

An Insurgent Mood: Lorraine Hansberry on the Politics of Home

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This article takes as its starting point a 1961 conversation between James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry, where the latter first posed the question that would recur in Baldwin's writings in the following years: "Is it necessary to integrate oneself into a burning house?" Although the phrase is often associated with Baldwin, who mostly used it as a metaphor for the racist nation, most famously in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), this article shows how Hansberry's analysis of many African Americans' skepticism toward integration into a "burning house" was situated in a global context of anticolonial, anti-capitalist, and feminist struggle. Writing within networks of Black internationalist feminists and presenting a multivalent and relational account of home, Hansberry revealed household labor and relations of intimacy to be central to the making and maintenance of empire, racism, and capitalism, as well as their contestation through acts and affects of insurgency.

INTRODUCTION


In "Letter from a Region of My Mind," first published in late 1962, James Baldwin famously asked, "Do I really *want* to be integrated into a burning house?" The fiery question figures centrally in interpretations of Baldwin as a commentator on domestic politics, racial consciousness, and injustice in the United States, including among political theorists, who have presented Baldwin as an exemplar of "Black democratic perfectionism" and an exceptional theorist of American democracy (Balfour 2001; Buccola 2019; Glaude 2020; McWilliams 2017) and who have embraced the image of the burning house as a metaphor for the nation.

Yet Baldwin did not think or write in isolation. Nor was the domestic equivalence between the burning house and the racist nation the only framework available in his intellectual milieu, which included radical networks of Black internationalist artists and activists, such as Alice Childress, Paul Robeson, and Lorraine Hansberry. Indeed, on January 10, 1961, Baldwin and Hansberry recorded a radio broadcast with Langston Hughes, Nat Hentoff, and others about the relationship between social commentary and art. In this case, it was Hansberry who asked, "is it necessary to integrate oneself into a burning house?" (Godfrey 2020, 130).

In this conversation, Hansberry pushed beyond the national framing of the burning house, situating her comments in an international context of revolutionary struggle. Presenting disillusionment with the nation as not an individual concern but a transgressive attitude shared by many Black Americans, she cited two recent

events: when the "American Negro delegate at the United Nations disassociated herself from her government, when we refused to vote for an Algerian Algeria, when we refused to vote for the end of colonialism" and when "ten thousand Negroes" came out "to greet Fidel Castro in Harlem and wave at him and cheer him every time he shows his head."

Hansberry's articulation of the image of the burning house onto an international context is just one example of her powerful and unusual account of home as a multivalent and relational site that exceeds domesticity understood in national terms. I discuss this relationality and multivalence in two main registers. First, Hansberry presents home as a critical node where different systems of oppression are produced, interrogated, challenged, and transgressed. The multivalence of her account goes beyond the quest for a space of "renewal and self-recovery" (Hooks 1990), "identity-supporting material" (Young 2005), or a "race-specific yet unracist home" (Morrison 1997), to a figuration of home as a site of "contradictory demands and conditions" (Reddy 1998). It moves between the house as a metaphor for a racist nation, but also the transnational relations that transcend and challenge it, as the unit of racialized urban segregation and the "hidden abode" of capitalist exploitation, as the site of personal imprisonment, un-waged labor, and socialization into heteropatriarchal gender roles, and as the intimate sphere of reproductive household relations that sustain *and* contest the violence of colonialism and empire. Home, for Hansberry, is slippery: in its usages, significations, and simultaneous reinforcement and demolition of boundaries.¹

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¹ Scholarship on Hansberry has focused on the home and family in her work, although they have limited their discussion to *Raisin* (Baldwin 2016; Matthews 2008; Smith 2004). Recent biographies have noted home as an important setting and theme in Hansberry's published and unpublished writings (Diggs-Colbert 2021; Perry 2018). This article builds on and expands this scholarship by centering and critically investigating her multifaceted discussion of home.

This slipperiness, I contend, is not an instance of analytical imprecision but instead generative in its multiplicity and relationality.²

Second, Hansberry's writings on home were produced through relations, in networks and in exchange with other thinkers and activists, and especially Black internationalist feminists.³ Hansberry and her networks were in conversation with the pre- and postwar Black Left, who drew connections between African American liberation, anticolonial struggles, and working-class movements across the world (Gaines 2002; Gore 2011; Higashida 2011; Kelley 2002; McDuffie 2011; Munro 2017; Washington 2003). Many of these radical leftist women were based in Harlem and "consistently link [ed] specific issues and local conditions to international, historical, and structural patterns" (Burden-Stelly and Dean 2022, 4). This group's writings anticipated feminist critiques that we are by now familiar with, showing home to be central to the maintenance and contestation of larger social and political economic structures, such as global capitalism, empire, racism, and heteropatriarchy.

This network's relational way of thinking about home has been obscured by how their work was surveilled and silenced during the anticommunism of the Cold War, when prevailing conceptions of domesticity envisioned home as the site of the heterosexual nuclear unit and national stability. Writing against the insular view of self-enclosed nations made up of domestic household units that then interact in an international arena, Hansberry and her networks brought a critical feminist and transnational perspective on household labor to show its centrality to empire and racial capitalism, as well as its potential for harboring anticolonial insurgencies. By weaving together public and private, and domestic and international, they depicted home as a central and deeply multivalent node in a politics that spills over Cold War boundaries.

Showing how home contains, makes possible, transgresses, and even explodes antagonisms, sticky coalitions, and shifting boundaries, Hansberry asks us: What does it mean to leave behind a conflictual home? What does moving to a different house, neighborhood, or nation entail? How is movement possible without reconstituting the inequalities and oppressions of home?⁴ In answering these questions, Hansberry does not offer a straightforward endorsement or vindication of a singular vision of home as a sanctuary for kinship, meaning-making, and family. Instead, she presents a capacious vision attentive to the many meanings and materials of home, such as labor in particular units like kitchens and bedrooms, showing how homes can potentially hinder or achieve what she calls the creation of "universal dignity" (Godfrey 2020, 96). She thus weaves together different politics, conceiving of Black

liberation as "inseparable from other pressing concerns," such as peace, colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy (Lieberman 2011, 208).

Understanding this interwoven conception of home through Hansberry's transnational context and networks also articulates a new approach to the interpretation of "Afro-modern political thought" by thinking with and against each of the two dominant frameworks in the field: Although my focus on Hansberry shares something with a single-thinker-based approach (Gooding-Williams 2011; Rogers and Turner 2021), I draw attention to the extraordinary character of Hansberry's thought precisely by reading her in the context of the community of radical thinkers and activists in which she wrote. And while I attend to Hansberry's feminism, internationalism, socialism, and anticolonialism, I do not treat these as distinct and isolable modes of thought that might serve as the basis of an ideological taxonomy (Dawson 2001; Robinson 1983). This approach sutures together different sites of domination and resistance, revealing political theories to be the products of shared histories and collectivities.

The article thus situates Hansberry in a long line of Black radical thinkers and activists who interrogated home as a critical node in relations of and struggles against domination, in households, nations, and beyond.⁵ The first part details Hansberry's relational analysis of home, along with that of her network of Black Internationalist feminists, who investigated problems of domesticity in a transnational context. The second section examines Hansberry's less known works that take place in colonial and slavery societies, where home is a multivalent site of "violence intertwined with the intimacies of love and sexual desire" (Kotef 2020, 3). In these works, Hansberry poses questions about who gets to move and stay where, and what types of intimacies are violently allowed, demanded, performed, and contested under colonialism and slavery. The third section turns to Hansberry's most famous work, *A Raisin in the Sun*, reading it as a critique of Cold War conceptualizations of domesticity with their valorization of property ownership and conjugal relations in the bourgeois home. Reading *Raisin* alongside Hansberry's own writings and interviews about it, I uncover an ambivalent commentary on the family and home as sites for disciplining gendered subjectivity in the broader context of worldwide capitalism and decolonization. I conclude by returning to Hansberry and Baldwin's conversation about the burning house and its transnational frameworks, thus presenting an alternative to the tendency to isolate thinkers from one another and their international contexts.

HOME AND AWAY

Feminist political theorists have long problematized the distinction between the private and the public, insisting

² For this article, I prioritize "home," but also use it somewhat interchangeably with the domestic, private, and intimate spheres.

³ Many of these figures would not have called themselves feminist, seeing the label as a bourgeois preoccupation, but since they clearly had feminist concerns, I name them as such.

⁴ For an excellent exploration of similar questions in Toni Morrison's work, see Balfour (2023).

⁵ For the omission of feminist scholarship and gendered analysis from many accounts of Black radical thought, see Boyce Davies (2009).

on the political nature of the sphere of intimacy, sexuality, reproduction, and care. They have resisted a model of the household where the political order consists of individual homes and small kinship units, which satisfy daily needs that then enable political action in the public sphere. Socialist feminists, critical race theorists, and scholars of empire have written about home as a site of labor, exploitation, and colonial and racial domination in the last several decades.⁶ While these accounts have complicated straightforward identifications of home with safety and community, they tend to be compartmentalized into discussions of homemaking and difficulties of coalition in the US context (Honig 1994; Hooks 1990; Reagon 1983; Smith 1983; Young 2005), on the one hand, and scholarship on colonialism and empire (Kaplan 1998; Kotef 2020; Lowe 2015; Stoler 2006), on the other. This separates Black radical feminist thought from anticolonial political theory and erases the persistence of anti-imperialist internationalism across prewar, postwar, and second-wave Black feminisms.⁷ Recovering Hansberry's account, therefore, is important for bringing together separate strands and unearthing different timelines for feminist scholarship.

Hansberry shows how home is both constitutive of the heteropatriarchal and racist nation and embedded in global structures, such as capitalism, colonialism, and empire. Writing within a network of Black internationalist feminists, Hansberry shows domestic spaces to be internally riven by gender, race, and class hierarchies and externally inseparable from global political, economic, and social processes like decolonization and internationalist solidarity. Critical to the conflicts and contradictions endemic to these systems, home also occasions mobilization and resistance against them. Hansberry's work unravels the oppositions between "home" and its various "elsewheres," including other homes, neighborhoods, cities, nation-states, and beyond, and instead weaves them together, making them places where oppressions collide and collude, and can occasion their own overcoming. This multivalent notion of home spills over rigid Cold War boundaries, replacing them with a productive slipperiness that, in its own seeming disorder, demonstrates the arbitrariness of such oppositions. Home is, as Hansberry put it, an important venue where it is possible to "achieve the universal through the specific" (Godfrey 2020, 60).

Hansberry famously argued that "in order to create the universal you must pay very great attention to the specific" (Godfrey 2020, 74). Her work, produced in the context of radical internationalist and communist politics, sought to create a counterpoint to the ostensible universals of Cold War-era US exceptionalism, because as she put it, "what we currently call the Western world is not necessarily the universe" (Godfrey 2020, 143). US exceptionalism insisted on the separateness of domestic from international politics and attempted to

disconnect racism from its global and political economic context of oppression. Its core ideology of domesticity envisioned home as the site of the heterosexual nuclear unit, family wage, and national stability, positing gendered tropes about "(white) women as homemakers" who would help sustain both the liberal nation and "domestic security" (Gore 2011, 49).

Hansberry tackled these assumptions in the keynote address she delivered at "The First Conference of Negro Writers," sponsored by the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) on March 1, 1959, two weeks before *Raisin* opened on Broadway. She criticized the "steady diet of television, motion pictures, the legitimate stage and the novel," which propagated platitudes such as "women are idiots," "people are white," "Negroes do not exist," and "the present social order is here forever and this is the best of all possible worlds" (1981, 4). The belief that systems of domination—gendered norms of postwar sexuality, domesticity, militarism, Eurocentrism, and racism—existed separately and only in a domestic context, she argued, was a "matter of political naivete" that assumed the "isolation and insularity of our struggles" (9). By contrast, "the Negro people cannot afford to imagine themselves removed from the most pressing world issues of our time—war and peace, colonialism, capitalism versus socialism" (3). Given the global connections between these systems of oppression and the "unmistakable roots of the universal solidarity of the colored peoples of the world," Hansberry said, "when questions are asked in Bombay and Peking and Budapest and Laos and Cairo and Jakarta," she would speak out on inequalities "in the most basic aspects of American life, housing, employment, franchise" and the need for "vast economic transformations far greater than any of our leaders have dared to envision" (6, 10–11).

As Mary Helen Washington (2014) has shown in her astute reconstruction of the meeting, Hansberry's incendiary speech was not included in the conference proceedings published the next year and would not appear until several years after her death, when it was published in the *Black Scholar* in 1981. AMSAC, after all, was an anticommunist front for the Central Intelligence Agency that aimed to steer emerging decolonization movements away from communist influence, as part of broader efforts "to disable leftist internationalism" among Black activists (Iton 2008, 38). As anticommunism and US exceptionalism became the dominant frameworks structuring conversations about race, nation, and empire during the Cold War, they dictated the terms of interaction between African American and Third World activists, insisting on the separateness of nation-state units, conscripting Black people into liberal nationalism, and redefining "race and racism from something understood as rooted in the history of slavery and colonialism to something seen as a psychological problem and an aberration in American life, and from an international to a domestic problem" (Von Eschen 1997, 6).

Hansberry's work went against the grain of these dominant narratives. In articulating how race and racism were products of the history of colonialism and slavery, how nations were artificial barriers to be

⁶ See Bhattacharyya (2018), Forrester (2022), and Threadcraft (2016) for recent overviews.

⁷ See Turner (2021) for an important exception.

overcome, and how capitalism stood in the way of “universal dignity,” she steered the conversation toward the different materials and meanings of home that could help wage connected struggles against different types of oppression. The persistence of racist stereotypes in the American theater, such as “the maid” and the “native girl,” she wrote, could not be explained away by individualistic claims about “singularly stupid or untalented” authors but rather had to do with global historical developments, such as “the sixteenth-century spirit of mercantile expansionism,” which “gave rise to colonial conquest and the European slave trade, and was also father of a modern concept of racism” (Hansberry 1960). Overcoming these legacies required recognizing that “the ultimate destiny and aspirations of the African people and twenty million American Negroes are inextricably and magnificently bound up together forever” (1981, 6). Hansberry described the bonds between African Americans and Africans in terms of not “the mystique of race” but rather “the fact that we are only now on both sides of the ocean coming into our destiny, so to speak, as emergent peoples and self-assertive peoples” (Godfrey 2020, 166). Working toward internationalist solidarity entailed articulating alternative conceptions of the universal, as Hansberry put it at the memorial service for W. E. B. Du Bois: “[we] look forward and work for a socialist organization of society as the next great and dearly won universal condition of mankind” (cited in Diggs-Colbert 2021, 85; Gordon 2008, 122).

It is possible to think of Hansberry, as Iton (2008) suggests, as a transitional figure between the “leftist/Popular Front political aesthetic” of artist-activists like Robeson, who were committed to internationalism, labor struggles, and “diasporic consciousness,” on the one hand, and the “post-Civil Rights” politics that came to incorporate gender issues, on the other (64). However, while highlighting Hansberry’s individual contributions, this interpretative approach erases her radical networks and the collective production of political thought. Instead, just as Hansberry saw beyond the blinkered belief in the “isolation and insularity of our struggles,” she did not write in isolation, but in company and solidarity.

As with her AMSAC speech, censorship was a fate shared by a broader network of radical authors, artists, and activists who were based in Harlem in the earlier part of the 1950s. Before her rise to fame, Hansberry wrote for Paul Robeson’s monthly newspaper *Freedom*, which ran from 1950 to 1955, covering global anticolonial and domestic struggles against Jim Crow at a time when Robeson and Du Bois, among others, were being persecuted with the imposition of US foreign priorities on domestic contestations of racism (Burden-Stelly 2018). Hansberry reported on anti-imperial struggles in Ghana, Egypt, Guatemala, and Kenya, as well as the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, an organization of Black women that linked gendered violence to the violence of war (Gore 2011; Washington 2003). She had formative political and intellectual interactions with radical thinkers and activists whose analyses connected the exploitation of Black women

workers to the struggle for peace, the Korean War, and empire, even as they increasingly came under attack from Cold War anticommunism and the “call for the revitalization of domesticity” (McDuffie 2011, 170).

Through her journalism for *Freedom*, Hansberry encountered a group of radical Black Internationalist women, including Alice Childress, Shirley Graham, Eslanda Robeson, and Claudia Jones, who “developed a model of feminism that put working-class women at its center” (Washington 2014, 185). As would prove crucial for Hansberry’s framing of home in global terms in coming years, this group reported on and organized against discriminatory lending policies and slum clearance projects and pointed out that war spending in Korea came at the expense of addressing the housing crisis in Harlem. Their critique of global empire, exemplified in their activism against the Korean War, was intertwined with their advocacy for domestic labor, housing, and victims of gendered violence. In organizing for global peace, they showed how “domestic issues pertaining to women (who suffered from the most deprivation during wartime) would be sidelined by the war effort” (Boyce Davies 2007, 49).

This group built on the earlier work of Black radical women who wrote about domestic labor, such as Louise Thompson Pattern, who discussed the triple exploitation of Black women workers; Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke, who chronicled Black women lining up between Jerome and Simpson Avenues to be “bought by the hour or day at depressed wages” as domestics by housewives; and Esther Cooper Jackson, whose 1940 master’s thesis addressed the relationship between Black women domestic workers and trade unionism (Burden-Stelly and Dean 2022). Indeed, as scholars of Black studies, literature, and history have shown, a crucial and consistent link bridging the anti-fascist, anticolonial, and anti-capitalist politics of the Popular Front era with the postwar period was Black internationalist feminist networks, rather than individual figures (Gore 2011; McDuffie 2011; Washington 2003). Forgetting these histories results in framing Black feminism as a response to the patriarchy of civil rights and Black power movements and the racism of second-wave white feminism, which obscures the “internationalist, anticolonial antecedents of Black feminism” (Higashida 2011, 5–6). This characterization of Black feminism as a reaction to the shortcomings of the movements of the 1960s erases earlier constellations and their collective political work.

While working for *Freedom*, Hansberry shared an office with playwright and actor Alice Childress, who wrote a regular column called “A Conversation from Life,” delivered from the perspective of Mildred, a domestic worker from Harlem who reflected on the interconnected dynamics of work life, racism, anticommunism, and anticolonial struggles. In Childress’s rendering (1956), Mildred trespasses the boundaries dictated by Cold War domesticity, boundaries that seek to confine bourgeois women in consumerist households, underpaid domestic workers in other people’s kitchens and bathrooms, and both sets of women in the nation-state (Harris 1986; Washington 2014). Similarly,

Hansberry's plays and unpublished writings are full of reflections about how subjects are imprisoned in kitchens, bedrooms, homes, neighborhoods, and nations and how they challenge these containments.

Hansberry shared a flat, during this time, with Trinidadian journalist, Claudia Jones. The highest-ranking Black woman in the Communist Party of the United States before her deportation, Jones centered on domestic labor in her astute analysis of the interconnected dynamics of empire, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy (Boyce Davies 2007). For Jones, the problem with the "fascist" ideology of "kitchen, church and children" was both its insistence that "woman's 'place' is in the home" and its demand for a "war psychology" for women (Jones 2011, 81, 92). What this ideology occluded was other people's kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms as sites of racialized labor. In London after her deportation, Jones launched *The West Indian Gazette*, which collapsed the distance between Jamaica, Alabama, and Notting Hill in its reporting and its motto, "all the news you want from home and here."⁸ Jones' commentary on intimacy's violent impositions, such as demands for reproduction, and her blurring of lines between the local and the global are themes that are also addressed in Hansberry's writings.

The internationalism of figures like Childress and Jones was continuous with the Popular Front's earlier efforts and survived well into the 1950s, despite coming under immense pressure from the security state and organizations like AMSAC (Munro 2017). Writing against the Cold War-dictated geopolitical norms and "bourgeois feminist notions" of security, they argued for world peace through the reallocation of resources to labor in the domestic sphere (Jones 2011, 117). They revealed relations of intimacy and domestic labor that the political economy of metropolises depended on, as well as Black women's resources for militancy and possibilities of anticolonial solidarity beyond nation-states. At the time of their writing, these relational ways of thinking were being erased and subverted through US anticommunist politics; they have since been neglected because of the marginalization of these radical figures due to McCarthyist amnesia (Washington 2014). To this day, the legacies of that silencing sideline and silo Black radical feminist thought from anticolonial political theory, upholding the very distinction between domestic and international that Hansberry and her networks sought to challenge.

Uncovering these networked and relational conceptions of home helps bring together historical and contemporary feminist scholarships that are too often treated separately. Because homes contain different types of oppressions and potentially occasion struggles against heteropatriarchy, colonialism, racism, and capitalism both at home and abroad (if we adopt the definition of "domestic" against "foreign"), Hansberry and others' work lays bare productive tensions between intersectional and transnational feminisms. As Nash (2019) has argued, the academic institutionalization of

intersectionality has led to its adoption as a separate analytic from transnational feminism, each embodied by a particular racially marked subject, whereby US women of color are not imagined as global subjects and "intersectionality is tethered to race, transnationalism to nation, as though these are wholly separate sites of analysis" (83, 96). As the affinities between intersectional and transnational feminisms have been erased, Black feminist scholarship has become increasingly "circumscribed by the US nation-state" (Boyce Davies 2007, 13).⁹ Rather than accepting the imposed boundaries of nation-states or focusing on different identities intersecting on the site of a single body, Hansberry and her network engaged in a "relational feminist praxis" (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xx). Pushing against the borders and boundaries between private and public, reproduction and production, and domestic and foreign, they adopted a "position that resists the seductions of home," making it possible to "theorize the possible connections between home and elsewhere" (Honig 1994, 579).

Hansberry's fictional work, which I turn to next, more concretely draws together these historical and contemporary discussions, presenting a multivalent account that anticipates debates between feminist studies scholars who have identified home as a source of safety and community, as a site of un-waged labor and capitalist exploitation, and an important venue of empire, where contestations over belonging, settlement, and intimacy take place. Discussing home in the USA and abroad in relational terms, these plays move across and unravel boundaries imposed by normative and nation-bound conceptions of domesticity.

INSURGENT INTIMACIES

While *A Raisin in the Sun* is her most famous play, Hansberry wrote others that, taking place in contexts of slavery and colonialism, critically explore aspirations to homeownership, heteronormative intimacy, and nation-states, presenting alternative modes of dwelling, belonging, and loving. *The Drinking Gourd*, *Les Blancs*, and *Toussaint L'Ouverture* all unravel the easy equivalence between home and nation, scrutinizing where and what home is and who has the power to stay and to move. In addition to showing the centrality of racialized and gendered labor to the making of racial capitalism, colonialism, and empire, the plays show homemaking to be up for grabs, without endorsing one version over another in contexts of violent eruption.

Exposing the historical roots and transnational contestations of US Cold War domesticity, these plays do not sanction preexisting, conventional meanings one might associate with home, such as safety, comfort, and uncomplicated relations of intimacy. Instead, they pose important questions about the types of boundaries that home both makes possible and can explode,

⁸ Black History Collection, Institute of Race Relations, London, UK.

⁹ For a recent attempt to foster conversations between the two approaches, see Collins et al. (2021).

interrogating the consequences that a radical revision of “home” can bring. They offer insights into the thorny ways in which intimacy is demanded and performed in contexts where the very ability to make and move homes, to create and foster the intimacies of home life, are themselves unevenly distributed. Home, to borrow terminology from Reddy (1998) and Zengin (2024), is a site of “contradictory demands and conditions,” perhaps of community, solidarity, and resistance, but also of “constitutive violence” and “violent intimacies,” where compulsory reproductive labor, sexuality, and desire sustain and are enmeshed with global systems of empire, colonialism, and capitalism. Home can also be a site of insurgent dwelling (Roach 2022) and insurgent intimacies (Schields 2020).

Households, houses, and homes are not necessarily synonymous. They signify variably in different historical and geographic contexts, and yet they share a hierarchical organization around “the administration of life necessities... according to the assumed biological and other status attributes of different members” (Owens 2015, 6). By extending her analysis of domestic and national aspirations to different time periods and geographies on the cusp of wars and revolutions, Hansberry shows home to be deeply enmeshed in what Lisa Lowe calls the “political economy of intimacies,” that is, the “calculus governing the production, distribution, and possession of intimacy” (2015, 18). These writings show how “the intimacies of desire, sexuality, marriage, and family are inseparable from the imperial projects of conquest, slavery, labor, and government” (17)—in this case how the ideal of bourgeois intimacy has historically been sustained by slavery and colonial labor. They document contestation over this political economy, with enslaved and colonized peoples insisting on alternative modes of belonging and intimacy that do not offer an uncomplicated notion of “home.”

The Drinking Gourd depicts the violence of and resistance to slavery at the poignantly named Sweet plantation at the brink of the Civil War. The drama pivots around the relationship between the plantation owners, the Sweet family, who disagree over modernizing the plantation operations by expanding them, and an enslaved family, consisting of Rissa and her son, Hannibal, who is secretly learning how to read and write in order to flee. The play opens with a broad overview of the global geography of slavery, narrated by a man dressed in military clothes. Later revealed to be a Union soldier, he gestures toward the connections between Europe, Africa, and the New World, where earth and cotton seed have “gotten mixed up together to make the trouble,” combining with a third force that gives them “meaning” and “potency,” that is, “labor” (Hansberry [1972] 1994 [LB, hereafter], 167–8).

The introduction seamlessly moves from this panoramic shot of the political economy of slavery to a “close-up of a large skillet suspended over the roaring fire which now crackles with live sound,” overseen by Rissa, the cook in the plantation owner’s kitchen (170). Exemplifying the “sexual, reproductive, and caretaking coercion and exploitation” of enslaved women (Threadcraft 2016, 38), Rissa performs the type of invisible labor and

complicated intimacy in the home that is both taken for granted and the structural foundation of worldwide capital accumulation (Mies 2014).

In the play’s first act, Rissa stealthily listens in on a conversation that displays the intergenerational conflict between Hiram, the plantation owner; his wife, Maria; and son, Everett. Hiram is wary of fighting “a war you know you can’t win.” The ambitious Everett boasts that “we have the finest generals in the country and a labor force of four million who can just go on working undisturbed” (LB, 177). The act closes with a tricky scene of intimacy between Hiram and Rissa, where they reminisce about founding the plantation with a handful of workers, including Rissa. At one point, Hiram asks Rissa to fetch his old weapon so he can caress it, and she “fuss[es] good-naturedly as she obeys,” using “a key hanging among a dozen or so keys on her belt” to open the gun cabinet. The keys have been entrusted her as a testament to the long-standing relationship between the two characters. Working on Hiram’s “nostalgic feelings” in this scene, Rissa reminds him of his old promise that her “unruly” son, Hannibal, will be made a house servant instead of staying in the field (Carter 1991, 122). Assuring Rissa that he will see to this arrangement despite his wife’s objections, Hiram maintains, “I am Master of this plantation and every soul on it. I am master of those fields out there and I am master of this house as well” (LB, 188).

In the next act, the ailing plantation owner is in bed, which creates an opening for Everett to expand the plantation’s operations and hire an overseer, Zeb. When Everett and Zeb catch Hannibal learning to read and write from Hiram’s younger son in preparation for his escape, Everett instructs Zeb to blind Hannibal as punishment. In the play’s final scene, the sickly Hiram comes to Rissa’s cabin to apologize for the sadistic blinding and insists that he “had nothing to do with this” and that “some things do seem to be out of the power of my hands after all.” Rissa shoots back: “Why? Ain’t you *Master*? How can a man be master of some men and not all of others?” (LB, 215).

Taking for granted their previous intimacy, Hiram expects Rissa to listen and care for him. Instead, she tends to her son, leaving Hiram to his death, “an act which belies the dearly-held stereotype of the faithful, self-deprecating servant” (Wilkerson 2017, 701). Rissa, on the other hand, takes advantage of this compulsory intimacy and unlocks the gun cabinet with the key she had used earlier to humor Hiram in their moment of shared reminiscence. Subverting the violent patterns of intimacy imposed on her through enslavement, she uses the gun cabinet to arm Hannibal and others as the Civil War breaks out. In rejecting Hiram’s expectation and demand for intimacy, Rissa overturns the “longstanding inhibition of black women’s intimate—that is sexual, reproductive, and caretaking—capacities under successive systems of racial domination” (Threadcraft 2016, 8). Following Rissa’s transgression, Hiram wanders outside her home. As “he cries out for help,” “one by one the lights of the cabins go out and doors close,” and he dies in the courtyard, “a dejected, defeated

figure,” alone. Rissa thus exemplifies how “enslaved Black women converted plantation slave quarters into radical sites of care, insurrection, and careful insurrection” (Roach 2022, 792).

During the radio broadcast she recorded with Baldwin and others, Hansberry noted how *The Drinking Gourd*, commissioned by the National Broadcasting Company in 1960 to commemorate the Civil War centennial, never aired on television because it was deemed “too controversial.” She contrasted her play with popular misrepresentations of slavery, such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), which depicts “beautiful ladies in big fat dresses screaming as their houses burned down from the terrible, nasty, awful Yankees.” Against this romance of the Confederacy, Hansberry noted, “but when someone asked me to write ninety minutes of television drama on slavery, not a propaganda piece, but, I hope, a serious treatment of family relationship, by a slave-owning family and their slaves, this was considered controversial. This has never been done” (Godfrey 2020, 133). Her play, she said, would be a corrective to many volumes on the Civil War that fixated on “which army was crossing their river at five minutes to two and how their swords were hanging” and those that “insist that slavery was not the issue,” that “it was fought for economic reasons, as if that economy were not based on slavery.”

By foregrounding the Civil War’s economic underpinnings through the lens of domesticity, Hansberry also revealed what the cult of Cold War domesticity occluded: the idealized domestic sphere’s inextricable links with racialized labor and broader geographies. As subsequent feminist scholarship has shown, investments in social reproduction in the global core were closely connected with imperialism and ongoing expropriation from the periphery (Fraser 2017, 30). Reproductive work’s devaluation under capitalist conceptions of productive labor was historically linked to the work of other unwaged laborers, such as enslaved people, contract workers, and peasants in the colonies (Federici [2004] 2014; Mies 2014). In the USA, the racialized and gendered division of reproductive labor that began under slavery continued, with Black and Brown women doing low-wage domestic labor in the homes of white families (Glenn 1992; Valdez 2023). As with the work of Jones, Hansberry’s plays reveal the gendered and racialized formation of domestic labor that provided the material conditions of possibility and sustenance for the metropole. Collectively, they document what Kaplan has described as “the overlooked relationship between domesticity, nation, and empire” (1998, 582–3).

Hansberry’s work shows intimacy to be up for contestation, especially when she dramatizes global emancipation struggles against empire, as in the opera she was planning to write about Toussaint L’Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution. The only available scene from the opera takes place in the bedroom of the plantation manager, Bayon de Bergier, and his wife, Lucie, while L’Ouverture can only be heard off-stage. This off-stage nature and proximity of revolutionary outburst to the intimacy of the bedroom can be read as “a political commentary on the domestic and the

inability of patriarchal capitalism to remain outside its doors” (Diggs-Colbert 2021, 129). In her introductory note, Hansberry underscores the global context of empire: “L’Ouverture was not a God; he was a man. And by the will of one man in union with a multitude, Santo Domingo was transformed; aye—the French empire, the western hemisphere, the history of the United States—therefore the world” (1986, 52). As in the *Drinking Gourd*, here Hansberry focuses on the domestic level, providing intricate detail on the couple’s “double boudoir” with its “excessive statuary; extravagant color; cushions and ornate furnishings” (55). The stage directions pay special attention to the partition that “marks both the separateness and union of the rooms.” This ambiguous spatial separation shows how the ideal of intimacy in the private sphere critically provides the conditions for the consolidation of colonial power (Lowe 2015; Stoler 2006).

Toussaint L’Ouverture stages the multivalence of home by showing its intimate violence and contestations over belonging, as the couple bicker over where “home” is. Against Bayon’s wish to return “home” to France, Lucie claims a “contradictory belongingness” (Glick 2016, 193): “You seem to forget, my darling, I am a *Creole*. This is my home,” she says, “I intend to die here” (Hansberry 1986, 58–9). She takes pains to differentiate herself from both her white husband, who can easily call France home, and the Black inhabitants of Saint-Domingue, who are on the verge of making a home from the place to which they had been violently brought. Later in the conversation, we learn that in the early days of their marriage, Bayon told Lucie that he had hoped to “marry into a distinguished family,” rather than someone like her, “spawned” from the “baggage of the Paris gutters... the prostitutes and refuse of the prisons of France dumped in that Bay out there” (60).

This brief scene also comments on the sexual violence of slavery and colonialism, when Lucie expresses her disdain for Bayon’s “bastard legions roaming this plantation—opening and closing doors for me; waiting at my table—*playing minuets in my own home!*” In the end, Lucie attempts to make love to Destine, a young enslaved woman, before Bayon interrupts this moment of violent intimacy. The explosive race, class, and sexual dynamics of Haiti, at the brink of the revolution, are scaled down to this snippet of domesticity in the plantation manager’s bedroom, whose internal and external boundaries are porous and prone to transgressions. In a scene of queer desire in which sexual boundaries appear to be transgressed, colonial and racial hierarchies are simultaneously reinscribed, hierarchies that can only be undone with the revolutionary explosion Hansberry did not have time to write about, due to her untimely death at 35.

The conflictual home appears in another explosive colonial context in Hansberry’s *Les Blancs*, which takes place in the fictional African country of Zatembe, whose people are about to overthrow colonial authority. As with Hansberry’s other work interrogating the cults of homeownership and nationhood, *Les Blancs* demonstrates home’s slipperiness, detailing competing

claims to belonging and different formations of family, desire, and intimacy at the brink of anticolonial insurgency. As Kotef (2020) has argued, the play depicts home as a tool of violence and provides contesting visions of “home/less/ness” among settlers and colonized peoples. The fictional country was likely modeled after Kenya, where the Mau Mau were resisting British rule and which Hansberry had written about in *Freedom* as a “highly organized guerilla movement for African freedom,” rather than a “weird association of witch-doctors and fanatics” as “pictured by British propagandists” (Hansberry 1952). Even as Hansberry writes in favor of African nationalism, as Wilkins (2006) argues, she anticipates the “pitfalls of national independence” and dynamics of neocolonialism.

The play’s main action revolves around Tshembe Matoseh, who lives in England and has returned to Zatembe for his father’s funeral, and his two brothers, Abioseh and Eric, as they disagree over joining the emergent independence struggle. Tshembe and his brothers have a complicated history with the mission compound and hospital, established by Reverend Nielsen, his wife, and other colonial personnel. Echoing Lucie’s racially and sexually violent claim to Saint-Domingue, Major Rice of the Colonial Reserve insists that “this is our *home*... They had it for centuries and did nothing with it” (*LB*, 71). This settler claim to home is also voiced by Marta, one of the medical personnel at the Mission, when she describes Reverend Nielsen as “not really one of them. More like their father. Like our father, too. We are *all* his children” (46). This paternalistic colonial fantasy is shattered when the minister is killed by the revolutionaries and the missionary compound is blown up at the end of the play. In each of these interactions, home functions as the “primary means, technology, and meaning of violence” (Kotef 2020, 235).

Countering, or perhaps mirroring, these violent claims to home and family is the tense relationship between the three brothers. Tshembe lives in England with his European wife and child and is slowly pulled into the anticolonial revolt upon returning to Zatembe. He is initially ambivalent about joining the uprising, fantasizing about a normative scene of domesticity, where he will “sit in Hyde Park with a faded volume of Shakespeare and come home to a dinner of fried bananas with kidney pie” (*LB*, 125–6). Tshembe does not approve of Eric’s queer relationship with the mission hospital’s white doctor, Willy Devoken; Tshembe considers it, from his “heteropatriarchal perspective,” a form of sexual violence of colonialism (Higashida 2011, 77). When Eric insists that he will join the anticolonial struggle, Tshembe “discredits him on the basis of Eric’s transgression of racial, national, and sexual boundaries,” asking: “And what will you do when your doctor calls, Eric? It takes more than a spear to make a man.” Eric shoots back, challenging Tshembe’s homophobic articulation of nationalism: “What does it take, Tshembe? You teach me! What does it take to be a man? A white wife and son?” (*LB*, 108; Higashida 2011, 77). Eric thus upends Tshembe’s normative conceptions of sexuality and nationalism, articulating an oppositional and insurgent understanding of intimacy.

In addition to this subversion of racial and sexual boundaries, Hansberry directly links the play’s African colonial setting to US racism, through the character of the American journalist Charlie Morris, who is visiting to write a book about Zatembe. Convinced of his own liberal credentials, Charlie tries to persuade Tshembe that they are “on the same side,” asking him to “throw away yesterday’s catchwords,” like “imperialism!” (*LB*, 92, 78). The doctor, Willy, seems to have a more self-conscious and critical understanding of the mission. He tells Charlie that “there is a *war* going on here. Everyone else that you talk to will call it a bit of an emergency, pacification, police action—I’m sure your country is familiar with such phrases?” (49). In a particularly sardonic exchange, Charlie finds out that Tshembe has been in the USA and asks if he has been to “our tobacco country.” Tshembe retorts, “Yes, I was in *the South!* (*with deliberate impatience*) And yes, I did find your American *apartheid* absolutely enraging!” (74). Echoing the work of Black internationalist feminists, Hansberry once again reveals the shared white supremacist logic of Jim Crow at home and colonialism abroad.

Presenting different visions of insurgent homemaking, Hansberry’s plays about slavery and colonialism argue against the cult of domesticity both in the sense of the familial household with its racialized and gendered labor and in the sense of the nation with its presumed distinction from “the foreign.” Revisited with this context in mind, *A Raisin in the Sun* becomes a play about struggle—between homeowner and tenant, capitalism and communism, colonizer and colonized—that exposes the myth of homeownership as a source of national stability and security, available to all, regardless of race and class, while also interrogating the politics of this myth in relation to worldwide decolonization.

OR DOES IT EXPLODE?

Hansberry is best known for *A Raisin in the Sun*, which debuted on Broadway in 1959, became a major hit, and won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, making her the first African American playwright to win the award and, at 29, its youngest winner. Set in South Side Chicago, *Raisin* chronicles the struggles of a working-class Black family, the Youngers, who disagree over how to use the \$10,000 insurance money awarded to them upon the death of the father, Walter Lee Senior. The son, Walter Lee, aspires to open a liquor store, while the mother, Lena, hopes to buy a house and set aside money so that the daughter, Beneatha, can achieve her dream of going to medical school. Although Walter Lee is swindled out of most of the money, including his sister’s education funds, at the play’s end, the characters reconcile and move into the house that Lena has purchased in a white neighborhood.

According to the agent who reviewed *Raisin* for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)’s bulky dossier on Hansberry, the play essentially deals with “negro

aspirations, their efforts to advance themselves” and “contains no comments of any nature about Communism.”¹⁰ The main conflict, the review claims, is between Walter Lee, the son who “wants to make big deals,” and Lena, a “firm-minded dominating matriarch with very strong feelings for family unity.” The agent notes that while Beneatha denies the existence of God and condemns her brother as an “entrepreneur,” relatively few members of the audience “appeared to dwell on the[se] propaganda messages.” The agent remarks on how one of Beneatha’s two suitors, the Nigerian Asagai, “helps to set up for her self-identification with the independence movement in Africa,” but, he quickly adds, “Africa, incidentally, is a matter which is only dimly comprehended by the other members of the family.” Ultimately, the FBI agent reads *Raisin* in a framework of liberal civil rights politics: as a domestic family drama about upward mobility and one nuclear family’s struggles to overcome segregated housing (Smith 2004).

There are good reasons to read the play this way. The family’s house purchase in a white neighborhood seems to confirm the Cold War-era script of US domesticity, which envisioned homeownership as a sign of, and precondition for, national integration and security. This “cult of domesticity,” as Kaplan (1998, 581–2) argues in a different context, insisted on an understanding of “the foreign” that required “erect[ing] the boundaries that enclose the nation as home.” With its multiple conversations about “what it means to be a man,” *Raisin* also reinstates heteropatriarchal gender norms and relations in the family, at times tying them to homeownership. Lena insists that “it makes a difference in a man when he can walk on floors that belong to *him*” and that homeownership has the effect of re-masculating Walter Lee, who “finally come into his manhood today” (Hansberry [1959] 1994 [RS, hereafter], 75, 84, 92, 151). Indeed, one strand of scholarship embraces the necessity for Walter Lee to attain “manhood” in order for the family to pull together as a unified collective at the end (Matthews 2008; Smith 2004; Wilkerson 2017).

Yet *Raisin* is doing more—and more radical—work than the agent sees. The FBI agent’s review, after all, was part of the anticommunist surveillance and erasure of Black internationalist feminist networks and their multivalent conceptions of home. Refusing the Cold War disconnection between the domestic and the international makes visible the interconnections that the play forges between the struggle for housing, domestic labor, and international solidarity against racism, colonialism, and capitalism. The FBI agent’s domesticated reading of the play purposefully refuses to see its themes of decolonization and anticolonial insurgency. But read alongside Hansberry’s own commentary and her other writings that challenge heteropatriarchal norms, the play presents a more ambivalent treatment

of home, peeking behind the cult of domesticity to reveal relations of labor, conflict, and exploitation.

As with her other work, *Raisin* is embedded in intertwined struggles against the domestic and global manifestations of racial capitalism and colonialism. Its transnationality appears here, not just in articulating solidarity between discrete nation-units but also in interrogating whether the nation-state is a desirable end goal in the first place. The play questions membership in the nation via homeownership, centering the global context of decolonization and critiques of capitalism. Steeped in Cold War domestic ideology, the FBI reviewer missed this, and we risk missing it too, if we stay beholden to siloed ways of political theorizing about home.

Written in the context of US housing practices of redlining, predatory loaning, covenants, and segregation, *Raisin* is a commentary on the role of home in racial capitalism and the role of real estate in the production and maintenance of racism (Diggs-Colbert 2021; Gordon 2008). Lena, a domestic worker, puts down the payment for a house in the white neighborhood of Clybourne Park for financial reasons: it happens to be the only one that the family can afford, since “them houses they put up for colored in them areas way out all seem to cost twice as much as other houses” (RS, 93). Overlooking this context allows for a conventional reading of the play as a story about thwarted Black aspirations toward national integration represented by the desire for homeownership and erases the play’s exposure of the methods by which racial segregation is maintained, as well as its more radical critique of US capitalism and colonialism (Wilkins 2006).

While the play’s title famously comes from Langston Hughes’ question about what happens to a “dream deferred” (“Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?”), it must also be understood in terms of what Hansberry dubbed the poem’s “too little noted final lines”: “Or does it explode?”¹¹ *Raisin* does not idealize home as a safe and static sanctuary signifying middle-class status and national security, but presents it as a “differentiated site of coalition,” to borrow Bonnie Honig’s terminology (1994). Throughout the play, Lena, Beneatha, Walter Lee, and Ruth enter into “strategic, conflicted, and temporary alliances” as they disagree about the insurance money and moving into the white neighborhood (586, 593). Yet, the characters share a desire to transcend their entrapment in their South Side home, whether by changing neighborhoods, starting a new business, or leaving the country altogether. Lena’s vision of moving to a new house in a different neighborhood may win out, but one version of home does not thereby prevail over the others (Matthews 2008, 567).

For Hansberry, questions of housing were more than symbolic. They were formative in her personal and family history in seemingly contradictory ways (Perry 2018). In a series of events complicating the dynamics of racial capitalism, her father, Carl Hansberry, was the

¹⁰ FBI File, 100–393031–28, March 30, 1959, Box 72, Folder 1, Lorraine Hansberry Papers, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem (LHP, hereafter).

¹¹ Hansberry to *NYT*, April 23, 1964 (unpublished), LHP, Box 64, Folder 3.

head of a major real estate corporation, Hansberry Enterprises, which split tenement apartments into one-room units called kitchenettes in the South Side of Chicago, precisely the kind of living conditions that Hansberry criticized in *Freedom* and in *Raisin*, where the opening stage directions specify that “weariness has, in fact, won in this room” (RS, 23). But Hansberry’s father was also actively involved in the legal struggle against segregation and bought a house in a white neighborhood in 1938, an event that led to the US Supreme Court case *Hansberry v. Lee* (1940).

In that landmark decision, the Court ruled in favor of Hansberry, overturning the restrictive covenant that barred African Americans from purchasing or leasing land in the all-white Woodlawn neighborhood. Lorraine Hansberry recounts her memories of moving into the hostile neighborhood, culminating with a violent mob outside their house: “I was on the porch one day with my sister, swinging my legs, when a mob gathered. We went inside, and while we were in our living room, a brick came crashing through the window with such force it embedded itself in the opposite wall. I was the one the brick almost hit” (Godfrey 2020, 22). Home is not a safe unit enclosed in itself in this scene: it is porous, surrounded, and invaded by white supremacy. This is reflected in the play when Karl Lindner of the “Clybourne Park Improvement Association,” the only white character in the play, tries to intimidate and bribe the family into not “moving into a neighborhood where you just aren’t wanted and where some elements—well—people can get awful worked up when they feel that their whole way of life and everything they’ve ever worked for is threatened” (RS, 119).

As home is vulnerable to dangers from the outside world, it is also, as in the earlier context of *The Drinking Gourd*, sustained by gendered and racialized labor. In a 1963 address to the American Academy of Psychotherapists, Hansberry analyzes a scene in *Raisin*, “written by a 27-year old woman, who had long since passed out of the embrace of her formative community, who would no longer feel any compatibility with the militantly held, tyrannically imposed worldview of the mother in that scene.”¹² The scene she describes is between Lena and Beneatha, who declares, “God is just one idea I don’t accept.” Lena slaps her daughter in response and makes her repeat, “In my mother’s house there is still God” (RS, 51). Hansberry explains, “to the atheist author of the piece, [the mother] is in that moment wrong, ignorant, bound over to superstitions which lash down the wings of the human spirit.” At the same time, “the mother is an affirmation of the author” because she is “the only possible recollection of a prototype,” “the black matriarch incarnate,” “the bulwark of the Negro family since slavery, the embodiment of the Negro will to transcendence.... It is she who, in the mind of the black poet, 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 the fire hoses.”

In the reconfigured context of racialized social reproduction, Lena—and Walter Lee’s wife, Ruth—does laundry for white people (Baldwin 2016). At various points in the play, the two women share exchanges that recall Alice Childress’ Mildred columns in their knowing depiction of white employers’ unreasonable expectations of domestic workers (RS, 42–3). It is their reproductive work, too, that culminates in refusal, resistance, and the trespassing of boundaries between neighborhoods. In favor of the move, Ruth declares, “I’ll work... I’ll work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago... I’ll strap my baby on my back if I have to and scrub all the floors in America and wash all the sheets in America if I have to—but we have got to MOVE! We got to get OUT OF HERE!!” (RS, 140). Some of the play’s passages romanticize care work and affirm gender norms and family roles. Trapped in what Claudia Jones castigated as the ideology of “kitchen, church and children,” Lena, Ruth, and Walter Lee constantly chastise Beneatha for not believing in God, for not marrying her rich suitor, and for studying to be a doctor instead of a nurse (RS 36–8, 49–50).

But these dynamics are in tension with other elements of the play and with Hansberry’s other writings. In an unfinished essay on *The Second Sex*, which she described as “the most important work of this century,” Hansberry writes of “housework” and “home-making” as “drudgery” that “women flee [in] one form or another.”¹³ In letters to *The Ladder*, the first lesbian publication in the USA, she defines herself as a “heterosexually married lesbian” (Perry 2018).¹⁴ In private reflections, she describes vacuuming “the rug and the corners of the house where the dog hair collects in pounds between times when I am finally moved to clean,” adding “then I scrubbed, not well at all, the bathroom and the kitchen and spread paper on the floor.” In between these tasks, she reads “Simone again” and “in frustration, again.”¹⁵

Depicting imprisonment and oppression as inseparable from flight and resistance, Hansberry criticizes women who do not “understand their own rebellion” and who respond to inquiries about their occupation with the diminutive, “oh me, nothing, I’m just a housewife.” The rest of the population insists that housework and “home-making” are the “cornerstone and key and bedrock foundation of her family, home, husband, nation and world,” she writes, as long as they do not have to do it. But this is an “unnatural role” that has been imposed on “woman,” who, “like the Negro, the Jew, like colonial peoples, even in ignorance, is incapable of accepting the role with harmony” since “the oppressed are by their nature forever in ferment and agitation against their condition and what they understand to be their oppressors.” Reproductive

¹² Hansberry, “Playwriting: Creative Constructiveness,” LHP, Box 56, Folder 13.

¹³ Hansberry, “Simone De Beauvoir and The Second Sex: An American Commentary,” 1957, LHP, Box 59, Folder 1.

¹⁴ See also Pollak (2023).

¹⁵ Untitled, October 19, 1956, LHP, Box 1, Folder 1.

work, as Silvia Federici will put it years later, is the “work in which the contradictions inherent in ‘alienated labor’ are most explosive” (Federici 2012, 2). In this respect, the performers of domestic work share what Hansberry dubbed the “insurgent mood” of colonized people.

Hansberry’s reflections on the constraints imposed by home seep into her account of the house as a site of differentiation and socialization into gender roles. She notes that “women are born of women” and “do precisely the same things that little baby boys do”: They gurgle, begin to grow, walk and talk, pull things on tables, and play with themselves.¹⁶ “Until now, maybe a little girl doesn’t know she is a little girl and a little boy doesn’t know he is a little boy. And then his mother puts pants on him and he sees the dress on his sister, the misery starts, he must do things more roughly and with less love than a woman, he must climb trees and fight and be unmanageable. The little girl should be taught to be nice and ladylike and play house.” The reason, Hansberry adds, that women are held in a subordinate position in society, that they are “exploited and held secondary to men,” as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels pointed out, is “because of: economics.” This insight resonates with Maria Mies’ later account of “housewifization”: the “externalization, or ex-territorialization of costs which otherwise would have to be covered by the capitalists. This means women’s labor is conceived a natural resource, freely available like air and water” ([1986] 2014, 110). Elsewhere, Hansberry wonders, “who can only guess what stores, what wealth she can give humanity: wealth which will be the product of her centuries of humiliation, exploitation, degradation and sheer slavery.”¹⁷

Hansberry’s reflections on the drudgery of housework connect the mundane performance of domestic rituals and femininity to global conditions of exploitation and subordination. As she puts it in her essay on Beauvoir, the woman’s question is “regardless of all other questions barring peace and liberation of the world’s working classes and colonial peoples, the greatest social question existent; its depth and horrors and universality sometimes overlapping, even certain of those paramount issues mentioned above.” There are marked class differences between Hansberry’s own routines of domesticity in her Village apartment and the cramped, rat-infested quarters of the kitchenette that the Youngers live in. But both sets of writings show that the home is never a static and insular site detached from the rest of the world with its political economic conditions and contradictions.

In fact, Hansberry described her play’s characters as “necessarily tied to an international movement and affirmative moment” in which “the colonial peoples, the African peoples, the Asian peoples, are in an insurgent mood” (Godfrey 2020, 70). She makes this

point through Asagai, a Nigerian university student, who personifies the liberatory potential of transgressing the boundaries between domestic and transnational. Asagai invites Beneatha to go “home” to Nigeria with him (*RS*, 150), linking “the South Side black community to a worldwide African diaspora” (Smith 2004, 314). In an interview with Studs Terkel, Hansberry argues that “in one sense,” Asagai “gives the statement of the play” when he tells Beneatha that even if independence and freedom in Africa bring “crooks and petty thieves” into power, “when that time comes, there will be Nigerians to step out of the shadows and kill the tyrants, just as now they must do away with the British. And that history always solves its own questions, but you get to first things first” (Godfrey 2020, 85). Indeed, Hansberry described Asagai as a “true intellectual” who “can already kid about all the features of intense nationalism because he’s been there, and he understands it beyond that point. He’s already concerned about the human race on a new level” (Godfrey 2020, 83). Here, as in *Les Blancs*, overthrowing colonial power through the nation-state is a necessary, but insufficient, step in the struggle toward universal dignity (Wilkins 2006).

Asagai also embodies an insurgency that permeates the intimate sphere. *Raisin’s* third act opens in the Younger living room, after Walter Lee has squandered the insurance money: “In the living room Beneatha sits at the table, still surrounded by the now almost ominous packing crates. She sits looking off. We feel that this is a mood struck perhaps an hour before, and it lingers now, full of the empty sound of profound disappointment.” Beneatha’s despondency pervades the house until Asagai enters, “smiling broadly, striding into the room with energy and happy expectation and conversation.” When Beneatha explains that Walter Lee “gave away the money,” Asagai asks, “isn’t there something wrong in a house—in a world—where all dreams, good or bad, must depend on the death of a man?” Here, he implores the Youngers to “question the material aspects of their individual ambitions and values” and “the capitalist principles on which modern society is structured” more broadly (Gordon 2008, 124).

In her *Village Voice* account of the play’s tortured son, Hansberry also situates Walter Lee Younger’s tragically derailed dreams about owning a liquor store in the broader political economic context of the play. She notes that in his life, “somebody has to die for ten thousand bucks to pile up.” Elsewhere in the world, “he might wander down to his first Communist Party meeting. But here in the dynamic and confusing postwar years on the South Side of Chicago revolution seems alien to him in his circumstances (America), and it is easier to dream of personal wealth than of a communal state wherein universal dignity is supposed to be a corollary” (Godfrey 2020, 96). Without the possibility of worldwide revolution, Walter Lee’s possibilities of action are constricted to homeownership or, at best, “helping to break down restricted neighborhoods.”

Critiquing these limitations, Hansberry’s play indicts aspirations to domesticity, which she construes as a

¹⁶ Hansberry, “Notes on the Woman Question,” n.d., Box 2, Folder 5, LHP.

¹⁷ Hansberry, “Notes on Women’s Liberation,” 1955, Box 56, Folder 6, LHP.

moderate and inadequate response to American racism. In criticizing the investment in national belonging through homeownership and by leveraging feminist attention to the multivalence of the house(hold), Hansberry shows that framing the problem in terms of the desirability of integration into the nation qua the “burning house” misses the point and overlooks how aspirations to domesticity in the postwar USA need to be understood vis-à-vis the global decolonization moment that she evocatively dubbed an “insurgent mood.”

LEAVING A HOUSE ON FIRE

When the radio broadcast with Baldwin and others aired, an audience member wrote to Hansberry asking about the meaning of “the burning house.” In her response, Hansberry once again emphasized the international context of her comments, noting that the “imagery” spoke to the “seedy morality” of a nation that “can so accommodate racism against 20,000,000 people while daring to present itself as the champion of human dignity in the world.”¹⁸ Still, she raised the question of what it would mean to stay or to leave when home finally erupts into flames: “this house is on fire. I, for one, will probably stay here to help try and put it out.”

What Hansberry did not disclose was that she had, in fact, not been able to leave the country for several years. Her passport had been confiscated after the FBI found out that she had lied about why she took a trip to Uruguay to represent Paul Robeson at an anti-militarist conference in 1952. Elsewhere, Hansberry described how her father “died 1945 [sic], at the age of fifty-one, of a cerebral hemorrhage, supposedly, but American racism helped kill him. He died in Mexico, where he was making preparations to move all of us out of the United States.” While she agreed with his “assessment of this country,” she added, “But I don’t agree with the leaving part. I don’t feel defensive. Daddy really belonged to a different age, a different period. He didn’t feel free. One of the reasons I feel so free is that I feel I belong to a world majority, and a very assertive one” (Godfrey 2020, 21–2).

Hansberry here articulates a non-proprietary type of belonging, eschewing claims to ownership, possession, and territorial forms of attachment. This political affective belonging transcends home’s multiple boundaries to partake in an insurgent mood that cannot be contained by national borders or Cold War norms of intimacy. As with Childress’ Mildred and Jones’ militant Black domestic workers, Hansberry and her characters strive toward the universal in their struggles against racism, capitalism, sexism, and homophobia, all of which can trap one in oppressive and exploitative versions of home, on fire or not.

Reading Hansberry’s, and indeed Baldwin’s, commentary on the burning house in specifically national terms amounts to the domestication of their thought, replicating the security state’s efforts to silence their critique of global capitalism and to curtail their project of transnational solidarity.¹⁹ Hansberry’s exchanges with her networks—and her plays and writings—especially underscore the persistent internationalism of Black feminist thinkers and activists, who wrote about shifting significations and locations of home, and the need to listen to those conversations across kitchen tables and in bedrooms, conversations that reveal the tyranny of the household, with its gendered, racialized, classed hierarchies, as well as the possibilities of rupture, transgression, and insurgency within and beyond home.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human participants.

¹⁸ Hansberry to Mrs. Wilhemy, March 22, 1961, LHP, Box 64, Folder 3.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Baldwin’s (1961) *New York Times* article, published two months after the radio broadcast, where he adopted Hansberry’s transnational framing of the burning house question, relating it to the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the ensuing protests outside the United Nations building in New York City.

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