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**Assimilation, nostalgia and African American identity in
Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun***

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Introduction

In 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry became the first play by a black female playwright to be produced on Broadway, where it amassed commercial success and critical acclaim.¹ Set in South Side Chicago, the play follows the Younger family as they attempt to improve their social and financial circumstances using the \$10,000 life insurance check paid to them following the death of the family patriarch. The play was particularly successful among Black audiences, and writer James Baldwin argued that before *A Raisin in the Sun* was produced, Black people 'ignored the theatre because the theatre had always ignored them', attributing the commercial success of the play to its portrayal of African Americans.² This sentiment was also noted by other critics who, according to Mollie Godfrey, heralded the play for being a work that focused on 'complex three-dimensional portrayals of Black characters and Black life,' displacing the stereotypes of Black people in American theatre that lingered as remnants of the blackface and minstrelsy of the previous century.³ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'theatre' derives from the Ancient Greek θεᾶσθαι, which means 'to behold' or 'to see', therefore, to attend the theatre is to observe.⁴ Harvey Young writes that through this observation we 'learn where we are, who we are, and how we are expected to behave,' thus, theatrical representations 'model examples of racial behaviour'.⁵ The presentation of stereotyped Black characters on stage reinforced racialised stereotypes within society, subsequently distorting African American identity as 'the caricatured performance of black folk never aligned' with their actual behaviours.⁶ In her dramatisation of a Black family, Hansberry explores the realities of African American life and identity, specifically through the character of Beneatha Younger.

Ron Eyerman describes the identity formation of African Americans as grounded in the 'collective memory' of slavery, as it was a trauma that affected and united all African Americans 'whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa'.⁷ Following the abolition of slavery, African Americans attempted to integrate into American life, often through assimilation, adopting the values and behaviours that were dominant in American society. Jens Schneider and Maurice Crul note that 'assimilation linguistically implies a referent to which immigrants and/or their offspring can become similar[...] this referent has generally been 'the mainstream,' and in 1950s America, the 'mainstream' dominant majority group was white Americans.⁸ Eyerman asserts that as African Americans are haunted by the trauma of slavery while simultaneously attempting to assimilate into white American society, their identity formation is distorted.⁹ The ambivalence of this identity can therefore create a nostalgia, or a longing for one's past, which in the case of African Americans can manifest as a longing for their ancestral roots in

¹ Robin Bernstein, 'Inventing a Fishbowl: White Supremacy and the Critical Reception of Lorraine Hansberry's 'A Raisin in the Sun'', *Modern Drama* 42:1 (1999), 16–27 (p.16).

² 'Sweet Lorraine', James Baldwin, in *To Be Young, Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in her Own Words*, ed. by Robert Nemiroff (New York: Signet, 2011), p. xii.

³ Mollie Godfrey, 'Introduction' in *Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry*, ed. by Mollie Godfrey (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020) p. xi.

⁴ 'Theatre' in *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, [\[https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/200227?rskey=RAFC4q&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid\]](https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/200227?rskey=RAFC4q&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid)

⁵ Harvey Young, *Theatre and Race* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013) p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁷ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p. 2.

⁸ Jens Schneider & Maurice Crul, 'New insights into assimilation and integration theory: Introduction to the special issue', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33:7, (2010) 1144-1148 (p.1144).

⁹ Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*, p. 4.

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Africa. This nostalgia is encouraged by the Pan-Africanist movement, defined by Hakim Adi as the 'belief in the unity, common history and common purpose of the peoples of Africa and the African diaspora' whose lives and destinies are interconnected.¹⁰ This division between assimilation and nostalgia within the African American identity has been explored in works such as Paul Gilroy's 'The Black Atlantic' and W.E.B Du Bois' 'The Souls of Black Folk', the latter of which originated the idea of 'double consciousness' to describe this duality and the internal conflict that it produces.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Beneatha Younger is a college student studying medicine, and struggling with her identity as an African American. This dilemma is reproduced in her interactions with her two male suitors: George Murchison and Joseph Asagai. Hansberry described Beneatha as a representation of 'the beauty of things African and the beauty of things Black,' and argued that as a Black American woman with intellectual pretensions, Beneatha was a character 'unknown to the theatre' at the time of the play's production.¹¹ Despite this, Beneatha's search for identity echoed the feelings of young African Americans in the late 1950s who were forging their identities within a changing American cultural landscape, following the abolition of slavery and the emerging civil rights movement. This dissertation will examine how Hansberry uses the character of Beneatha to explore how the opposing forces of assimilation and nostalgia exist within African American identity.

Chapter One: Assimilation

In 'The Souls of Black Folk', W.E.B. Du Bois developed the concept of 'double consciousness' to describe the internal conflict experienced by African Americans as a marginalised group in white society, and the effects that this has on their identity formation. Du Bois describes African American identity as defined by a duality, or the continued feeling of 'a twoness — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body' that exist simultaneously.¹² The opening stage directions assert this contradiction within Beneatha's identity, stating that her speech is 'a mixture of many things', in part due to the educational disparity between her and the members of her family, but also suggesting that '*perhaps the Midwest rather than the South has finally at last - won out in her inflexion*'.¹³ Through evoking the collective memory of slavery in the South, this description demonstrates the internal conflict between her ancestral heritage and her present in the Midwest as an educated woman. The use of the word 'won' suggests the aggression of the conflict between the two aspects of her identity, establishing and emphasising the 'twoness' that exists within Beneatha.

Amiri Baraka observes that Beneatha is initially able to climb the ladder of upward mobility 'on the rungs of education' as a result of her family's hard work, as she is financially supported by them.¹⁴ Despite her family's lower economic status, she has been able to participate in different hobbies, including horseback riding, for which she bought a fifty-five dollar riding habit that her sister-in-law Ruth comments 'has been hanging in the

¹⁰ Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018) p. 2.

¹¹ Lorraine Hansberry quoted in Mollie Godfrey, 'Unaired Interview with Lorraine Hansberry, Mike Wallace' in *Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020) p. 66.

¹² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p.3.

¹³ Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (London: Methuen Drama, 2021), p. 19. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be given in the form: Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. x.

¹⁴ Amiri Baraka, 'A Critical Reevaluation: A Raisin in the Sun's Enduring Passion' in *A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, ed. by Robert Nemiroff (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) pp. 9-20

closet' ever since it was purchased.¹⁵ Beneatha does not seem to be as sensitive to her family's economic situation, and behaves as though she is a middle class American, rather than someone living in a cramped apartment. Beneatha sees these hobbies and interests as a way to express herself, defending her interests to her family by saying she 'experiment[s] with different forms of expression [...] people have to express themselves one way or another'.¹⁶ These hobbies establish the importance of identity and self-expression to Beneatha, reflecting the 'American' ideal that exists within her as these interests are associated with middle class Americans. Although Beneatha has partially integrated middle class American hobbies into her life, as an African American, in order to succeed in society, she is expected to fully assimilate into the dominant American culture.

Yomna Saber defines cultural assimilation as a process where a marginalised group identity is 'dissolved into the culture of the dominant larger group' through the adoption of the dominant group's behaviours and beliefs.¹⁷ Within the context of African Americans in America, Saber states that assimilation involves 'a profound and irremediable loss of one's ethnic identity' in favour of the ideals of white America.¹⁸ The topic of assimilation is central to the play, as the Younger family decides whether or not to spend the insurance check on a house in a new, whiter neighbourhood. The question of moving house was inspired by Hansberry's own life in which she experienced mob violence after her family moved to an affluent, predominantly white Chicago neighbourhood.¹⁹ Throughout the play Beneatha vocally rejects assimilation, however Hansberry explores the temptation of assimilation through her interactions with George Murchison. George is a wealthy African American who has been courting Beneatha and is described as 'probably the richest boy [she] will ever get to know', as the difference in wealth between George and the Youngers is substantial, even with Beneatha's middle-class hobbies and behaviours.²⁰ The Murchison family is wealthy and successful, as they have achieved the comfortable middle class life that the Youngers desire through assimilating into white American society. George, therefore, personifies the temptation to assimilate and the possibilities, primarily financial, that can be gained when one does. The first time Beneatha mentions George, she says his name to her family '*with displeasure*', a stage direction that associates his character and the assimilation that he represents as something that Beneatha dislikes, foreshadowing the disputatious relationship that they have throughout the play.²¹ Despite her disapproval of George, the other Younger's attempt to convince Beneatha not to reject him, mostly due to his money. The Younger's see the benefits to marrying George, not just for Beneatha, but for the family as a whole. As Beneatha describes, her family are 'sitting around waiting to see if their little Bennie is going to tie up the family with the Murchison's,' acknowledging that the Youngers believe that their proximity to an assimilated Black family will aid their integration into a higher class of American society and therefore closer to financial wealth.²²

¹⁵ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 30.

¹⁶ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 31.

¹⁷ Yomna Saber, 'Lorraine Hansberry: Defining the Line Between Integration and Assimilation', *Women's Studies* 39:5 (2010) 451-469 (p. 452).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Imani Perry, *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018) p. 18-19.

²⁰ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 32.

²¹ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 31.

²² Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 32.

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In 'Black Skin, White Masks' critic Frantz Fanon explains that 'the Negro is appraised in terms of the extent of his assimilation' and George, who has chosen to assimilate, attempts to persuade Beneatha to do the same.²³ Part of this assimilation includes the abandonment of the minority culture and heritage in favour of the dominant, white culture's ideals, which Beneatha acknowledges as she accuses George of being 'ashamed of his heritage' after he expresses a dislike of her natural hair.²⁴ George describes Beneatha's unstraightened, natural hair as 'eccentric', and in doing so places whiteness as normal, and the Africanness that is natural to Beneatha as subordinate.²⁵ Furthermore, in arguing that being eccentric means 'being natural', George acknowledges that whiteness is not natural to him or Beneatha, but something that they must attempt to be or perform in order to be accepted by white society.²⁶ Milton Gordon suggests that assimilation means the elimination of 'characteristics of foreign origin', and in expressing his disapproval of Beneatha's hair and African dress, George is encouraging Beneatha to assimilate.²⁷ George commands her to change out of the African attire, telling her that they're 'going to the theatre - we're not going to be in it', alluding to the representations of Africans and African Americans on the stage at the time.²⁸ To turn to Fanon once more, he asserts that 'the Negro has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him,' remarking on the stereotyped portrayals of Black people in the media, particularly in children's picture magazines and American films.²⁹ In the twentieth century, depictions of Black people in theatre were mostly in musicals rather than serious drama, and relied heavily on stereotypes or what Hansberry referred to as 'cardboard characters' with little substance.³⁰ These portrayals stereotyped African Americans as buffoonish and superstitious, based on negative colonial attitudes towards African culture, in which Ralph Ellison states, 'the Negro is reduced to a negative sign that usually appears in a comedy of the grotesque and the unacceptable'.³¹ Using the context of the representation of Black people on the stage allows Hansberry to further emphasise that minority cultural traditions were only seen as entertainment, and not accepted in white American society where African Americans are expected to reject and sever themselves from their African cultural past.

As an African American woman, within the pressure to assimilate into white American society Beneatha faces pressure to submit to patriarchal concepts such as marriage and domestic life. Gwen Bergner reevaluates the role of gender and sexuality in Fanon's work, arguing that 'Black Skin, White Masks' explores sexuality's role in constructing race 'only through the rigid categories of gender' as when analysing race Fanon takes the male as the norm.³² Fanon's omission of gender analysis 'confirms women's role as objects of exchange in the homosocial, heterosexual colonial economy[...]' and Hansberry explores this by

²³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (London: Paladin, 1970) p. 24.

²⁴ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 59.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Milton Gordon, 'The Nature of Assimilation', in *Incorporating Diversity, Rethinking Assimilation in a Multicultural Age*, ed. By Peter Kivisto (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 98.

²⁸ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 59.

²⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 22.

³⁰ Lorraine Hansberry, quoted in Nan Robertson, 'Dramatist Against Odds' *New York Times*, 8 March 1959.

³¹ Ralph Waldo Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Waldo Ellison*, ed. by John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), p. 243.

³² Gwen Bergner, 'Who Is That Masked Woman? Or, the Role of Gender in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*' *PMLA*, 110:1 (1995) 75-88 (p. 77).

demonstrating how Beneatha's gender alienates her, further distorting her identity.³³ Hansberry was influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's feminist work 'The Second Sex' which she described as 'the most important work of this century', and credited the book with broadening her perspective both in her life and writing.³⁴ In her analysis of women in society throughout history, Beauvoir argues that man is considered the universal default, and woman is considered 'Other' as humanity defines women as relative to men.³⁵ Michele Wallace expands on this, arguing that Black women are the 'Other of the Other' as they face dual oppression that further marginalises them within society.³⁶

The patriarchal expectations placed upon Beneatha due to her gender alienate her, causing her to reject assimilation further. Beneatha dreams of becoming a doctor, a profession that was heavily male dominated at the time, and those around her dismiss her dream, instead encouraging her to marry George and assimilate into American society. Her dream is repeatedly disregarded, evidenced when Walter begins 'ain't many girls who decide...' and Beneatha joins in, as they say '(in unison) to be a doctor', showing the phrase to be a familiar refrain to her, to the point of recitation.³⁷ Walter goes on, telling Beneatha to 'go be a nurse like other women – or just get married and be quiet', dictating the professional achievement she should desire and reiterating traditional gender roles that circumscribe women to the domestic sphere.³⁸ Beneatha, however, seems uninterested in marriage and sees it as a secondary priority in her life, telling her family that she 'probably will' get married, 'but first [she's] going to be a doctor'.³⁹ Like George, Walter desires assimilation, and his dismissal of Beneatha's dream in favour of gendered expectations binds the idea of marriage to assimilation, pushing Beneatha to further reject both.

George expresses that if they were to marry, Beneatha would have to adhere to traditional gender roles as he describes her career aspirations as 'pretty funny', dismissing her professional dream as a humorous fantasy.⁴⁰ George's patriarchal attitudes are further explored when they return from a date and Beneatha rejects his attempts to kiss her in favour of talking. George patronises her, insisting that he does not go out with Beneatha to 'discuss the nature of 'quiet desperation' or to hear all about [her] thoughts', implying that if Beneatha refuses to fulfil his sexual desires she is useless to him.⁴¹ As George speaks he is 'exasperated; rising', standing up as he rants so that he is physically above her as he patronises her, reaffirming patriarchal gender expectations where women are subordinate to men. The constant explicit and implicit dismissal of her dreams as frivolous from those around her leads Beneatha to sarcastically ask to be forgiven for 'ever wanting to be anything at all,' angered by the traditional ideas of gender that are projected onto her.⁴² Seemingly unbeknownst to him, George's expressions of patriarchal expectation and disgust

³³ Ibid, p. 85.

³⁴ Lorraine Hansberry quoted in Cheryl Higashida 'Lorraine Hansberry's Existentialist Routes to Black Internationalist Feminism' in *Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945-1995* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), p. 65.

³⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953) pp. xv–xxix.

³⁶ Michele Wallace, 'Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity' in *Women, Creativity, and the Arts: Critical and Autobiographical Perspectives* ed. by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona and Lucinda Ebersole (New York: Continuum, 1997) p.125.

³⁷ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 20.

³⁸ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 22.

³⁹ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 33.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 73.

⁴² Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 22.

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at her heritage pushes Beneatha further into the arms of her other suitor, Joseph Asagai, who represents and encourages the nostalgic ideal within Beneatha, in the same way that George represents assimilation.

Hansberry uses Beneatha's interactions with George to explore the pervasive and demanding nature of assimilation, as it asks African Americans to alter their identities through severing any ties that they may have to their roots in favour of the dominant, white culture. George's expressions of contempt for African and African American culture, only serve to make Beneatha dislike him more. His comments result in Beneatha loudly proclaiming that she 'hate[s] assimilationist Negroes!', to which she provides a definition, describing someone that is 'willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case, oppressive, culture!', an accusation that George does not deny or object to.⁴³ The patriarchal attitudes that are associated with George's assimilation alienate Beneatha further, as she struggles with and subsequently rejects the demands of assimilating into white American culture and the gendered expectations that come along with it. In this rejection, Beneatha is driven further towards her African nostalgia, or 'Negro' soul, as previously described by Du Bois.⁴⁴

Chapter Two: Nostalgia

Throughout the play, Beneatha expresses a profound nostalgia or longing for her African past and says as much to her suitor Joseph Asagai. Asagai recalls that the first time they met, she told him that she would like to speak with him 'about Africa' as she is 'looking for [her] *identity!*', tying her identity and lineage to the entire continent, rather than a specific region or country.⁴⁵ The title of the play comes from the poem, 'Harlem' by Langston Hughes, which also serves as the play's epigraph.⁴⁶ Hughes was one of the leading artists of the Harlem Renaissance, an African American cultural movement that spanned the 1920s and 1930s. In Hughes' own words, the Harlem Renaissance gave African Americans the courage to 'express [their] individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame' as they celebrated their cultural identity.⁴⁷ The Harlem Renaissance gave birth to the idea of the New Negro movement, in which African Americans were encouraged to define their identity themselves through expressions of both racial pride and Pan-Africanism, in which the connection between Black Americans and Black Africans under colonial rule was promoted. Beneatha is the sole member of her family that represents the New Negro, as during the play she is seen dedicating her time to intellectual pursuits such as literature and the arts, and in searching for her identity, attempts to reconnect with her African heritage. This leads Beneatha to express embarrassment about her family's little knowledge about Africa, especially when Asagai comes to the Younger household, as she urges her mother to refrain from asking him 'a whole lot of ignorant questions about Africans' and laments that 'all anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan'.⁴⁸

Beneatha also leans into Pan-Africanism with the expression of the atheistic and anticolonial sentiment that Black Americans should focus on helping Africans gain 'more

⁴³ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 60.

⁴⁴ W.E.B Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 43.

⁴⁶ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', *The Nation* (New York, N.Y.) 300:14 (2015) p. 83 (p. 83).

⁴⁸ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 38.

salvation from the British and the French' instead of the salvation from 'heathenism' that missionary work of African American churches attempts to provide.⁴⁹ In 'The World and Africa', Du Bois states that Pan-Africanism originated in the West Indies and United States as a result of slavery. Despite being descended from different groups of Africans, slavery united previously enslaved Africans living in America, who in the process of being exposed to new cultures on American soil, 'began to think of Africa as one idea and oneland' resulting in 'various "African" societies' in many parts of the United States.⁵⁰ Du Bois particularly draws attention to the formation of the first separate Negro Church formed in Philadelphia, calling itself African, and later African American. Throughout the play *Beneatha* expresses a dislike of religion that was characteristic of the New Negro, as Eyerman describes, 'the church was a central source of community and identity-formation already during slavery[...]until its influence waned during the great migration,' particularly in the northern cities, where the Harlem Renaissance began.⁵¹ Despite religion being a foundational aspect of African American cultural identity, *Beneatha* chooses to disregard it, as she tells her mother 'it's all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don't accept', presenting American religion as another assimilationist idea.⁵² As a representation of the New Negro, *Beneatha* promotes Pan-Africanism in her quest to learn more about her African heritage, and rejects religion, adopting the scepticism of African Americans redefining their identities during the Harlem Renaissance.

In searching for her identity, *Beneatha* expresses a nostalgia for her African heritage, which causes her to romanticise the African continent. Svetlana Boym states that nostalgia (from the Greek *nostos* - return home, and *algia* - longing) is 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed', thus, nostalgia is a recollection of a past not as it was, but through a distorted lens in light of what has happened since.⁵³ Boym likens nostalgia to a 'superimposition of two images - of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life'.⁵⁴ This exact superimposition of 'home and abroad' is explored in Act Two Scene One when the Youngers' cramped Chicago apartment is transformed into a hybrid space where *Beneatha* reclaims her African past. *Beneatha* reemerges wearing the African robes that Asagai gave her and a headdress that covers her hair. The stage directions expose this as a performance rather than reality that is available to *Beneatha*, as she '*parades*' and '*promenades*' around the room, her movements described as elaborate and affected, '*coquettishly fanning herself*' before turning off the radio in an '*arrogant flourish*'.⁵⁵ The use of an '*ornate oriental fan*' as a prop inadvertently makes her look '*more like Butterfly than any Nigerian ever was*,' revealing that *Beneatha*'s own ignorance is preventing her from constructing the image of a true Nigerian woman, and instead draws comparison to the titular Japanese character of the opera *Madame Butterfly*.⁵⁶ *Beneatha* yearns for her African past but the image that she has of it in her mind has been distorted by her own nostalgia, which misrepresents reality. This leads her to put on a romanticised performance of what she describes as 'a well-dressed Nigerian woman' that is based on stereotypes and a conflation of different cultures.⁵⁷ This distorted image of Africa that is

⁴⁹ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 39.

⁵⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa* (New York: Viking Press, 1947), p. 7.

⁵¹ Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*, p. 25.

⁵² Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 34.

⁵³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xiii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 56.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

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created still renders Beneatha 'enraptured' and longing to go 'back to the past', a sentiment that seems incongruous with the somewhat comical performance that she and Walter go on to participate in.⁵⁸

Beneatha begins what she calls a 'dance of welcome', which according to her, is used to welcome the men back to the village.⁵⁹ When Ruth questions where these hypothetical men would be returning from, Beneatha answers, 'how should I know - out hunting or something,' exposing her naivety to the realities of African life.⁶⁰ Walter joins this performance, his eyes also looking 'back to the past', although his participation is caused by his drunken state.⁶¹ Instead of teasing Beneatha for displaying her longing for Africa as he does for much of the play, Walter begins thumping his chest, wielding an imaginary spear through the air as he proclaims 'in my heart of hearts...I am much a warrior!'.⁶² Walter's outburst is driven by alcohol, as his eyes are 'pure glass sheets', behind which 'he sees what we cannot, that he is a leader of his people, a great chief, a descendant of Chaka, and that the hour to march has come', showing his participation to be rooted in his own romanticised version of Africa as a place in which he is a leader and not constrained by the discrimination he faces as a Black man in America.⁶³ Beneatha is 'thoroughly caught up with this side of him' and encourages him, repeating back his own shouts of 'OCOMOGOSIAY, FLAMING SPEAR!'.⁶⁴ By juxtaposing Walter's drunken rants with Beneatha's earnest, sober encouragement, Beneatha's image of Africa is further emphasised as an idealised image that is divorced from her reality, and the reality of what Africa is actually like. Beneatha's Pan-Africanist nostalgia leaves her unable to interrogate the lack of authenticity in her presentation of Asagai's culture as she unknowingly participates in a performance reliant on stereotypes, regarding Africa as 'oneland', as described by Du Bois, that is culturally homogenous.⁶⁵ In this performance, the alienation caused by that stereotype becomes naturalised, and her ignorance is emphasised by the appearance of her drunken brother who also participates in an imagined nostalgia. Her nostalgia seems to possess her, as she is described as 'completely gone' in the act, however this ceases once George enters the room, reminding her of her reality as a Black woman living in America, as George once again represents the intruding nature of assimilation.⁶⁶

Beneatha's nostalgic identity is also explored through her hair transformation, as she is prompted by Asagai to reevaluate how her physical appearance relates to her cultural identity and personal politics. Willie Morrow argues that 'hair is the basic, natural symbol of the things people want to be[...]and its social-cultural significance should not be underestimated', noting that in many African societies, hair was a cultural marker that could denote multiple aspects of one's identity, including age, occupation, clan and status.⁶⁷ After gifting her some Nigerian robes, Asagai comments that Beneatha wears the robes well,

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 57.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 58.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa*, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Willie L. Morrow, *400 Years Without a Comb* (San Diego: Black Publishers of San Diego 1973), p. 17; quoted in Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness* (New York University Press, 2000), p. 7.

'mutilated hair and all', pejoratively referencing her straightened hair.⁶⁸ Morrow explains that the curl of African people's hair was used to further justify their enslavement, later becoming a symbol of servitude and racial inferiority, despite being glorified in West African societies.⁶⁹ Following the abolition of slavery, Ingrid Banks writes that 'African Americans began associating hairstyles with their ability to achieve economic success in a segregated society,' as Black women attempted to fit 'white standards of beauty' through straightening and lengthening their hair.⁷⁰ Through his comment Asagai implies that Beneatha's straightened hair, a sign of assimilation into American culture, is incongruous with her attempts to connect with her heritage. In comparing assimilation to mutilation, Asagai's language choices connote ideas of brutality, implying that through straightening her hair, Beneatha is inflicting violence upon her heritage. When Beneatha rejects Asagai's accusation, he shrugs, further probing by asking if she was 'born with it like that', causing Beneatha to '*look back to the mirror, disturbed*', revealing the feelings of self-consciousness and embarrassment that his question has prompted within her.⁷¹ Raquel Kennon argues that through this comment, Asagai is further signalling 'an interpretation of natural hair as a cultural birth right and marker of ancestral lineage' as his teasing inquiry binds her styling choices to her politics.⁷²

Asagai's questions prompt Beneatha to physically look in the mirror and investigate her own thoughts about her hair, as she '*clutches at it[...]and frowns at herself*', clearly affected by their previous interaction.⁷³ Beneatha decides to cut her hair, and leaves the house in a '*breathless blaze of glory*', once again possessed by her nostalgia to the point where she is rendered breathless, leaving the room in a dramatic and triumphant manner.⁷⁴ When asked where she is going, she replies to 'become a queen of the Nile', directly tethering her decision to cut off her hair to her African ancestral heritage, and reappropriating Asagai's earlier comment when he described her profile as 'not so much a profile of a Hollywood queen as perhaps a queen of the Nile' as she seeks to fulfil this image.⁷⁵ Beneatha's decision to cut her hair is initially a shock to those around her, as '*George freezes mid-sentence and Ruth's eyes all but fall out of her head*' when she reveals her newly cropped and unstraightened hair.⁷⁶ George asks 'what have you done to your head – I mean your hair?' a verbal slippage that reveals his inner thoughts, as he expresses that he now believes her entire head, including her brain, to be deficient, shaming the nostalgic feelings for Africa that persuaded her to cut it.⁷⁷ Seeing Beneatha's hair prompts George to belittle her African ancestry, as he '*nastily*' reduces her heritage to 'nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts!' to which Beneatha responds in disbelief, invoking the intellectual superiority of her heritage, insisting that 'the Ashanti were

⁶⁸ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 43.

⁶⁹ Morrow, *400 Years Without a Comb*, p. 7.

⁷⁰ Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness* (New York University Press, 2000) p. 9.

⁷¹ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 43.

⁷² Raquel Kennon, "Africa Claiming Her Own": Unveiling Natural Hair and African Diasporic Identity in Lorraine Hansberry's Unabridged 'A Raisin in the Sun', *Modern Drama*, 64:3 (2021) 283-308 (p. 293).

⁷³ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 47.

⁷⁴ *ibid*.

⁷⁵ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 47, p. 44.

⁷⁶ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 59.

⁷⁷ *ibid*.

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performing surgical operations when the English-' before she is forcibly removed from the room by Ruth.⁷⁸

The passages in the play script in which Beneatha cuts her hair and reveals her Afro were originally cut from the 1959 staged version of the play, as according to Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry's husband at the time, they were told by theatre owners to 'not take any risks [they] did not need to take,' and as 'maybe one half of one percent of black women wore their hair that way,' the team behind the play felt that this scene, among others, were too prophetic to be understood by audiences at the time.⁷⁹ Although Beneatha's choice foreshadows the popularity of the Afro hairstyle that would emerge in the 1960s as a result of the rising Black Power movement and Pan-Africanist sentiment, the politics of natural hair had not been performed on a Broadway stage, and as Lawrence Jackson argues, 'in 1959 there was no single greater aesthetic gesture of repudiating the heritage of Europe and whiteness than this', which may have mystified a white theatre going audience.⁸⁰ The fact that both Asagai and George voice their opinions on her hair, shows Beneatha to be caught between two opposing sides of patriarchal desirability. George thinks that she looks 'eccentric' when she is wearing her natural hair and African robes, however once she returns, hair still natural but wearing a cocktail dress, he decides that she looks 'sharp', despite his vehement disapproval of her hair minutes ago.⁸¹ Hansberry portrays the burgeoning acceptance of the Afro by the wealthy, as Robin Kelley writes, 'the Afro has partial roots in bourgeois high-fashion circles in the late 1950s and was seen by the black and white élite as a kind of new female exotica' shown by George's swift reconciliation with Beneatha's hair, once she has changed her clothing and looks desirable to him.⁸² This reversal restates the duality of Beneatha's identity, as when she has her natural, nostalgic African hair and is wearing a Western cocktail dress, she is more accepted by George.

Beneatha's nostalgic search for identity leads Asagai to give her the nickname 'alaiyo' a Yoruba word, which translates to 'One for Whom Bread – Food – Is Not Enough', acknowledging that Beneatha is searching for her cultural identity, and has a deeper desire for fulfilment beyond her physiological needs, such as food.⁸³ When translating the nickname to her, Asagai struggles at first, saying 'the sense of a thing can be so different when it changes languages', a line through which Hansberry examines the nature of translation and identity.⁸⁴ Phillip Uko Effiong describes Asagai as a 'revolutionary model' for Beneatha and Black America, as while operating in an African American setting, 'he strengthens, but does not resolve, the destabilised ancestral connection between Africans and Black Americans'.⁸⁵ Asagai prompts Beneatha to indulge in her nostalgia, however Hansberry does not suggest that this nostalgia is the answer to Beneatha's struggle with her identity. When Beneatha tells him that she's not interested in being his 'little episode in America', Asagai replies laughing, saying that 'every American girl' has said that to him, and that white or black they are 'all the

⁷⁸ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 60.

⁷⁹ Robert Nemiroff quoted in Stephen Farber, "'Raisin" Film to Include Scenes That Were Cut', *Chicago Tribune*, 8 September 1988.

⁸⁰ Lawrence P. Jackson, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics 1934–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 489.

⁸¹ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 64.

⁸² Robin Kelley, 'Nap Time: Historicizing the Afro', *Fashion Theory*, 1:4, (1997) 339-351 (p. 341).

⁸³ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 46.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Phillip Uko Effiong, 'Realistic, Mythic, Idealistic: Hansberry and the African Image', *In Search of a Model for African-American Drama* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2000): 35– 42 (p. 37).

same', showing him to regard Beneatha as an American.⁸⁶ Even Asagai's proposal in which he promises to take her 'home' to Nigeria reinforces Beneatha's Americanness.⁸⁷ Asagai indulges in Beneatha's idyllic fantasies, telling her 'three hundred years later the African Prince rose up out of the seas and swept the maiden back across the middle passage over which her ancestors had come' as he details her hypothetical diasporic homecoming.⁸⁸ He continues, saying that 'in time, we will pretend that (*very softly*) you have only been away for a day', and this line exposes the logistical reality of his proposal.⁸⁹ The use of the word 'pretend' reveals the uncomfortable truth that Africans and African Americans have different experiences that have formed their group identities, therefore, this romanticised, idyllic diasporic welcome in which Beneatha seamlessly integrates into African society can only ever be an act, as it is not reality. Through Asagai's reference to the middle passage and use of the word 'pretend' Hansberry indicates that the time and space that has passed since Beneatha's ancestors left Africa means that her identity is now too different to those that currently live in Africa.

Hansberry engages with and critiques African nostalgia through Beneatha's search for identity and suggests that despite a drive to reject assimilation and embrace their ancestral African roots, there may be too many cultural disjunctures between Africans and African Americans. These cultural disjunctures mean that African Americans could never truly return to Africa as African citizens, and therefore must forge a new identity. Beneatha is an example of the limitations of nostalgia, as although she is driven by Pan-Africanism characteristic of the New Negro movement, her nostalgia for Africa leads her to conflate cultures and create an image of Africa as a monolithic continent, contradicting her own expressions of embarrassment concerning her family's cultural ignorance. Hansberry appears to endorse African Americans connecting with their ancestral roots but argues that they will be unsuccessful if they attempt to eliminate their American side completely as America is a part of their identity.

Conclusion

Beneatha is representative of a generation of African Americans coming of age in a society with a vast and changing cultural landscape. Hansberry uses Beneatha's character to show how these cultural and societal changes affected the identity formation of young African Americans, caught between the temptation to assimilate into white American society, and the rejection of America in favour of nostalgia, driven by the rising Pan-Africanist movement. Beneatha's arc is partially centred around education and marriage, and her pressure to choose between assimilating into the patriarchal domestic sphere, or looking forward to a future as an educated woman with a professional career is emblematic of the struggles of young African American women at the time.

In exploring and critiquing both assimilation and nostalgia, Hansberry is able to demonstrate the duality of identity that African Americans possess. Hansberry presents Pan-Africanist nostalgia as freeing, but simultaneously critiques nostalgia as a process that causes identity to become homogenised as it is based on a place that most African Americans have never been to and can therefore never properly know. At the same time,

⁸⁶ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 45.

⁸⁷ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 108.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

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assimilation is presented as alienating as in the play it asks Beneatha to sever all ties to her roots in favour of white, patriarchal American values and is associated with the unlikeable character of George Murchison. On their own, both assimilative and nostalgic ideals are rendered unsuitable for Beneatha, as she vehemently rejects assimilation, but the nostalgia she desires is portrayed as incongruous with her life in America.

There is no certain conclusion to Beneatha's identity, as she does not accept Asagai's proposal, instead she '*pull[s] away*' from him, telling him that he's getting her all 'mixed up' and that she 'must sit down and think', leaving him without an answer when he departs from the stage.⁹⁰ She insists that she does not see a future with George, as the play ends with Beneatha telling Walter that '*she would not marry George if he were Adam and she were Eve*', her final expression of rejection.⁹¹ In not explicitly choosing either man, the ending of the play shows that Beneatha is not confidently aligned with either side of the pure assimilation or pure nostalgia that the two men represent. Hansberry opts for an open-ended conclusion to Beneatha's story, one that is representative of the unfixed and hybrid nature of the African American experience of identity. As African American identity is defined by its duality, Hansberry's portrayal of Beneatha illustrates that the 'American' ideal, represented by assimilation, and the 'African' ideal represented by nostalgia oppose each other, but must coexist.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, p. 119.

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