

# Hansberry's Hidden Transcript

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That Justice is a blind goddess  
Is a thing to which we black are wise.  
Her bandage hides two festering sores  
That once perhaps were eyes.—Langston Hughes<sup>1</sup>

When we consider the facts, certain chapters of American history  
will have to be reopened—Arthur Schomburg<sup>2</sup>

**M**ANY WRITERS REMIND US THAT THE LITERATURE OF AFRICAN-America is a literature of exile (Baldwin, Du Bois, Darsey, Douglass, Williams-Witherspoon). The African American novelist Richard Wright made his home elsewhere in France, the African American writer and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois ended his years in Ghana. But when James Baldwin tried to make Paris home in the 1950s, he discovered, to his astonishment, that he was “as American as any Texas G.I.” (Baldwin, *Nobody* 4). Baldwin, like Frederick Douglass before him, called to a home in a future America. Baldwin inveighed upon his audience to “end the racial nightmare and achieve our country” (Baldwin, *Fire* 104–05). One hundred years earlier Douglass, notwithstanding America’s bloodied conscience, drew enough hope from the lofty genius of the Declaration of Independence to “not despair of this country” (Douglass 173).

Today, as in America of the 1850s and the 1950s, the question still presses—is home a return or a restoration; is it elsewhere or here? Home, to Baldwin and Douglass was a future America, a promised land. And what is a promised land but a topos (from the Greek for place) built by words; a place brought into being by an act of

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speaking—the making of a promise. To get to this place no travel over land or water is necessary, for no continental or intercontinental voyage could bring us there. For this is a topos of utopia, of, literally, no-place. The only journey we can make is to travel through time to the fulfillment of a promise, to a place that exists not in space, but in future time. And yet, ironically, to arrive at home in this future America, requires a voyage into the past, to an examination of a hidden history that many would prefer remain soundly asleep under a blanket of cultural amnesia.

In this essay I examine one emblematic expression of Black culture and literature that has been betrayed by history—the 1959 award winning Broadway classic *A Raisin in the Sun*—in order to restore it to its rightful home in a historical context of white racist terror. For *A Raisin in the Sun*, like many black American cultural icons, contains a hidden transcript (Scott, Squires, Williams-Witherspoon) that continues to elude public declaration. The hidden transcript tells the story of exile and search for home under a reign of racial terror and violence not adequately understood by audiences, critics, or scholars. It is this elision of history that I address in this essay. For just as what Mark Twain called “the lie of silent assertion” erased the horrors of slavery from the nation’s cultural memory at the turn of the century, the nightmare of white racist violence during and after the great Black migration continues to sleep, undisturbed, backstage (Fishkin 283).<sup>3</sup> This essay attempts to take one step toward beginning the work of an awakening needed to restore the play to its home in history.

### *A Raisin in the Sun*

Briefly, the story of *A Raisin in the Sun* is a classic exile story that, at its heart, revolves around a family’s search for home—a place with a garden like the family matriarch Mama “used to see sometimes at the back of the houses down home” (Hansberry 53). The action centers on a post-war Southside Chicago family of the 1950s who live in a dark and crowded “kitchenette” apartment where three of the four adults work full time jobs to support two younger people: Mama’s 12-year-old grandson Travis, and her college student daughter Beneatha. In spite of three salaries, the family can barely scrape by in the overpriced and underpaid world of the ghetto. Their house, described by

Mama's son Walter Lee as "a beat-up hole" and by his wife Ruth as a "cramped little closet" leaves all members of the family longing for home (32, 93). Mama, who works as a domestic, yearns for a place to plant roots in the earth with plenty of sunshine and room enough for her grandson Travis to play. Her son Walter Lee, who works as a chauffeur, yearns for a home in worldly success with plenty of money, prestige, and a chauffeur of his own. When the family gains a \$10,000 windfall of insurance from the death of the family's patriarch, Big Walter, they argue over how to spend the money and their quarrels reflect competing visions of home. Mama's vision is to use the money to buy a house in a nice neighborhood, even if it "happens" to be white. In contrast to Mama's vision, the Nigerian suitor Asagai invites Mama's daughter Beneatha to consider Africa her home. He envisions a marriage that ushers her "back" across the Atlantic and declares "In time, we will pretend that you have only been away for a day" (137). Beneatha's other suitor, an "honest-to-God-real-live-rich" young man named George Murchison, offers her an upper-class bourgeois vision of home that Beneatha, disdains, but after which her older brother Walter Lee yearns. In one scene Walter Lee tells George, "Your old man is all right, man. I mean he knows how to operate. I mean he thinks big, you know what I mean, I mean *for a home*, you know?" (84). But the longing for the promise-land of home is most strikingly portrayed by a pathetic half-dead little plant that Mama loves because it reminds her of 'back home'. The plant, still rooted in the soil of the past, withers in the dim recesses of the Southside Chicago apartment.

The action of the play builds when Mama puts a down payment on a house in the white community of Clybourne Park. In response to her children's shock and alarm, she reasons "Them houses they put up for colored in them areas way out all seem to cost twice as much as other houses. I did the best I could" (92–93). Within days the family is contacted by the racist white neighborhood association, which tries to buy the family out of their house contract. Outraged but undeterred, the family refuses the offer—until Walter Lee is scammed out of his father's insurance money. Having seemingly lost everything, the family must struggle over whether to capitulate to the racist white neighborhood association and accept the proffered "30 pieces of silver," or to move ahead with their plans to build a new life outside Chicago's Southside ghetto (118). The play ends when the family unites behind a shared vision to

brave an uncertain future in Mama's new home in the white and unwelcoming land.

When *A Raisin* debuted on Broadway in 1959 it was received with widespread critical acclaim and enthusiastic responses from audiences both black and white. The first Broadway play written by an African American woman and directed by an African American, it was nominated for a Tony Award in 1960 (as were both lead actors and the director) and won the New York Drama Critics Circle "Best American Play" award. Yet white critics celebrated what they saw as the play's affirmation of universal human spirit in ways that obscured the specificity of racism faced by northern blacks. As a result, Black Arts critics such as Harold Cruse and Amiri Baraka denounced the play, calling it bourgeois and assimilationist melodrama. In justifying his judgment, Cruse quotes a white *New York Times* reviewer who wrote that "The leading character is, to be sure, a Negro, but his principle problems have nothing to do with his race. They are pre-eminently the problems of the human being as such, for this is, so far as I can recall, one of the first consciously existentialist novels to be written by an American" (Cruse 92). Cruse argued that the play's very success, as well as the "patronizing critical exuberance" of theater critics, were proof that it was unthreatening to White racism: "Not a dissenting critical note was to be heard from Broadway critics, and thus the Negro made theater history with the most cleverly written piece of glorified soap opera I, personally, have ever seen on a stage" (278). Baraka, reflecting back on his initial responses to the play, describes how he "thought Hansberry's play was part of the 'passive resistance' phase of the movement ... We thought her play 'middle class' in that its focus seemed to be on 'moving into White folks' neighborhoods'" (Baraka 19). Seen in its historical and cultural context of 1950s racism, these contradictions surrounding *A Raisin's* reception are not surprising. As Williams-Witherspoon writes, sometimes "pieces of African American Theater make it to the stage specifically because of a seemingly complicit 'public discourse' which masks a carefully crafted hidden transcript that offers counter hegemonic strategies of survival for African Americans who must daily wage overt and/or sometimes subversive battles against their oppressors" (Williams-Witherspoon 10–11).

But today, more than 50 years later, *A Raisin's* hidden transcript remains hidden while universalized integrationist readings of the play

persist. The Black film scholar Donald Bogle claims “the film celebrated integration and ultimately paid homage to the America of free enterprise and materialism,” (Bogle 198) and African American theater scholar Williams-Witherspoon describes the play as a “liberal integrationist drama” (Williams-Witherspoon 78). These milquetoast critical assessments are annually reconstituted in countless theatrical productions, high school curricula, and theater reviews that fail to examine the play’s context in the violent history of northern Jim Crow racism. For example, a recent review of an Arizona Theater Company’s production described how “Hansberry sought nothing less than to prove the family lives of America’s Negroes weren’t much different from everyone else. There was never enough money, enough living space or enough tolerance for the lifestyles of siblings and parents” (Graham 1). A recent Canadian production reviewed in the *Toronto Star* describes the play’s central message as “it is everyone’s birthright to dream and to strive to improve one’s lot in life” (Crew E11). Similarly, an online curriculum guide for teachers describes “the universal themes of the importance of dreams and the frustration of dreams deferred” (TeacherVision). Back during the time of the play’s opening run in 1959, Hansberry vociferously objected to both the white and Black Arts integrationist interpretations of the play, and said so in a number of published essays and interviews. She argued that the play evokes the complex and historically grounded experiences particular to Black Americans that emerge at the intersection of slavery, reconstruction, industrialization, and northern racism.<sup>4</sup> When she sold the film rights to Columbia Pictures, her original (and unproduced) 1961 screenplay attempted to paint more plainly the conditions of white racism. Since that time, some critics like Baraka have retrospectively revised their original negative interpretation of the play and current productions are more attentive to the specificity of racism and scholars are exploring the play’s political critiques of race, class, and gender. Lester, for example, examines how the play offered a critique of sexist Black manhood and male chauvinism “at a time when collective Black identity was couched in the values of rhetoric and Black manhood” (Lester 246) and Keppel describes how the play explored the relationship between racism and economic exploitation and “sought to reestablish the salience and legitimacy of the leftist and Marxian critique that had been publicly purged from American discourse during the early fifties” (Keppel

314). And yet, in spite of countless theatrical productions around the world (including a 9-week award winning Broadway revival in 2004), the play's hidden transcript about Chicago's bloody racist history remains unread. So buried is this history that as recently as 2009, a Tucson, Arizona theater critic could so baldly, and erroneously, assert that the play takes place when "race riots, civil rights demonstrations and color TV were still to come in the 1960s" (Graham 1).

### Jim Crow Chicago

As C. Van Woodward described in his 1955 history *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, segregation was born in the north long before being fully adopted in the South. Despite the fact that by 1830 slavery was abolished in the North, "the Northern Negro was made painfully and constantly aware the he lived in a society dedicated to the doctrine of white supremacy and Negro inferiority" (18). Chicago's Black Belt epitomized the institutionalization of this doctrine, and the impact on migrants from the South was often debilitating. In the 19th century, Chicago, along with other northern cities such as Detroit, New York, and Cleveland, became a city of refuge for fugitive slaves. By 1900, after the failure of reconstruction, roughly 30,000 Blacks lived in Chicago. In the decades that followed, a great migration of southern Blacks moved northward seeking decent wages, better living conditions, and the possibilities of life more-or-less free from the legalized depredations of Jim Crow. Hansberry's parents both came to Chicago in that migration—her father from Mississippi and her mother from Tennessee—to make a new life in a new home.

Although there had long been a sprinkling of Black communities in and around the highly segregated Chicago region, the vast majority of Blacks lived on Chicago's Southside in an area known as the Black Belt—a narrow strip of land some 7 miles long and about 1 mile wide that stretched south from about 22nd to 51st Streets and State Street eastward to Cottage Grove Avenue. During the teens and twenties, this city within a city came to be known as The Black Metropolis, and later, Bronzeville. The industrial demands of World War I furthered the demand for Black workers and by 1920 the Black population of Chicago had tripled to 127,000 people. By 1930, the Black

population had nearly doubled to 234,000, and during WWII it boomed yet again bringing the population to close to 400,000 by the end of the decade (Philpott, Reed, Wright). In his autobiographical novel *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes describes his first summer in Chicago in 1918: "South State Street was in its glory then, a teeming Negro street with crowded theaters, restaurants, and cabarets ... For neither love nor money could you find a decent place to live" (Hughes 33). Hughes experienced first hand how "whites resisted the black demand for living space more ruthlessly than ever. Gangs of young men patrolled the border of the 'foreign' district to the west and terrorized black trespassers" (33). On his first Sunday in town, Hughes "wandered too far outside the Negro district, over beyond Wentworth, and was set upon and beaten by a group of white boys, who said they didn't allow niggers in that neighborhood" (33). The very next summer of 1919, five days of racial terror left nearly 40 people (mostly black) dead, upwards of 500 (mostly black) injured, and over 1,000 Southside residents homeless. The so-called riots began with the drowning of a young man, Eugene Williams, who was being pelted with rocks by whites on the shore. When the police refused to arrest the white rock-throwers, the fighting between white and black youths escalated and soon roving white gangs were making their way into Southside, shooting residents from speeding cars, torching buildings, dragging people from trolleys and autos, and indiscriminately beating anyone they encountered. The race riot had to be suppressed by 6000 National Guard Troops. In the wake of this devastation, the city appointed the Chicago Commission on Race Relations to investigate and make recommendations. The Commission's report, issued in 1922, warned against enforced segregation and documented "gross inequalities" of protection at beaches and playgrounds, unfair police action and judicial procedures, and reiterated the statement that "Negroes were entitled to live anywhere in the city. It pointed out several neighborhoods where they had lived harmoniously with white neighbors for years" (Drake and Cayton 71). The Commission recommended that the City Council and administrative boards "be more vigilant in the condemnation and razing of 'all houses unfit for human habitation, many of which the Commission has found to exist in the Negro residence areas.' In such matters as rubbish and garbage disposal, as well as street repair, Negro communities were said to be shamefully neglected" (Drake and Cayton 70).

In response, the City of Chicago did nothing. The Black Belt continued to grow in population but remained meager in size, inching outward slowly as whites that could afford to leave fled to the suburbs. The combination of a booming population with fierce racial segregation led the Black Belt inevitably toward terrible overcrowding and shocking disrepair. And, like the rest of the nation, the conditions only worsened with the stock market crash and the onset of the great Depression in 1929. What had been already tight housing conditions soon grew to slum like proportions. Apartments were cut up into what were called “kitchenettes” with rudimentary cooking facilities and often no bathing facilities. Schools were segregated and overcrowded, so much so that most Southside children could only go to school for half a day, receiving less than half the education of their white counterparts. In an entry in *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, Hansberry describes her South Side elementary school:

From its inception Betsy Ross had been earmarked as a ghetto school, a school for black children and, therefore, one in which as many things as possible might be safely thought of as ‘expendable.’ That, after all, was why it existed: not to give education but to withhold as much as possible, just as the ghetto itself exists not to give people homes but to cheat them out of as much decent housing as possible. (35)

Despite Illinois’ explicit prohibition of racial discrimination, informal state and city practices promoted racial oppression in areas of jobs, housing, and education. Although industrialization and two world wars had promised and delivered employment for black workers, the jobs were often low-wage menial occupations with little opportunity for advancement. Further, many unions barred black workers and ignored racial discrimination on the job. Housing was scarce, much of it was decrepit, dangerous, and far from habitable. Rent was exorbitant, so much so that many residents lacked sufficient funds for property upkeep. And in spite of high rents, landlords were notoriously lax in repair. Too many people were crammed into too small spaces, and as a result, living conditions were hazardous and less than sanitary. People were living in sheds and shacks, crammed into rickety firetraps, and squeezed into living spaces fit for far fewer inhabitants (Drake and Cayton). In 1941, a Federal Writer’s Project author describing Southside housing conditions wrote: “From 31st



Street south, traversing Dearborn, Federal, La Salle, and Wentworth Avenue, the scene is a spectacle of sympathy for many blocks” (Winkfield 16–17). This “spectacle of sympathy” had for nearly a decade been chronicled by WPA writers and photographers; studies by the Urban League and other organizations; by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations; and most graphically and compellingly described in Wright’s 1940 novel *Native Son*. In a tribute to the Chicago painter Charles Wright, Hansberry looks back to her childhood in the Southside. “Like him I came to adolescence in a community where the steel veil of oppression which sealed our ghetto encased within it a multitude of Black folk who endured every social ill known to humankind: poverty, ignorance, brutality and stupor” (Jackson 333). By 1940, a Chicago Urban League investigation found many homes without light, water and toilets. Impossibly tight housing conditions continued in the Black Belt into the 1940s, in spite of the post-war building boom. According to a 1941 description of the home of a family of recent immigrants from Arkansas, “The apartment is in an indescribable state of disrepair, with leaking roof, rat holes in the floor, falling plaster ... There is no bath and the toilet is in a bad state from overuse and lack of repair (Roskam 34). In 1942, one Southside resident wrote a letter to the editor of the *Chicago Defender* complaining: “I have walked the South Side Streets (Thirty-first to Sixty-ninth) from State to Cottage Grove in the last 35 days searching for a flat” (Hirsh 20).

## White Racial Terror

In spite of the absence of Jim Crow laws on the books, Jim Crow governed most aspects of social and political life in Chicago. In addition to city and state neglect, the boundaries of Southside were violently policed by white hostility expressed on one front by the power of fists, guns, and torches, and on another by the power of legal covenants that prevented white property owners from selling or renting to Blacks. On the legal front, by the late 1920s restrictive covenants were prevalent throughout white Chicago. In 1927, the Chicago Real Estate Board had devised a model covenant that could be implemented by various sections of the city. Philpott describes how the Chicago Real Estate Board actively solicited white neighborhoods

and communities to adopt the covenants. The board “sent speakers across the city to stir up interest in restriction. ‘The colored people of Chicago are bent on invasion’, board spokesmen claimed. They made the rounds of YMCAs, churches, women’s clubs, PTAs, Kiwanis clubs, chambers of commerce and property owner’s associations, sounding the alarm: black organizations were conspiring ‘to settle a negro family in every block in the city.’” (Philpott 191). Although restricting a large area was costly and extremely time consuming (covenants had to be signed by each individual owner in the restricted area) by 1930, three quarters of all residential property in the city was restricted (Drake).

None other than Carl A. Hansberry, a wealthy real estate broker and father of the young Lorraine, launched the first successful legal challenge to restrictive covenants in 1936. In the 1930s, the Chicago branch of the NAACP, which up until that point had been seen by Southside Chicago merely as a rich folks club protecting their own interests, began to take a far more active role in fighting Jim Crow, police brutality and civil rights violations. Although membership numbers were very low, the branch began in 1936 to campaign against restrictive covenants and create more housing opportunities for Southside residents (Reed). The campaign took its first major step in 1937 when, as branch secretary, Hansberry, along with Harry H. Pace, president of the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company, bought property in the racially restricted neighborhood of Woodlawn at 413 East Sixtieth Street and 6140 South Rhodes Avenue. The homes were bought with the intention of legally contesting and defeating restrictive covenants. The Woodlawn neighborhood was a ‘white island’ roughly one square mile in size bordered on the north by the Black Belt’s Washington Park and on the east and west sides by Black neighborhoods. Just northwest of Woodlawn was the elite white neighborhood Hyde Park, home of the University of Chicago, which while not entirely restricted, had worked assiduously over the years to keep black families (with the exception of local laborers and service people) out of the neighborhood (Reed). A 1937 editorial in the *Chicago Defender* chastised the University for promoting racial covenants in the area: “What is new, and shockingly new to us is the bizarre spectacle of an academic institution going out of its way to deny our people certain fundamental rights” (Abbott 20). Another editorial published in the *Chicago Defender* 3 months before the

Hansberry's moved into the racially restricted Woodlawn neighborhood ran a front page banner headline that read: "Death Squad Slays Four: Cops Baffled By Hoodlums in Limousine: Use Pistol and Shotgun in Campaign of Murder and Terrorism" and reports that "in some circles it was hinted the terror reign might be part of a campaign to drive members of the Race from the homes in the vicinity bordering on Chinatown," and ends with "The vital question is: Where will they strike next?" ("Death" 1).

The answer came shortly thereafter when the Hansberry's moved into the Rhodes Avenue home and a gang of whites attacked the family throwing rocks and mobbing the house, and causing the Hansberry's to flee their home. The incident was covered in a *Chicago Defender* article headlined "Two Bricks in Window Start Lilywhite War: Hansberry Home Scene of Attack by Gang" ("Bricks" 4). The article reports "the bricks were thrown with such force that they left holes in the windows without shattering the glass." Local police, responding to a riot call, remained on duty at the house all night. The next day, the Woodlawn Owner's Association filed suit against Hansberry for \$100,000 and the white seller for violating the local restrictive covenant. Although the Hansberry's lost their case in Illinois courts, they eventually won on a technicality in a Supreme Court decision, leading shortly to the absorption of Woodlawn into the Black Belt.<sup>5</sup> By the end of World War II, white racial terror and violence against Southside residents were taking up where restrictive covenants had left off. A June 1945 editorial in the *Chicago Defender* wrote:

Danger: Dynamite at Large. Hate-crazed incendiaries carrying the faggots of intolerance have in the past several months attacked some 30 homes occupied by Negroes on the fringes of the black belt ... Buildings have been set afire, bombed, stoned and razed. Their occupants have been shot and slugged. To date the Chicago Police Department has done virtually nothing to apprehend the guilty. (Abbott 20)

As the second wave of WWII migration continued, the pressures to expand grew and dozens of incidents of racial terror occurred in the area where in thousands of whites (in one case up to 10,000 whites) would mob and terrorize individual families or entire neighborhoods. Throughout the second half of the decade, Southside had on the order of

one racially motivated bombing or arson every twenty days ... Large housing riots—the mobbing of black homes by hundreds, if not thousands, of whites—broke out ... From May 1944 to July 1946, 46 black residences were assaulted ... Beginning in January 1945 there was at least one attack every month, and 29 of the onslaughts were arson-bombings. Yet despite this upsurge in deadly violence, the major dailies provided ‘scant coverage.’ (Hirsch 53)

The “scant coverage” was the result of both the white and Black press succumbing to political pressure to censor reports of the violence. Responding to fears of a race riot comparable to the fierce 1943 Detroit riots, Chicago Commission on Human Relations Director Thomas Wright asked the Chicago press to downplay their riot reporting so as not to further inflame both Black and white citizens. Although Abbott’s *Chicago Defender* protested this policy, it for the most part capitulated. As Hirsch notes, “the press silence of the late 1940s relegated Chicago’s housing riots to a carefully hidden niche in a largely forgotten past” (Hirsch 63). Between 1945 and 1953 at least six episodes of large-scale white racial terrorism occurred when mobs of whites terrorized Black residents or drove through neighborhoods firing shotguns. According to Hirsch, racial violence continued unabated in the neighborhood of Park Manor between 1945 and 1950: “By the late 1940s, a virtual guerrilla war raged between Sixty-seventh and Seventy-first Streets as increasing numbers of blacks moved into the area” (Hirsch 58). In 1946, a mob of somewhere from 1500 to 3000 whites fought with police in attempting to stop Blacks from moving into the neighborhood of Airport Homes. Another neighborhood known as Fernwood exploded in racial terror in 1947 when between 1500 to 5000 whites mobbed a Chicago Housing Authority project after Black veterans had been housed there temporarily. While not covered in the local press, the black newspaper *Pittsburgh Courier* described how “Over 3,000 Negrophobes milled around the project, breaking windows and assaulting Negroes when it was learned that the project was to be open to Negro and white citizens alike” (Anonymous “Standing” A6). The *New York Times* also covered the riot, stating that “About 1,000 policemen were assigned indefinitely today to keep order at the Fernwood Park Housing project where demonstrations have been staged in protest against admission of eight Negro families as tenants” (Anonymous “Chicago” A4). According to

Hirsch, the racist violence in Fernwood lasted three nights as “blacks were hauled off streetcars and beaten. Roaming gangs attacked people on streets and in vehicles” (Hirsch 55). Two months later, the *Chicago Defender* ran a short news item reporting that “Eight police squads were called early Wednesday night to disperse a mob of more than 150 whites protesting Negro families occupying a building at 6710 Wasbash” (Anonymous “Death” A12). In 1949 in the Englewood neighborhood, where the Hansberrys lived, over 10,000 whites mobbed the streets brutally beating residents and bystanders alike. That same year, another anti-Black riot was held in Park Manor. The press silence finally ended in 1951 when white racial terrorism in the suburban community of Cicero was reported nationally and locally. On this occasion, mobs of up to 5000 whites burned, looted, and otherwise assaulted a large apartment building that housed a single Black family. The violence lasted three nights and required 450 National Guard and 200 police to end (Hirsch). But whatever justice prevailed after the National press and the National Guard made a presence in Cicero was short lived. According to a 1952 issue of the *Daily Worker*, a Cook County judge acquitted the Cicero Police Chief, “who had been accused of standing by as Ku Klux mobsters wrecked an apartment building and committed other acts of violence to prevent Harvey Clarke Jr., a Negro, and his family, from moving into his newly-rented apartment” (Anonymous “Judge” 3). And according to Hirsch and Philpott, mobbings and explosions that began in 1953 continued unabated for years in the Trumbull Park neighborhood of Chicago.

### The Hidden Transcript

While Hansberry's path-breaking play is clearly steeped in Chicago history, most productions and criticism of the play fail to paint the full picture of racial violence taking place off-stage on the streets of Southside. Surely, had Hansberry fully sketched the play's context of racial terror and violence, it would not have been produced. In 1950s America, censorship was the mild side of the racist mask—beatings, lynchings, arson, and rape loomed always in the background. Nevertheless, there are elements of the play that allude, in disguised form, to this historical terror. In his groundbreaking *Domination and the*

*Arts of Resistance*, Scott describes how oppression never completely silences the voices of the oppressed, but that discourses that are unspeakable in the dominant public sphere are preserved clandestinely through what he calls a “hidden transcript.” Under conditions of domination, subordinated groups voice political resistance in disguise, hidden between the lines of the official or public transcript in a multiplicity of coded forms: “The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear ... the hidden transcript takes place off-stage” (Scott 4). As Catherine Squires notes, African American public spheres (of which literary, artistic, political and other cultural formations play a part) have historically been subject to multiple constraints that mitigate and/or silence resistance to white racism. She writes, “In the history of Black public spheres, the pressures of living in a racist society, the ongoing fight for equality, and the rich cultural reserves have necessitated” the use of hidden transcripts (Squires 457). Similarly, theater historian Williams-Witherspoon draws on Scott’s framework to explore how a “hidden transcript is replete in every period of African American Theater, from the earliest forms of slave entertainment, to the minstrelsy, to musical theater, on to the development of serious drama” (Williams-Witherspoon 21). In her analysis Williams-Witherspoon demonstrates how “the history of African American theater is a history of a struggle against the pain of silencing” (273).

Thus in spite of decades of production and reception, *A Raisin in the Sun* has yet to be situated in its historical context of racist violence. This is perhaps nowhere more sadly illustrated than in the 2004 Broadway revival that boasted a nine-week run at Broadway’s Royale Theater and that cast two superstars—hip-hop artist and mogul Sean Puffy “P. Diddy” Combs as Walter Lee and former *Cosby* *Show* legend Phylicia Rashad as Mama. The \$2.6 million production recouped not only its production cost but also earned a profit of \$700,000, one of the biggest weekly takes for a non-musical play in Broadway history. The revision also earned four Tony nominations and two Tony awards. Phylicia Rashad became the first African-American woman to win the Tony Award for best performance by a leading actress in a play and Audra McDonald won the Tony Award for Best Featured Actress in a Play. The production inspired over 158

reviews and news articles published in major U.S. papers and 50 articles in major national magazines and journals. Yet within this body of over 200 articles, a key word search of the term “violence” results in only one review, in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, that references the violence of none other than *Mama*: “For a moment, Mama totters on the brink of revenge and violence, then rocks herself into a place of grace and forgiveness” (Brock 1). Similarly, a key word search of the word “terror” resulted in just one article—a *New York Times* review focusing on *Sean Combs* that read: “Hip-Hop 101, the hustler’s credo: that the undercurrent of terror is just as important to hip-hop capitalism as flash and swagger.” (Sanneh 1). Thus, in 2004, public discourse about violence and terror with respect to the play appears to reference only the *Black* cast and characters.

### Behind the Mask

Outside of the general cultural amnesia about northern Jim Crow and the north’s history of racial violence, readers and producers of the play have relatively little help from the text itself. This is not surprising given that “the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask” (Scott 3). As Williams-Witherspoon writes “Recognizing that in African American Theater there is both a public discourse and a hidden transcript ... [makes it] critical for us to deconstruct the history behind the necessity of layered dichotomies on the American stage” (Williams-Witherspoon 232). But while it was perhaps necessary to keep the hidden transcript hidden in the 1950s, it need no longer be so. It is long past time to breach the boundary between the play’s hidden and public transcripts and restore the play to its place in history. But doing so is not easy, for the hidden transcript “requires that we enter the world of rumor, gossip, disguises, linguistic tricks, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures, anonymity. For good reason, nothing is entirely straightforward here; the realities of power for subordinate groups mean that much of their political action requires interpretation precisely because it is intended to be cryptic and opaque” (Scott 137).

In *A Raisin*, several allusions to racial violence occur in Act II scene III where Karl Linder, the white representative of the fictional Clybourne Park Improvement Association, approaches the family to

buy back the house. Sitting before an anxious congregation of Beneatha, Ruth, and Walter Lee, Linder anxiously bumbles about. He refuses a beer, then coffee, and wants, he says “nothing at all” (Hansberry 115). Throughout the scene, the humor of Linder’s fearful trembling performance masks the menacing threat that underlies his purpose. In the public transcript, white racism appears less threatening than it does downright rude—manifesting in the clumsy cowardice of the play’s sole white character. In the hidden transcript, however, Linder’s satire masks the violent face of Jim Crow. After refusing the Younger’s hospitality, he gets to the point and offers to “give them a lowdown on the way we do things out in Clybourne Park” (115). After more bumbling, he finally says: “I am sure you people must be aware of some of the incidents which have happened in various parts of the city when colored people have moved into certain areas” (116). Although the “incidents” remain unnamed, Hansberry’s stage directions, in a veiled reference to white racist stone throwing, instruct Beneatha to “exhale heavily and start tossing a piece of fruit up and down in the air” (116). Although Linder then says regretfully that “we deplore that kind of thing,” nowhere does he, or any of the characters, state what “kind of a thing” they are talking about (116). Everything is implied, understated and the euphemism “that kind of thing” becomes a cipher, a wispy trace. At first the young members of the Younger family are puzzled—does this white man Linder really mean to welcome them to their new home? To restore a human ethos to white America? A few lines later Linder finally gets to the point: The Association wants to buy back the home in order to keep the Youngers from moving into the neighborhood. “For the happiness of all concerned, our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities” (118). Linder’s pompous presumption in his decree of ‘our’ Negro families” combined with his repeated incantation of the phrase “you people” throughout the scene, disguise the menacing presence of white domination behind a pretense of obvious and nonthreatening condescension. After Linder leaves and Mama returns, the children describe the Judas-like encounter with Linder. Walter Lee tells Mama how “they just *dying* to have ... a fine family of fine colored people,” and Mama immediately asks “did he threaten us?” (121). For a brief moment, Walter Lee’s reference to *dying* is underscored by Mama’s concern, but then she is quickly reassured. “No,” Beneatha tells her, “They don’t do it



like that anymore. He talked Brotherhood” (121). Beneatha’s simultaneous acknowledgement of past and disavowal of present white racist violence reveals what Scott describes as the dialectical relationship between the public and hidden transcripts: “By recognizing the guises the powerless must adopt outside the safety of the hidden transcript, we can, I believe, discern a political dialogue with power in the public transcript” (Scott 138). This dialogue is by necessity in a double-voiced form, one that must speak and unspeak in the same breath.

Aside from these nuanced references to white violence, Hansberry wrote another scene that was deleted from the Broadway and film productions and not published until 1995. This scene contains far more than a vague allusion to the conditions of white mob violence that prevailed in Southside Chicago. Surprisingly, both the 1958 pre-Broadway runs in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New Haven, the 2004 pre-Broadway revival in Atlanta appear to have successfully included this scene. Not surprisingly, however, in both cases the scene was cut from the Broadway runs. The scene involves a conversation between Mama and Mrs. Johnson, a troublesome busybody neighbor who speaks herself in a hidden transcript of gossip and innuendo. Hansberry’s script disguises the truth-telling of Mrs. Johnson’s speech with mockery and satire as the two women preen and coo and bait one another, letting verbal nuance, indirection, and nonverbal hyperbole tell the story. Even though Mrs. Johnson “can hardly stay a minute” she readily accepts a piece of Mama’s sweet potato pie and some milk (100). After sitting down to dig into the pie she asks “I guess y’all have seen the news what’s all over the colored paper this week?” When Mama says she hadn’t, Mrs. Johnson admonishes her with astonishment. “You mean you ain’t read ‘bout them colored people that was bombed out their place out there? Ain’t it something how bad these here white folks is getting here in Chicago! Lord, getting so you think you right down in Mississippi!” (100). As a caricature of the minstrel clown, Mrs. Johnson plays the part of the trickster who is permitted to speak the truth, but only through a guise of comedy. After downing her pie and imparting her news, Mrs. Johnson makes haste to leave, but not without another cup of coffee and another dig before departing. In her neighborly troublemaking way, she muses aloud that it must have been Walter Lee’s idea to move out to Clybourne Park. She says, “I bet this time next month y’all

names will have been in the papers plenty—NEGROES INVADE CLYBOURNE PARK-BOMBED!” (102). Hiding the truth in plain sight, the trickster Mrs. Johnson serves as a disguise that enables Hansberry to “carve out a public, if provisional, space for the autonomous cultural expression of dissent. If it is disguised, at least not hidden; it is spoken to power” (Scott 166). To further bury the dead, Hansberry adds a final symbolic inversion wherein the trickster Mrs. Johnson dons the mask of white racism. On her way out the door, Mrs. Johnson declares, “Mmmmmmm. The Youngers is too much for me! You sure one proud-acting bunch of colored folks” (Hansberry 103). As Scott notes, “One of the most effective ways subordinates may express resistance is by embedding it in a larger context of symbolic compliance” (Scott 166).

In his notes to the 1995 new edition of the play Hansberry’s literary executor Robert Nemiroff explains why this scene was excised from previous published and produced versions of the play. By attempting to stave off the obvious conclusion about its deletion, Nemiroff actually underscores the absence created by the cuts. “Not one of these cuts, it should be emphasized, was made to dilute or censor the play or to ‘soften’ its statement” (Nemiroff xvi). And yet on the very next page says “the pressures were enormous (if unspoken and rarely even acknowledged in the excitement of the work) not to press fate unduly with unnecessary risks. And the most obvious of these was the running time” (xvii). Nemiroff then contends that the Mrs. Johnson scene was cut because it added the cost of another character and 10 minutes to the play, and therefore “it has not been used in most revivals” (xxi). Ironically, he then goes on to report that where the Mrs. Johnson scene had been included, it had “worked to great-and hilarious-effect” (xxi).

Another coded reference to white racial terror comes toward the end of the play when the children give Mama a hat for gardening in her new home in Clybourne Park. In his chapter on Hansberry in his epic “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,” Cruse accuses Hansberry of being a pawn of both Communists and Black Bourgeoisie, and, as illustration, describes how the play’s “Negro working-class characters had to mouth middle-class ideology-witness the line about Mama Younger with her wide-brimmed hat: ‘She looks just like Mrs. Miniver’” (Cruse 280–81). To Cruse, Hansberry’s reference to Mrs. Miniver was a simple and unambiguous expression of her

bourgeois cultural affinity—it was a revelatory statement that stripped away any illusions of critical artistry and revealed instead the sophomoric ethos of Hollywood propaganda. But read in its historical context, Hansberry's allusion to Mrs. Miniver is a revelatory statement of a radically different kind.

Directed by William Wyler, the 1942 film *Mrs. Miniver* takes place in a small village in WWII England where the main character, Mrs. Miniver, is a wife and mother whose husband is away at war while she and the children must face the German Blitzkrieg on their own. Although it's a powerful antiwar film, it's not at first glance clear why Hansberry references it. But reading the play in light of the hidden transcript, it becomes clear that Hansberry was speaking in code. She was comparing Mrs. Miniver and her family and neighbors to Mama and her family and the Black Americans of Southside Chicago, all of whom were victims of a terrible and dangerous war. Like Mrs. Miniver and her neighbors, Chicago Southside Blacks were being bombed indiscriminately never knowing when or from where harm would come. Like the heroic British portrayed in the film, heroic Southsiders were fighting not just for their lives, but also for freedom. In the film's final scene the town Vicar is presiding over yet another funeral for a young villager killed by German air raids.<sup>6</sup> He says:

We, in this quiet corner of England, have suffered the loss of friends very dear to us ... The homes of many of us have been destroyed, and the lives of young and old have been taken. There is scarcely a household that hasn't been struck to the heart. And why? ... Because this is not only a war of soldiers in uniform. It is a war of the people, of all the people, and it must be fought not only on the battlefield, but in the cities and in the villages, in the factories and on the farms, in the home, and in the heart of every man, woman, and child who loves freedom! (William Wyler).

The Vicar's statement, referenced indirectly in Hansberry's play, equates American racism with German fascism and the bombs of racial terror in Chicago with the bombs of fascist terror in England. Moreover, it warns of the dangers that racist violence poses to freedom and the culture as a whole. Such comparisons were common in the Black public discourse in the 1940s. Consider, for example, a 1944 story in the *Chicago Defender* that leads with "Negro-hating,

home-wrecking vandals of the most vicious type duplicated the terrorism of Hitler's Europe on the Southside last week ..." (A12). Similarly, advocates of the proposed (but never enacted) 1946 anti-lynching bill frequently compared American racists to Nazis, as did the Civil Rights Congress' 1951 (virtually silenced) petition to the United Nations titled "We Charge Genocide." Yes, Hansberry was by necessity speaking in code, for she was sending a stronger message than was possible to plainly speak on stage. As Scott writes, "Most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in overt collective defiance of power holders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites" (Scott 136).

## Conclusion

Every year thousands of high school students across the United States read Lorraine Hansberry's classic play and learn about racism and housing segregation in the nation's distant past. But what they do not learn is how white violence was used to enforce and underwrite that racism. As Moon and Nakayama demonstrate, culturally mediated texts shape historical events in ways that encourage audiences to see events in particular strategic ways "to validate some, usually dominant, social realities, while nullifying those of others" (88). Given its origins in the institutionally racist and commercially motivated New York theater world of the 1950s, the play Hansberry wrote and produced could not but have been written in code. In fact, what is remarkable is just how much she was able then, to say. But today, more than 60 years after the deadly and systematized violence that accompanied the great black migration north, there has been little to no public accounting of the racist violence that haunts the backdrop of the play *A Raisin in the Sun*. And not for lack of opportunity—the play, which over the last five decades has been published in dozens of languages and produced in scores of countries, has won dozens of national and international awards. In the United States alone, the play has had five major award winning productions: 538 performances (many sold-out) on Broadway in 1959; a major Columbia film released in 1961; 847 performances and a Tony award for best (Broadway) musical in 1974; an Emmy nominated nationally

televised PBS teleplay in 1989; and had a nine-week Tony award winning Broadway revival in 2004. The erasure of the play's historical context remains a serious breach in American cultural memory. In this sense, the play—itsself about exile and the search for home—remains in exile. In her discussion of the Biblical story of Esther, Sue Zaeske observes how exilic rhetoric is by necessity coded, for its confrontation with power can be deadly. Exilic rhetoric, she writes, “Is rhetoric aimed at survival, resistance, and even elevation within the foreign government. Its audience is a people positioned at the margins of dominant culture, a people with limited access to rhetorical spaces and one for whom mortal fear curtailed rhetorical action” (Zaeske 199). Like Esther, Hansberry sought to resist domination from within the system of domination—from a public transcript produced by white mainstream theater and film industries. Her access to this public transcript both enabled and confined her speaking, and the hidden transcript of her play still travels in exile, seeking its home in history.

## Notes

1. Hughes, Langston. “Justice.” *The Poems: 1951–1967, The Collected Work of Langston Hughes, Volume 3*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2001. 160.
2. Schomburg, Arthur. “The Negro Digs Up His Past.” *Harlem Renaissance Reader*, New York: Penguin, 1995. 64.
3. Fishkin here investigates the misreading of Twain and Dunbar's dialect writing in light of the contemporary cultural silences surrounding slavery.
4. Hansberry, Lorraine. “Me Tink Me Hear Sounds in De Night.” *Theatre Arts* 44.10 (1960): 9.  
Hansberry, Lorraine. “An Author's Reflections: Willy Loman, Walter Younger, and He Who Must Live.” *The Village Voice Reader: A Mixed Bag from the Greenwich Village Newspaper*. Ed. Daniel Wolf and Edwin Fancher. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962. 194–99.  
Hansberry, Lorraine. “Make New Sounds: Studs Terkel Interviews Lorraine Hansberry.” *American Theater* (1984): 5–41.
5. In 1948, the Supreme Court in the case *Shelley v. Kramer* banned restrictive covenants outright.
6. The film's final scene makes this point so compellingly, in fact, that it apparently inspired President Franklin D. Roosevelt to have the scene broadcast over the *Voice of America* and printed on millions of leaflets dropped over German-occupied territory.

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