

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and the "Illegible" Politics of (Inter)personal Justice

Tricia Rose

The world or "life" may seem to more often overwhelm the human being, but it is the human being's capacity for struggling against being overwhelmed which is remarkable and exhilarating.

—LORRAINE HANSBERRY

Oppression functions not simply by forcing people to submit . . . but also works by rendering its victims unlovable.

—PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, *Black Sexual Politics*

Here you were: to be loved. To be loved, baby, hard, at once, and forever, to strengthen you against the loveless world. . . . We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived.

—JAMES BALDWIN, *The Fire Next Time*

At the emotional climax of Lorraine Hansberry's landmark 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter's sister Beneatha is on the verge of totally rejecting him. Walter is planning to take a payoff from Mr. Lindner, a neighborhood association representative, for agreeing *not* to racially integrate their all-white community. This seeming acceptance of white people's rejection and dehumanization of them enrages Beneatha and Walter's wife, Ruth, for two reasons: first, because of its seeming internalization of the hatred represented by the payoff, and second, because it occurs right after Walter had been scammed out of a significant portion of Mama's deceased husband's insurance money in a liquor store scheme by his runaway friend, Willy Harris. This life insurance money (some of which Mama used for a down payment on the house in question) was a small way that her husband felt he could pay forward in death some of the value of a life of exploited labor. With his sacrifice, he hoped to advance the lives of the

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next generation. The money Walter lost (which Mama gave him to “manage” after he complained that he was not given any fiscal decision-making power in the family) had been especially held aside to pay for Beneatha’s education. Walter’s agreement to take the payoff money from Lindner is presented as the last straw, the final indignity. In this pivotal scene, Walter articulates a kind of ethical nihilism; he rejects the history of Black dignity as a form of political resistance, claiming, “There ain’t no causes—there ain’t nothing but taking in this world, and he who takes most is smartest—and it don’t make a damn bit of difference *how*.”¹ As described by Hansberry in the stage direction, Walter dress-rehearses how he will act when Lindner arrives by “*groveling and grinning and wringing his hands in profoundly anguished imitation of the slow-witted movie stereotype*.”² This is the exchange that follows Walter’s performance:

BENEATHA: That is not a man. That is nothing but a toothless rat.

MAMA: Yes—death done come in this here house. (*She is nodding, slowly, reflectively*) Done come walking in my house on the lips of my children. You what supposed to be my beginning again. You—what supposed to be my harvest. (*To Beneatha*) You—you mourning your brother?

BENEATHA: He’s no brother of mine.

MAMA: What you say?

BENEATHA: I said that that individual in that room is no brother of mine.

MAMA: That’s what I thought you said. You feeling like you better than he is today? (*Beneatha does not answer*) Yes? What you tell him a minute ago? That he wasn’t a man? Yes? You give him up for me? You done wrote his epitaph too—like the rest of the world? Well, who give you the privilege?

BENEATHA: Be on my side for once! You saw what he just did, Mama! You saw him—down on his knees. Wasn’t it you who taught me to despise any man who would do that? Do what he’s going to do?

MAMA: Yes—I taught you that. Me and your daddy. But I thought I taught you something else too. . . . I thought I taught you to love him.

BENEATHA: Love him? There is nothing left to love.

MAMA: There is *always* something left to love. And if you ain’t learned that, you ain’t learned nothing. (*Looking at her*) Have you cried for that boy today? I don’t mean for yourself and for the family ’cause we lost the money. I mean for him: what he been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain’t through learning—because that ain’t the time at all. It’s when he’s at his lowest and can’t believe in hisself ’cause the world done whipped him so! When you starts measuring

somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.³

Encouraged by the recognition from and political consciousness of Mama and his extended family, Walter rejects the white homeowners' association pay-off and the play ends on what many have falsely registered as a pro-integrationist trajectory: the Youngers are all set to move into not only a hostile, all-white neighborhood (albeit in much better physical living conditions), but also a "community" willing to pay them *not* to move in.

Raisin's political and social meanings were misread every which way but Sunday. Both its critics and its champions projected onto *Raisin* their own desires and wants. Many middle-class whites cheered it because it seemed to offer proof that the American Dream is worthwhile, meaningful, and now available to all. *Raisin* was, for some, a story of racism defeated through homeownership and racial integration. Some Black critics and scholars dubbed *Raisin* a "swan song for integration," and a "kitchen-sink drama" (e.g., a female-centered play devoid of "real" political value). Mama's climactic sermon and her role, in general, were perceived to be a crystallization of an all-too-familiar "emasculating" Black matriarchy. To some feminists, the women characters were less than heroic, played supporting roles, were too sacrificial, and thus not feminist enough.

Hansberry was not celebrating US nationalist dreams of the bourgeois white nuclear family, nor was she celebrating an "emasculating" Black matriarchy, as those who cheered and jeered the play respectively claimed. What appeared to be a capitulation to the quintessential American Dream and the longing for Black inclusion in it was in fact a deep critique of the American Dream—in particular, the pivotal role of racialized domesticity that lies at its heart. Hansberry reveals that Black exclusion was a necessary component of the American Dream itself. Instead of celebrating the American Dream (which has always been tied up with elevated homeowner investment value associated with homogeneously white towns and neighborhoods), Hansberry rewrites this familiar and hegemonic trope to challenge its valuing of upward mobility, normative domesticity, the white nuclear family, and homeownership. She re-reads it from within the Black radical tradition and reveals its fundamentally exclusionary role in containing Black mobility, freedom, and self-determination.

Hansberry illuminates her concern over Black belonging, makes her complex critique of the American Dream, and elevates the interpersonal politics of racism via a subtle, multifaceted story that in many ways dramatizes the acclaimed and very well-known Langston Hughes poem from which the title of the play is taken. Although Hansberry chose a poem that addressed the complex effects of deferred and denied dreams, *Raisin* was interpreted to be about the value of racial integration. Denied integrationist dreams seem to finally

come true in her play, an analysis that reads her political vision incorrectly. In this pivotal misreading, integration is the balm that heals the legacy of deferred dreams. Hansberry's ending "proves" this interpretation to be untrue and yet this willful and tenacious misinterpretation continues to be made.⁴

If not a celebration of the American Dream, what then *is* the dream to which Hansberry refers and why does what happens to it matter so? Hansberry defines the dreaming articulated by the Youngers as the freedom dreams of everyday people, and she explores the dangers of constant crushing deferral and systematic denial of them. The collective dream of desegregation (not integration) as a material manifestation of Black freedom is the social context in which the far more fundamental desire for fully recognized Black humanity is animated. The Youngers represent two crucial facets of Black freedom dreaming: the *refusal* to accept the literal payoff for acceding to ghettoization and deprivation, and their simultaneous *embrace* of collective desires for mobility, opportunity, and dreams.

But this dream is only part of the story. Hansberry's *Raisin* brings to our attention the fact that attempting to exercise this dual action of refusal and embrace is central to our survival, but is also painful, dangerous, and volatile territory. The multi-generational experience of systemic and normalized injustice takes its toll on the mind, spirit, and body; finding a sustainable way to resist the web of conditions that work against Black humanity is complex and difficult work. Hansberry reminds us that freedom dreaming for Black people is fraught with risk, as such dreams are vulnerable to despair, manipulations, and loss of perspective. It is with this context in mind that she answers the question "what happens to a dream deferred?" by revealing the delicate and complex set of micro-responses to myriad social conditions that active Black freedom dreaming requires. Hansberry pivots the dramatic highpoint of *Raisin* around the Youngers' navigation of these psychological, interpersonal, and structural dangers and impediments that characterize deferred Black freedom dreams.

Hansberry's *Raisin* also emphasizes the deep and complex impact of structural racism and sexism on Black intimacy, social relationships, and community health. It challenges the presumption that Black so-called dysfunctional family structures and the overly powerful women in them are to blame for racial inequality. The home and the central roles all the women play (even while Walter also remains dramatically centered) serve as a powerful rejection of the twin legacies of sociological discourses about Black family/cultural dysfunctionality. These discourses, essential for garnering support for policies that created racial housing segregation to cordon off Black life, also regulate interracial intimacy and contact and represent a defining nexus for Black social relations. By creating a drama based in a Black domestic sphere that exposes the interior, intimate impact of structural racism via housing segregation, oppression, economic exploitation, and inaccessible educational opportunity, Hansberry is

able to reveal the importance of this nexus in a deft and complex fashion. Her use of Hughes's poetic phrase "raisin in the sun" as the play's title conjures his series of vivid and emotionally resonant descriptions of the personal and interpersonal impact of racialized exclusion on the Black community.

The pivotal scene to which I refer at the outset averts what the play seems to argue would have been a political, familial, and personal disaster. Walter's actions and reactions, Beneatha's outrage, and Mama's intervention highlight the importance of developing a subtle lattice of interpersonal strategies in response to the corrosive and disabling conditions of racialized segregation and oppression. This scene reveals the fragility and power of Walter's network of interpersonal bonds (in this case, his family) to prevent the complete internalization of despair that Walter exhibits at the outset of the scene when he shares his plans to take the money. As Julius Lester has argued: "What is at stake here is not moving into a white neighborhood, as some would have it, nor is it the aspiration 'to own color TV.' . . . What is at stake is the kind of human being Walter Lee Younger should be."⁵

Hansberry wants us to look closely at what happens to the dreamer and the people closest to him or her when the hope for freedom and justice is continually denied. In a world defined by deeply rooted injustice, Black intimate bonds that nurture these dreams are taxed, frayed, and sometimes broken. When these bonds are cut, spiritual death follows and the community's overall health declines. This is the death of the spirit and psyche to which Mama refers in the climax of *Raisin* when she says death "done come walking in my house on the lips of my children."⁶ When dreams are deferred and "fester like a sore and then run," who sees this the most? When they "dry up," who grapples with this arid emotional terrain? When they "stink like rotten meat" or sag "like a heavy load," who cleans things up and tries to lift the heavy load we carry? Our closest friends, loved ones, family members do these things for us; we do it for them.

When dreams are deferred, denied, and rejected, the impact is felt most intensely in our most intimate relationships—the places where dreams are made real and are uttered quietly and hopefully. With those closest to us, in interpersonal spaces, our most fragile dreams are given fleeting voice, solidified, challenged, supported, affirmed. It is also where they can be crushed into dust.

(Inter)personal Justice Politics

Intimate relationships are never privately negotiated; they are defined significantly by complex public discourses, policies, and institutions. This is especially true for African Americans, whose social relationships and intimate relationships have been at the heart of hostile and discriminatory public discourse and social science examination since their arrival on North American shores. Theories of Black inferiority have been explained by various articulations of pre-

sumed Black cultural “pathology,” which has been consistently located in the so-called hypersexuality of the Black male and female and the “dysfunctional” matriarchal tendencies of Black family structures. According to the titans of twentieth-century sociology and social policy (Robert Park, Gunnar Myrdal, E. Franklin Frazier, and then, post-*Raisin*, Daniel P. Moynihan), all Black families, considered the core institution of Black culture, have been labeled abnormal and to varying degrees dysfunctional. Substituting the nineteenth-century emphasis on biological difference/inferiority with cultural difference/inferiority, twentieth-century sociologists framed Black culture as “unstable,” “pathological,” and “non-normative.”⁷ As Rhonda Williams points out:

The architects of cultural and (social) scientific racism historically have represented black communities, black families, and black bodies as the bearers of stigma, disease, danger, violence, social pathology, and hypersexuality. . . . Black families have long functioned as markers in the public imagination: they generally signify and manifest a morally problematic sexually [*sic*] agency, a cultural degeneracy.⁸

Hansberry’s entire play, but especially its dramatic resolution, illuminates the significant role of interpersonal relationships in negotiating, fending off, and challenging structural oppression and the distorted worldview and despair it cultivates. Hansberry consistently seems to argue that political possibility and perceptions of impossibility are nurtured or starved in the intimate and interpersonal sphere among those who encourage us to choose *how* to respond to the psychic and emotional violence wrought by structural oppression.

Hansberry’s *Raisin* is a deeply political play, but its domestic setting rendered it vulnerable to the normalized sexist political reasoning that devalues domesticity, which likely obscured a core facet of its political vision. Despite the fact that nearly all so-called public-sphere assaults on Black citizenship and normalcy relied (and continue to rely) on the pathologization of Black private-sphere relations, gendered identities, family, and cultural formations, many analysts located the *real* politics of *Raisin* solely in the public-sphere matter of desegregating housing. For them, Hansberry’s dramatic depiction of combating housing segregation was *unfortunately* located in a domicile. For Hansberry—and many feminist thinkers and artists—the home, literally and metaphorically, is a crucial locus for the development and nurturance of political possibility itself; it is an anchor for emergent political consciousness, community vision, and survival. In short, the Youngers’ apartment is at the political heart of the play.

Hansberry’s *Raisin* is not alone in drawing our errant attention to the fragile but crucial political role of intimate spaces. Her work is part of an underappreciated facet of Black radical tradition that has been expressed by some of the most visionary Black artists and thinkers. I am calling this facet “(inter)per-

sonal justice." (Inter)personal justice attends to the crucial role of intimate relationships and community formations in producing or suffocating social justice movements or other forms of radical resistance. Rather than focusing only or primarily on the details of structural oppression in isolation from lived interpersonal experience, (inter)personal justice emphasizes the impact of structural forms of inequality on interpersonal dynamics and how these dynamics can influence the quality and sustainability of political thought and action. An (inter)personal justice politics draws complex, mutually informing connections between political consciousness/action and intimate lives and relationships in Black cultural/community spaces. Personal matters and relations are deeply shaped by the structural injustice and inequality that manifest in interpersonal dynamics and lived experience. (Inter)personal justice responds to the complicated interpersonal means by which structures of injustice deform, produce more injury, and delimit the emergence of languages of collective community building and the development of sustainable social movements.

(Inter)personal justice reveals the politically generative work that goes on in relational, private spaces and social interactions, as well as *the development of political consciousness that goes on within these interpersonal spaces*. Ideas about community resistance that emphasize the importance of (inter)personal justice draw only limited separation between public and private politics, as this distinction has often disparaged or rendered invisible the political work that goes on in the more intimate, often female-associated, spaces. This model of (inter)personal justice takes very seriously the generative grounds for a politically resistive consciousness and the importance of maintaining and enabling a healthy community fabric for social change.

Hansberry portrays each member of the Younger family as having to negotiate constantly the economic effects of racism and sexism and their emotional and interpersonal impact. Her decision to set the play in the Youngers' apartment, and her consistent narration of the ways the Youngers are affected by structural forces (menial jobs for little pay, frustration over lack of opportunity, the physical and psychological exhaustion caused by enervating service work) and communal cultural forces (music, Black history and culture, community interactions, and religion), set up the very nexus to which (inter)personal justice is dedicated. As the play develops, the frustrations mount and the compounding forces begin to simmer and then boil over.

In the climactic scene in *Raisin*, Hansberry trains our attention on the corrosive nature of some completely human and understandable responses to oppression: rage, nihilism, and the internalization of self-hatred associated with it. Hansberry forces us to confront the highly destructive interpersonal and worldview-related consequences of the conditions in which the Youngers find themselves. She addresses the complexly destructive dynamics of unchecked but justifiable rage as a distorting fuel for political action and vision via two

interrelated angry/explosive outbursts: Walter's rehearsal of what he will say to Lindner when he arrives at the Youngers' apartment hoping that they will take payment for not moving into his white neighborhood, and Beneatha's betrayal-laced, scathing rejection of Walter in response to his plan. (Remember that the funds Walter lost were partly dedicated to paying for Beneatha's medical education.) The anger and betrayal they both feel threaten to explode in this scene.

Walter's pain and rage are expressed in his rational/rationalizing capitulation to a dog-eat-dog worldview. He uses Mama's long-standing advice to him to "see life like it is" to claim his new realization that life is really about "who gets and who don't get." Life, Walter says, is divided up "between the takers and the 'tooken.'" He has learned his lesson not only because of what Lindner has offered the Youngers, but also through the betrayal of Willie, who stole a large portion of the insurance money they were supposed to use to set up a business in the community. He thanks Willie for teaching him to keep his eye on what counts in this world: money. Walter continues his justification of what he intends to say to Lindner by chastising his family, especially Mama (and by extension her generation) for always "trying to figure out 'bout the wrong and the right of things all the time."¹⁰ He alludes to those who take up political causes, like Beneatha and "that boy" (her friend Asagai), who carry flags and "sing . . . marching songs" or perceive justice as being blind:

You wanna spend your life looking into things and trying to find the right and the wrong part, huh? Yeah. You know what's going to happen to that boy someday—he'll find himself sitting in a dungeon, locked in forever—and the takers will have the key! Forget it, baby! There ain't no causes—there ain't nothing but taking in this world, and he who takes most is smartest—and it don't make a damn bit of difference *how*.¹¹

Following his bitter realization speech, Walter announces that he intends to take the money from Lindner and will put on a show while doing it. Mama rejects Walter's rationalization and equates his decision with self-hatred and spiritual death, replying that she comes "from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers—but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We ain't never been that poor. We ain't never been that—dead inside."¹² Walter erupts, and defends his plan by saying he didn't make this world. Mama retorts: "How you going to feel on the inside?" He replies that he'll feel fine, that he'll feel like a man. Mama says, "You won't have nothing left then, Walter Lee." He walks toward Mama and claims:

I'm going to feel fine, Mama. I'm going to look that son-of-a-bitch in the eyes and say—(*He falters*)—and say, "All right, Mr. Lindner—(*He*

falters even more)—that's *your* neighborhood out there! You got the right to keep it like you want! You got the right to have it like you want! Just write the check and—the house is yours." And—and I am going to say—(*His voice almost breaks*) "And you—you people just put the money in my hand and you won't have to live next to this bunch of stinking niggers!"¹³

At this point, Ruth, Bennie, and Mama watch in "frozen horror" while he escalates the enactment:

And maybe—maybe I'll just get down on my black knees . . . "Captain, Mistuh, Bossman—(*Groveling and grinning and wringing his hands in profoundly anguished imitation of the slow-witted movie stereotype*) A-hee-hee-hee! Oh, yassuh boss! Yassssuh! Great white—(*Voice breaking, he forces himself to go on*)—Father, just gi' ussen de money, fo' God's sake, and we's—we's ain't gwine come out deh and dirty up yo' white folks neighborhood . . ." (*He breaks down completely*) And I'll feel fine! Fine! FINE! (*He gets up and goes into the bedroom*).¹⁴

This is immediately followed by Beneatha's angry castigation of Walter and his plan in a brief but stinging series of strong rejections: "That is not a man. That is nothing but a toothless rat."¹⁵ She then quotes Mama as having taught her to refuse to love those who have internalized the racial self-hatred performed and projected by Walter in this moment of the play, asserting, "Wasn't it you who taught me to despise any man who would do that?" "He's no brother of mine," she declares.¹⁶ This ejection from the family is the final and ultimate rejection. Beneatha is furious about their situation and the unadulterated injustice that characterizes it. She is also angry that Walter has lost a large chunk of the family money and disgusted by his willingness to succumb to—and to internalize and justify—racist ideals. She relies on Mama's own politics, which stand against those who sell out the community and their own family. Beneatha's anger and frustration blind her to the crucial pressures that often influence us. Calling Walter a "toothless rat" and "not a man," Beneatha withholds her love from Walter and uses language designed to strip him of his manhood, family status, and humanity based on his willingness to sell out the family and his community. Walter's plan to accept the white neighborhood association's implicit dehumanization of Black people left nothing for Beneatha to love.

Hansberry resolves what may appear to be an irresolvable contradiction without taking sides about their respective anger and the implosive and self-destructive energies unleashed by the condition they all share. She gives Mama the final word on this subject of how to respond to Walter and his egregious behavior, how to manage the rage these choices produce in others, and how to

move forward. Mama supports Beneatha's rejection of his plan and its meaning, but expresses empathy for that which drives Walter's response(s), and refuses to reject him. Hansberry also displays sympathy and understanding for Beneatha's angry and separating position—her feeling that Walter's willingness to sell out the family negates his lovability.

Through the voice and vision of Mama, Hansberry has framed the emotional and political climax of the play to illuminate the profound interconnections between structural racism and individual, family, and community health, psyche, and self-worth, and has offered a potent, flexible, sustainable strategy for long-term survival under such conditions. Mama begins her response to Beneatha by acknowledging that yes, she did teach her to despise any man who would, in effect, sell out the family and by extension the community. But Mama offsets this crucial stance with her and Big Walter's equally important lesson about love and its foundational role for collective survival: that "there is *always* something left to love." To imagine otherwise, Mama seems to argue, is to allow the notion of the fundamental "unlovability" of Blackness to take root in the soil of political righteousness, killing Walter's and Beneatha's spirits along the way. This seemingly resistive act ends up serving as a victory for the very values against which the drive to reject Walter was made. Mama argues that Beneatha's identity-stripping rejection and her "writing" of Walter's epitaph mimic the hatred expressed by "the rest of the world."¹⁷ She also defines Beneatha's rejection as another form of the internalization of self-hatred that has been most vividly displayed by Walter. Mama identifies the death produced by these internalizations immediately, saying, "[Death] done come walking in my house on the lips of my children," which sets up spiritual death—rather than the loss of the house or the money—as the most devastating potential tragedy unfolding.¹⁸

The matter of spiritual death, of the impact of oppression on the psyches and spirits of Black people and their ability to undergird collective movements for justice, was of grave and sustained importance to Hansberry. During the years surrounding the emergence of *Raisin*, she was visibly involved in much broader cultural debates about the meaning of human community, responsibility, and freedom. She strongly criticized what she felt were politically and spiritually disabling tendencies among modern existentialists such as Jean Genet (whose play *The Blacks* negatively inspired Hansberry's play *Les Blancs*), Albert Camus, Norman Mailer, and others who often celebrated this kind of spiritual death as a form of resistance, and who mocked those who retained faith in the human spirit to overcome despite the apparent absurdity of their condition. As Cheryl Higashida argues: "While these writers and thinkers presented diverse, even incommensurable, worldviews, Hansberry understood them to be linked by an intellectually, politically, and morally bankrupt nihilism and solipsism. Rather than leading to freedom, their view of the modern condition led to despair, apathy, or undirected anger." Despite "the tenacity of the absurd," Hansberry

was adamant that "attention must be paid in equal and careful measure to the frequent triumph of man, if not nature, *over* the absurd."¹⁹ This struggle to have what Hansberry calls both "sighted eyes and feeling heart," to see reality as it is even at its worst, and to respond with a loving and hopeful heart over a hardened one was a core political ideal for the playwright. This pivotal scene in *Raisin* precisely articulates these facets of her broader political and social vision.

Thus, Mama rejects politically *conditional* love not in favor of an apolitical, unconditional love, but rather in support of a politically *conditioned* love. It is a love that connects interpersonal healing to larger social contexts, but does not allow those contexts to justify all responses to it. Nor, though, is politically *conditioned* love reserved only for those who offer politically sanctioned behavior. This politically *conditioned* love aims to affirm and transform, to show compassion while revealing the death impulse in Walter's intended plan. She wants to know if Beneatha has cried for him today "for what he been through and what it done to him." Mama demands that Beneatha account for the real pressures and suffering caused by Walter's experiences with racism and their relationship to his expectations regarding proper manhood; she suggests that his plan be rejected but that he remain fundamentally loved. Walter is not present while this conversation goes on between the women members of the family, but it seems safe to assume—given the size of the apartment and its thin walls—that he has heard the exchange. Once Lindner arrives, Walter reverses his planned course of action and announces that they won't be taking his money and that the family will move into the home purchased with their father's hard-earned money.

Politically conditioned love is at its most potent and valuable when it is in shortest supply, when it is the hardest to muster: "When do you think is the time to love somebody the most," Mama says, "when they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then you ain't through learning—because that ain't the time at all." Hansberry wants Beneatha to do the following: to keep together in her mind both the individual—the bruised and beaten Walter—and the "hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is"; to remain equally critical of his potential capitulation to/internalization of the logic of white racism and the powerful, active ways such structural oppression beats him down; and to take into account that he's at his lowest, and can't believe in himself because "the world done whipped him so."²⁰

Here we see the structural forces that influence intimate bonds, the pressures under which such intimate bonds operate, and how these intimate bonds—when shaped by an (inter)personal justice politics—can be a significant source of political power and community resilience. Walter and Beneatha are saved, as it were, not by their political awareness of their circumstances; they escape this perilous moment marked by imploding despair and rage by remaining connected to a Black radical consciousness of (inter)personal justice

fueled by politically conditioned love. This love acknowledges the need for justice as it is developed within compassionate social relationships, despite the enormous pressure to find blame and liability as temporary relief from the pain of injustice.²¹

The Struggle over *A Raisin in the Sun*

In the three decades following the highly visible success of *A Raisin in the Sun*, the play was both celebrated and intensely criticized for being universal (instead of Black) and for adopting “color-blind” (which really meant white) visions of the American Dream. At the same time, critics and political writers struggled over the value of integration in US society. For the most part, Hansberry was warmly embraced and celebrated by the mainstream liberal white press and public and (almost as if on cue) lambasted, rejected, and criticized by the radical left—both Black and white.

The terms of her celebration and embrace rested on the interpretation that *Raisin* was a universal story, that it revealed that Blacks were “just like whites” and suggested that full integration could take place without substantial disturbance to or sacrifice of the status quo of white privilege. White audiences and critics alike seemed unable to confront the play’s more pertinent themes and, as one critic suggests, “seemed to be embracing the play without fully understanding it—or perhaps without wanting to understand it.”²² Many white critics and supporters interpreted *Raisin* as a play about any family and their struggles for self-improvement, who just happened to be Black. One typical comment along these lines is reflected in a 1971 claim that Hansberry’s play, “although involving Negro characters, is essentially one that deals with common human problems confronting a family that happens to be black.”²³ It is in response to this commonly expressed logic that Ossie Davis announced, as Robert Nemiroff characterizes, that “white America ‘kidnapped’ Mama, stole her away and used her fantasized image to avoid what was uniquely *African* American in the play.”²⁴ Imagining themselves to be reasonable and embracing, while denying the structural and encompassing nature of white supremacy, many white audiences and critics interpreted the play’s conclusion (the day that the Youngers move out of the ghetto into a hostile all-white community) as a happy ending. The Youngers’ future as a solitary, financially vulnerable Black family in this hostile all-white community was seen as the end of the struggle, as a victory and not the beginning of another, perhaps more troubling chapter in the long story of violent exclusion. In an interview with Studs Terkel, Hansberry responded to this sentiment as expressed by one critic by saying, “If he thinks that’s a happy ending, I invite him to come live in one of the communities where the Youngers are going!”²⁵

Perhaps because of the nature of this general embrace, Black and progres-

sive critics and writers heavily criticized the play, Hansberry by extension, and the presumed middle-of-the-road, mainstream political vision *Raisin* was accused of espousing. The "integration-as-happy ending" vision was interpreted as an African American dream that defined Black possibility in terms of proximity to and acceptance from whites. Some Black nationalist critics seemed to suggest that white mainstream viewers should be so confronted by its radical politics they would be unable to erase the specificity of Black suffering. If they could, then the play itself was responsible for their interpretation. In 1968, Harold Cruse, a notable and visible critic of Hansberry and *Raisin*, argued that the play represented the "swan song of the integrationist tradition," given that it embraces the supposedly universal white ideal.²⁶ Some derisively called *Raisin* a "kitchen-sink drama," or as Cruse called it, "a shopworn ethnic soap-opera"²⁷—clear indictments of its domestic (which also means weak, female, and less politically important) framing and likely, too, an anxious rejection of the powerful roles of the women in the play. Given the gender conflicts about the so-called emasculating force of Black matriarchal power throughout the 1960s and 1970s, it is not a stretch to imagine that these vociferous Black male critics perceived Walter's brokenness (and perhaps, too, the emotional support provided by the women in his family) as painful signs of emasculation; his eventual embrace of Mama's worldview and his moving into their new home were interpreted not as evidence of how community and family can pull us back from our own spiritual deaths by nurturing self-love and resistance, but instead as confirmations of his weakness and subordination.

Scholars such as Genevieve Fabre and Helene Keyssar, writing as late as the early 1980s, also took the position that the play was written to please whites and supports a middle-class vision of upward mobility.²⁸ Some critics subsequently retracted their narrow interpretations of *Raisin*. With some distance the complexity of her vision perhaps became more apparent. Writing nearly thirty years after *Raisin* first opened on Broadway in 1959, Amiri Baraka eschews his past rejection of the play, saying that he and his contemporaries got it wrong: "Young militants . . . taken with Malcolm's coming, with the immanence of explosion . . . missed the essence of the work—that Hansberry had created a family on the cutting edge of the same class and ideological struggles as existed in the movement itself and among the people."²⁹ Baraka suggests something important about the reasons Hansberry might have been misread: that racial discrimination fuels a seductive rage and this seductive rage blinded many to the political importance of her work. Yet even those who publicly retracted their rejections of Hansberry many years later did so in ways that overlook the importance of an (inter)personal justice politics. Even decades later, he and others retained the notion that the play was somehow really about intra-race class politics and what strategies the movement ought to adopt for social justice. Many remained committed to the idea that the Younger family represented class and ideological

struggles related to public-sphere political strategies: “The Younger family is part of the black majority and the concerns I once dismissed as ‘middle class’—buying a house and moving into ‘white folks’ neighborhoods’—are actually reflective of the essence of black people’s striving and the will to defeat segregation, discrimination and national oppression.”³⁰ This is right, but it does not reflect the full range of political significance articulated by *Raisin*. It’s not only that some young militants’ investment in the “immanence of explosion” blinded them to the value of the Youngers’ dignified will to defeat segregation and oppression. This investment also reduced their ability to see that Hansberry was speaking directly to them about the perils of an investment in explosion and the temporary relief provided by outbursts such as Walter’s rage-inspired realization. Missed, too, were her attempts to both honor the sources of this rage and reject its allure, because rather than leading to freedom it ultimately leads to despair.

Some of the ways in which *Raisin* was misread and reframed were largely due to the power of Cold War–era hegemonic discourses about race, class, and culture, especially the struggle over the meaning and significance of the construction of Black cultural (e.g., intimate, personal, and/or domestic) spaces in social science, social policy, and therefore Black political activism. As Ben Keppel notes:

During the 1960s and 1970s . . . *Raisin* would become a symbol . . . of the mainstream’s appropriation and domestication of the struggle for racial equality. Following the verdict of the critics, academics would situate *Raisin* within the literary canon of postwar America as a “crucial document” of the early civil rights movement, its “sociologically ideal family” sharing that movement’s alleged political naiveté and comfortably middle-class aspirations and orientation.³¹

This kind of pejorative “domesticating” and forward reading—seeing *Raisin* as a palatable early Civil Rights play, rather than an effort to preserve the “vitality of the social democratic values of the 1930s”—masks the crucial discourses about Black family and cultural dysfunction that justified racial public-sphere exclusions.³² There is nothing “sociologically ideal” about the Youngers’ multi-generational, female-led family. Hansberry’s Youngers are envisioned and received in the context of this dominant liberal conception of Black cultural dysfunction, family instability, and pathology in the context of integration as salvation. The Moynihan Report (which borrowed heavily from Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier’s earlier writings on Black matriarchal family structures as the central impediment to Black progress) would ultimately overshadow previous incarnations of Black cultural/familial non-normativity and dysfunction.

During Hansberry's politically formative years in the early to mid-1950s, however, Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 classic, *An American Dilemma*, was a highly influential document that shaped dominant social analysis of Black culture.³³ As Roderick Ferguson notes:

African Americans enter Myrdal's framework as the antithesis of heteronormative American identity. . . . In a section entitled "The Negro Community as a Pathological Form of an American Community," Myrdal argues . . . American Negro culture is not something independent of general American culture. It is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture.³⁴

At the heart of this pathology, Myrdal argues, is the "instability of the Negro family" and the "emotionalism of the Negro church."³⁵ In the context of normative and idealized nuclear white families, which are constructed in direct relation to this construction of Black non-normative and pathological culture and families, defining the Youngers as "sociologically ideal" requires quite a bit of re-imagination and repression. Not only are the Youngers Black (enough alone to render them flawed), but they are also a multi-generational (therefore non-nuclear) extended family with a matriarchal (not patriarchal) head. Furthermore, the three women in the play articulate significant (but not consistently) non-normative, and sometimes feminist, behaviors, roles, and values.

Rather than capitulating to the dominant discourses about family, race, and integration, *Raisin* challenges them with a Black and feminist radical perspective. In the years following the distorted celebration of *Raisin*, Hansberry particularly addressed the misreading of Walter as insignificant/emasculated and Mama as overbearing. She did this by forcefully restating the significance of Walter in the family, and instead of downplaying Lena's centrality as evidence for Walter's significance, she reframed Mama's centrality alongside that of Walter. She did not shrink from the pejorative interpretation of Black matriarchy; neither did she attempt to undermine women's value and strength, nor equate it with emasculation. Quite the opposite, she points out the crucial role women play in the development of high-achieving and politically active youth. Addressing the American Academy of Psychotherapists in 1964, Hansberry argued that Lena Younger was not only the "black matriarch incarnate; the bulwark of the Negro family since slavery," she was also the symbol of "the Negro will to transcendence. . . . It is she who . . . scrubs the floors of the nation in order to create black diplomats and university professors. Seemingly clinging to traditional restraints, it is she who drives the young into firehoses. And one day she simply refuses to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery."³⁶

Hansberry's phrase "seemingly clinging to traditional restraints" speaks

quite directly to the historical record, but also displays her attentiveness to the radical political potential of spaces and personalities often considered compliant and complicit. Her choice to situate the play entirely in the Youngers' apartment makes *Raisin* a family drama, a theatrical trope, and yet she rewrites this conventional space. When considered in the context of the more limited frame of the twentieth-century American theatrical "family drama" genre, *Raisin* resolves family conflict in unconventional ways that alter the common family plot dynamics and refute readings of the interpersonal family conflicts in *Raisin* as they are typically portrayed and resolved. As Tom Scanlan notes, the family context in theater is often represented as a disintegrating institution or a place where individual development is stymied and thus must be transcended for the sake of personal growth. Hansberry resolves a typical American drama deadlock of family counter-claims (especially those between Walter and Mama) in a decidedly different manner. Hansberry, Scanlan points out, "recognizes both claims *but sees their interaction as a matter of continuing possibility* rather than a fixed dilemma. The family does not represent a fixed psychological set or a metaphysical certainty but *a potential for turning agitation into interaction.*"³⁷ Hansberry herself writes a radical play while seeming to cling to the "traditional restraints" of the family drama.

Scanlan's description of Hansberry's unconventional use of conflicted interaction as a "matter of continuing possibility rather than fixed dilemma" speaks directly to the operating logic of an (inter)personal justice politics. *Raisin* articulates a politics of (inter)personal justice that reframes the family—the Black family—not as a place to be "transcended for the sake of personal growth," but as a place where challenge, respect, and the "turning [of] agitation into interaction" can occur, and where the interaction of multiple counter-claims is a "matter of continuing possibility." Thus Hansberry situates Black culture and Black families as the basis for and wellspring of political resistance, vision, and sustenance, not the source of repression of individual growth, nor the hotbed of pathology and dysfunction posited by dominant culture and social science.

At its core, *Raisin* is about both the political centrality *and* fragility of intimate bonds for oppressed communities. "There is *always* something left to love" is the central line of this play. As Hansberry wrote in 1955 in *Freedom*: "From the time he is born the Negro child is surrounded by a society organized to convince him that he belongs to a people whose past is so worthless and shameful that it amounts to no past at all. . . . Awaiting our youth in every area of American life is a barrage of propaganda which distorts and disparages their identity."³⁸ We must find what is left to love, she says, especially when it is most difficult to do so, when the effects of long-term deferral, disdain, and presumed worthlessness on members of a community have exploded on each other in the day-to-day.

The emphasis on exceptional public explosions and conflicts (race riots, Civil Rights marches, etc.) as primary symbols of racism and its effects was replaced by Hansberry with the everyday pattern of intimate-sphere explosions and disintegrations caused by structural oppression. Instead of glorifying the angry interpersonal implosions, she illuminated the painful consequences of stoking these flames. Hansberry's *Raisin* revealed the implosive power of deferral, disparagement, and despair and the urgent need to will ourselves out of succumbing to it. Walter's ability to prevent the internalization of worthlessness and shame is collectively generated by the women of the Younger family—his immediate and most intimate community—via a politics of (inter)personal justice.

Hansberry argues for the resistive and restorative power of Black love and redefines it as a political act. To sustain the drive to love and challenge those who have been deeply damaged by the social, psychic, physical, economic, and emotional devastation of racism and sexism is a form of political nourishment. Hansberry's *Raisin* represents what feminists such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins argue decades later about the political salience of Black affirmation and politically conditioned Black love. As Collins notes, "Loving Black people . . . in a society that is so dependent on hating Blackness constitutes a highly rebellious act."³⁹ In *Salvation*, hooks confirms the political power of Black love in the works of Baldwin and Hansberry when she says that they both "believed that black identity was forged in triumphant struggle to resist dehumanization, that the choice to love was a necessary dimension of liberation."⁴⁰ This love need not evade conflict and difference; in fact, politically conditioned love and respect for multiple perspectives is the most productive ongoing rebellion of all.

Illegibility: (Inter)personal Justice as "Excess Race Issue Material"

The centrality of interpersonal relationships as the grounds for developing and maintaining a social justice consciousness was a central motif in every facet of *Raisin*, but was illegible in the context of mainstream political vocabularies for justice. From this perspective, each of the key dramatic conflicts—housing discrimination, racialized class oppression, limited access to education, the assault on Black gender identities, and the conflicts resulting from structural racism and sexism—were not just explained *in the context* of personal or family relationships, but were revealed to powerfully shape individual consciousness, as well as familial, sexual, and social relationships.

The stage play is evidence of these connections, but the expanded visual scope, notes, and instructions that Hansberry added to the screenplay provide an even richer body of evidence. Further, the refusal/misrecognition of her second, more emphatic effort to make this point speaks to the power of entrenched

political and cultural narratives shaped by existing racial and gender logics. Hansberry's screenplay—which has been understood as a clarifying response to the multiple misinterpretations of the stage play⁴¹—was substantially edited by Columbia Pictures executives who had, by the fall of 1959, already purchased the rights to the film version of *Raisin*. Hansberry's intentional revisions further emphasize the importance of (inter)personal justice and the nexus between structural racism and (inter)personal injury.

In the uncut screenplay for *Raisin*, Hansberry uses the film medium to extend the intimate lives of the Youngers out into Chicago and to reveal the relational aspects of structural racism. She made visual the deeply interlocking facets of public and private life. “She wanted,” as Margaret Wilkerson describes,

to widen the camera's view beyond the cramped Younger apartment to encompass the “City of the Big Shoulders” and its contradictions. . . . By taking the camera outside the Younger apartment in her script and following the adult characters in their normal daily lives, Hansberry forces her audience to see the conditions and circumstances that drive a man like Walter to strike out at his family, that motivated Walter's father to quite literally work himself to death, that lead Ruth to risk [illegal] abortion rather than add another child to the family, and that impel a Lena Younger to move into a hostile neighborhood.⁴²

In the hands of Lorraine Hansberry, the camera connects race to space, racialized pain to systemic racism, and Black family formations to structures of oppression.

Hansberry further reinforces these connections by linking consecutive scenes of Mama and Walter Lee at work by means of close-up shots of four main characters' hands. Hansberry's screenplay direction notes reveal her interest in making personal and intimate the racialized structures of exploitation and oppression:

The scene in the Holiday household [the white household in which Mama Lena works], for example, opens with [as Hansberry describes] an “Extreme close shot of Lena's hands fixing bedding,” then later, an “Extreme close up of Lena's hands working at buttons on a coat.” The Holiday household scene then dissolves to an “Extreme close shot: the hands of Walter Lee Younger buttoning up his livery,” . . . and then a “Close shot—Employer's hands moving back cuff to look at watch.”⁴³

The choice of these repeated close-ups of Black and white hands embody and personalize economic disparity and the racial hierarchies built into them. Despite the fact that these hands are “at work,” they are very intimately depicted

(close-up) so that viewers are led (by the hand, as it were) to see the intimate and interpersonal impacts of racialized injustice on Black bodies.

Hansberry continues to focus her screenplay on what Wilkerson calls "the many subtle ways in which racism invades the characters' lives on a daily basis."⁴⁴ Scenes added by Hansberry, such as Lena's contact with a surly white store clerk selling inferior fruit at premium prices and her later seeing more reasonably priced, "large, red, voluptuous apples" at a market frequented by and more accessible to whites, makes clear the isolation and "economic exploitation of the impoverished Black neighborhoods."⁴⁵

Hansberry was also concerned with the ways structural racism distorts Black perceptions of white intentions and motivations, distortions that exacerbate and inflame race relations. This invasion of racism is psycho-emotional as well; it alters perceptions in a way that undermines Black/white interpersonal exchanges, even those exchanges that bear potential fruit for cross-racial solidarity. For example, in another added scene, Walter asks a white liquor store owner about the liquor business (which he hopes to enter) and in reply, the store owner "lapses into the typical shopkeeper's complaint about long hours . . . and general hardship."⁴⁶ Walter mistakenly takes the shopkeeper's discouragement as racism and responds angrily. Hansberry's notes specifically describe this "misunderstanding" as Walter's alone. His racial paranoia, resulting from sustained rejection, discouragement, and insult, completely colors his interpretation of the white shopkeeper's response. In the screenplay, Hansberry's note reads: "There is nothing 'racist' in Herman's [the shopkeeper's] attitude to Walter Lee. He is genuine, helpful, is simply voicing a typical shopkeeper's plaint. It is Walter who cannot understand."⁴⁷ This misunderstanding is an important addition to Hansberry's web of complex and twisted interpersonal exchanges wrought by structural racism. It suggests that dreams deferred by structural racism produce distortions among Black people and implies that neutral intentions alone might not be enough to undo what has happened to their psyches. Knowing what "hills and valleys" Black people have come through (to paraphrase Lena) is central for creating (inter)personal justice across race as well.

Hansberry worked intentionally to widen the lens, to show the wider racial, gender, and class context for the Youngers' interpersonal exchanges, and to make these broader contexts more intimate and personal by requesting close-ups of individual people and the broader forces at work in defining their interaction. The screenplay also works to undo the pro-American Dream/racial-integration-as-savior interpretation of *Raisin*. She did this by showing that the Youngers' daily lives beyond their home (no matter where that home was located) would remain deeply impacted by racial inequality in services, job ceilings, treatment, and access to affordable and quality groceries, and by foregrounding the interconnections between suffering and unjust power.

All of the scenes depicting the complex, sustained, and intimate impact of

structural racism were cut out, were labeled “excess race issue material,” and thus never made it to the film version of *Raisin*.⁴⁸ This phrase, “excess race issue material,” is a provocative description of the hands-on, up close experience of (inter)personal injustice. These added scenes and the political intent of her camera instructions, I believe, created discomfort and encouraged the reading of them as “excess” because of the way they broke the implicit social rules of racial segregation, intimately revealing the types of cross-racial contact that regularly took place. These extra scenes did not repeat what *Raisin* the play had already covered; they were scenes that expanded the terrain of Black lived experience within the context of racial and economic inequality beyond the segregated South Side of Chicago into the mainstream public realm.

Overcoming Incommunicability

(Inter)personal justice is a generative model for progressive movements because it attends to the effects of structural inequality on aggrieved communities and provides one means by which a sustainable form of resistance and affirmation can be developed and maintained. It also frequently possesses an Achilles heel of incommunicability. As you’ll recall, Hansberry’s political vision in *Raisin* was deeply misunderstood across the political spectrum. Baraka’s subsequent retraction of his own political critique along with that of his peers did not capture what I am arguing is the essence of (inter)personal justice. White liberal readings of it as a pro-racial equality/integration story drive *Raisin*’s continued centrality on public school reading lists; moreover, Hansberry remains somewhat marginalized as a politically visionary artist. In fact, without paying astute attention to the relational facets of (inter)personal and public spaces, her politics are easily translated into either a “kitchen-sink drama” or a kind of celebration of integration as a public-sphere political solution to the intimate-sphere family-based suffering illuminated by her drama.

(Inter)personal justice is antithetical to a heightened and, in some cases, problematic emphasis within some Black radical movements on establishing visible and patriarchal heterosexual male leadership as a form of resistance to the emasculating power of white racism. This emphasis included a frequent rejection of Black women’s issues, denial of sexism as a Black problem, sexist practices, and a rejection of Black domestic spaces as confining, emasculating, and lacking political potential. It also emphasized an anger-fueled “take it to the streets” brand of male-dominated, physically confrontational political activism driven by a liability model of social change. As bell hooks notes, “As an organized black liberation movement emphasizing love was replaced by a call for militant violent resistance, the value of love in movements for black self-determination and liberation was no longer highlighted.”⁴⁹ Many committed Civil Rights and Black Power political activists raised crucial concerns about

these tendencies and their dangers. These challenges were considered divisive, however, and seen as a threat to Black unity and therefore to the Black freedom struggle itself.⁵⁰

Calls for Black unity were understandably essential in the context of Black social movements in the 1960s. Black people were collectively under assault and their effort to become full citizens in the US nation state was violently challenged by the government, religious leaders, and other power brokers. But the dominant drive toward Black unity, in the context of a waning influence of a love ethic and an escalating quest for material success and power (especially Black patriarchal power), delimited the expression of multiple and overlapping types of inequality among African Americans. Too often, unity claims combined with uninterrogated support for Black male patriarchal-inspired leadership worked to repress and deny the complex and interlocking facets of racialized oppression. These claims particularly rejected Black feminist, queer, and other concerns about how a heterosexual and patriarchal male interpretation of racism's effects worked against community empowerment and unity. These conditions also served to render invisible the powerful ways that women and queer Black people made crucial contributions to the Civil Rights movement, as well as the unique insights for political vision and action they offered.⁵¹

Black unity was lobbied for partly vis-à-vis the deployment of a liability model of political and social change. Efforts to produce social justice in and for Black communities via a liability model have impeded as well as enhanced justice. Feminist movements have been similarly invested in liability models on behalf of women who have been victims of gendered oppression. A liability model encourages an antagonistic and irreconcilable interpretation of multiple kinds and sources of oppression. As Iris Marion Young states, the liability model is a "concept of responsibility . . . that seeks causally to connect an agent to a harm in order to assign the agent responsibility for it."⁵² Liability models also seek to isolate some responsible parties in order to absolve others, and have a tendency to define those who suffer from the agents of harm as "victims" and therefore not responsible for engaging in actions directed at transforming social structures. These three features of a liability model are especially disabling for the gendered transformation of racial justice movements.

An oppositional discourse of us ("victims") versus them ("liable agents inflicting harm"), coupled with the ways structural oppression is veiled in intimate/interpersonal social exchanges, has a tendency to produce contentious, fractured intra-group conflict, and leads to the seemingly irreconcilable conflicts among multiple kinds of liability within Black communities, rather than toward collective transformation and equality for all. A liability model of achieving social justice does more than identify multiple and overlapping forms of injustice; it creates "isolated responsible parties" who are then responsible for attending to "victims." It should be obvious how this liability model of social

justice pits Black men and women against one another on matters of gender inequality and injustice, Black gay people against straight Black people regarding homophobia and heterosexism, the Black working class against the Black middle class, and so on. A liability model defines those in Black communities responsible for oppressing Black women as “outsiders”—or “responsible agents of harm”—from whom concessions must be extracted.⁵³

Civil Rights visionaries, including Baker, Carmichael, Hamilton, and especially King, advanced a collective responsibility model for social change, but this approach was confined by liberal rights-limited framing and conservative hostility aimed at limiting a broader collective responsibility model for change to a tort-driven interpretation of rights infringement. These factors were exacerbated by mounting Black anger and despair, and the dominant cultural market value of Black rage and violence as entertainment.

Black feminists and queer theorists have also paid special attention to the dangers of a liability model in Black social movements, where racial insiders end up being gendered and sexual outsiders within the Black community and therefore marginalized and sometimes excluded from powerful Black movements for justice. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s generative concept of intersectionality illuminates the dangers of liability models for social justice. Her insights have served as a fruitful basis for significant reconceptualizations of legal as well as feminist and anti-racist theories and social movement organization. Cathy Cohen’s work on AIDS politics in the Black community reveals the power and perils of a politics fueled by the imagined permanence of the opposition between “cross-cutting political issues”—“those issues that affect only certain segments of a marginal group”⁵⁴—and “consensus issues”—those issues “framed as somehow important to every member of ‘the black community.’”⁵⁵

(Inter)personal justice—through its consistent attention to the psychic, emotional, and social impact of structural racism and oppression—challenges a liability-driven model of social justice. Its focus on the nexus between structural force and the personal/interpersonal invites our attention to a multiplicity of oppressions, including racism, sexism, and so forth, and encourages our compassionate responses to a wider range of injuries endured by those who are oppressed. It does not rely on the illusion of consensus issues, nor reject “cross-cutting” political issues as divisive. Its emphasis on “walking in the shoes” of the other person, on encouraging a response that supports the whole community over one’s own elevation, works to build bridges and supports mutual understanding and unity.

An (inter)personal justice politics places intimate, interpersonal relationships and exchanges at the core of Black political consciousness and action, effectively challenging the so-called “public” terms of racialized political discourse and the dominant sociological ideologies about Black culture that drive them.

Thus, it has the potential to contribute to a new language of Black progressive political and collective responsibility that envisions these "cross-cutting political issues" as a form of community reinforcement, inclusion, diversity, and strength. It undermines a blame-driven liability assessment of who is a victim and who is an agent, a model that inadvertently maintains and justifies harm and injustice while claiming to work toward their dissolution.

Despite the elevation of leadership models that emphasize a liability-focused brand of patriarchal Black masculinity, this is not the only historical model for Black masculinity. In our effort to challenge the hegemony of patriarchal Black masculinity, we often diminish our collective memory about significant alternatives. Elsa Barkley Brown's work on the gendered complexity of the formation of Black political participation in the decades following emancipation reveals significant alternative gender formations and Black political spaces that explicitly point to the importance of intimate-space struggles in determining political action in public spaces. Her research suggests that our work may not be a matter of inventing new frames, but rather of remembering, claiming, and revising already existing ones. As she astutely notes in her conclusion: "Those who construct masculine notions of blackness and race progress and who claim only some forms of violence as central to African American liberation struggles are claiming/remembering a particular history."⁵⁶ Hansberry's depiction of Walter's struggle over what constitutes an empowered form of Black heterosexual masculinity may be one such resurrection of long-standing, but too often repressed, histories of African American liberation practices.

Brown's distinction between existing patriarchal notions of Blackness and the claiming and remembering of them is a productive one that I think hints at something else at work here, something beyond the mere power grab associated with the elevation of patriarchal masculinity and the terms of political vision it produces. Patriarchal Black masculinity—especially its heightened resurgence as a political vehicle during the late 1960s on through today—also provides a cover; it not only hides the immense pain and suffering attached to living as a racially marked male heterosexual body, but also protects from view the reality of racialized and gendered forms of Black male heterosexual vulnerability. It is a communicative process that creates "categories, subjectivities, and social relations" and positions "people hierarchically within them."⁵⁷ Patriarchal Black masculinity is a safe and highly rewarded form of political visibility, communicability, and recognition that is dependent on the rejection and denial of the intimate Black sphere and the vulnerabilities and subjectivities articulated there. It manages in acceptable masculinist terms the enormous hurt inflicted by racialized and male-gendered structural oppression.

(Inter)personal justice has the potential to contribute to the expansion of a

non-patriarchal masculinity and to enable a progressive, multi-positional politics within Black communities. Racialized sexuality and gender—more specifically, Black lesbian, gay, and feminist, as well as non-patriarchal heterosexual Black masculinity—have been critical contexts for the development of a politics of (inter)personal justice precisely because of the ways that oppressed and non-normative sexual and gender positions illuminate the relational nature of Black intimate social formations and public-sphere politics. (Inter)personal justice is a way of seeing that generates from feminist, queer (out and closeted), and other marginalized members of Black communities who are acutely aware of the political significance of intimate spaces and who are, therefore, sometimes better equipped to see (and are more comfortable illuminating) the mutually constitutive, relational nature of public- and private-sphere politics and social relations. Proponents of (inter)personal justice politics are often those who have been excluded or marginalized by the framing of others' gendered and sexually situated issues as “meaningful, important, and representative of black communities.”⁵⁸ They are also simultaneously committed to opposing the negative forces that “give blacks a shared consciousness and linked fate.”⁵⁹

Surely the entrenched power of Black patriarchal ideology and privilege was central to the rejection and invisibility faced by many Black feminists, queer Black political activists, and others. But entrenched resistance to gender equity cannot explain all of the problems that troubled and continue to trouble everyday relations and social justice movements. Nor should Black male patriarchy be blamed for the supposed failures of some Black solidarity movements. Though many factors must be taken into account, what is most important for my argument here is the degree of personal damage done by oppressive forces and the liberal use of liability models for achieving social change within Black movements. (Inter)personal justice navigates around both of these pitfalls in a way that has the potential to create a healing, protective shield against personal damage and opens up a space for alternative models for social change where responsibility might replace liability. While a liability model has the potential to correct some forms of injustice, it disables the Black feminist and gendered transformation of Black movements because it devalues and undermines the significance of Black community bonds as the basis for survival and political consciousness. Collective responsibility rejects the fundamentally oppositional stance embedded in liability models of social justice. It reinforces a sense of connection despite seemingly insurmountable differences and investments in identity and social location. This connection is not designed to repress conflict, but to see “interaction as a matter of continuing possibility” that has the potential to turn “agitation into interaction.”⁶⁰ It emphasizes multiply situated kinds of inequality and injustice and highlights the connections between them; it also illuminates a com-

mon plight without relying on fictions of universality or setting up equally fictitious and destructive hierarchical notions of them *versus* us.

Heavily damaged selves are sometimes unable to produce a sought-after kind of social transformation. Alongside Hansberry's *Raisin*, powerful texts such as Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* draw our errant attention to this pain and poison, as well as to their vital political significance. Hansberry's call to love the seemingly unlovable and to do so under duress and inequality is the beginning of an ongoing process, one designed to produce justice, not stabilize unjust social relations. Bambara's opening line in *Salt Eaters*, "Are you sure . . . you want to be well?" speaks to the defining sickness of body and mind generated by oppression even among those—perhaps most among those—who are engaged in battles for justice. Baldwin captures the depths of and bears witness to the injuries Black people have sustained when he tells his nephew about Baldwin's own brother: "No one's hand can wipe away those tears he sheds invisibly today, which one hears in his laughter and in his speech and in his songs. I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it."⁶¹

The intimate or private sphere is a contested and fraught space; most activity there should not be expected to be progressive, nor radical, nor can it be expected to produce just social relations on its own. In fact, that is the point: (inter)personal justice is a progressive response to the colonization of and complex struggles over this space. The battles over defining Black culture, families, and social relations are taking place at micro and macro levels; this is not the space where "the" answer will be found. Instead, such spaces should be understood as crucial and potentially generative places to be fought over, not ignored, abandoned, or conceded.

(Inter)personal justice politics, then, is at best valuable, but underexplored and often invisible; at worst, it is a potent but seemingly incommunicable concept. (Inter)personal justice politics may be difficult for many to register because it challenges normative conceptions of the Black public sphere that sustain an imagined boundary between intimate Black spaces and public ("real") racialized politics. (Inter)personal justice politics not only centers on Black subjectivity and interiority, but it also redefines their relationship to dominant conceptions of Black culture, community, and social formation—particularly the ways that Black "private" spaces (especially the "Black family," "Black love," and "Black community") have been constructed in public projects and policies—to offer an alternative, potentially liberatory mode of interpersonal exchange. (Inter)personal justice politics attends to the deep connections between liberation and community healing through intimate and social interactions and imagination.

(Inter)personal justice is rendered "illegible" by the struggle over meaning

in this space, which serves to illuminate its political centrality. Of course, it has the potential—if not carefully crafted and defined—to be absorbed into conservative political agendas that, as Lauren Berlant astutely notes, have been animated by a “nationalist politics of intimacy.”⁶² This kind of absorption and revision is in many ways what happened to Hansberry, despite her extensive efforts to resist it. More recently, since Reagan, conservative political strategies heavily deploy intimate-sphere politics in ways designed to extend the state’s oppressive control over intimate spaces—strategies also used to privatize citizenship by means of private, intimate-sphere issues. Black cultural political movements like the Million Man March are an example of the importance and complexity of drawing on intimate-sphere relations as a central facet of social justice movements. The Million Man March had the potential to articulate a politics of (inter)personal justice, but chose instead to reinforce Black heterosexual patriarchal value and importance as a vehicle for developing political consciousness. As Luke Charles Harris reminds us in his analysis of the March:

Patriarchy, even in its benevolent forms, was never the solution. The solution for both Black men and women lies elsewhere. It lies in the struggle for an inclusive politics and the emergence within the Black community of a social movement that focuses on the complex ways in which issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation work together to endanger the lives of both Black men and Black women.⁶³

Thus, what could have been a moment to redefine Black masculinity as non-patriarchal, sexually diverse, and a source of resistance and community building instead participated in the conservative national politics of intimacy.

The process of identifying and building the spaces for (inter)personal justice is also hampered by the shrinking range of Black public spheres and the corporate commodification of Black counter-public spheres.⁶⁴ These spaces, it should be recalled, have been under assault over the past forty years partly resulting from efforts to undermine Civil Rights victories that expanded and legitimated Black citizenship. It should also be noted that scholarly attention to the contours of Black publics and counter-publics for the most part leaves the question/significance of Black private spaces undiscussed and disconnected. These two contexts—the conservative national politics of intimacy and the targeted challenges to the legitimacy of Black public spheres—both trouble the easy development and problematize the legibility of (inter)personal justice politics. At the same time, these contexts, conservative mobilizations of the intimate sphere and the severity of the struggle over defining and policing Black intimate spaces, point to the urgency and relevance of a politics of (inter)personal justice, not to its irrelevance. As Black public spheres contract and are

increasingly pressed into market service, perhaps it is time we more seriously consider works of Black art, music, and culture, as they hold the potential to be progressive counter-publics where visions, critiques, and strategies for developing (inter)personal politics may be hiding in plain sight.

Despite our abundant strategies of resistance and self-protection, we must face the fact that oppression exacts a price in our personal lives, because *it causes intimate injury*. We often act as if people pay little personal price for being oppressed. It enables our hope that fully embodied resistance—untainted by the very forms of structural oppression that motivate resistance—can spring forth from the communities that need it most. Some forms of structural oppression are rendered invisible by the complex web of individuals and processes that keep them in place. Still, too many of us live in denial about the deep injury that many are forced to endure so that we can continue our lives as they are.

Justice is far more than compensation for past theft and abuses; it is far more than economic redistribution. Calls for justice are not and should not be limited to languages of liability and compensation, as this approach reduces the larger call for freedom and possibility that drives a language of justice. As Robin Kelley contends,

Freedom and love may be the most revolutionary ideas available to us, and yet as intellectuals we have failed miserably to grapple with their political and analytical importance. . . . I have come to realize that once we strip radical social movements down to their bare essence and understand the collective desires of people in motion, freedom and love lay at the very heart of the matter.⁶⁵

It is my claim that this drive for freedom and love can be animated by envisioning and enacting justice in interpersonal, intimate terms and that artists, activists, and cultural workers are a powerful resource for showing us how.

Justice is an intimate matter that never happens in isolation. Intimate relationships are not privately negotiated; they require, as Bambara suggests, the presence of the community. As Hansberry reveals, politically conditioned love requires that we see the conflicts and struggles in the intimate sphere as "a matter of continuing possibility," not as an irresolvable fixed dilemma. Social justice is a commitment that is lived in collective, interpersonal, intimate exchanges and thus the spaces in which these exchanges take place are crucial and potentially generative sites. Linking interpersonal dynamics to the larger structural forms of injustice to which they are connected is a potentially fruitful facet of developing a progressive language of social justice that centers the role of interpersonal experience and dynamics within the larger project of developing a just society. Martin Luther King's 1963 collection of sermons, *Strength to Love*, pro-

phetically worries about the fact that “we have foolishly minimized the internal of our lives and maximized the external.”⁶⁶ Understood this way, (inter)personal justice, then, isn’t a retreat or distraction from but rather a critical component of Black progressive political possibility.

NOTES

1. Lorraine Hansberry, “*A Raisin in the Sun*” and “*The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window*” (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 143.

2. *Ibid.*, 144.

3. *Ibid.*, 144–145.

4. I, myself, experienced this tenacious and willful misreading firsthand. A few years ago, at an academic conference where I presented an earlier draft of this article, the scholarly reader assigned to comment on my paper actually interpreted *Raisin* in exactly this way—as a celebration of racial integration—without explanation or comment on my analysis and rejection of this reading. She felt no need to respond to my argument; it was as if no other reading could be made visible.

5. Julius Lester, introduction to *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*, by Lorraine Hansberry (New York: Random House, 1972), 7.

6. Hansberry, *Raisin*, 144.

7. See Jualynne Elizabeth Dodson, “Conceptualizations of African American Families,” in *Black Families*, ed. Harriette Pipes McAdoo (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 67–82; Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and K. Sue Jewell, *Survival of the African American Family: The Institutional Impact of U.S. Social Policy* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2003).

8. Rhonda M. Williams, “Living at the Crossroads: Explorations in Race, Nationality, Sexuality, and Gender,” rpt. in *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 140.

9. Hansberry, *Raisin*, 141.

10. *Ibid.*, 142.

11. *Ibid.*, 142–143.

12. *Ibid.*, 143.

13. *Ibid.*, 144.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 145.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 144.

19. Cheryl Higashida, “To Be(come) Young, Gay, and Black: Lorraine Hansberry’s Existentialist Routes to Anticolonialism,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2008): 901.

20. Hansberry, *Raisin*, 145.

21. I am not arguing here that *Raisin* or Hansberry support the traditional family as the primary or ideal context for this practice of (inter)personal justice; I do, though, think that Hansberry understands the Black family as one crucial political site where Black women in particular can make important political contributions. At the same time, however, *Raisin* articulates several critiques of the constraints of the patriarchal nuclear family, especially on women. This squares with her writings on gender and sexuality, and her own closeted lesbianism and companionate marriage to Robert Nemiroff—both of which trouble her presumed support of traditional heteronormative, racially separate, and nuclear familial spaces with which her play was overly and incorrectly associated.

22. Steven R. Carter, *Hansberry’s Drama: Commitment amid Complexity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 20.

23. *Ibid.*, 21.
24. Hansberry, *Raisin*, xix.
25. *Ibid.*, xx.
26. Carter, *Hansberry's Drama*, 21.
27. Lisbeth Lipari, "Fearful of the Written Word': White Fear, Black Writing, and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* Screenplay," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 1 (2004): 85.
28. Carter, *Hansberry's Drama*, 21.
29. Hansberry, *Raisin*, 19.
30. *Ibid.*, 20. Black feminists have been surprisingly silent on *Raisin* and on Hansberry's critical vision of gender and family in the play. In *Salvation*, bell hooks calls *Raisin* a vivid dramatization of how "valuing material goods above all else creates spiritual crisis. . . . Prophetically, Hansberry foresaw the negative impact worship of money and acceptance of addiction would have on black life." See *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), 12–13. Many Black feminists, including me, await Margaret Wilkerson's forthcoming biography of Hansberry, but given just how significant a figure she is, little has been published in its absence. See Jewelle L. Gomez, one of the few scholars to discuss the importance of Hansberry in this dimension of *Raisin* ("Lorraine Hansberry: Uncommon Warrior"). Perhaps there is disappointment in Hansberry's implicit call for Black female sacrifice, particularly that which attends to Black male needs over their own. Perhaps Black feminist critics are frustrated over Mama's rescue of Walter and take her scolding of Beneatha as an affirmation of the degree of Black women's sacrifices (despite the ways that Black men often betray them in their quest for full "manhood"), excessive internalization of discontent, and tolerance for Black men's disturbing stabs at obtaining full patriarchal rights. Adrienne Rich has argued that Hansberry was a protofeminist, but she also argues that Hansberry seems to give the men the heroic roles and reduces the female characters to cheerleaders. A straightforward reading of Mama's demand that Beneatha love and embrace Walter—despite the fact that his reckless effort to develop status via the wielding of patriarchal power, and thus "manhood," was exercised at the expense of the family as a whole, especially Beneatha's education—could support this interpretation. However, my reading reveals the central role that the women play in setting the discursive and community-based terms that produce Walter's heroic engagement with the white homeowners' association representative. This reading also reveals the way in which Black domestic space is posited as a politically radical space that directly impacts the more conventional kind of public-sphere confrontation regularly associated with Civil Rights resistance.
31. Ben Keppel, *The Work of Democracy: Ralph Bunche, Kenneth B. Clark, Lorraine Hansberry, and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 184.
32. *Ibid.*, 235.
33. *Ibid.*, 9.
34. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 91.
35. *Ibid.*, 91.
36. Keppel, *The Work of Democracy*, 210. Hansberry's changes in the screenplay version of *Raisin* further emphasize the mutual significance of both Mama and Walter. See especially Margaret Wilkerson's analysis of the screenplay's ending. Introduction to *A Raisin in the Sun: The Unfilmed Original Screenplay*, ed. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), xlii–xliii.
37. Lawrence Kappel, ed., *Readings on A Raisin in the Sun* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 2001), 114. Italics mine.
38. Keppel, *The Work of Democracy*, 189.
39. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 250.
40. hooks, *Salvation*, xxi.
41. Hansberry expressed a strong ambivalence about the reception of *Raisin* on Broadway; she was "grateful for the recognition," but also "disturbed by the critical consensus" that

seemed unable to see and link *Raisin's* simultaneous focus on the specificity of Black subjectivity and suffering and the larger universality of dreams and pain. She worried, for example, about the exoticization of Walter—the inability to see his class aspirations beneath the racial projections. She also seemed to confirm Davis's sense that Mama had been kidnapped, and asserted that Lena is not just the “bulwark of the Negro family since slavery,” but also a symbol of “the Negro will to transcendence.” Keppel, *The Work of Democracy*, 207, 210.

42. Wilkerson, introduction to *Raisin: Screenplay*, xxx, xxxv.

43. Lipari, “Fearful of the Written Word,” 88.

44. Wilkerson, introduction to *Raisin: Screenplay*, xxxv.

45. *Ibid.*, xxxii.

46. *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

47. Lipari, “Fearful of the Written Word,” 94.

48. *Ibid.*, 83.

49. hooks, *Salvation*, xxii.

50. It is important to note that white liberal race discourse normalizes and affirms patriarchal masculinity and the modes of public address it generates and fosters. America's phantasmagorical fascination with aggressive, hypersexual, patriarchal Black masculinity enables the elevation and recognition of this form of Black masculinity and produces the grounds for its punishment at the same time.

51. George Lipsitz's essay “Reveling in the Rubble: Where Is the Love?” speaks to the many ways that the Black freedom struggle “benefited from the situated knowledge of people with non-normative sexualities.” He refers specifically to the experiences of Curtis Hayes (later Curtis Muhammad), who found that “his most important supporter in conducting voter registration drives in Washington County in Mississippi was a bisexual operator of a house of prostitution (and grandmaster of the Masons).” In *Musicological Identities*, ed. Steven Baur, Raymond Knapp, and Jacqueline Warwick (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 44.

52. Iris Marion Young, “Political Responsibility and Structural Injustice,” Lindley Lecture, Philosophy Department, University of Kansas, May 5, 2003, 7.

53. See Kathleen Daly, “Seeking Justice in the 21st Century: Towards an Intersectional Politics of Justice,” *Sociology of Crime, Law and Deviance* 11 (2008): 3–30.

54. Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 13.

55. *Ibid.*, 11.

56. Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” in *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, ed. Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 150.

57. Charles L. Briggs, “Communicability, Racial Discourse, and Disease in the New Global Inequalities,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005): 282. Unpublished version.

58. Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 11.

59. *Ibid.*, 10.

60. Kappel, *Readings on Raisin*, 114.

61. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 5.

62. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 7.

63. Luke Charles Harris, “My Two Mothers, America, and the Million Man March,” in *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality: A Critical Reader*, ed. Devon W. Carbado (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 65.

64. Michael C. Dawson, “A Black Counterpublic? Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics,” in *The Black Public Sphere*, 201.

65. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 12.

66. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 57.

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