

Or Does it Explode?: Sounding Out the U.S. Metropolis in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

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Abstract

Editor's Note: Cars. Trains. Festivals. Music. Noise. Sound. The concept of the city is inherently aural. Cities are always thought of in opposition to quiet, to stillness. However, representing cities as noisy is not without its problems; in fact, one thing we have tried to do here at *Sounding Out!* is question what ideas of quiet and noise carry with them. They are social constructions, like race and gender.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Cultural Studies and Interdisciplinary Research (Topic), Philosophy (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Class, Drama



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Editor's Note: Cars. Trains. Festivals. Music. Noise. Sound.

The concept of the city is inherently aural. Cities are always thought of in opposition to quiet, to stillness. However, representing cities as noisy is not without its problems; in fact, one thing we have tried to do here at *Sounding Out!* is question what ideas of quiet and noise carry with them. They are social constructions, like race and gender. We cannot talk about urban sounds in a vacuum.

Cities are an essential part of the scholarly work I do; cities are also an intrinsic part of who I am. So when I started thinking about what I wanted February Forum #3 to be about, I felt it was time to edit a series on city sounds. This month *Sounding Out!* is thrilled to bring you a collection of posts that will change the way you hear cities. Regular writer [Regina Bradley](#) will discuss the dichotomy of urban and suburban in the context of sound (noisy versus quiet, respectively), guest writer **Linda O' Keeffe** will take readers on a soundwalk of the Smithfield Horse Fair in Dublin, and CFP winner **Lilian Radovac** will share with us a photoessay on the sound installation *Megaphône* in Montreal. The forum will prompt readers to think through ideas about urban space and sound. Are cities as noisy as we think they are? Why are cities described as "loud"? Who makes these decisions about nomenclature and why?

I'll be kicking things off in the forum with a critical reading of sound in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play about African Americans in Chicago that still rings/stings true today. Take your headphones off and listen up because you might miss your train...—**Liana M. Silva-Ford**,
Managing Editor

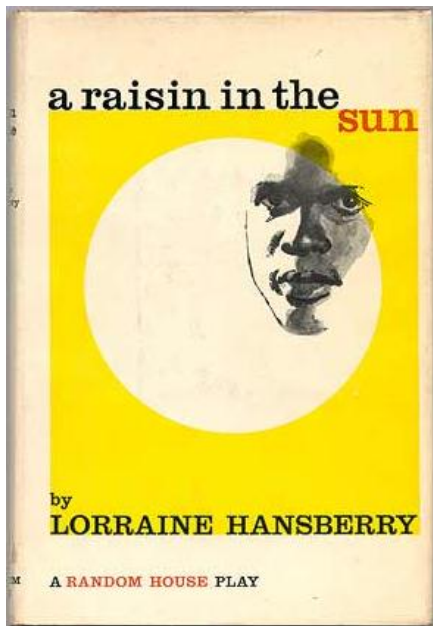
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[Lorraine Hansberry](#)'s groundbreaking play *A Raisin in the Sun* starts with the Younger family waking up and getting ready for work. Ruth Younger wakes her son, Travis Younger, to get ready for school. Her husband, Walter Lee Younger, is as reluctant to get up as his son does. After a brief tense exchange with his wife, Walter Lee turns to the paper:

WALTER (...vaguely reads the front page) Set off another bomb yesterday.

RUTH (Maximum indifference) Did they? (Hansberry 26)

With those two lines, seemingly thrown in amid a marital spat, Hansberry evokes the last line of [Langston Hughes's](#) poem "[Harlem](#)": the aural image, in italics, *Or does it explode?* Inserting this poem as an epilogue, together with these lines in Act I, Scene 1, foreshadow the race riots of the 50s and 60s. However, these lines could easily fall out of earshot of the audience, or get swallowed up in the tension between Ruth and Walter Lee. In fact, the power of Hansberry's play lies not just in her focus on the complexities of African Americans' lives in then-contemporary Chicago, but that much of the action happens off stage, outside of the apartment. The audience must pay close attention to actually hear the story of urban racial violence. Sonic cues become an alternative to talking directly about the racialization of space.



*"RaisinInTheSun" by Wikipedia
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Broadway audiences will soon get the chance to relive those opening lines when *A Raisin in the Sun* [comes back to theaters later this year](#), starring Denzel Washington and Diahann Carroll. Contemporary audiences will encounter the Younger family's struggles in the Southside of Chicago. In the play, Lena (Mama) Younger receives a life insurance check after the death of her husband, which lays bare the aspirations and desires of the characters: Lena wants a new home for the family, Beneatha wants to become a doctor, and Walter Lee wants to open up a business. Lena decides to use the money for a down payment of a home in a working-class neighborhood called Clybourne Park. (This neighborhood later inspired the 2010 Bruce Norris play [Clybourne Park](#).) The only problem is that the neighborhood houses only whites. However, Broadway (and Hollywood for that matter) frequently stages revivals; why is *A Raisin in the Sun* still relevant?

[Robert Nemiroff](#), in the [Introduction](#) to the [1994 Vintage Books edition of the play](#), recognizes that part of the allure of *Raisin* is that race relations are just as strained as they were in the mid-twentieth century. However, according to Nemiroff the play also holds sway because it holds a

mirror up to very human emotions that go beyond race (13-14). James Baldwin, on the other hand, believes its staying power lies in how it showcased the raw fear African Americans felt (and still feel) in a racist society. He mentions in his Introduction to Hansberry's autobiography *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* titled "*Sweet Lorraine*",

In Raisin, black people recognized that house and all the people in it—the mother, the son, the daughter, and the daughter-in-law, and supplied the play with an interpretative element which could not be present in the minds of white people: a kind of claustrophobic terror, created not only by their knowledge of the house but by their knowledge of the streets. (xii)

Baldwin values the context that African American theatergoers brought to the play. For them, the play would already have a soundtrack of terror to go along with it, a soundtrack that African Americans knew by heart. White audiences, on the other hand, would not; they more than likely had to rely on what was on stage. Instead of staging the racial violence on Chicago's streets, Hansberry renders audible the contours of racialized urban spaces through the people who become the focus of that violence.



"Chicago community areas map" by
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Hansberry's play was inspired by [her family's own situation in moving to Woodlawn in Chicago](#), which was for the most part white and middle class until the 1950s when racially restrictive zoning ordinances were struck down. In this neighborhood they faced violence and anger from their white neighbors, and were ultimately mandated to vacate the area. [Carl Hansberry](#), father of the playwright, would take this case to the Supreme Court, which later overruled the injunction. [George Lipsitz](#) discusses the sociohistorical context surrounding *A Raisin in the Sun* in his book *How Racism Takes Place* (2011). He focuses on racialized spaces, and Chicago in Hansberry's play is a prime example of that. Lipsitz points out, "[m]ore than any other single work of expressive culture, it called (and still calls) public attention to the indignities and oppressions of racialized

space in the United States at mid-century" (Loc. 2747). For Lipsitz, *A Raisin in the Sun* didn't just represent how race operated in urban spaces but took a stand against it. He states, "Hansberry's play staged a symbolic rebuke of the white spatial imaginary" (Loc. 2883). In my reading of the textual references to talking, coupled with Hansberry's choice to stage the play inside the apartment at all times, they call audiences to not just look but listen to how spatialized racism affected African Americans.

It is important to point out the sounds that theater-going audiences in the 1950s, many white and middle/upper-class, would not have heard in the play. *A Raisin in the Sun* evokes bombings (as seen in the quotation that started this piece), protests, and racial slurs. Although these sounds would be evocative and almost expected in a play about race and urban space in the 1950s, Hansberry stays away from those sounds. The only sounds Hansberry inserts in the stage directions are the sounds of music, children playing on the street, doorbells, and an alarm. In fact, the alarm clock opens the screenplay: "An alarm clock sounds from within the bedroom at right, and presently RUTH enters from that room and closes the door behind her" (24). The presence of alarms, in addition to the ring of the doorbell, is indicative of the busy city life: apartment buildings need bells to announce the arrival of someone downstairs, and alarms coax workers to get up. However, they are the only sonic indicators that Hansberry points out in her play. These sounds makes the apartment seem common, homely; they do not give way to what is happening in Southside Chicago—or in the United States, for that matter—at the moment.

The indications of the urban violence and racism outside of the Younger's apartment door are in the interactions between the characters. However, it is not just in the events they describe but also in their speech. In that sense, when Hansberry inserts rhetorical cues such as "talking" and "listening," they do not just refer to plot lines but also as a call for audience members to listen to what is being said (and what is not being said) in the play. For example, Hansberry introduces the three main characters in terms of their diction, their voices. Although this is to be expected in a playwright's directions to the director, it is also an indication of the importance of speech in this play. Hansberry describes Walter Lee as "inclined to quick nervous movements and erratic speech habits—and always in his voice there is a quality of indictment." Walter constantly vocalizes frustrations about being a black man in America—particularly his frustrations that his family second-guesses his aspirations. His voice carries the stern accusation against racism, but he seems unsure.



"A Raisin in the Sun 1959 3" in the public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Beneatha and Lena also seem wary in their tone. When Hansberry describes Beneatha, she mentions

her speech is a mixture of many things; it is different from the rest of the family's insofar as education has permeated her sense of English—and perhaps the Midwest rather than the South has finally—at last—won out in her inflection; but not altogether, because over all of it is a soft slurring and transformed use of vowels which is the decided influence of the Southside. (35)

Beneatha's voice shows a confluence of speech patterns, but also a struggle. The description brings to mind respectability politics, which judge others based on their appearance or their speech patterns. When it comes to Lena, Hansberry describes her as such: "*Her speech, on the other hand, is as careless as her carriage is precise—she is inclined to slur everything—but her voice is perhaps not so much quiet as simply soft.*" (39). As with Beneatha, Mama's voice signals a tension: carelessness versus precision. Her softness makes way for the hard truth often in the play. The tension in their voices point to the stress of experiencing racialized urban space. Walter Lee's experience of racialized space comes from the point of view of a chauffeur for a white businessman, Lena experiences it as a Southern migrant (also, someone who fled the racial violence of the South only to find it again in the North), and Beneatha sees it in her interactions with black men: George Hutchinson, the upper class African American and Joseph Asagai, the international student from Nigeria.



"A Raisin in the Sun 1959 4" in the public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The characters also reference talking in their dialogue. There always seems to be someone who does not want to listen or who feels they are not being heard. For example, when Walter Lee asks Lena about the insurance check that's supposed to arrive, Lena chastises him: "Now don't you start, child. It's too early in the morning to be talking about money. It ain't Christian" (Hansberry 41). Mama prevents Walter Lee from starting another conversation about his business ideas. In another scene, Walter Lee is annoyed that Ruth dislikes his late-night chat sessions with his buddies in their living room: "the things I want to talk about with my friends just couldn't be important in your mind, could they?" (27). Later in the play, after Lena finds out Ruth put a down payment for an abortion, she tells Walter, "Son—I think you ought to talk to your wife..." to which he responds, "I can talk to her later." I read these thwarted efforts to speak and be heard, as vocal metaphors for how African Americans were being ostracized and ghettoized in cities, especially when I consider that the play is set in Chicago.

However, the most pressing example of how talking is representative of racial relations in urban spaces is the visit of Karl Lindner, the representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. Although violence had become an unsanctioned form of policing African Americans in urban space, in the play Hansberry opts instead to represent that violence through the presence—and the voice—of Karl Lindner. Initially, Lindner has the attention of Ruth and Walter Younger, and they listen to him talk about the virtues of Clybourne Parks' neighbors. He gains their sympathy by invoking their sense of equality: "we don't try hard enough in this world to understand the other fellow's problem" (117). However, Lindner soon reveals his intentions: he comes bearing an offer to buy the house back from the Youngers to keep them from moving to the neighborhood. The Youngers show shock, to which Lindner replies, "I hope you'll hear me all the way through" (118). His request is the request of the privileged though, and tries to make it seem like the Youngers are being unreasonable. In Lindner the audience hears the threat of white supremacy.



"A Raisin in the Sun 1959" in the public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry focuses on rendering the city audible through the characters. Listening brings a deeper engagement with what is happening in the lives of the characters. Talking marks the bodies of the characters as sites of struggle, as microcosms for what is happening in Chicago in the 1950s—and what would happen later, as Lipsitz discusses in his book. In depictions of the city as noisy, it is often forgotten that part of that noise comes from human bodies, from people. Hansberry breaks through that noise by toning down the hum of the city on stage and focusing on making her audience listen to people. Perhaps a revival of *A Raisin in the Sun* can make a different generation of Americans tune in to how urban space continues to be racialized today.

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[Liana Silva-Ford](#) is co-founder and Managing Editor of Sounding Out!.

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