Black theatre artists from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, including Rose McClendon, Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, Carlton Moss, Louise Thompson, Alice Childress, Richard Wright, Countee Cullen, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee – the list could go on for pages – worked in the Communist-sponsored theatre and were inspired by Communist methodologies that critiqued racist, sexist, and capitalist institutions in the United States.

When *A Raisin in the Sun* triumphantly arrived on Broadway in 1959, the play's success, according to James Hatch, "clearly indicated that the McCarthyism of the early 1950s was giving way to the integration of the 1960s" ("Hansberry to Shange" 376). Hatch locates the play at the beginning of the New Left of the 1960s, relating Hansberry only to anti-Communism. At the same time, Hatch understands *Raisin* as

> the foster child of two earlier Chicago plays: Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog* (1938), which ended with an eviction, and [Paul Green and] Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1941), which was set in a rat-infested slum. All three plays clearly demonstrated that racism caused poverty, which in turn caused crime and mental and physical illness, leading to family disintegration. Hansberry's drama was set solidly in this tradition. ("Hansberry to Shange" 377)

Hansberry's play unquestionably exists in a direct line from the two earlier plays, but they have more in common than their Chicago setting and their focus on family dynamics. All three plays insistently interrogate the material living conditions of black Americans; *Big White Fog*, *Native Son*, and *A Raisin in the Sun* each consciously adopts a Communist perspective to critique the destructive power of capitalism as well as the collusion of (white) economic oppression and (white) racist oppression. These plays demand a reassessment of American society from a specifically Old Left point of view.

Yet recent scholarly analyses of *A Raisin in the Sun* have almost uniformly avoided mention of Communism. Hansberry's biographer Anne Cheney calls the play a "moving testament to the strength and endurance of the human spirit, . . . a quiet celebration of the black family, the importance of African roots, the equality of women, the vulnerability of marriage, the true value of money, the survival of the individual, and the nature of man's dreams." She goes on to note that, in *Raisin*, "the simple eloquence of the characters elevates the play into a universal representation of all people's hopes, fears, and dreams" (55). White critics' claims as to the play's universality have haunted *Raisin* for the last fifty years, and in Cheney's analysis, Hansberry's play is almost completely concerned with middle-class problems – national identity, marriage, the

primacy of "family" over "wealth," the individual – and only minimally interested in critiquing racism, sexism, and capitalism.[3] For Cheney, *Raisin* is about "the American dream, a house in the suburbs. But the more important part of the dream is freedom for the individual, for the family" (71). Such analyses imagine the struggles of *Raisin*'s working-class black people as a metaphor for something other than the struggles of working-class black people. And framing the characters' battle against a racist society as a representation of a larger struggle for the "individual" – or for a generalized freedom – makes yet another claim for the play's universality. The problem with constructions such as this one is that, if a fight against racist discrimination is a symbol, it works as a symbol primarily for white people. The struggles and aspirations of the Younger family are about actual freedom of movement and about the need for better living conditions in Chicago's South Side. No metaphors are necessary. The constraints on the freedoms of people of colour in the United States were then, and remain, all too real.

More recent critics have attacked assertions that Hansberry's play is universal. Diana Mafe argues that "far from being 'universal' *despite* its 'particularity,' *Raisin* encapsulates duality, engaging with ostensibly familiar American issues *through* a specifically African American context" (36; emphasis in the original). Similarly, Ben Keppel argues that the play's central theme is "the illusory and, consequently, destructive quality of American platitudes about equality and opportunity – clichés that, in their falsity, deny the economic, political, and social power of American racism" (181). Critics such as Mafe, Keppel, Kristin Matthews, and Robin Bernstein have clearly and helpfully read *Raisin* as a social protest against a racist society. Still missing in this discussion, however, is a critical assessment of the play as a leftist critique of capitalism that is indebted to American Communism. And if the play is a direct descendant of *Big White Fog* and *Native Son*, it will be helpful to look at the play as the FBI did in 1959 and try to see red.

READING *RAISIN* FOR PROPAGANDA

Like *Big White Fog*, *A Raisin in the Sun* is undeniably a social drama. Hansberry insisted upon the merits of exactly this type of socially conscious theatre in her keynote speech at the first conference of the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) in 1959 – a speech, incidentally, deemed too leftist for inclusion in *The American Negro Writer and His Roots*, the published proceedings[4] – arguing that "all art is ultimately social: that which agitates and that which prepares the mind for slumber. The writer is deceived who thinks that he has some other choice" (Hansberry, "Negro Writer" 5). Although many critics have understood the play to be about bourgeois aspirations, *Raisin* avoids discussion of the black middle class almost entirely, focusing instead on the

working-class figures that most interested mid-century black Communist feminists such as Claudia Jones. In a 1959 interview, Hansberry notes this focus, telling Studs Terkel that "at this moment the Negro middle class – the comfortable middle class – may be from five or six percent of our people, and they are atypical of the representative experience of Negroes in this country" (qtd. in Terkel 7). Hansberry's play points clearly to her female characters' working-class jobs: both Lena and Ruth work in white women's kitchens (26), and Walter tells us that Ruth also "has to go out of here to look after somebody else's kids" (58). Hansberry stages this domestic labour explicitly. During the entirety of the play's first scene, Ruth makes breakfast and does the ironing. This housework dramaturgically signifies the labour she performs in other people's houses and the care that her job requires her to give other people's children.

Weigand, in her history of mid-century feminism, argues that this attention to the labour of black female domestics was one heavily influenced by Communist thought. Communism's influence on feminist politics in the United States has, for many reasons outlined by Weigand, gone unremarked by historians, but her research shows that

> By the end of the [1940s] most descriptions of women's oppression in Communist literature emphasized workplace discrimination against African American women and their vulnerability to rape by white men, especially in the South. Communist publications regularly used the terms "triple burden" and "triple oppression" to describe the status of black women who were exploited by their race, class, and gender. Among most other predominantly white organizations in the United States before the late 1940s, the Communist Party was the foremost defender of African American women's rights and the chief advocate of their equality. (99)

If a majority of Americans would not immediately make this connection, Hansberry certainly did. In 1959, she stated matter of factly that "the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women, who are twice oppressed. So I should imagine that they react accordingly: As oppression makes people more militant, women become *twice* militant because they are twice oppressed" (qtd. in Terkel 6; emphasis in the original). Although she herself was from a middle-class background, it is no accident that her play's attention is turned toward working-class African Americans. "I have to believe," she said in the same interview, "that whatever we ultimately achieve, however we ultimately transform our lives, the changes will come from the kind of people I chose to portray" (qtd. in Terkel 7).

Importantly, Hansberry doesn't see the black working class as alone in fomenting this change. Her play demonstrates that the struggles of the African American working class have identity with the struggles of the white working class. In this way, *Raisin* echoes Hughes's more explicitly

Communist plays, particularly *Don't You Want to Be Free?* and *Scottsboro Limited. Raisin* most clearly articulates this argument in the scene in which Mr. Lindner, the white homeowner from Clybourne Park, first comes to visit the Youngers. Mr. Lindner suggests that "most of the trouble in the world, when you come right down to it[, . . .] exists because people just don't sit down and talk to each other" (102). If this overture of potential neighbourliness turns out to be disingenuous, it nevertheless offers to the play's audience a possibility of interracial understanding through communication, even if Mr. Lindner himself seems honestly to subscribe to the racism embedded in the idea that "people get along better [. . .] when they share a common background" (104). Mr. Lindner believes that the Youngers and the Lindners are dissimilar enough that they shouldn't be neighbours, but Hansberry, in fact, has made the similarities between the two families quite clear. Lindner describes the white families of Clybourne Park as "not rich and fancy people; just hard-working, honest people who don't really have much but those little homes and a dream of the kind of community they want to raise their children in" (103). Later, in Act Three, Walter Lee describes his own family in precisely the same language: "I have worked as a chauffeur most of my life – and my wife here, she does domestic work in people's kitchens. So does my mother. I mean – we are plain people [. . .] And – uh – well, my father, well, he was a laborer most of his life [. . .] I mean – we are very proud people" (137–38). Walter Lee might also have said that his family, like the families Mr. Lindner described, doesn't really have much but the little home into which they are about to move.

Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park* (2010) reimagines the families in that neighbourhood as decidedly middle class, but in Hansberry's text, Mr. Lindner refers to his neighbours as people "who've worked hard as the dickens for years to build up that little community" (103). Hansberry describes both the Lindners and the Youngers as outside of the middle class, and if they are divided in the play by the Clybourne Park community's racism, Hansberry makes visible to her audience a possibility for class solidarity that Mr. Lindner cannot see. When Walter Lee finally offers to Mr. Lindner that "we will try to be good neighbors. That's all we got to say" (138), his nod to the possibility of neighbourhood parallels the "Left slogan ubiquitous to the trade union and unemployed struggles of the 1930s: 'Black and White Unite and Fight'" (Smethurst 84). The notion of being a good neighbour was, of course, hardly the sole provenance of the CPUSA, but few organizations in the United States fought for interracial unity the way that the Party did. Interracial solidarity among workers was not only a Communist ideal in the United States; it was an official directive of the Party to its individual units, both in Harlem

and elsewhere in the United States. Naison reports that, as early as 1931, the Harlem District Bureau declared that

> Tendencies toward racial and ethnic separation had to be combatted and efforts made to insure "the proper attraction of Negroes to all social affairs, dances, concerts, etc."[5] "The greatest degree of fraternization," the Bureau concluded, "the closest association of the white with the Negro comrades in social life inside and outside the Party is imperative" (47).

Being a good neighbour was official Communist Party policy.[6]

As part of her critique of housing developments and corrupt landlords, Hansberry also takes care to emphasize the Younger family's disconnection from the land – the urbanization to which they have been subjected and the stifling air of their tenement house (4). Again and again in the contentious discussions among American Communists, rent-collecting landlords and owners of large farms were singled out for criticism as exploiters of the working class, particularly of black Southern farmers; CPUSA platforms consistently call for government ownership of all natural resources. *Raisin*'s focus on a move into a privately owned residence might seem to indicate middle-class aspirations rather than a Communist critique, but the Party had long recognized black access to home ownership as important to the fight against racism. As early as 1928, the Party's platform included the demand that "[t]he law shall forbid all discrimination against Negroes in selling or renting houses" ("National Platform" 318). Critics who have understood Lena's desire for a house as linked either to bourgeois respectability or the capital-generating possibilities of home ownership have ignored what Lena herself says about the house. Mrs. Younger wants a house "with a yard where Travis could play in the summertime" and "a little garden in the back" (28). Lena consistently connects this dream house and its plot of land to her Southern roots "down home" (38); she has chosen a house that has "a yard with a little patch of dirt where I could maybe get to grow me a few flowers" (84) and "a whole lot of sunlight" (86). This imagined task of growing flowers links Lena with the "folk culture" so championed by the Communist left in the 1920s and 1930s – the "true love of the folk heritage" for which Hansberry passionately advocated in 1959 ("Negro Writer" 8) – but, more importantly, it also characterizes Lena as fundamentally different from the "capitalists, landlords, clericals and other non-producers" that the CPUSA aimed to combat (Foster 173).

While Margaret Wilkerson calls "the family's effort to move into a white neighborhood [the play's] major metaphor," the move to Clybourne Park is not a metaphor so much as it is the play's dramatic action (40–41). The chief metaphor in the play is, rather, Lena's plant, an image Hansberry sets up in *Raisin*'s first scene. Lena links the plant directly to Beneatha and Walter Lee when she says, "They spirited all right, my children [. . .] Like this little old

plant that ain't never had enough sunshine or nothing – and look at it" (38). More than a simple nod to Wright and Green's *Native Son*, whose opening stage direction includes "[a] flower pot on the sill of the window at the Left Center with a single red geranium" (26), *Raisin* deploys this plant as a metaphor for the African Diaspora in the United States: uprooted from their homes, taken to the Americas and forced to labour in service of white capitalist landowners; they remain disconnected from their own land and stifled in urban areas where they were promised economic prosperity but found only "a wage slavery virtually no better than the contract labor in the South," as the 1928 CPUSA platform put it ("National Platform" 318). Hansberry extends the metaphor, as Lena dreams of relocating her little plant into the soil of her own backyard, where it will have access to sunlight and be able to grow away from the stultifying influence of urbanization. In this way, Hansberry puts her work in conversation with Communism as an international movement still strong after World War II: *Raisin* here reflects the dramas of Hansberry's British contemporary Arnold Wesker – *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959), and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* (1960) – in which the idealistic Communists Ada and Dave move to the country to make a life away from an urban environment they feel is killing them.

The symbol of Lena's plant brings the targets of *Raisin*'s social critique into clearer focus. As Judith Smith argues, although most white critics of the play saw a universal family drama about the generation gap and the "American Dream,"

> Those aware of the recent political debates within black communities noticed . . . a critique of the materialistic and imperialist aspirations of the American Century, as well as of segregation, and an alternative vision of change drawing on the collective resources of black working-class women and families, African American labor, and worldwide anticolonial agitation. (283)

Smith is one of the few critics of the play who come close to saying that Hansberry has designed *Raisin* specifically as a socialist critique of American society with a Communist vision for the future. She points to the play's criticisms of materialistic aspirations and segregation but also, importantly, to the Communist ideals of the power of collective labour and gender equality, ideals specifically underlined by the directive of the 1928 Comintern Resolution on the Black National Question in the United States (see also Wilkerson 46).

It should go without saying that the play also aims criticism at white homeowners who seek to prohibit black people from living in "their" neighbourhoods. The play is unequivocal on this point. Hansberry literalizes this figure of white exclusivity in Mr. Lindner, but she – like Wright and Green in *Native Son* – also notes that the system itself is stacked against African Americans. Lena reports, in Act Two, that the only reason she buys a house

in a so-called white neighbourhood is because "them houses they put up for colored in them areas way out all seem to cost twice as much as other houses" (85). Hansberry describes an entire structure that works in favour of race discrimination, segregation, and class oppression. The Youngers and other working-class black families are kept from purchasing houses in predominantly black neighbourhoods through a system of artificially inflated home prices, and they are effectively prohibited from purchasing houses in predominantly white areas through a system of hostile neighbourhood practices, which appear in the play not only as the honey-tongued emissary Mr. Lindner but also in the violence he invokes when he warns them, "I sure hope you people know what you're doing" (139). As *Raisin* clearly demonstrates, this racist and capitalist system is designed to keep working-class African Americans as rent-paying tenants who do not own property and thus continue to contribute to the wealth of a white land-owning majority.

This critique might just as easily be directed at black landlords. Cyril Briggs, one of the first and "the most influential of the early Harlem Communists" (Naison 5), often attacked black middle-class organizations in the pages of the Communist papers the *Liberator* and the *Amsterdam News*, with language such as

> the Negro bourgeoisie does not put up any real fight against Negro oppression for the reason that they have a stake in the system that oppresses us. They are lap dogs at the table of the imperialists, demanding simple increased participation (as landlords, employers, etc.) in the exploitation of the Negro masses. (qtd. in Naison 36)

If Hansberry does not use inflammatory language such as this in *Raisin*, her play pointedly lacks the black nationalist outlook that might be assumed in a play combating racism; it opts instead for a critique of capitalism itself. This is not a play in which white people are pitted against black people (as black nationalist ideology would have it) but a play about systemic racism and oppression. In *Raisin*, Briggs's "lap dogs at the table of the imperialists" have their avatars in the Murchisons, the rich family whose son is dating Beneatha, and in Willy Harris, that "good-for-nothing loudmouth," who finally runs off with the Younger family's money (13). Beneatha openly mocks the Murchisons, saying that "the only people in the world who are more snobbish than rich white people are rich colored people"; and Willy turns out to be totally uninterested in brotherhood, race consciousness, or anyone aside from himself (34).

Hansberry's critique of society does not stop with housing or class solidarity. The plot of *Raisin*, of course, hinges on the arrival of a check for ten thousand dollars. The question with which each character wrestles is how the family ought to spend this money: Lena and Ruth want to move into a

house; Beneatha wants to go to medical school; Walter Lee wants to invest in a liquor store. But Hansberry does not weight her play equally in favour of the three options. The conflict of *Raisin*, indeed, is the result of Walter Lee's desire to become a businessman: this conflict ends when Walter Lee makes his desires concordant with the goals of the rest of the family. Hansberry portrays Walter Lee's get-rich-quick scheme as putting the health of both the Younger family and their Chicago community at risk. He jeopardizes Beneatha's dream of becoming a doctor, and his squandering of the family savings even threatens the family's move to a house of their own. The other characters critique Walter Lee's dream of a liquor store from the play's beginning. Their criticisms are both moral and fiscally conservative, but by the play's end, Hansberry critiques Walter Lee's materialistic aspirations from an explicitly Communist point of view. In Act Three, after her brother has lost the money, Beneatha rails at him:

> There he is! *Monsieur le petit bourgeois noir* – himself! There he is – Symbol of a Rising Class! Entrepreneur! [. . .] Did you dream of yachts on Lake Michigan, Brother? Did you see yourself on that Great Day sitting down at the Conference Table, surrounded by all the mighty bald-headed men in America? All halted, waiting, breathless, waiting for your pronouncements on industry? Waiting for you – Chairman of the Board? I look at you and I see the final triumph of stupidity in the world! (127)

Walter Lee says that he wants what is best for the whole family, but in this sequence, Beneatha names his aspirations as individualist and, therefore, damaging to the family as a unit. She ridicules Walter Lee's assimilationist goals – his desire for a seat at the white table – and in doing so, she ridicules the white table itself. Beneatha's criticisms echo Hansberry's 1959 keynote speech at the AMSAC conference, in which she insisted that "[t]he desire for possession of 'things' has rapidly replaced among too many of us the impulse for possession of ourselves, for freedom." She argued that black art must "dispel the romance of the black bourgeoisie" and that "these values have their root in an *American* perversion and no place else" ("Negro Writer" 9). Hansberry explicitly rejects Walter Lee's dream of joining the bourgeoisie through enterprise and industry: a seat at the capitalist table is not enough; the table needs to be turned over.

Hansberry saw this desire to join the black middle class as worthy of sympathy more than derision. In her AMSAC speech, she refers to Miller's *Death of a Salesman,* noting that

> We do not laugh at Willy Loman, white or black – the [impulse] is more to cry . . . He is the spawn of something he never really understood, its victim and its product. Sooner or later between the man and his source we must indict something if we agree that Willy Loman is a failure. But when

> we have seen his helplessness – the limitation of the choices his world (or his understanding of it) has offered him – it will not be Willy we indict. ("Negro Writer" 9)

Although Beneatha criticizes her brother strongly, the play itself is not without sympathy for Walter Lee. Lena, in fact, admonishes her daughter after she disowns her brother. She asks Beneatha, "Have you cried for that boy today?"; and Hansberry is asking her audience, too, to think about Walter Lee and to "measure him right," as Lena says: "Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is" (135–36).

In contrast, the dreams for which Hansberry advocates are inflected with a rejection of middle-class values through the embrace of collective efforts and a connection to productive, unalienated labour. The play has quite a bit of fun mocking Beneatha's search for self-expression in Act One (see Terkel 8), and we might see Beneatha's goal of becoming a doctor as indicative of her own aspirations to join the bourgeoisie. Hansberry, however, does not treat medicine as a means to gaining wealth or even as an assertion of individuality. In Act Three, Beneatha tells Asagai a story of seeing a young man's face broke open on a sidewalk; the next time she sees the boy, he has only a small scar to show for all of his wounds. "That was what one person could do for another, fix him up – sew up the problem, make him all right again," she says. "I wanted to do that. I always thought it was the one concrete thing in the world that a human being could do" (123). Beneatha's dream is specific to her, but Hansberry's example is communal. She has Beneatha speak about the impact one person can have through dedicating her life to other people. Hansberry immediately echoes Beneatha's discussion of collectivity as Asagai declares his willingness to sacrifice his life for the people in his village in Nigeria. Asagai understands that even "such a thing as [his] own death" might at some point be "an advance" for his countrymen. He advocates a radical ethics of collectivity that is astounding in its rejection of individualism. As Beneatha considers leaving the United States and moving to Nigeria to practice medicine, Hansberry articulates this goal of helping people as both global and divorced from aspirations to the middle class. Asagai recognizes in Beneatha a dream of collective effort: theirs is an advocacy of self-sacrifice and a critique of labour performed only for profit.

THE BUREAU AS AUDIENCE

Although the FBI's informant reported that from his "observations of the plot and the dialogue, nothing specific was found that is particular to a CP program," he still managed to see a great deal. His synopsis and even his analysis of the play are accurate and highly detailed (FBI1 113). He comprehended

well that *A Raisin in the Sun* contains many social critiques and, indeed, that the play has more than one clear message. In fact, he understood Hansberry's dramaturgical strategies enough to report to his superiors that "[Beneatha's] comments and her discussions with other characters produce such propaganda messages as are included in the play" (FBI1 111). The agent recorded a list of "propaganda messages" in his report that includes Beneatha's denial of the "belief in God and the existence of God," the necessity for African nations to "overthrow the rule of European nations, find political freedom, improve themselves economically and educationally, and make their own future," and Asagai's mockery of "assimilationists," "who straighten the kinks from their hair and imitate other ways of the whites" (FBI1 111).

If the agent understood the play's critiques of colonialism, he was just as well aware of its Communist critiques of life in the United States. The agent singled out Beneatha's speech about Walter Lee's middle-class aspirations. He reports: "When her brother has stolen from him the $6500 insurance money, including her medical school tuition, she reviles him as an 'entrepreneur,'" placing this single sentence in its own paragraph in the memo (FBI1 111). That he singled out Hansberry's specific language in this sequence indicates that the agent understood the word *entrepreneur*'s significance to the meaning of the play as a whole. However much we may understand *Raisin* as a document that does not overtly argue in favour of Communist ideals, it was clear to at least one agent of the Bureau, in 1959, that the play uses Communist ideas to mobilize its critiques of society. Further, the agent is clear, in the memo to his superiors, that Lena is interested in moving out of the tenement because "[s]he and her late husband always wanted a house with conveniences, adequate room, and sunlight" (FBI1 110). He points out that Lena "buys the best house she can get for her money which happens to be in a white neighborhood since comparable houses in a negro development are twice as expensive," noting as well that, although "[t]he other members of the family are appalled that she bought in a white neighborhood," they change their minds because of what he (and Beneatha) refers to as "ghettoitis" and because of "so great and so old a hunger for a house with adequate bedrooms, space, and light" (FBI1 111). In short, the FBI agent also understood Hansberry's critique of racist housing practices and – unlike many of Hansberry's later critics – he saw the desire for sunlight and space as important enough to the play that he mentions each of them twice.

There is an irony here. The FBI memo summarizes the content of the play by focusing on the same sections of the play as the ones that I have outlined above as pertinent to Hansberry's Communist-inspired critique. Yet the report begins by blithely noting that *Raisin* "contains no comments of any nature about Communism as such" (FBI1 110). We might reconcile this

apparent paradox by referring briefly to a widely circulated text of anti-Communist propaganda, a trade paperback with the ominous title *What We Must Know about Communism* (1958), published contemporaneously with the play. As the book suggests that Americans seek out more knowledge about "the new tyranny – the Communist tyranny" (Overstreet and Overstreet 8), it also notes that "[w]hile an increasing number of individuals have come to know, by responsible study or direct experience, exactly why they regard Communism as a gigantic threat to human well-being, . . . [t]he majority, it would appear, are still inventing the Communism to which they are opposed: fashioning it out of what they have hated and feared in the American scene" (14). The Federal Bureau of Investigation, so intent on stamping out Communism wherever it found it, was looking at *Raisin* and expecting pro-Soviet argumentation, not an argument about better lives for black Americans whose consonance with CPUSA ideas can be clearly discerned.

As Hansberry articulated her own goals for *Raisin*, in May of 1959, she posited that

> [s]ooner or later we are going to have to make principled decisions in America about a lot of things. We have set up some very materialistic and overtly limited concepts of how the world should go. I think it's conceivable to create a character today who decides that maybe his whole life is wrong, so that he ought to do something else altogether and really make a complete reversal of things that we think are very acceptable. (qtd. in Terkel 5–6)

Hansberry discusses reversals – revolution – and she makes a point of the materialism and limitations of bourgeois society. But for anti-Communists in the United States, Communist propaganda was much more easily recognizable if it "echo[ed] the Soviet charge that our own foreign policy has been 'imperialistic' and 'war-mongering'" (Overstreet and Overstreet 135). Part of the reason *Raisin* escaped the Communist label in 1959 was that it critiqued the domestic policies of the United States and articulated an anti-capitalist dream for black Americans that avoided discussion of U.S. foreign policy. But Communism in the United States was much more than a fight against German fascism or a propaganda machine for Soviet authority; Communism was an inspirational and deeply influential force in black literature and black theatre, and it had this impact because of its vision for black America, a vision created jointly by Communist Americans black and white, female and male, a vision actively combated by powerful forces in the U.S. government.

If, since the year of *Raisin*'s premiere, we have come to understand the play more clearly as a social critique, we have remained blind about Communism and its positive influences on American theatre. Communism has been

understood as anti-American and pro-Soviet, but it was also anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and by the 1950s, staunchly feminist. Our assumptions about what we think Communism was and the insistent question about whether or not someone in particular "is now or ever has been a member of the Communist Party" continue to blind us to the ways that the CPUSA, as a leading institution on the left, was the centre of a larger movement of progressive people who believed the United States could become something other than it was: less racist, less sexist, more equitable.

I do not wish to be reductive about *A Raisin in the Sun*, nor is this intended as a definitive reading of the play. To argue that *Raisin* is Communist propaganda would be, as I said at the outset of this essay, to misread the play, replicating the single-mindedness Charlie demonstrates in the sequence from *Les Blancs* that stands as my epigram. Hansberry's politics and *A Raisin in the Sun* are much more complex than the label "Communism" can describe, and the play and its historical moment will continue to provide rich material for historians. Noticing the play's indebtedness to Communist ideals ought not, in any way, to diminish its value as a document that argues that racism is both psychologically and physically damaging, nor should it reduce our appreciation for Hansberry's ability to portray this working-class black family with nuance and empathy.

It is my hope, rather, that this analysis draws our attention to the absence of discussions of Communism in scholarship dedicated to African American theatre and its history. If the Communist message in *Raisin* is visible, while the conversation about this political critique is near non-existent, is not this silence functioning ideologically? Theatre historiography reflects the FBI's own blindness when it omits discussions of black Communism that critique American society and describes instead the (admittedly powerful) influences of anti-Communism on black creativity. Further, our silence about the political goals of black Americans in the 1950s also works to suggest that the Communist critique of American society was effectively and definitively answered by the 1960s, that the problems the Communist critique intended to illuminate have already been solved. And if we rewrite the terms of the African American success story to make it the same as that of mainstream culture, we do Lorraine Hansberry and the black Americans of her generation an enormous disservice. Hansberry's struggle was a fight for something larger than the economic success promised us by the so-called American dream. Hers was a fight for an African American working class that joined with an international and interracial working class to fight – as the American Communists of the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s did – the everyday oppressions of global capitalism and the racist institutions that support them.

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NOTES

1 A 5 Sep. 1958 memo is the first to mention *Raisin*, referring to the play as "Rais'n in the Sun," apparently understanding *raisin* as the verb *raising*. All information from Hansberry's FBI files was obtained through my request under the Freedom of Information Act.

2 See Hansberry, "Readers," *Ladder* issues 1.1, 1.8; on Hansberry's lesbianism, see Harris.

3 Bernstein deftly parses the alleged paradox between "universality" and "specificity" that critics have created (16–27).

4 For discussion of the way the Left was edited out of the *Roots* volume, see Washington 242–49.

5 Naison cites *Daily Worker* 19 Feb. 1931. According to Naison, this level of integration was one of the reasons the Party never caught on to an enormous degree among a Harlem black working class that mistrusted white people.

6 Housing discrimination was a present and immediate problem for audiences in 1959. The Civil Rights Commission created by the Civil Rights Act of 1957 issued its first report in September 1959, after *Raisin* had already premiered. It stated unequivocally that housing discrimination was a national problem, not simply a local one. According to Stephen Grant Meyer, "The commission . . . suggested that every city and state with 'a substantial nonwhite population' establish an interracial or housing committee to study the local conditions, propose solutions to problems, and provide enforcement of the remedies" (164). The Communist Party had advocated an interracial solution to racist housing practices as early as 1931.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AARON C. THOMAS is Assistant Professor of Theatre History and Literature in the School of Performing Arts at the University of Central Florida. His current book project, *The Violate Man*, explores representations of male/male sexual violence in British and American drama since the 1960s.