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Two Unattainable Ideals: Beneatha's Struggle for Identity in *A Raisin in the Sun*

ELIZABETH BRADY

The late 1950's were a time for revolution in African American history as the Civil Rights movement gained momentum and grasped the attention of the public. During the fight for African American equality, Lorraine Hansberry published the critically acclaimed play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), a story of an urban black American family and their attempts to improve the trajectory of their future using a \$10,000 check paid upon the death of their patriarch, Big Walter. Beneatha Younger, a twenty-year-old medical student and the daughter of the deceased, gives a voice to a fledgling generation of aspirational black Americans. Beneatha provides audiences insight into a shared experience of African Americans grappling with cultural identity through her interactions with two suitors, George Murchison and Joseph Asagai. Through Hansberry's juxtaposition of George as a symbol of assimilation and Asagai of Afrocentrism, she demonstrates the vexing African American struggle to find a distinct identity in one of two unattainable extremes.

Beneatha's relationship with the wealthy George Murchison symbolizes the temptation for African Americans to assimilate into white society. In her article "Lorraine Hansberry: Defining the Line Between Integration and Assimilation," Yomna Saber defines assimilation in the context of African Americans as "a fusion that entailed a profound and irremediable loss of one's ethnic identity. In assimilation, the marginalized group identity dissolved into the culture of the dominant larger group: white America" (Saber 452). The loss of one's ethnic identity in favor of the dominant white culture is personified in George Murchison's character. George is described before he appears in the play, and the

first mention of his name is said, according to the stage directions, "with displeasure" by Beneatha when she is asked by her mother who she's going out with the following night (Hansberry 1485). Though this tone may arise from Beneatha's annoyance with her family for prodding into her personal life, Hansberry still chooses to associate George with displeasure from the very first time his name appears in the play. Beneatha goes on to say that she couldn't be serious about George because of how shallow he is, and her brother's wife Ruth replies, "Shallow — what do you mean he's shallow? He's *rich!*" (1485). It is clear in this response that Ruth prioritizes George's money over Beneatha's feelings about him. This shows a generational distinction between Ruth and Beneatha even though they only have about a ten-year age difference: Ruth values economic success while Beneatha values identity and character. This divide is further emphasized by Beneatha's description of George later in the scene: "Well. George looks good—he's got a beautiful car and he takes me to nice places and, as my sister-in-law says, he is probably the richest boy I will ever get to know and I even like him sometimes—but if the Youngers are sitting around waiting to see if their little Bennie is going to tie up the family with the Murchisons, they are wasting their time" (1485).

Beneatha understands why Ruth thinks George is so appealing, but she swiftly dismisses any ideas of settling down with him regardless. She doesn't think that George's money is as important as his character. In his first appearance in Act II, George walks in on Walter and Beneatha participating in a Nigerian song and dance, immersed in an idealized and deeply cultural past. Though Walter is under the influence of alcohol, Beneatha's enthusiasm is sober and genuine. Still, all of this ends the moment George walks into the apartment, which is symbolic of how assimilationism forcefully halts all hints of African influences. Beneatha grows frustrated with George in the scene, exclaiming, "I hate assimilationist Negroes!" (1500). Here, Beneatha explicitly labels George as an assimilationist, which Beneatha defines as "someone who is willing to give up on his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this

[African American's] case, oppressive culture" (1501). Assimilating into white culture would make Beneatha more palatable to her white counterparts, which could pay off socially and financially as she works her way through a white-dominated medical field. Still, she views this choice as shallow, which is made clear by her disgust with George's materialism, lack of individuality, and general assimilationist attitudes, captured in her outburst that she "hates assimilationist Negroes." In this way, he represents how assimilation may benefit African Americans financially, but strips them of their culture.

Beneatha's disgust with George's superficiality develops into disdain, cementing Hansberry's opposition to assimilationism. The stifling effects of assimilation are further emphasized in George's remarks about Beneatha's traditional African garments and hair, calling them eccentric. When Beneatha asks how something natural could possibly be eccentric, George replies, "That's what being eccentric means — being natural" (1500). This is clearly George normalizing a standard "white" appearance, distancing himself from an African American identity, and acting upon internalized racism. He believes Beneatha's natural self is strange and wrong and that she must shape herself to fit into white American culture. George has a distinctly assimilationist worldview, which Beneatha points out to George later in the same scene. He brushes off the label by exclaiming nastily that African culture is "nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts" (1501).

Clearly, Hansberry is trying to make George an unlikeable, pretentious character by emphasizing his contempt for Beneatha's choice to reclaim her African identity. Though initially Mama values George's money over his personality, over the course of the play she recognizes his contempt for African American culture. He is later regarded in the play as a "fool" by both Beneatha and Mama, a declaration which concludes his appearance in the play (1509). By staging the process by which the Younger family rebuffs George's way of thinking, Hansberry shows her own rejection of

assimilationism.

Even though Beneatha's other suitor, Joseph Asagai, is presented in a more favorable light than George, he is still presented as patronizing and even sexist. Asagai is a classmate of Beneatha's from Nigeria, which gives his character an alternative perspective on America's race problem and a distinctly Afrocentrist point of view, given that he comes directly from Africa and is described by Beneatha as an "intellectual" (1489). However, his embodiment of African culture distances him from American ideals and causes him to make insensitive remarks to Beneatha throughout the play, showing that an emotional rift from African American people and culture can be problematic. In his first appearance in the play, he brings Beneatha colorful Nigerian robes and remarks that she wears them beautifully despite her "mutilated hair," referring to her relaxed and straightened hair (1491). Though Beneatha says her hair is "hard to manage" when it's natural, Asagai disagrees, claiming that her choice to relax her hair is a remnant of assimilation (1491). She is horrified and embarrassed by this claim, but he seems to dismiss her genuine need for an identity. He says, laughing, "Do you remember the first time you met me at school? You came up to me and you said — and I thought you were the most serious little thing I had ever seen — you said: 'Mr. Asagai — I want very much to talk with you. About Africa. You see, Mr. Asagai, I am looking for my *identity!*'" (1491). Asagai seems to talk down to Beneatha here, and he trivializes her struggle for an identity and culture. Though Beneatha may be naive, her identity crisis is a valid experience created by an oppressive culture, and she deserves to be taken seriously. Asagai clearly doesn't see her pursuits as anything but the whims of a young American woman, calling her "the most serious little thing" like she's a child and not his equal (1491).

Asagai's lofty attitude emerges again later in the same conversation when Beneatha says that there can be more than "one kind of feeling" that exists between a man and a woman, and Asagai says that one kind of feeling, romantic love, should be "enough" for a woman (1492). Beneatha is yearning for his respect,

and Asagai is only willing to grant her infatuation, claiming that it is all she needs. He speaks for not only Beneatha but also for women generally in this statement, seeming to assume he knows what women need and want from a relationship. Perhaps through her portrayal of Asagai, who represents Africa in the play, Hansberry is trying to communicate that Afrocentrists, particularly men, generalize in this way as well. In Gerald Early, Wilson J. Moses, Louis Wilson, and Mary R. Lefkowitz's 1994 symposium titled "Historical Roots of Afrocentrism," the core ideas and founding principles of Afrocentrism are described and explored. The authors claim that those of African descent can only achieve full humanity "when they are permitted to overthrow and denounce white or Eurocentric premises and when they can fully realize and articulate their view and their consciousness through their own self-creation" (Early et al. 44). This is exactly what Beneatha is trying to do, yet Asagai, a man *from* Africa and a role model for her, is stifling her self-creation, telling her what she needs and who she should be by making fun of her hair, her aspirations, and her needs in a relationship. This, frankly, isn't that different from what George does in the play: they both seek to influence Beneatha to do what they think is "right" for an African American woman. Though Beneatha seems to buy into Asagai's beliefs more than George's, their intentions are the same.

This shared intention of controlling Beneatha becomes even clearer in Asagai's case in the beginning of Act III, when he tries to comfort Beneatha after her brother loses all the insurance money that she was going to use to finish medical school. Asagai, instead of offering support, delves into a philosophical debate with her over the state of man, which seems not only out of context but callous as well. When Beneatha rhetorically asks when human misery will end, Asagai, smiling, says condescendingly, "You sound like a French intellectual" (1525). Saber describes his out-of-context behavior in the scene in depth, claiming that "despite the flaws in [Asagai's] characterization, he remains a convincing argument against readings of Hansberry as an assimilationist" (Saber 462). Although I agree that Hansberry should not be read as an

assimilationist, Saber is incorrect to label Hansberry's portrayal of Asagai as "flawed." His actions are too consistent to be accidental, and, in fact, he is flawed in the same way that Afrocentrism is flawed: it is lofty and unattainable for the average African American. In "The Historical Roots of Afrocentrism," William J. Moses claims that "the Afrocentrist dreams of appropriating the high culture of classical civilization and disdains the low culture of gangster rap" (Early et al. 47). This idealization of a culture that often isn't tailored to middle- to lower- class individuals ultimately hurts the movement, and it is apparent that Asagai romanticizes high culture and intellectualism in this scene through his references to philosophy and lack of emotional warmth. The pressure he puts on Beneatha to see the world in a particular way is incessant and condescending, even when she needs his emotional support. Far from being flawed, Hansberry's characterization of Asagai contributes to her critiques of Afrocentrism.

It is evident that George and Asagai—because of their lack of complexity, straightforward goals, and minimal change throughout the play—are flat characters. Their only function in the play is to influence Beneatha, who is representative of a young African American generation in the late 1950's that struggled to either assimilate into or diverge from white culture. In fact, in "Historical Roots of Afrocentrism," the authors describe Afrocentrism as representing, "the continued longing among black Americans for some set of ideas that would bind them together as a community and offer some alternative to an assimilation that is either foreclosed by whites or seen by blacks as an admission of inferiority and defeat" (Early et al. 45). Beneatha wants to find her community and find a way to label who she is, which is likely why Afrocentrism is so appealing to her: it is an evocation to the part of her soul that longs for a distinct identity. But it is notable that her character does *not* have a singular identity, and that's part of what makes her a multifaceted character. In the stage directions, describing her when she first walks onstage, Hansberry writes:

She wears a bright-red flannel nightie, and her thick hair stands wildly about her head. Her speech is a mixture of many things; it is different from the rest of the family 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. (1478)

She is described as a walking contradiction. Although she meticulously straightens her hair, it still stands “wildly” about her head. Her speech itself somehow falls in between her roots as the descendant of slaves and her current position as a medical student in Chicago. It is suggested that the Midwest may have “won” over the South in her voice, a notably aggressive word to describe her internal conflict between integration into white culture and deviation from it. This internal conflict is brought into view for the audience and reader as an initial impression of her character. Her lack of conviction in her own identity allows the characters of George and Asagai to influence her thoughts.

By the end of the play, there is no concrete closure to Beneatha’s struggle for identity, which is likely intentional. In Act III, Asagai proposes to Beneatha and asks her to return to Africa with him. She expresses interest but doesn’t firmly decide anything by the conclusion of the play. “Too many things—too many things have happened today,” Beneatha says, “I must sit down and think. I don’t know what I feel about anything right this minute” (1527). Hansberry is conveying the absurd nature of asking African Americans to choose one of two unattainable ideals: rejecting their own culture or fully embodying a foreign one. By showing Beneatha getting “all mixed up” (1526) after Asagai’s proposal and omitting any closure to this confusion, Hansberry shows that there is no way to make a concrete decision one way or another. The freedom of African Americans to choose what they want to do rises above all. Beneatha’s choice to straighten her hair does not make her an

assimilationist, and her choice to embrace Nigerian music does not make her an Afrocentrist. By placing Beneatha in between assimilationism and Afrocentrism, Hansberry seems to be making a claim that African Americans are able to exist between these two extremes.

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About the Author

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