# Prefiguring the Environmental Justice Movement: the Ecodramaturgy of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

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Ecodramaturgy is a critical and historiographic framework that applies the tenets of environmental justice, as well as ecological perspectives more broadly, to plays and performances. I argue that Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*[1] exposed environmental racism and prefigured the tenants of environmental justice by depicting the impacts of poverty and environmental degradation on communities of color. Thirty years before the rise of the current environmental justice movement, Hansberry's play details the intersectional aims of environmental justice by centering women's experience, and by making connections between the health and well-being of women and children and the larger environment. In this way, an ecodramaturical lens illuminates the power and potential of theatre to inspire civic action. Hansberry's play stands as a keystone in the rhetorical architecture of the environmental justice movement, which insists that environmental policy must include consideration of where people live, work, play, and worship

Themes of environmental justice were abundant in theatrical work associated with the social justice struggles of the civil rights era, including the Black Arts Movement, Chicano theater, feminist theater, and Native theater,[2] but the connections between social, economic, and environmental justice (now at the forefront of mainstream environmentalism) went unremarked by artists and scholars until the 1990s.[3] As a historiographic lens, ecodramaturgy can (re)illuminate canonical plays in order to show their ecological through-lines. By examining the representation of lived experience and asking questions about the welfare of

[1] The original publication of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958) was by New York: Random House. The play opened at the Ethyl Barrymore Theater on March 11, 1959, received the New York Drama Critics Award that year, and has been frequently produced since then, including three Broadway revivals in 1973, 2004, and 2014. In the "Introduction" to *A Raisin in the Sun*, Robert Nemiroff writes that the 1989 film version (with Danny Glover playing Walter Lee, Jr.), which restored scenes considered too controversial in 1959, is a "luminous embodiment of the state play… not altered for the camera" (Nemiroff, 12).

[2] This essay draws with permission from my chapter, "Re-claiming Home and Homelands," in *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology, Environment and American Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 162-172.

[3] The rise of environmental perspectives in theatre studies began in the 1990s. See, Chaudhuri, "'There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake': Toward an Ecological Theater," 23-31; Wendy Arons and Theresa May, "Ecodramaturgy and/of Contemporary Women Playwrights," 189-96; May, "Indigenous Theatre in Global Times: Situated Knowledge and Ecological Communities in Salmon Is Everything and Burning Vision," Ch. 8; May, "Beyond Bambi: Toward a Dangerous Ecocriticism," 95-110; May, *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology, Environment and American Theatre*.



 

bodies, families, and communities affected by racism and economic injustice, ecodramaturgy illuminates canonical plays in new ways, revealing how ideologies of domination and white supremacy have caused both social and ecological havoc across the land. Rob Nixon identifies the environmental degradation resulting from longstanding patterns of U.S. imperialism as slow violence perpetrated on the world's poorest and most vulnerable communities. As the environmental justice movement would argue some 30 years later, Hansberry's play makes clear that environmental health and social justice are inextricably linked, and that ecological concerns must be understood as intertwined with economic justice as well as gender and racial equity.

Below, I examine the way environmental and social justice concerns came together in this hallmark play, revealing a (then) radical ecological viewpoint that the environment is coupled with human health and welfare. I contend that the white supremacy the Youngers face when they plan to move to a new home not only constitutes systemic environmental racism but reflects the historic abuse of land and bodies on which the U.S. extractive economies depend. My analysis traces the subtle ways those legacies infect and damage the day-to-day lives of those who carry the disproportional burdens of that historic abuse. I foreground clues to the ecologies represented on stage, including human bodies and habitat, in order to examine the environmental implications of the Youngers' struggle and the racial and class-based oppressions and hierarchies the play represents. Hansberry's claim to homeplace in the milieu 1950s foreshadows the principles of environmental justice in prescient ways.

## (Re)Claiming Home: *A Raisin in the Sun*

A story of family, body, and homeplace, *A Raisin in the Sun* rhetorically asserted a vision of the future in which the right to a healthy and health-full homeplace is a civil right. Five years after the Supreme Court's decision in Brown v. Board of Education, which struck down the "separate but equal" standards of the South, Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* exposed how historic and institutionalized racism in northern cities actively excluded Black Americans from full participation in post-war economic prosperity. In his introduction to the 1994 edition of the script, Robert Nemiroff details the long arc of critical reception that has followed Hansberry's play from its debut as a landmark (first Black playwright, first Black woman, youngest woman, etc.) to receive critical acclaim as a 'universal' story about Americans, to the later scholarly and artistic acknowledgment of the play's politics.[4] Since its -premiere, *A Raisin in the Sun* has been recognized for its specificity in relation to institutionalized racism, economic class, and the rising Black consciousness of the late 1950s

[4] Robert Nemiroff, "Introduction," in *A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 5.

and 1960s, a Black "humanist"[5] drama that centers Black experience in ways that are both historic and still relevant. But the longstanding humanist interpretations of Hansberry's play, its critical reception, and analysis have often disguised the larger social, economic, and environmental contexts within and against which the Younger family's struggles play out.[6] Attention to these contexts, however, is central to understanding the ways in which violations and injustices stemming from the legacies of slavery (e.g. institutional racism, explicit racism, racial microaggressions, and state-sponsored, racially motivated economic inequality) expose and underscore environmentally unjust and destructive practices and ideologies.

By centering the Younger family as protagonists, Hansberry points concretely to the correlation and interdependence of longstanding racial inequities in the United States, revealing the extent to which these patterns of white supremacy play out as environmental degradation which falls disproportionately on communities of color. Demonstrated through the material-ecological aspects of the characters' lives*, Hansberry* thus paints an intimate portrait of environmental racism at work. The impacts of systemic poverty, red-lining housing practices, and the health effects of longstanding societal racism (such as red-lining) shape the lived experience of Hansberry's characters. As the Younger family struggles within a context of economic structures shaped by white supremacy, the lived and living aspects of that environment impact their capacity to thrive. The characters' hopes for a better future, including a homeplace that nurtures their collective material, emotional, and spiritual well-being, chafes against the stress that comes from living in a compromised environment.

Defined as the disproportional burden of the impact of environmental degradation on people and communities of color, environmental racism deprives individuals of the very foundations of life – clean air, water, healthy foods, shelter, and adequate to support healthful families.[7] Poverty caused by systems of privilege by which generation after generation of African Americans have been denied the opportunities considered the birthright of those who pass as white is a form of environmental racism. Lack of access to healthy food, clean air, and water in impoverished urban neighborhoods results in higher incidences of asthma and other childhood diseases.[8] Structures of exclusion in housing have been built and maintained

[5] Nemiroff, 12.

[6] For a discussion of the critical reception of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the ways in which white critics at the time used tropes of universality to mitigate the play's activism, see Robin Bernstein's "Inventing a Fishbowl" (1999). See also Nemiroff's (1994) "Introduction" to *A Raisin in the Sun*, in which he discusses scenes of the play that were not included in the 1959 Broadway production and that were restored in later productions and publications.

[7] For more on this topic, see Giovanna Di Chiro in "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 298-320.

[8] These impacts have been well documented. See, for example, Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Gerald Jaynes, "On Neighborhoods and Neighborhood Effects," in *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 11, no. 2 (2104): 465-75; and Robert J. Sampson, *The Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect (*Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2012.

through unscrupulous yet legal lending practices. Such structures were policed by both social and institutional expressions of white supremacy and by violence and the threat of violence against families and individuals who challenged that system. Throughout the play, Hansberry maps the ways those impacts land heavily on the bodies of women and children, determining longevity, child-bearing, and mental health – all of which are now recognized as impacts of environmental injustice.

*A Raisin in the Sun* is set in a two-room apartment on the Southside of Chicago, home to a multi-generational family that includes Mama Younger, her daughter Beneatha, and her son Walter Lee, Jr., Walter's wife Ruth, and their young son, Travis. Hansberry's early stage directions describe a place of great "weariness"[9] and compression, a setting in which "too many people have lived for too long"[10] and where a "single window [is the] sole source of natural light."[11] In the opening scene, the family eagerly awaits a life insurance policy from the death of Walter Lee, Sr., due to arrive by mail, Mama Younger hopes to use the money to buy a new home for the family, but her son, Walter Lee, Jr., presses his mother to allow him to invest in a liquor store, and her daughter Beneatha needs funds to pay for college. The conflict among the central characters is generational in nature and points to the arc of African American history of the twentieth century. Hansberry's Lena and Walter Lee, Sr. were part of the Great Migration of the twentieth century, when Black families moved in high numbers to the urban, industrial North, seeking jobs, economic opportunities, and freedom from segregation laws, unfair labor practices, the threat of lynching, and other forms of systemized violence against Black Americans. Lena Younger has held fast to the aim of a homeplace in an environment free from racism in which she and her husband, and now her children and grandchildren, might thrive. Meanwhile, her adult children's goals and desires are focused on finding their own places in the world; yet in 1959, these futures are under threat from the very patterns of racism that their parents sought to escape a generation earlier. When the life insurance check finally arrives, the family struggles to realize disparate goals on the small sum that represents the lifelong labor of their husband and father. The universally humanist proclamations of critics underscored this familial struggle in which parents want a better future for their children and must weigh present needs (like food) against future ambitions. Hansberry embraced the recognition that her play engenders pathways of empathy by which white audience members might recognize aspects of their own human struggle. Her play also illuminates the specific struggles of a hard-working, economically disadvantaged, Black family, and in doing so, asks more of its audience than mere identification. *A Raisin in the Sun* asks for expanded awareness on the part of white audience members, including recognition of their own role in (and privilege derived from) systemic racism and the injustice it inflicts on many families and communities.

[9] Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958, 1994), 24.
[10] Hansberry, 24.
[11] Hansberry, 24.

**Homeplace-an Environmental Right**

*A Raisin in the Sun* constitutes a clear indictment of the ways that Black families were shut out of the pathways to prosperity available to whites in the 1950s, and is a testament to the effects of that exclusion in the daily lives and health of families like the Youngers. Lena's desire to use her husband's insurance money to own a home has been a longstanding one: "I remember the day me and Big Walter moved in here. Hadn't been married but two weeks and wasn't planning on living here no more than a year. We was going to set away little by little…and buy a little place out in Morgan Park"[12] [13] Like many who came north to flee the Jim Crow south, the Younger brought skills and commitment to build a future. As a bricklayer, Walter Lee, Sr., participated in the post-war development boom, though he died before he could realize a share of the dream that his labor had helped to build. Drawing strength from the memory of her husband, Mama tells Ruth that he "sure loved his children. Always wanted them to have something – be something."[14] Lena's commitment to her family's future - to their well-being - stands on the shoulders of her husband's labor and her own, as she remains determined to claim that home after a lifetime of struggle: "Been thinking that we maybe could meet the notes on a little old two-story somewhere, with a yard where Travis could play in the summertime, if we use part of the insurance for a down payment and everybody kind of pitch in. I could maybe take on a little day work again."[15] Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us that conditions in the North continued, sometimes in subtler, but no less racist, ways, effectively excluding Black families from the opportunity to provide for their families, accumulate wealth and build a future for their children in the way that white families were more empowered to do, particularly after World War II.[16] In *The Case for Reparations*, Coates describes that in the 1950s "85 percent of all Black home buyers who bought in Chicago bought on contract" given that conventional collateral loans were unavailable to Blacks.[17] The growing mortgage industry sanctioned these highly predatory contracts as a matter of course, while white lenders profited. Holding a note for a Black family almost guaranteed future repossession of the property when the high-interest rates and inflated housing prices could not be paid. Since Black homebuyers were systematically denied

[12] Hansberry, 45.

[13] Located on the south side of the greater Chicago area, Morgan Park became a burgeoning African American community beginning in the early twentieth century. As a result of the construction of Interstate 57, the neighborhood became increasingly isolated and impoverished between 1969 and 1974. For more on this history, see Ta-Nehisi Coates' "The Case for Reparations" and *We Were Eight Years in Power*, especially 163-208. According to the online *Encyclopedia of Chicago History* greater Morgan Park demographics in 2013 were recorded as approximately 57% African American and 35% white.

[14] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 45.

[15] Hansberry, 44.

[16] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*. (New York: Spiegel & Grau), 2015, 184-194.

[17] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (New York, NY: One World Publishing Company) 2017, 170.

conventional mortgages, the chances that Lena Younger would buy on contract, becoming victim to such unfair lending practices, was high.

A safe home that supports thriving lives is an environmental right. Lena Younger explains, "I just tried to find the nicest pace for the least amount of money for my family. […] Them houses they put up for colored in them areas way out an all seem to cost twice as much as other houses."[18] Through the process of red-lining, in which some neighborhoods were coded/mapped as more or less desirable based on racial demographics, the Federal Housing Administration, Coates writes, "exhorted segregation and enshrined it as public policy."[19] Redlining – a system that excluded Blacks from certain housing markets, and devalued properties already owned by Blacks – is one tactic of ongoing settler colonialism aimed at the extraction of wealth from land. In a public lecture I attended in 2017 at the University of Oregon, Coates observed that accumulation of wealth, and the Black bodies in which that wealth was "secondarily housed," lays as the foundation of the U.S. nation-state. The systemic sequestering of wealth away from Black families is brought home in *A Raisin in the Sun* by the visit of Mr. Linder from the Clybourne Park "neighborhood committee," who urges the Youngers *not* to move into the house on which Lena has already made a deposit. In fact, Linder offers the family cash – the equivalent of their down payment, but to bribe them not to move. Linder's offer is a means to prevent Blacks from owning reasonably-priced property in neighborhoods where home values have not been inflated by the contract gouging common in areas redlined for Blacks.

Lena's commitment to securing a new home represents an act of fierce resistance in the face of very credible threats made palpable in the play. In Act 2, Scene 2, Lena's neighbor Mrs. Johnson stops by for a piece of pie and some conversation. As Mrs. Johnson learns of the Youngers' plan to move into a new home, and into a home of their own, she reminds them of the risks: "I guess you all seen the news what's all over the color paper this week […] 'bout them color people that was bombed out their place out there? […] getting so you think you right down in Mississippi!"[20] Mrs. Johnson's story echoed real-world events, such as that of the Meyers, which Coates describes. In August 1957, "Daisy and Bill Myers, the first Black family to move into Levittown, Pennsylvania, were greeted with protests and a burning cross"[21] The play does not specify that Mrs. Johnson was referring to this much-publicized incident or others like it. Nevertheless, through Mrs. Johnson's presence, Hansberry was implicitly calling out the racist acts of terrorism aimed to prevent families like the Youngers not only from acquiring a home that would better serve their needs.[22] By the late 1950s, a litany of such incidents would have been familiar to the Youngers, and to the audience as

[18] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun,* 91.
[19] Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power,* 188.
[20] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun,* 100.
[21] Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power,* 187.
[22] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 100.

well.[23] The real-life harassment of the Myers by white mobs lasted many weeks, and yet the Myers stayed. Likewise, Lena Younger is equally determined to move into their new home in the face of a decade of violence by whites against Black families. Packing boxes on stage in Act III represents a collective act of resistance and resilience that (re)claims the promise of freedom on their own terms, including their human right to a safe home in which they can thrive.

As Coates observes, the mining of Black labor not only occurred by way of the institution of slavery from which the economic wealth of the then-new nation grew, but the exploitation of Black Americans also continues in our present moment in discriminatory practices that have long institutionalized and perpetuated the economic power and privilege of whites.[24] Looking closely at the unfolding dynamic over money between Mama and Walter Lee, Jr. reveals the extent to which this exclusion, compounded by the poverty it holds in place, has had a corrosive effect on the family. Lena's adult children, Walter Lee, Jr. and Beneatha, want what any young person might want – to invest in and own a business, to go to college, to start a career, to make a difference in the lives of their family and society. Yet for the Younger family, social and economic inequities have limited employment and educational opportunities in such ways that such basic, childhood goals exist in a constant state of jeopardy. Walter Lee, Jr. earns a living as a chauffeur, while his wife, Ruth, does domestic work for a white family. *A Raisin in the Sun* opens with a disagreement between Walter Lee, Jr., and Lena centered around whether to give Travis fifty cents, or whether he should carry groceries after school to earn the money himself. Walter Lee, Jr. wants more for his son, and he presses his case to use his father's insurance money to invest in a liquor store. Lena refuses, and Walter Lee flies back at her, "Well, *you* tell that to my boy tonight when you put in to sleep on the living-room couch. […] and tell it to my wife, Mama, tomorrow when she has to go out of here to look after somebody else's kids...every time we need a new pair of curtains and I have to watch *you* go out and work in somebody's kitchen."[25] His anger, like Walter Lee, Sr., can be read as a palpable response to a world that has long exploited and deprived Black Americans of ownership of land, the fruits of their labor, and the possibility of intra-generational wealth. In a later scene, Walter Lee, Jr., confides his sense of displacement: "Mama – sometimes when I'm downtown and I pass them cool, quiet-looking restaurants where them white boys are … sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars…guys that don't look much older than me."[26] His observation is not merely the reflection of his desire for a place in, or a piece of, that marketplace, but is also an indictment of its racist exclusion, and its impact on his sense of self. Lena finally recognizes his need for self-determination and allows him to invest a portion of the insurance money.

[23] Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, 190-91.
[24] Coates, 194-199.
[25] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun,* 71.
[26] Hansberry, 74.

Self-determination, which would become one of the Principles of Environmental Justice, is a foundation for social and ecological well-being.[27] Yet an economic system that preys upon disadvantaged communities thwarts Walter Lee, Jr.'s choices. Neither his father nor he can gain ground in a system designed to exclude their participation. At the end of Act II, Walter Lee's business partner Bobo reveals that their investment in the liquor store has been stolen by their third partner, who was to "go down to Springfield and spread some money 'round so we wouldn't have to wait so long for the liquor license [ …] Everybody said that was the way you had to do,"[28] Bobo explains, his bewilderment pointing to the underbelly of a system of graft and greed mapped across the state of Illinois. As the men realize that this system is larger and deadlier than they dreamed, the stage directions indicate that Walter Lee, Jr. "starts to pound the floor with his fists, sobbing wildly," and crying out "THAT MONEY IS MADE OUT OF MY FATHER'S FLESH."[29] When Lena Younger realizes what has happened, and all the plans they have made, as well as her trust in her son, have been lost, she invokes her husband's labor – labor now mined again by systemic theft in which her son has been caught: "I seen him grow thin and old before he was forty…working and working and working like somebody's old horse…killing himself…and you – you tell me you give it all away in a day."[30] In Lena's fury the stage directions tell us, "she raises her arms to strike him again,"[31] but stops herself. The system that seduced her son into a venture that promised financial gain, and the system that mined her husband's labor, never paying Walter Lee Sr. enough to own a home or adequately feed his family, are one. In this moment, the play brings home the connection between institutionalized racism born of colonial systems of exploitation, which continued to exclude Blacks not only from mortgages, but a host of economic avenues typically open to whites.

## Bodies at Risk

The economic system predicated on greed, and fueled by graft, institutionalized theft, and manipulation of investments in the economic sectors of neighborhoods, ultimately finds its way into the bodies and long-term health impacts affecting families like the Youngers, where poverty is a kind of poison. As Coates describes, racialized exclusion from the processes of wealth accumulation (like home and business ownership) is not merely a legacy of slavery, it is the active perpetuation of racial exclusion that in turn results in toxic stress,

[27] Giovanna Di. Chiro, "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice" in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton), 1996, 298-320.
[28] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun,* 126.
[29] Hansberry, 128.
[30] Hansberry, 129.
[31] Hansberry, 129.

reduced air and water quality, exposures to environmental contaminants, disease and death.[32] Mama Younger has already lost her husband and a child to these effects, and she is determined to resist and (re)claim a homeplace that provides this most basic ecological foundation.

Toxic stress – the long-term cumulative effect of poverty, insecurity, and racism – has caused losses that continue to accumulate in the lives and bodies of the Younger. When it becomes apparent in Act I that Ruth is pregnant and planning an abortion – not an abortion that arises out of choice, but one demanded by the lack of space to live healthy lives, to raise healthy children, Mama recalls the infant death of one of her own children, and the toll it took on her husband:

> Big Walter would come in here some nights back then and slump down on that couch…I'd know he was down then….And then when I lost that baby – little Claude – I almost thought I was going to lose Big Walter too. Oh, that man grieved […] I guess that's how come that man finally worked hisself to death like he done. Like he was fighting his own war with this here world that took his baby from him.[33]

Lena confides these memories to Ruth, testifying to both women's embodied experiences of how the inhospitable environment in which they live limits their freedom, impacts their health, and endangers their children. The "world that took his baby from him" is one documented in studies on infant mortality in urban communities marked by a lack of healthy food, adequate medical care, space for children to play, and locally owned businesses.[34] The losses bolster Lena's resolve to claim a homeplace in which her family might thrive. "We done give up one baby to poverty and that we ain't going to give up nary another one."[35] Poverty, perpetuated by institutional racialized economic exclusion like the Youngers face, is a kind of poison. Here Lena demands that her son bear witness to his wife and his mother's lived experience, and implicitly asks the audience to acknowledge the psychological and physical burden of poverty and its effect on the health of children, families, and communities.

Similarly, when Ruth calls the apartment a "rat trap"[36] in Act 1, Scene 1, her complaint is not a metaphor. Living conditions that require regular chemical pest control, rat

[32] Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, 190-99.

[33] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 45.

[34] The reduction of infant mortality rates in the U.S. between the 1950s and the early twenty-first century has not benefited blacks and whites equally. See, for example, Gopal Singh and Stella Yu and Kenneth Y. Chay and Michael Greenstone. In the present, infant mortality rates for blacks in the U.S. continue to be recorded as 50% higher than for whites (see, e.g. Jessica Firger). Attesting to racism as a kind of toxicity, John Yang similarly reported in a December 27 *PBS NewsHour* program that "And it's not just physical conditions that influence their [mothers'] health. In Cincinnati, and nationwide, high infant mortality is driven by the fact that black infants are more than twice as likely to die as white babies, regardless of the mother's income and education."

[35] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 75.

[36] Hansberry, 44.

poison, leaded paint, marginal sanitation, lack of fresh air and even light to grow a small houseplant constitute a kind of secondary violence, one that lands most heavily on children, pregnant women, and the elderly – all of whom reside in the Youngers' apartment. Scene 2 opens as Mama and family members clean their small apartment. Stage directions describe that Beneatha, "with a handkerchief tied around her face, is spraying insecticide into the cracks in the walls."[37] Playfully, Beneatha chases her younger brother with a spray bottle full of roach killer, while Mama calls, "Look out there, girl, before you be spilling some of that stuff on that child!"[38] Rachel Carson's 1962 research would show what women of color across the country already knew from their lived experience: that the pesticides and herbicides, developed as weapons of war but increasingly used in civilian homes and gardens, impacted the health of society's most vulnerable populations.[39] All over the nation, these newly created "miracle" chemicals promised pest-free farms, gardens, parks, countryside, and neighborhoods.[40] Many of these same chemicals were commonly used within the home, particularly in homes infested with insects as a result of poor construction and negligent management. In the scene described above Beneatha retorts, "I can't imagine it would hurt him – it has never hurt the roaches…There's really only one way to get rid of them, Mama…Set fire to this building!"[41] In the context of the play, it is a chilling metaphor for the white neighborhood committee's effort to keep "pests" out of their privileged community, and a material testament to environmental risk. Mama's response – "Well, little boys' hides ain't as tough as Southside roaches"[42] This moment foreshadows issues of eco-racism and environmental justice that would embattle many communities of color in coming decades.[43]

Scene 2 offers another demonstration of the Younger's compromised habitat as Beneatha calls out the apartment window "TRAVIS! TRAVIS …WHAT ARE YOU DOING DOWN THERE? (*She sees*) Oh Lord, they're chasing a rat!"[44] The moment comes just after Ruth, Travis' mother, has revealed that she is planning to terminate her pregnancy. Travis enters the scene here, eager to recount his adventure to his mother:

> Mama, you should have seen the rat … Big as a cat, honest! […] Bubber caught him with his heel and the janitor, Mr. Barnett, got him with a stick – and then they got him in a corner and – BAM! BAM BAM! – and he was still jumping around and bleeding like everything too – there's rat blood all over the

[37] Hansberry, 54.
[38] Hansberry, 55.
[39] See, Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1962).
[40] Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2005), 83-85.
[41] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 55.
[42] Hansberry, 55.
[43] For more on the way in which the environmental justice movement transformed the messaging and rhetoric of mainstream environmental organization as well as activist priorities in the U.S., see Gottlieb chapters 6 and 7, and particularly p.240-250.
[44] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 59.

> street – (*Ruth reaches out and grabs her son without even looking at him and clamps her hand over his mouth and holds him to her.*)[45]

The physical violence represented in the above scene is as unsettling as the presence of the rat itself. Ruth's fear and impulse to protect her son from both is a palpable visage of the dangers of an out-of-balance ecosystem, where human children are at higher risk of health impacts from chemical pollutants within and outside their home, where they must fend against rats and roaches to sleep or to play.

**Tending the Roots of Belonging**

In Act II, Scene 3, Lena's family presents her with gifts – garden tools, gloves, and a sunbonnet in anticipation of the gardening she will do at their new home. It is a celebratory scene in which her children honor her love of the earth. Positioned just after a visit by Mr. Linder, the scene is a kind of response to Linder's white supremacist message. Travis presents her with a hat, "like the ladies always have on in the magazines when they work in their garden."[46] But Lena's love of gardening should not be confused with middle-class desires for a suburban pastiche of the little house on the prairie. Rather it is a signal of resistance and intentional autonomy consistent with the early civil rights activism and the rise of Black Nationalism, signifying social, political, and ecological resilience emerging from her own connection to the land in the south – an expression of Lena's commitment to herself and to her family.[47] In *Earthbound on Solid Ground*, bell hooks reminds us of the relationship to the earth" that verified for southern Black folks that "white supremacy, with its systemic dehumanization of Blackness, was not a form of absolute power" given that no one, not even plantation owners, could make it rain.[48] Even as Black bodies were commodified in service of the nation's first cash crop, slaves and then sharecroppers tended small gardens of their own, providing for their own families, nourishing an intimacy with the soil that maintained a "concrete place of hope"[49] in the face of white supremacy.[50] In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lena refers to a similarly felt connection with the land, explaining that her desire for a garden like the ones she saw at "the back of the houses down home."[51] comes from her life in the South

[45] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 59.
[46] Hansberry, 124.
[47] As one response to the condition of urban poverty, Lena's desire for a garden perhaps foreshadows the food security movement of the 1990s, when urban community gardens in vacant lots and schoolyards became sites of resistance in a larger struggle. Gardens enabled poor communities to take collective food security and community health into their own hands. For a discussion of food security, which became an important arm of environmental justice, see Erika Mundel's "Theorizing community food security as a multi-institutional social movement."
[48] hooks, "Earthbound on Solid Ground," 69.
[49] hooks, 70.
[50] See bell hooks' *Belonging: a Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
[51] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 53.

before coming to Chicago. Given the growing home and garden industry that was so prevalent at the time, Lena might be tempted to use the many advertised miracle-chemical products. On the other hand, she's already sensitive to the impact of roach spray on her grandson.

Hansberry's play (often produced, and frequently taught in high school literature classes), carries the weight of its longstanding place in the U.S. dramatic canon. As such, the place-based, racialized, and economic particulars of the Younger family's struggle have too often been interpreted (and taught) as a Black family's search to achieve the universally desired so-called American Dream. Lena's small, struggling houseplant has often been read as a metaphor for that ubiquitous dream. But while it clearly represents her resilience. When understood in terms of its ecological relatedness to the family, the little houseplant points to the white privilege that underpins that dream. It sits on a windowsill, soaking in what little light there is, as family members routinely tease Lena for the care she affords it: "You going to take that to the new house […] that raggedy old thing?"[52] Beneatha teases; yet Lena defends her attention by exclaiming that "It expresses ME!"[53] Lena's identification with the plant is more than symbolic; it is empathetic and biochemical. She empathizes with the plant's struggle to survive with little light: "Lord, if this little plant don't get more sun than it's been getting it ain't never going to see spring again,"[54] she pronounces early in the play. However, the reciprocity goes further and becomes more material, signifying a relatedness that is also physiological by virtue of the biochemical exchange between people and plants. The family produces carbon dioxide for the plant, which in turn produces oxygen for exchange in human blood. The plant is, thus, kin, family, and blood. In the final moment of the play, all the moving boxes are cleared, the plant sits on a table, and the children are calling from the street for her to hurry, Lena pauses, "a great heaving thing rises in her as she puts her fist to her mouth to stifle it."[55] She puts on her coat and goes out, and the lights begin to dim. Then, remembering the plant that has long been the recipient of her care, she "comes back in, grabs her plant, and goes out."[56] Here, Lena engages in an act of defiance and resistance against the forces that nearly killed her little plant, as well as an act of resurgence and resilience as she claims this small piece of soil as one in which she too is rooted and has a right to thrive.

*A Raisin in the Sun* echoes the ideas from the history of Black intellectual thought in the U.S. that reaches back to Marcus Garvey and forward to Malcolm X. Rising Black nationalism is expressed through scenes that point back over the arc of history, in which those whose ancestors were stolen from their homelands for the purpose of empire continue to experience extraction – of labor from their bodies and money from their life's savings – but also forward, acknowledging, asserting, and celebrating African heritages. As a Black

[52] Hansberry, 121.
[53] Hansberry, 121.
[54] Hansberry, 40.
[55] Hansberry, 151.
[56] Hansberry, 151.

intellectual, Hansberry engages the ideas that would inspire the Black Power movement and the need for Black people to break free of internalized [white] stereotypes. Walter Lee Jr.'s drunken performance of an African warrior in Act II, Scene 1, throws open the doors of collective imagination to dream into and reclaim – specifically through performance – cultural ties to African homelands.[57] Beneatha appears in the Yoruba garment Asagai has given her: "OCOMOGOSIAY!"[58] she shouts, translating the meaning for her sister-in-law Ruth as "welcome," in the sense of welcoming "the hunters back to the village."[59] Beneatha also dances and sings a traditional Nigerian folk song, "Alundi, Alundi."[60] The inclusion of Yoruba language here resists the interpretation of the scene as mere parody, locating the garment, the dance, and the song in a specific traditional homeland. Hansberry suggests that cultural knowledge, traditions, and ties to homeland are potential tools with which people might decolonize their own thinking, and claim a self-determined future. Scenes such as this not only serve to remind audiences that African ties to homelands are real and legitimate but also assert resilience and power of cultural knowledge and tradition/identity. Walter Lee, Jr., joins in the scene's assertion of embodied connections to Africa. He jumps on the table, as "a leader of his people, a great chief, a descendent of Chaka"[61] the stage directions tell us, saying, "Listen, my Black brothers – […] – Do you hear the water rushing against the shores of the coastlands?"[62] Beneatha remains caught up in her brother's reverie, "OCOMOGOSIAY! […] We hear you Flaming Spear!"[63] It is a meta moment on Hansberry's part that asserts Black Nationalism and African placed-based identity, and demonstrates the power of theater itself, the power of embodied enactment to empower and enliven. But then, in the opening of Act III, after Walter Lee has lost his father's money to local corruption, Beneatha challenges Asagai's vision of African renewal: "What about all the crooks and thieves and just plain idiots who come into power and steal and plunder the sale as before – only now they will be Black"[64] (133-34). Asagai's response to her rightful despair lays blame on systemic injustice, rather than the individual, by asking, "[W]as it your money he gave away? […] Would you have had it at all if your father had not died? […] isn't' there something wrong in a house – in a world – where all dreams, good or bad, must depend on the death of a man?"[65] He positions himself here as part of a longer arc of history through which, even though the present moment contains struggle (even though Nigerian freedom from colonialist rule may yield new corruptions, as Beneatha alludes). Decolonization, Asagai suggests, is a generations-long project in which he sees himself and Beneatha participating.

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[57] For further discussion and analysis of Hansberry political activism and its reflection in *Raisin*, see John Liver Killens' "Lorraine Hansberry: On Time!", especially 103-109.
[58] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 77.
[59] Hansberry, 78-79.
[60] Hansberry, 77.
[61] Hansberry, 78.
[62] Hansberry, 78.
[63] Hansberry, 78.
[64] Hansberry, 134-135.
[65] Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 135.

His proposal envisions not a reversal of history, but a new vision of home: "when it is all over … come home with me […] home to Africa."[66] Through the character of Asagai, Hansberry asserts and reclaims a connection between identity, home, and homeland, between intellectual and cultural traditions, in a vigorous and unabashed vision of a replenished future that is at once African and American.

The same claim of a right to homeplace and homelands at the center of Hansberry's play would be at the heart of the environmental justice movement thirty years later. The articulation of an ecological framework that is inclusive of people – envisioned as part of, and not separate from, nature – is one that recognizes justice as fundamental to ecological health and well-being. The civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s would lead in the years to come to the recognition that social justice and environmental health are intertwined. Carson's *Silent Spring* exposed the personal cost of the illusion that nature and culture are separate. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Carson's *Silent Spring*, the *New York Times* compared her book's impact to that of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which fueled the anti-slavery movement in the early nineteenth century.[67] The Environmental Protection Agency was established in 1970, and DDT was finally banned in the U.S. in 1972 under the Federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act. The Clean Air Act of 1970 and Clean Water Act of 1972 began concurrent municipal and industrial regulation of wastes entering the environment. Yet for ideological as well as economic reasons, U.S. culture continued to embrace chemical production and use. Regulations and health standards were delayed or ignored. Certain chemicals, like DDT, were replaced, but often with substances that are more toxic.[68] Twenty years later in 1992, the then U.S. Vice President Al Gore observed that in a single year:

> 2.2 billion pounds of pesticides were used in this country – eight pounds for every man, woman and child. Many of the pesticides in use are known to be quite carcinogenic; other work by poisoning the nervous and immune systems of insects, and perhaps of humans. Although we no longer have the doubtful benefits of one household product that Carson described – "We can polish our floors with a wax guaranteed to kill any insect that walks over it" – today pesticides are being used on more than 900,000 farms and in 69 million homes.[69]

[66] Hansberry, 136.

[67] Eliza Grizwald, "How Silent Spring Ignited the Environmental Movement," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2012, 9-21. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/magazine/how-silent-spring-ignited-the-environmental-movement.html.

[68] Albert Gore, "Introduction" to *Silent Spring*, (Houghton: Mifflin, 1994), xxi.

[69] In his introduction to *Silent Spring*, Gore further explains that 70 million tons of the herbicide atrazine, classified as a human carcinogen, are used on the cornfields of Mississippi each year; as a direct result, 1.5 million pounds of runoff from the cornfields flow into public drinking water. Even more troubling, atrazine is not removed by water treatment plants.

By the time Gore wrote those words, the environmental justice movement was already calling attention to the ways in which communities of color – including families like the Youngers – faced disproportional risk for exposure not only to pesticides but also to all manner of environmental degradation, including air and water pollution. Whether considered through the vantage point of its moment of production, or from our present socio-cultural moment, Hansberry's play serves as an enduring reminder that women, children, and communities of color bear the burden of environmental ills. Connecting the dots in this play, for example, between unfair housing laws, the construction of waste facilities, the slow violence of air and water pollution, and human health demonstrates the subtle and personal ways that environmental racism is felt in bodies, families, and neighborhoods of those whose lives and labor were tools of extractive capitalism and the consumer culture that it fostered in the 1950s and beyond.

As Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us, Black bodies were stolen, possessed, traded, and mined under the structures of settler colonialism -- extractive capitalism and white supremacy.[70] The harm – generational, environmental, social, and economic – inflicted and enforced by colonialism is revealed in Hansberry's intimate portrait of a Black family in crisis. *A Raisin in the Sun* attests to the conditions of eco-racism thirty years before the rise of the environmental justice movement, a movement that shifted the environmental awareness of the United States and the world. Hansberry's deft attention to the embodied experience of Black women, who were caught between systemic economic inequities and the demands of caring for their families and consequently at increased risk of health effects of pollution and environmental damage understood too long as the necessary collateral damage of extractive capitalism. *A Raisin in the Sun*, while understood as a canonical American play about race, should also be understood as a prescient work of ecodrama for its explicit and tender examination of the effects of eco-racism on a single Black family of the 1950s.

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[70] Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power,* 73-132. Coates reflects on the impact of settler colonialism on black bodies, and the implications of this extractive commodification for contemporary society.

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