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Green Thumbs: Cultivating Greenery and Personal Freedoms in Miné Okubo's Citizen 13660 and Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun

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In her classic 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry explores the impacts of generations of violence, exploitation, and discrimination on an African American family in Chicago's Southside. The Younger family is headed by the matriarchal character Lena Younger, also known as Mama. She is the mother of Walter and Beneatha Younger, grandmother of Walter's son Travis Younger, and mother-in-law to Ruth Younger. One of Mama's key characteristics is her affinity for a struggling houseplant she keeps in the window of her dreary apartment as well as her dreams of having an entire garden of her own. Throughout the play her plant comes to symbolize Mama's hopes for her children, and her ability to nourish the plant reflects on her ability to fulfil her own modest dreams and provide for the dreams of her progeny. We see plants fulfilling the same role in another tale of American racial injustice, Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*, an illustrated personal account of the artist's experience in Japanese American concentration camps during World War II. For those who were interned in the camps during this period, their relationship with greenery and gardening served as a balm for their loss of freedom while imprisoned as well as a way for them to express themselves creatively and improve their comfortless surroundings. In each of these works cultivated greenery serves important roles for the people represented. Greenery becomes a means of expression, an avenue for hope, and an outlet of personal freedom and autonomy.

The first moments the viewer sees Mama in *A Raisin in the Sun* she is making her way across the kitchen towards her houseplant. Hansberry writes, "*She goes to the window, opens it and brings in a feeble little plant growing doggedly in a small pot on the window sill. She feels the dirt*" (28). In a short space both Mama and her houseplant are introduced. This moment comes just after her children Walter and Beneatha have both expressed anger about different aspects of their frustrated dreams. It should be noted that Mama's role in the Younger family

places her in a position of responsibility for the dreams of each of her family members, and she also carries the knowledge of her own wilted dreams within her memory. As Mama devotedly waters her plant in the sink first thing in the morning, she says to Ruth, “My children and they tempers. Lord, if this little old plant don’t get more sun than it’s been getting it ain’t never going to see Spring again” (Hansberry 28). Mama’s plant, which Hansberry describes as “growing doggedly,” can easily represent the hopes and dreams of the Younger family. In the same morning, Mama waters the plant once more while talking about the wild and frustrating wills of her children: “(*bringing her plant in from sill and sprinkling a little water on it*) They spirited all right, my children. Got to admit they got spirit—Bennie and Walter. Like this little old plant that ain’t never had enough sunshine or nothing—and look at it” (40-41). Here Hansberry draws an explicit parallel between the wellbeing of Mama’s plant and the striving of her family which struggles “doggedly” for a better life. Each member of Mama’s household struggles under the burden of a lack of opportunity due to systematic discrimination against African Americans. Like Mama’s plant lacks sunlight, her children lack opportunity and strive to grow and thrive.

Mama’s dreams have been frustrated just like the dreams of her children. She tells Ruth, “I always wanted me a garden like folks had down home. This plant is close as I ever got to having one. (*She looks out of the window as she replaces the plant.*) Lord, ain’t nothing as dreary as the view from this window on a dreary day, is there?” (41). When the Younger family has the opportunity to move into a new home one of the potential benefits of that house is having room for a garden, as Mama explains when trying to convince Walter to accept the new house. She pleads with him, “there’s a yard with a little patch of dirt where I could maybe get to grow me a few flowers” (81). Ruth is sold on the idea right away, seeing it as the best way to give her baby a more pleasant future. She asks, “(*looking off*) Is there—is there a whole lot of sunlight?” to

which Mama replies, “(*simply*) Yes, child, there’s a whole lot of sunlight” (82-3). Here, “sunlight” serves an allegorical role and represents the light of opportunity and the ability for Ruth’s children to grow up in a more privileged home. This “light” will enable the Younger family to grow rather than become stunted by the dreariness of their current poverty and their cramped life in the apartment which Mama had hoped, many years ago, would be only a temporary residence for her family.

Mama’s plant serves as a means of expression for her character as well. For a woman who has lived her adult life with very little opportunity at hand, she kept alive her hopes of gardening for many years. This little plant, the last vestiges of her hopes for a better life, is what remains of her instinct towards an expression of herself as a gardener. She says herself what the plant means to her when her daughter questions whether she should bring it along on the family’s move:

BENEATHA. (*laughingly, noticing what her mother is doing*) Mama, what are you doing?

MAMA. Fixing my plant so it won’t get hurt none on the way—

BENEATHA. Mama, you going to take *that* to the new house?

MAMA. Uh huh—

BENEATHA. That raggedy-looking old thing?!

MAMA. (*rises, looking at her; enunciating grandly*) It—expresses *ME!* (103)

When the family learns about their opportunity to move into a house of their own they thank Mama for her generosity by gifting her a “*brand new sparkling set of gardening tools*” to support Mama’s hope for the family’s new life in their next home (105). These tools will allow Mama to exact her will on their living environment when they own their new home. Here the potential for

indulging the hobby of gardening takes on the significance of bringing creative autonomy to the matriarch.

Gardens serve as an expression of autonomy in Okubo's account of concentration camp life in *Citizen 13660* as well. Interned Japanese Americans labored under intensely difficult circumstances in these camps according to Okubo's personal account. For example, in Okubo's first camp she and her brother were housed in unfinished, dirty horse stables until they were able, by acquiring lumber, to somewhat renovate their quarters. Similar examples of the ingenuity of camp internees are displayed throughout Okubo's account, and perhaps the most striking examples have to do with the cultivation of gardens. In the second camp Okubo writes that "Despite reports that the alkaline soil was not good for agricultural purposes, in the spring practically everyone set up a victory garden. Some of the gardens were organized, but most of them were set up anywhere and any way. Makeshift screens were fashioned out of precious cardboard boxes, cartons, and scraps of lumber to protect the plants from the whipping dust storms" (192). For the inhabitants of the camp, gardening became an avenue of expression and a means of experiencing some autonomy when a great deal of their freedoms had been taken from them. By constructing these victory gardens, the gardeners set themselves up for a better tomorrow, one that included growth. The interned gardeners also had the creative outlet of using whatever tools were available around them to make and tend to a part of their environment and thus benefit their minds and bodies. In the later months of their internment the prisoners were allowed to leave the fenced in areas of the camp, and many took advantage of this freedom in order to "gather vegetation and small stones for their gardens" (203). In this case, while improving their gardens the internees also expressed their personal freedom by venturing outside the camps. This must have felt validating for hearts striving to feel some sense of freedom.

A similar occurrence on a much bigger scale happened in the Tanforan Camp, Okubo's first camp, where some of the internees who had had careers as landscape architects "decided to build a lake to beautify the camp" (98). In fact, they not only built a lake but an entire aquatic park. This task was much more difficult than Okubo's simple sentence at first reveals, for it required that the inhabitants of the camp, using almost no tools and inadequate resources, dig up, move, and transplant large trees across acres of difficult terrain, as well as excavate a lake from a "mere wet spot in the Tanforan scenery" (99). Okubo writes, "The workmen struggled day after day with limited equipment. For a long time we were kept in wonderment by this activity. Everyone knew the camp was not a permanent one" (98). Why did the architects struggle so much for the park if they would only be able to enjoy the results for a short while? It seems the appearance of the water park brought worthwhile happiness to the internees, judging by Okubo's description that, "The lake was a great joy to the residents and provided new material for the artists. In the morning sunlight and at sunset it added great beauty to the bleak barracks" (99). Yet it seems that the act of creating the water park in all its overachieving glory, "complete with bridge, promenade, and islands" (99) was the most important aspect for the interned Japanese American architects. Not only were they able to express their creative abilities by struggling to build the park, they also demonstrated to themselves their personal autonomy. Through such an ambitious project the architects showed themselves and their fellow residents what they were capable of, even given their constraining circumstances. In much the same way, Mama feels that growing her little houseplant expresses her family's own perseverance under limiting circumstances.

In both of these literary works which treat separate instances of American racial inequality, the cultivation of greenery is present as an important expression of creativity, hope

for the future, and personal autonomy in limiting circumstances. Okubo's real-life account of internment demonstrates that this use of greenery is not simply a literary device employed by Hansberry to symbolize the Younger family's struggle with deferred dreams, but in fact the cultivation of plants and greenery is a coping mechanism used in the material world by human beings in unpleasant situations. Greenery, and working with greenery as an expression of human will, is a powerful antidote to feelings of powerlessness or hopelessness, and this idea is found with surprisingly similar significance in both of these works.

Works Cited

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Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun*. Thirtieth Anniversary (Revised) ed., Samuel French, Inc., 1989.