

A Raisin in the Sun

by Lorraine Hansberry

Directed by Lou Bellamy

Co-produced with

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A Family Portrait: Fifty Years of the American Dream

“The destinies of the two races, in this country, are indissolubly linked together, and the interests of both require that the common government of all shall not permit the seeds of race hate to be planted under the sanction of law.”¹

— Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan, *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Introduction

A Raisin in the Sun debuted on Broadway in 1959 marking the first time a play written by a black playwright—Lorraine Hansberry, directed by a black director—Lloyd Richards, and featuring an all-black principal cast hit the big time. Hansberry, an intellectual and activist, used the play as a vehicle to address significant issues of the day including segregation, poverty, political resistance, social justice, feminism and reproductive rights. This introspective look at one black family living in Chicago’s south side brought into sharp focus the issues facing black people in America and abroad in the 1950s. In the decades following, the play would become an integral addition to grade school curricula throughout the country. The story reached audiences far and wide, in production and on the page. It was welcomed by audiences formerly wary of racial topics, breaking through barriers with an undeniably human story that was universal in scope and yet a definitively African American tale.

In 1951, **Langston Hughes**, crowned the poet laureate of Harlem, asked *what happens to a dream deferred?*

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it *explode*?²

His meditation on the frustration experienced by black Americans living as second-class citizens in the US struck an open nerve in American racial politics. Hughes, by this time, was read widely not just in the US, but abroad as well. The poem echoed the lasting effect of America’s racist policies, both legislative and social, that prevented African Americans from participating fully in American life. More candidly, the last line of the poem threatened revolution—directly

¹ Harlan, *ibid*.

² Hughes, Langston. “Harlem.” *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. (New York: Vintage, 1959); 221.

acknowledging the power behind the mounting resentment black Americans harbored. The poem was both a recognition of the situation and a call to action.

It resonated deeply with Hansberry, a young writer heir to the wealth of the literature generated during the **Harlem Renaissance**, which espoused philosophies of pride, strength and resistance against white racism. The ideals communicated through the poetry, music and literature of this period inspired black Americans to organize and support one another, to press for real and lasting social change. Education and literacy, of paramount importance after centuries of enforced illiteracy, was positioned as the gateway toward the elevation of the race; individual enlightenment was claimed and nurtured by whole families, whole communities, in a push to rise up from the depths of subjugation. *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry's masterpiece, was one answer to Hughes' fundamental question. The play represents a remarkable synthesis of ideas and experience. In it, Hansberry revisits the true story of her parents' struggle with racism, but grounds the story in the philosophies advocated by the likes of Langston Hughes and **Marcus Garvey**. In the late 1930s, Lorraine Hansberry's parents found and attempted to purchase a home outside of Chicago, Illinois but ran into complications when members of this all-white community tried to prevent the family from moving in. The community lived under a code that said no part of their neighborhood should be "sold, leased to or permitted to be occupied by any person of the colored race," as long as 95 percent of the residents agreed. The Hansberry's purchase of their home in this restricted neighborhood began a legal struggle that resulted in the Supreme Court case of *Hansberry v. Lee*, 311 U.S. 32 (1940). The decision opened housing in Chicago neighborhoods that previously were about 80% protected by so-called "**Restrictive Covenants**."

Increasingly, as black Americans contemplated their position in American society, the gaps between the privileged and the disenfranchised became acutely observable. Across the country, the last bastions of racial segregation were beginning to give way, signaling the advent of one of the most important social movements the world has seen—the American **Civil Rights Movement**.

A History of Segregation: Separate but Equal

While black people had struggled against the racist notion that by virtue of their skin they were inherently inferior for centuries in America, it was not until the abolition of slavery that social codes determining their second-class status were made into law and fiercely enforced. Once the burden of slave status was lifted, the country began to systematically set parameters that would limit the participation of black people in American life. It began with the notion that black and white people, while both citizens of the United States, should occupy separate social,

political and cultural spheres. Enforced, this philosophy was known as **segregation**. World over, territories occupied by white colonists paid great heed to the American situation—South African **apartheid**, for example, was heavily influenced by foundational and legislative elements of American segregation.

In 1896 The US Supreme Court effectively institutionalized racial segregation in the United States when it ruled that white and black Americans were “separate, but equal” under the law. The decision came down after a man named Homer Plessy contested his arrest for refusing to remove himself from a white-only passenger car on the East Louisiana Railroad. Plessy argued that the **Separate Car Act**, which enforced segregation on railways, violated the **Thirteenth** and **Fourteenth Amendments**.³ The case was heard three times before the US Supreme Court ruled against Plessy who pleaded guilty and paid the mandated fine.

Plessy v. Ferguson, as the case was known, became the foundation for establishing state’s rights, and was used in the future to demonstrate the limited purview of the federal government. This is primarily why the case is referenced and remembered. It is important to recognize the origins of the laws we have inherited, not just their practical use in contemporary times. The primary impetus for state governments to contest federal involvement in their affairs was not to strike a balance of power between state and federal authority, but rather to pardon the racism still rampant in some states that threatened the fragile bonds of the Union. In particular those states belonging to the former Confederacy (South Carolina, North Carolina, West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, Louisiana, Georgia, Alabama, Florida and Mississippi) did not want the federal government dictating how black and white people should treat one another. Each state wanted to create its own system of rules and policies in relation to the newly freed black people living within its borders. As black Americans attempted to go about their lives as free people, segregation threatened the integrity of their status as American citizens. The case, while somewhat complicated, is immensely important as it marks the first contemplation of what white Americans described as “the Negro problem” at this level. Fundamentally, white folks did not know what to do with black folks—while even disgruntled whites by law had to recognize black freedom, most were reluctant if not determined not to share the wealth and privileges that defined whiteness as an upper-class status. The case would change the face of American history and catalyze the creation of segregationist codes that would rule the country for seventy years.

³ In 1890, Louisiana passed a statute called the "Separate Car Act". This law declared that all rail companies carrying passengers in Louisiana had to provide separate but equal accommodations for white and non-white passengers. The penalty for sitting in the wrong compartment was a fine of \$25 or 20 days in jail. See online resource for exact stipulations of the Separate Car Act: <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=163&invol=537>

The first article of the Fourteenth Amendment formally defined the terms of US citizenship and protected the civil rights of anyone born or naturalized in the US from infringement of these rights by any state in the Union. Homer Plessy had contested his arrest by saying that the railroad's segregationist policies were in violation of the Constitution. The first judge to try the case had decreed previously that the Separate Car Act was unconstitutional, but only when railroads crossed state lines; on a federal level, the Separate Car Act could not be mandated or enforced. State laws were different, however, and because the East Louisiana Railroad operated within state lines, the railroad could enforce segregationist rules as desired.

As history shows, separate but equal in theory did not always add up in practice. Most often those facilities designated for use by people of color were paltry and unkempt compared to those reserved for whites. In practice, the creed was reinterpreted as "separate and unequal" and began to determine two classes of American citizens. *Plessy v. Ferguson* incited states to begin to ratify segregation policies to ensure that black Americans would remain a separate and subordinate class. As historian Ronald Davis explains, the majority of these laws focused on regulating public spaces such as hotels, restaurants, parks, schools and public transportation. By 1910, every state that had belonged to the Confederacy had legalized segregation.⁴ Davis points out that these rules were often enforced by angry mobs, resulting in state-sanctioned racially motivated violence; "from 1889 to 1930, over 3,700 men and women were reported lynched in the United States."⁵ Hundreds more were never reported by the press. **James Weldon Johnson** named the summer and fall of 1919 the "**Red Summer**" after race riots erupted in twenty-five cities across the country, most notably in Chicago, Illinois, Washington D.C, and Elaine, Arkansas.⁶

Emboldened by their collective voice and struggle, black Americans organized and fought back, inspiring poet **Claude McKay** to write his famous poem "If We Must Die Tonight,"

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy

⁴ Davis, Ronald. "Creating Jim Crow." Online resource: <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/creating2.htm>

⁵ Davis, *ibid.*

⁶ Erickson, Alana J. *Red Summer*. In *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*. (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996).

Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!⁷

McKay's poem resounds with a sense of brotherhood and a spirit of resistance that was bigger than the daily assaults on the humanity of black people. It openly referred to a "common foe" that was both monstrous and cowardly. The poem makes warriors out of ordinary folks. Faced with unimaginable odds, the people rise up together to combat poverty, discrimination and mob violence. Still, the poem asks for blood—predicts it, in fact. Unlike "A Dream Deferred," wherein Hughes left the threat of revolution open-ended, McKay acknowledges the cost of resistance, locating glory elsewhere—in the hearts of the survivors and in the afterlife.

Ultimately it was not access to goods and services that black Americans wanted. The hard-won rights to citizenship should have brought about the recognition of black Americans as fellow human beings. Instead it engendered resentment and anger in many white Americans. As McKay's poem iterates, honor and respect for black humanity was at the heart of the struggle, as it is at the heart of Hansberry's play *Raisin*. Sixty years later Walter Lee wonders what good is being able to dream if he cannot take action to make his dreams a reality? Without access to the resources he sees available to those who have, Walter Lee cannot bear the burden of his dreams. Time and again black people were told they were citizens of the United States of America, free from bondage, but still inferior.

After the ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, this fight became increasingly more challenging. The "separate but equal" creed offered racist Americans a way to get around the Fourteenth Amendment, which required states to provide equal protection of civil rights under the law to all persons irrespective of race or color. After *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the law could be used to enforce segregation without risk of infraction or consequence.

Plessy v. Ferguson had incredible impact on the laws of state and federal governance pertaining to civil rights. As black Americans struggled to etch out a place for themselves after the abolition of slavery, the security of their civil rights was a hotly contested issue. The country may have abolished slavery, but states in which slavery had reigned for over two centuries were slow to make the adjustment to regarding black Americans as people with rights instead of property with none. States rallied for their right to determine the culture and

⁷ McKay, Claude. *Selected Poems*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004). This collection of poems was published posthumously in 1953.

conditions under which residents would live—and have to deal with the abolition of slavery. In the ruling, Supreme Court Justice Henry Billings Brown stated while the goal of the Fourteenth Amendment “was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law...it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either.”⁸ In other words, while the Fourteenth Amendment supposedly made due process and the law colorblind, it was not intended to do away with racism. Justice Brown believed that the Fourteenth Amendment should have no bearing on whether or not people want to discriminate against one another.

He was not alone.

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision came back with a seven to one ruling in favor of segregation. The single opposing vote came from Justice John Marshall Harlan, a former slave owner. Harlan disagreed with the decision referring to it as “sinister legislation” and later wrote rather prophetically that

It is...to be regretted that this high tribunal, the final expositor of the fundamental law of the land, has reached the conclusion that it is competent for a state to regulate the enjoyment by citizens of their civil rights solely upon the basis of race. ... In my opinion...the present decision...will not only stimulate aggressions, more or less brutal and irritating, upon the admitted rights of colored citizens, but will *encourage the belief that it is possible, by means of state enactments, to defeat the beneficent purposes which the people of the United States had in view when they adopted the recent amendments of the Constitution...*

What can more certainly arouse race hate, what more certainly create and perpetuate a feeling of distrust between these races, than state enactments which, in fact, proceed on the ground that colored citizens are so inferior and degraded that they cannot be allowed to sit in public coaches occupied by white citizens? That, as all will admit, is the real meaning of such legislation as was enacted in Louisiana.

State enactments regulating the enjoyment of civil rights upon the basis of race, and cunningly devised to defeat legitimate results of the war, under the pretense of recognizing equality of rights, can have no other result than to render permanent peace impossible, and to keep alive a conflict of races, the continuance of which must do harm to all concerned... The thin disguise of 'equal' accommodations for passengers in railroad coaches will not mislead anyone, nor atone for the wrong this day done.⁹

Harlan quite clearly understood that the ruling would be used to keep states from abiding by the hard won amendments to the Constitution that would free black people from bondage and

⁸ Brown, Justice Henry Billings. Online resource: <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=163&invol=537>.

⁹ Harlan, Justice John Marshall. Online resource: <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=163&invol=537>. Emphasis mine.

allow their participation in society as citizens. He clearly identified the fear and abuse of power inherent in the interpretation of the law:

The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power....But in view of the constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law...[I]t seems that we have yet, in some of the states, a dominant race,-a superior class of citizens,-which assumes to regulate the enjoyment of civil rights, common to all citizens, upon the basis of race...Sixty millions of whites are in no danger from the presence here of eight millions of blacks. The destinies of the two races, in this country, are indissolubly linked together, and the interests of both require that the common government of all shall not permit the seeds of race hate to be planted under the sanction of law.¹⁰

The Supreme Court ruling that Homer Plessy could in fact be held accountable for breaking segregationist codes by riding in a “white only” passenger car would also have a staggering effect on US lawmaking. It began in 1899 when the Court ruled that “separate schools in Georgia were allowed to operate even if comparable schools for blacks were not available...a unanimous court ruled that because Richmond County, Georgia, had only enough money to provide a high school for whites it need not shut down the white school in the interests of separate but equal.”¹¹ The presiding justices cited *Plessy v. Ferguson* in support of their decision. The case, known as *Cumming v. Richmond County Board of Education*, would set a precedent for the segregation of public schools that would not be overturned until 1954. Moreover, this case “opened the door for the elimination of black schools in districts able to demonstrate (or assert) financial hardships.”¹² The message was loud and clear—even at the federal level in the highest court of the land—separate was more important than equal and whites would not be burdened by the freedom of black Americans.

Jim Crow and the Limits to American Freedom

In practice, the legislation sanctioned by *Plessy v. Ferguson* became known as **Jim Crow**. Surviving Jim Crow meant more than enduring the daily assaults on human dignity imparted through signs directing “colored” to separate and often paltry services than those offered to whites. It also meant that black Americans had no protection and no recourse within the law for racially motivated crimes. Intimidation, terrorism, unfair job practices, rape, beatings, murder, lynching; rarely these crimes were punished when black people were the victims. On the other hand, the mere accusation of a crime committed by a black person was taken very seriously.

¹⁰ Harlan, *ibid.*

¹¹ Davis, *ibid.*

¹² Davis, *ibid.*

More frequently than not, such accusations never made it before a real court; white communities were sanctioned by Jim Crow law to act as both judge and jury. All too often black people were convicted and punished for crimes in which no substantial evidence was demonstrated and due process was nowhere in sight. Jim Crow, which lasted effectively from 1867 to the 1960s, is the story of our American caste system. As historian Ronald Davis writes, Jim Crow represents “an epic tale of endurance and survival that ranks among the great, tragic feats of heroism in American and world history.”¹³

Even though there are many Americans alive today who remember segregation, it is hard for young people to understand the extent to which Jim Crow was experienced, particularly because of the amnesia with which Americans tend to reflect on the darker elements of our shared history. The “freedom” promised after the abolition of slavery was quite limited:

Blacks avoided looking whites in the eyes; and black males and youths knew not to look, even indirectly, at white women or to touch them accidentally. Blacks were expected to stare at the ground when addressing whites of both sexes. Black customers usually were not served first in stores when white customers were present. They usually were not allowed to try on clothing in white businesses, as it was commonly believed that white customers would not purchase clothes that black customers had tried on. Black shoppers almost always were expected to wait patiently for white clerks to address them before speaking. Adult African Americans were seldom afforded titles of respect by whites, such as the terms "Mister," "Mrs.," or "Miss." They were instead referred to by their first names or by the words "boy," "girl," "auntie," "uncle," and, frequently, "nigger."¹⁴

Most of these rules, though not written into law in specific terms, were customary and colloquially enforced. Jim Crow laws created two distinctly separate social worlds that were at odds yet dependent upon one another. Essentially, segregation divided America with what was known as “the color line.” Based purely on race, this tacit agreement amongst whites kept black people in a kind of identity limbo. They were Americans yet not fully, denied basic civil rights and the freedoms that white citizens enjoyed. **W.E.B. DuBois** is famous for explaining this experience as a “dual consciousness,” an awareness of oneself as a human being that includes but is not limited to one’s experience as a black person living under siege in America.

Black people found ways to endure this existence, largely through feigning acquiescence to their supposed inferiority in the presence of whites. Still, the daily humiliations planted a seed of resentment deep in the hearts of many black Americans. While many presented a smooth veneer of contentment and submission, amongst one another black people were living wholly different lives. The survival history of this period is written largely in folkloric texts, songs and adages that come from the dark era of American segregation. Black people understood with

¹³ Davis, Ronald. <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/surviving2.htm>

¹⁴ Davis, Ronald. <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/surviving2.htm>

pristine clarity the situation with which they were faced. **Paul Laurence Dunbar** captured this survival mechanism eloquently in his 1895 poem entitled “We Wear the Mask”:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To Thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream other wise,
We wear the mask.¹⁵

Black Americans knew that daily survival meant putting on a show that supported white racist notions of their inferiority. Demonstrating strength, intelligence, the ability to read and write, or to display any wealth was dangerous. Subsequently, African Americans developed ways to subtly circumvent this oppression. Black people addressed white people and talked to one another in codes that prevented whites from comprehending the multiple layers of meaning at play in everyday conversation. History—particularly those details pertaining to resistance—was recorded and disseminated amongst the people not just in books, but in stories, fables and music. Feigning ignorance, weakness and personifying the utmost humility were common tactics that kept white rage at bay. Wearing this mask was both a brilliant and degrading way of outwitting authority.

Race and Representation: The American Stage

One of the most important elements of the debut of *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway was that black artists finally had control of their representation on stages that had historically either ignored or disrespected the black American experience. For the first time, Broadway audiences were introduced to the black American family from the inside out, demonstrating what was behind the mask blacks wore to endure the racism with which they were daily faced. For years, American stages had been dominated by representations of black people that served to undermine their freedom and humanity. Ironically, much of the language and witticism that

¹⁵ Paul Laurence Dunbar (1895)

allowed black Americans to skirt white authoritarian rule was used as fodder for these representations.

Reinterpreted by whites, black American wisdom and storytelling became sites for much mockery and ridicule. The “Jim Crow” adage is a prime example. The wisdom discernable in the “Jump Jim Crow” song was introduced to popular culture by a white comedian named Thomas Dartmouth Rice who performed in **blackface**, known as T.D. Daddy Rice. “*Wheel about, and turn about, and do just so; Every time I wheel about, I jump Jim Crow.*” The insightful trickery evident in this expression divulges a deliberate effort to circumvent the rules of Jim Crow segregation. Inside the culture it is a celebration of resistance and a proverb for younger generations to follow. Rice, however, took this insight to the American stage where he donned rags as clothes and rubbed his face with cork so that white audiences could laugh at his depiction of an old crippled black man he dubbed Jim Crow. Exactly where the character comes from is unknown, but it is said that Rice was inspired to create the caricature after encountering an elderly black man in Kentucky who Rice watched sing and dance to a song with this adage as the chorus. Indeed the insight contained in the ditty is not foreign to black culture, and its wisdom seems beyond the realm of the white American comprehension of the black experience. It articulates a cunning acquiescence to the notion that blacks were inferior in order to survive the extreme limitations placed on black life in America. While difficult to embrace because of its degrading nature, most black people understood that it was necessary to survive. In this sense, an elder such as the one Rice encountered represents a wealth of knowledge, a spirit of resistance, and a keeper of the flame. His song and dance routine actually represents subterfuge against white racism. Rice, however, saw an opportunity to claim the behavior that had shut whites out of black life, manipulating it for white audiences to laugh at.

Rice and other white performers were made astoundingly popular by their nonsensical imitations of black people while dressed in rags and their skin darkened with cork, so popular that Rice traveled to the biggest cities in America and even performed abroad for audiences in London and Dublin. To further illuminate the connections between the US segregation and South African apartheid, a mere ten years after Rice performed his Jim Crow routine in Pittsburgh, white South African performers were imitating his caricature to adoring white audiences there.¹⁶ For his silly mimicry, Rice is credited as the “father of **minstrelsy**,” a

¹⁶ Martin, Denis-Constant. *Coon Carnival: New Year in Cape Town, Past to Present*. (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 1999) 80. Martin quotes, “In 1846, Sam Sly, in a satirical ballad to a famous singer, advised her to sing ‘Jim Crow’ before she departed from the stage, ‘for’, he wrote, ‘it is a song which we can recommend if circulation is your only aim.’ In the same year, Boniface regarded this song as being so widely known that he used it with new lyrics. And two years later, W.F.H. Parker, at his puppet theatre in Long St., presented a doll in the role of Jim Crow who would dance a jig and sing a comic song.”

performance tradition that became tremendously popular in the 1900s.

Alongside Jim Crow, another caricature sprang up known as Zip Coon. Originally created by a white performer named George Washington Dixon, this stereotype began as a ridiculous black servant donning his master's clothes. This representation of black people as dandies eventually became known as Zip Coon, referring to the insult "coon" that was reserved for blacks who did not adhere to their lot in life as servants and strove for betterment, but in the eyes of whites came off as a clownish instead.¹⁷

Another damaging and tenaciously enduring representation was that of the Mammy. Brutish and cruel to her own children, the black Mammy was a beloved addition to the white moneyed family. Overweight and dark-skinned, the Mammy was the antithesis to white womanhood. Her size and darkness made her sexually unappealing, while her strength and authority ensured that she would keep her own man and children in line. In relation to her coarse manner, the white woman emerged as the penultimate in feminine grace—a trophy to be prized and protected. White men dressed in drag and blackface depicted the Mammy onstage as an overbearing matriarch with unwomanly strength. She was often seen picking up adult black men and spanking them over her knee like children, an emasculating figure that made a mockery of black female authority and black male autonomy.

In these supposedly comical representations of black people, whites made light of and fantasized about slave life and plantation culture in the antebellum South. White entertainers in blackface would do comedic impressions of, or parody, the stories, songs and dance, jokes and music of blacks for white audiences. Minstrelsy was a very lucrative and beloved form of theater for white audiences for many years. White theatre-goers filled houses to laugh at representations of blacks as happy, contented and dim-witted. It made sense then, according to these depictions, that black people were treated as second-class citizens. Many of these representations were referenced as political propaganda to scare white people into thinking that black people were menacing, or too stupid to understand the way of life outside of slavery. Such stereotypes were used to justify innumerable offenses against black Americans.

Even more ironically, for many years, (largely due to the expectations created by these white performers) the only work black performers could find was to perform in minstrel shows, in *blackface*. This absurd situation reinforces the notion that the depictions of blackness and black people on white stages was not real. Even black actors had to "perform" white ideas of blackness by darkening their skin, wearing silly costumes and miming the white actors' racist depictions of black people. It would continue long into the mid-1900s. This theatre tradition

¹⁷ Ibid.

was hardly benign; such stereotypes would have a devastating effect on black people for decades to come. Their impact had a life that extended far beyond the stage and into American social, political and civil rights policy. Minstrelsy can thus be regarded as a form of performance that is a hybrid of rebellion and mockery that encapsulates the tense race relations that governed this country for centuries.

Acutely aware of the immeasurable damage done by centuries of misrepresentation, Hansberry carefully constructed characters that were both authentic and archetypal. In the comfort and confines of their own culture, the Younger's discuss critical issues facing the country with depth and relevance to their own experience. Audiences witness the frustration Walter Lee feels at the mask he daily dons as the chauffeur for a wealthy white man. These conversations happen organically, as white people interact and interfere with the lives of the characters. When Ruth, Walter Lee's wife, receives a telephone call from the wife of the man for whom her husband works, her voice is staid, guarded and impeccably polite. She is acquiescent, veiling much of the world-wearied wisdom she displays in conversation with her family. Walter Lee is also aware of the white expectations of blacks to be submissive and spineless. When he considers relinquishing the home his mother has purchased in the all-white community of Clybourne Park, he tragically mimics the white representation of black inferiority.

WALTER LEE: I'm going to look that son-of-a-bitch in the eyes and say—
 "that's your neighborhood out there. You got the right to keep
 it like you want. . . Just write out the check and—our house is
 yours." . . . Maybe I'll just get down on my black knees, "Captain,
 Mistuh, Bossman. A-hee-heehee! Yassssuh! Great White Father,
 just gi' ussen de money, fo' God's sake, and we's ain't gwine out
 deh and dirty up yo' white folks neighborhood..."¹⁸

Audiences heretofore unaware of the complexity of the African American experience were able to witness the agency and the pain engendered by the behavior they believed was true and authentic. The only way to illuminate the layers of truth and fabrication in these representations of black people was to give the power of voice to African Americans themselves. Langston Hughes understood this, and captured the need to it beautifully in his poem "Note on Commercial Theatre,"

You've taken my blues and gone—
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.

Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

¹⁸ Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun*.

You also took my spirituals and gone.
You put me in Macbeth
And all kinds of Swing Mikados
And in everything but what's about me—
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me—
Black and beautiful—
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!

I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

It'll be me.¹⁹

Heeding the call, Hansberry juxtaposed black life in actuality with white expectations of black behavior to illuminate both the strength and the sacrifice being black in America required. This is an important divergence from white representations of black life and culture.

White minstrel representations of black people mocked black logic as ridiculous and farcical. Yet the real irony, as Hansberry illustrates, is that white representations of black culture and life were many times removed from the actual intent behind certain kinds of language and behavior. Not only were whites re-imagining black people through a cultural lens which saw them as subordinate, childlike, animalistic, and even dangerous, they were also mimicking the very tactics black Americans used to resist white oppression. Today, thanks in large part to Hansberry and others, American theatre goers now have the opportunity to witness and marvel at the depth of the African American ethos represented in everyday conversations.

The American Dream: An Opaque Apparition

Essentially Walter Lee's dream to go into business for himself is an articulation of the American dream. His desire to achieve the dream nearly tears him apart and causes friction within the family. The more Walter Lee invests in his desire for autonomy and wealth, the more alienated he becomes from himself and his family. In this way, *A Raisin in the Sun* can be read as an exploration of the internalization of a system of wealth and power that if not kept in check, can threaten those cultural elements that are foundational for African American people.

¹⁹ Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001) 93.

Walter Lee's understanding of success is largely fictional as is demonstrated by the dream he shares with his son,

WALTER LEE: One day, when you 'bout seventeen, I'll come home and I'll be pretty tired, you know what I mean, after a day of conferences and secretaries getting things wrong the way they do... 'cause an executive's life is hell, man. And I'll pull the car up in the driveway... just a plain black Chrysler, I think, with white walls—no black tires More elegant. Rich people don't have to be flashy... though I'll have to get something sportier for Ruth—maybe a Cadillac convertible to do her shopping in... And I'll come up the steps to the house and the gardener will be clipping away at the hedges and he'll say, "Good evening, Mr. Younger." And I'll say, "hello Jefferson, how are you this evening?" And I'll go inside and Ruth will meet me at the door and we'll kiss each other and she'll take my arm and we'll go upstairs to your room to see you sitting on the floor with the catalogues of all the great schools in America around you.... All the great schools in the world! And, and I'll say, all right son—it's your seventeenth birthday, what is it you've decided? Just tell me where you want to go to school and you'll go. Just tell me, what is it you want to be—and you'll be it... whatever you want to be—yessir! You just name it son... and I'll hand you the world!

As the monologue progresses, it becomes clear that what Walter Lee ultimately wants is greater opportunity for his son. He wants access to the finest schools in the country. He wants his son to have a choice, not to have to make decisions upon need. He sees the material markers of wealth (the house with hedges, the cars, the gardener) as proof of liberation from the confines of poverty and racism. The intent behind his desire for wealth, though exhibited through a rather circuitous and materialistic route, is not too far flung from what each generation of Younger's have wanted—opportunity for their children. However, at the sacrifice of respect for his mother as an elder, at the sacrifice of his sister's dreams, Walter Lee's musings as to the life of an executive emerge as a sad misdirection of focus and reality.

The first manifestation of this is illustrated in the early exchange between Walter Lee and his wife Ruth over his plan to use his father's insurance money to open a liquor store with his friends Willie and Bobo.

WALTER LEE: You see, this little liquor store cost \$75,000 and we figured the intital investment on the place be 'bout \$30,000, see. Ten thousand each. Course, there's a couple of hundred you got to pay so's you don't spend your life just waiting for them clowns to get your license approved—

RUTH: You mean graft?

WALTER LEE: Don't call it that. See there, that just goes to show you what women understand about the world. Baby, don't nothing happen for you in this world 'less you pay *somebody* off!

Not only does Ruth understand exactly what the nature of this pay off is, she also keys into a very keen observation about her husband and his need to prove himself. Graft, by definition, is more than a payoff—it includes the caveat that someone in a position of power is taking advantage of that power to enact his or her own will. Ruth understands clearly that her husband wants to be a “big man” and that spreading money around will help him feel he has achieved that. She also realizes the inherent danger; because of her husband's need to be recognized, he will likely have hard time doing this discretely. Rather than respond to Ruth's concerns, Walter Lee challenges her intelligence as a woman, thereby relocating the site of the conversation toward gender roles, something Ruth simply does not have the time or energy to go through with her husband yet again. His trick does exactly what he intended it to: it silences her critique of his plan.

A light has come into Walter Lee's life, something that makes his inability to tolerate his situation less outrageous. A check is coming—an opportunity to invest in something that could lift he and his family out of the poverty in which they survive. It has filled him with something daring, something perhaps irresponsible for a man in his position—hope. Ruth cannot afford hope. A practical woman who fills in the gaps between her dreams and reality with daily chores, Ruth has no time to entertain Walter Lee's dream to open a liquor store.

WALTER LEE: You see that? Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: Eat your eggs. Man say: I got to take hold of this here world, baby! And a woman will say: Eat your eggs and go to work. Man say: I got to change my life, I'm choking to death, baby! And his woman say: your eggs is getting cold!

This mirrors the dialogue earlier between Ruth and Travis in which she tells her son to “get your mind off money and eat your breakfast.” She has no trouble being honest with her son about their situation—refusing his request for money. Travis turns to his father to explain why he wants to get a job carrying groceries at the supermarket,

TRAVIS: I *have* to—she won't give me the fifty cents—

WALTER LEE: Why not?

RUTH: 'Cause we don't have it.

WALTER LEE: (*to RUTH*) Why you tell the boy things like that for?

Walter Lee gives his son a dollar and tells him grandly to take a cab to school or buy a piece of fruit at school—extravagances that excite the boy. Later, Walter Lee has to ask his wife for carfare to get to work because he has given his money to Travis.

Walter Lee's frustration eclipses more than his own situation—he is vexed by the idea of not providing his son with the same sense of opportunity and potential that his father instilled in him. Ruth's ability to buckle down and "get by" day after day stifles any impetus to dream; dreaming of something larger would make the toil of daily life nearly intolerable. Worn down herself, Ruth tries to find compassion for her husband but refuses to get swept up in his anxious and frustrated energy that has not yet found a place to actualize itself.

RUTH: Honey, you never say nothing new. I listen to you every day, every night, and every morning, and you never say nothing new. So you would rather *be* Mr. Arnold than be his chauffeur. So I would rather be living in Buckingham Palace.

WALTER LEE: That is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world...Don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something.

RUTH: There are colored men who do things.

WALTER LEE: No thanks to the colored woman.

RUTH: Well being a colored woman, I guess I can't help myself none.

WALTER LEE: We one group of men tied to a race of women with small minds.

This conversation is simultaneously one between a man and a woman with a particular history and mode of dealing with one another, and one about gender roles within African American culture. In reality, Walter Lee is criticizing his wife more than he is black women in general, and Ruth is illustrating Walter Lee's inability to succeed more than she is concerned with the successes of other black men. Yet the conversation brings to light one manifestation of his internalization of American capitalism. Walter Lee's expectations of his wife are focused on him, not on her ability to provide for the family as a caretaker and wage earner herself. Instead, he discounts her contributions to the household with the criticism that she is not serving to shore him up, which he identifies as her primary role. In fact her role within the household as an employed mother supports the larger efforts of the family to subsist. Rather than dealing with the issue at hand (that black people are oppressed by white people—a fact Walter Lee fundamentally understands and experiences daily) he directs his frustrations at black women, something more tangible to him. There is little Walter Lee can do to assert power or agency over his racial situation in 1950s America, where he can and does attempt to assert power is in

relation to his wife and sister, women who exemplify the strength and focus diminishing in Walter Lee. As he utters this last contemptible comment who enters the room but Beneatha, a brilliant thinker studying to be a doctor, insightful commentary by Hansberry that this exchange, and Walter Lee's opinions, are unfounded and attempting to reconcile something much larger in scope than an argument between a man and his wife.

Another signal that Walter Lee has invested in what could be identified as an American capitalist mentality is evidenced by his frustration with Beneatha, his sister. In an historically grounded African American ethos, investing in one individual to succeed for the betterment of the entire culture is a sacrifice worth making. However, Walter Lee is entirely willing to surrender Beneatha's hopes to become a doctor in order to accrue wealth by means of a liquor store, a commodity that has done immense damage to African American people throughout history. What instigates this shift is the presence of money; an amount limited enough to engender competition and a redistribution of priority within the family dynamic. For three years the Younger's have shared the cost of the investment in Beneatha's education. It is not until the prospect of money and through it potential, that Walter Lee begins to diminish his sister's work to make her dream of becoming a doctor a reality. Before the presence of the money it was not just Beneatha's dream, it was a collective dream, a family dream, a cultural dream that she would succeed—her success would undermine the system of oppression that kept doors closed for both women and people of color. Losing sight of that, Walter Lee invests instead in the idea of personal wealth, at whatever the cost and by whatever means. Again, turning away from the communal and cultural strength that has kept solid ground under his feet, Walter Lee feels isolated and becomes defensive about his need for agency and independence. His immediate reaction is not to deal with the system that keeps him down, but rather to employ that very system to further subjugate his sister.

WALTER LEE: Who the hell told you you had to be a doctor? If you so crazy 'bout messing 'round with sick people—then go be a nurse like other women—or just get married and shut up!

Not only does Walter Lee insult Beneatha's intelligence, (an aptly chosen name considering her situation in life as a black woman) he also diminishes any agency Ruth has as a married woman. When he whines that no one in the house will ever understand him, Beneatha replies with a simple retort that he is "a nut. Thee is mad, boy." While on one hand this exchange illuminates a common sibling rivalry, Beneatha importantly identifies Walter Lee's behavior as madness, something that does not make sense for the cultural order in which the Younger's have historically invested. His plan and his behavior are foreign to the communal survival technique

that preserved the life, culture and history of African American people since their birth in this land.

In response, Walter Lee, further demonstrating his sickness, lashes out at that very foundation upon which he stands, “the world’s most backward race of people, and that’s a fact.” More than investing within the ideals of wealth and prosperity that American capitalism touts, Walter Lee has also internalized a white patriarchal gradient by which he measures progress and civilization. No longer does civilized behavior rely on humanity, community and compassion as has traditionally governed relationships between kin in African American culture, instead it relies on a hierarchical arrangement of power according to which the Younger’s have invested in the wrong person; because of her gender Beneatha is less worthy of investment than Walter Lee.

He remains in limbo, however, for he cannot “pull himself up by his own bootstraps” as is supposedly the way one must achieve not just success but masculinity. Instead, Walter Lee must rely on his mother, a female, and her allocation of his father’s insurance money to make himself his own man, so to speak. In reality though, no one has made money without assistance from inheritance—whether it is financial or racial inheritance, privilege is passed down through generations and manifests itself in the youth. George exemplifies a young black intellectual whose family has money; his sexist behavior illuminates an internalization of the patriarchal model that governs white society—women should be seen, not heard, which is rather antithetical to a more communal African experience wherein women were often placed at the center of the culture, with tasks and responsibilities divided between the genders in service of the greater good. Along with assimilation into the American ethos, patriarchal structures that favor white men were impressed upon black people. As power trickled down from this hierarchical organization of society, race and gender merged to create complicated systems of oppression that effect white women (disenfranchised by gender), men of color (disenfranchised by race) and women of color (disenfranchised by race and gender). This says nothing about the heterosexist manifestations of power and privilege that dominate American society.

Throughout the play Walter Lee exhibits blatantly sexist behavior, treating both his sister and his wife as though they and their dreams are less important than his. At first glance one might write Walter Lee off as a purebred misogynist. However, as Hansberry brings Walter Lee into clearer focus, he also exhibits behavior which signals that he has internalized aspects of racism that poison him from being kind to himself and to his family. In this way, his sexism emerges as a direct result of his racial experience that has left him feeling emasculated in relation to the power white men exhibit over him, suggesting a much more broad and nuanced problem.

A Clash of Cultures: Power and Kinship within the Black Family

At the heart of Walter Lee's struggle is the sense that he is not able to claim his manhood without power and success. Working for a pittance amongst the servant class for wealthy whites has taken a toll on his sense of authority. In a patriarchal society, the responsibility to provide for his family, to lead his family, falls upon his shoulders. Yet without wealth and a formal education, Walter Lee finds himself subject to the racial situation of the times and the limited options available to him. Like many of us, Walter Lee lashes out in anger at those who are closest to him. Bearing the brunt of his frustration are the women who surround him, powerful figures who are focused and determined in relation to Walter Lee's imaginative and rather ineffectual spirit.

Raisin depicts many generations of a family living under one roof, a relatively common situation for African Americans. In one tiny tenement apartment, three generations of the Younger family live and work to support one another. It is not until Walter Lee attempts to assert his position as a dominant male that the structure of the family begins to fracture. Walter Lee regards the money as an opportunity to claim his rightful place as the head of the family. The idea that a male, by virtue of his gender, should rightfully be the head of the family runs counter to a family structure wherein an elder, regardless of gender, occupies that role. Further, the notion that a male should be the "head" of the family implies that men have the ability to think and make more rational decisions than women or children. But clearly just because he is a man does not ensure that Walter Lee possesses this ability—it is in fact his planning that squanders the family's resources by investing in a notion of individual as opposed to communal wealth in which everyone's opinions and conditions might be taken into consideration and effect the ultimate decision.

Lena, as the elder in the family, is the leader. While her children do challenge her, Walter Lee and Beneatha know when to back down—and if they do not, she quickly reminds them.

MAMA: 'Course you going to be a doctor, honey, God willing.

BENEATHA: God hasn't got a thing to do with it.

MAMA: Beneatha—that just wasn't necessary.

BENEATHA: Well—neither is God. I get sick of hearing about God!

MAMA: Beneatha!

BENEATHA: I mean it! What has God got to do with anything? Does he pay tuition?

MAMA: You 'bout to get your fresh little jaw slapped!...

BENEATHA: ...Mama you don't understand. It's all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don't accept. It's not important. I'm not going out and be immoral or commit crimes because I don't believe in God. I don't even think about it. It's just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God—there is only Man—and it is he who makes miracles!

MAMA absorbs this speech, studies her daughter and rises slowly and crosses to BENEATHA and slaps her powerfully across the face. After, there is only silence and the daughter drops her eyes from her mother's face, and MAMA is very tall before her.

MAMA: Now—you say after me, in my mother's house there is still God.

BENEATHA: In my mother's house there is still God.

MAMA: There are some ideas we ain't going to have in this house. Not long as I am at the head of this family.

Even as she labels her mother a tyrant, Beneatha concedes. This is not because she is a domineering black woman, but rather because of her status as an elder. Hansberry's depiction of a strong black matriarch adds nuance and complexity to the story that racist depictions would encourage people to believe about the black family. Without the luxury of space for reflection and privacy, the Younger's delicately negotiate the family dynamic to keep everyone on a relatively even keel. While Lena is a solid mother who does at times impose her will on her children, she is also forgiving and learns from them as demonstrated in the exchange between Lena and her daughter the following morning:

MAMA: Who is that you inviting over here with this house looking like this? You ain't got the pride you was born with!

BENEATHA: Asagai doesn't care how houses look, Mama—he's an intellectual.

MAMA: Who?

BENEATHA: Asagai—Joseph Asagai. He's an African student I met on campus.

MAMA: What's his name?

BENEATHA: Asagai, Joseph Ah-sah-guy...He's from Nigeria.

MAMA: Oh, that's the little country that was founded by slaves way back—

BENEATHA: No, Mama—that's Liberia

MAMA: I don't think I've met no African before.

BENEATHA: Well do me a favor and don't ask him a whole lot of ignorant questions like do they wear clothes—

MAMA: Well, now, I guess if you think we so ignorant 'round here maybe you shouldn't bring your friends here.

BENEATHA: It's just that all anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan—

MAMA: Why should I know anything about Africa?

BENEATHA: Why do you give money at church for missionary work?

MAMA: Well that's to help save people.

BENEATHA: You mean save them from heathenism—

MAMA: Yes.

BENEATHA: I'm afraid they need more salvation from the British and the French.

When Lena meets Asagai, she is graceful and kind and genuinely surprises her daughter:

MAMA: How do you do?

ASAGAI: (*Total politeness to an elder*) How do you do, Mrs. Younger. Please forgive me for coming at such an outrageous hour on a Saturday.

MAMA: Well, you are quite welcome. I just hope you understand that our house don't always look like this. You must come again. I would love to hear all about—your country. I think it's so sad the way our American Negroes don't know nothing about Africa 'cept Tarzan and all that. And all that money they pour into these churches when they ought to be helping you people over there drive out them French and Englishmen done taken away your land.

Hansberry's depiction of this family and the struggle for leadership within it once Walter Lee begins to invest in the dominant cultural beliefs brings to light an important conversation that began in the early fifties in America. In 1965 U.S. Senator **Daniel Patrick Moynihan** published "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." This article articulated an opinion that was increasingly more prevalent as black Americans demonstrated frustration and action around their continued oppression. The report, regarded by many of his

contemporaries as a brilliant sociological analysis illuminating the pathology of African American people, concluded that the chief hindrance facing black Americans was in fact the black family. Unable to conform to white society's "natural" **patriarchal** order, African Americans were stunted primarily because they were a **matriarchal** culture. According to Moynihan, the strength of the black woman was detracting from the authority of black men, keeping them from acting as proper male role models and heads of the family. Through his study, Moynihan purported to demonstrate that "black female-headed families [were] a serious retardant to the progress of African American communities."²⁰ In other words, because of her strength, because she was also often an equal breadwinner within the family, because she disciplined her children and was an active parent, she was to blame for the depressed state in which African Americans found themselves mid-century. Rather than acknowledge the history of slavery which deliberately tore black families apart for four hundred years, rather than discuss the racism that prevented African Americans from achieving job security or making equitable wages as whites thereby requiring that everyone in the family had to work, rather than looking at the paltry educational system to which black children were exposed, Moynihan decided to blame the mothers. They were just too powerful; they were ruining everything. The relationship between Walter Lee and his mother Lena can be read as a negotiation of power between two structures of family—one wherein elders occupy powerful positions within a family, and one wherein males occupy powerful positions within a family.

The Moynihan report was nearly exclusively responsible for the resurgence in media representations of an old, familiar stereotype from the antebellum South, the Mammy, only this time she did not don a handkerchief and labor tirelessly for the white family. This time the Mammy resurfaced as a Welfare Mother who collected babies and government checks. Her ineffectual and damaging presence is summed up in Walter Lee's bitter rejoinder to Ruth's suggestion that he *do* something about his desire for autonomy and wealth, "why? You want to know why? 'Cause we all tied up in a race of people that don't know how to do nothing but moan, pray and have babies!" Echoing the sentiments of those who thought of the black family as a drain on society, Walter Lee has succumbed to the internalization of the dominant opinion.

The reemergence of the Mammy character as a Welfare Mother who pilfered American resources as opposed to one who supported white wealth signaled a new fear in dominant culture. The Welfare Mother was depicted as interminably lazy, promiscuous, irresponsible and without pride. While black men and women across the country struggled to raise their children

²⁰ This document, now known as The Moynihan Report, was originally published as "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1965). It is quoted here by Feagin and St. John in *Double Burden: Black Women and Everyday Racism*. (Armonk, New York and London, England: M.E. Sharpe, 1999) p. 153.

on a pittance earned from menial jobs, dominant society was constructing elaborate stories to support their deviance and to garner support for their dismissal. For decades after the Moynihan report aired, definitions of an ideal American woman or family have historically involved the devaluation of black femininity and families through racist misrepresentations disguised as “data.” This is why adhering to externally defined determinations of success, like Walter Lee does, can be poisonous for the black community. It is at this point that the structure of the family, and as a microcosmic example of the large black community, begins to break down. Our adherence to such systems of value allows for the circulation of the stereotypes such as the Welfare Mother to continue. Rather than value the strength and leadership of an elder and recognize the support therein, Walter Lee fights his mother for position within the household.

Black people experience family quite differently than Moynihan imagined. The dedication to a balance between personal wealth and communal health exhibited by the sacrifices the Youngers have made to invest in Beneatha’s education is predicated on the notion that the capitalist order is not communally responsible. Yet black Americans have managed to work within this framework, albeit often at a different pace or via nontraditional routes, to create security for their families and communities, and regard this as indicative of personal success, in spite of a system that does not value such culturally associative connectivity or responsibility. It is because of Walter Lee’s investment in a capitalist notion of wealth that he feels so devalued, as exhibited in this exchange between he and his mother.

MAMA: You a good-looking boy. You got a job, a nice wife, a fine boy and—

WALTER LEE: A job. Mama, a job? I open and close car doors all day long. I drive a man around in his limousine and I say, “yes sir; shall I take the Drive sir?” Mama that ain’t no kind of job. ...that ain’t nothing at all. Mama, I don’t know if I can make you understand.

MAMA: Understand what baby?

WALTER LEE: Sometimes it’s like I can see the future stretched out in front of me—just plain as day. The future, Mama. Hanging over there at the edge of my days. Just waiting for me—a big, looming blank space—full of nothing. Just waiting for me. But it doesn’t have to be. Mama—sometimes when I’m downtown driving that man around and I pass by them cool, quiet-looking restaurants where them white boys are sitting back and talking ‘bout things....sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars....sometimes I see guys don’t look much older than me—

MAMA: Son, how come you talk so much ‘bout money?

WALTER LEE: Because it's life, Mama!

MAMA: Oh—So now money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it's money.

WALTER LEE: No—it was always money, Mama. We just didn't know about it.

The generational gap between Lena and her son is widened further by the fact that Walter Lee has lost sight of those elements of life in which African Americans traditionally placed value. As Lena challenges him on his belief that money is of penultimate importance, she brings home the disregard for those who fought to bring him to a place where he might even contemplate such things. By placing value outside of the culture, Walter Lee turns his back on the legacy of his ancestry.

MAMA: No...something has changed. You something new, boy. In my time we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we could and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too...Now here come you and Beneatha talking 'bout things we ain't never even thought about hardly, me and your daddy. You ain't satisfied or proud of nothing we done. I mean that you had a home; that we kept you out of trouble till you was grown; that you don't have to ride to work on the back of nobody's streetcar. You my children, but how different we done become.

Black Americans are heir to a long tradition of communal reinforcement. The NAACP was founded on the tenets that supporting one another was beneficial to the advancement of all. The **Underground Railroad**, education initiatives such as “each one, teach one,” and the order of black Catholic nuns known as the **Oblate Sisters of Providence**, all subscribe to an internally instigated effort toward communal health. These are the dictates that govern the sacrifices made for Beneatha to succeed. Intergenerational connectivity like that illustrated by the Younger family, in which the a female leader lives with her children and grandchildren both as a figurehead and as an active participant in the family, is a system of cooperation that runs counter to the dictates of dominant society that identify success as individual wealth versus communal health. Walter Lee has subscribed to the notion of a traditional male at the center of the household, this is what drives his frustrations with his mother; he feels invaluable to the family because he is not regarded as primarily responsible for its welfare.

WALTER LEE: What you need me to say you done right for? You the head of this family. It was your money and you did what you wanted with it. So what you need for me to say it was all right for? So you butchered up a dream of mine—you who always talking 'bout your children's dreams.

Because he subscribes to an external model of family and success, Walter Lee is willing to suppress Beneatha's dream to become a doctor in order to push forward his own dream, rather than find a way to share the wealth the family has inherited so that both could succeed. Warped by a independent notion of success, he does not see that he has interrupted the careful balance the family has created for the betterment of all.

In a more communal model, individual wealth and communal health are co-constitutive of one another, not at the expense of either; "individualism means successful cooperation," and "togetherness and helping are critical to individual advancement."²¹ There is a "built-in mutual aid system for the welfare of its members and the maintenance of the family as a whole."²² This runs absolutely counter to Moynihan's assessment of black culture and kinship networks.

Thanks in large part to the damage done by the claim that strong black women were responsible for ruining the fabric of African American culture, and the normalization of the nuclear family household with a male breadwinner at the helm, the organization of the black family has changed significantly. Joe Feagin and Yanick St. John found in one sociological study on the impact of race and class on contemporary black families that focus group participants were conscious of an ideological and practical breakdown in the ties binding black American families. Respondents alluded to a "gradual weakening" of extended family and kinship networks within the contemporary black community due, they suggested, to an increasingly more common "identification with dominant values of individualism," versus what Feagin and St. John call "traditional communalism."²³ The impact of the American system of capitalism and its use of race to determine access to resources, to determine the level at which non-whites can participate in the sociopolitical and cultural currents that govern the society, cannot be underestimated. The weakening of the care and kinship bonds between members of the Younger family is evidenced through Walter Lee's engagement with a capitalist society that values individual wealth over communal health.

Still, Feagin and St. John find evidence that "today, relative to whites and even to some ethnic groups of color, [black Americans show] a higher level of multigenerational households, fosterage of kin and nonkin children, care for dependent family members, respect for elders, religiosity, and sacrificial efforts for the upward mobility of [the members of the community]."²⁴ If contemporary black Americans are made aware of this history, it seems

²¹ Ibid., 152.

²² Ibid., 153.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Feagin and St. John are quoting research garnered by Robert Staples and Leonor Boulton Johnson; they quote from *Black Families at the Crossroads: Challenges and Prospects* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2005) pp. 194-5.

impossible to extricate oneself from the network of subsistence black Americans have created and such a decision, like the one Walter Lee makes, smacks of a violent, self-imposed exile.

Why doesn't the nuclear family model, independent of community, make sense for black Americans? The reason for this is explained by the history of the birth of an American economy. Within the US economy of racialized slavery, money and power were not available to black people as commodities. Instead, black *people* were *objects* for sale within an economy of flesh. Wealth and power, the gradients by which whites measured success, signaled their enslavement. Their labor did not produce fruits they could enjoy. Instead, within an economy of slavery, black notions of value were negotiated around the creative ingenuity of the people to survive and maintain a sense of collective, cultural continuity. Already we see the creation of an alternate system of value with its own code of ethics, morality and justice that runs parallel and largely in opposition to the dominant track. What was valuable in this economy to black people was not material goods outside of the self; rather true value is placed on the self *itself*, and how this *self*, bound within a prison of its own flesh in an absurd and illogical context of human bondage, can reach out, relate to and form coalition with other *selves*, thereby mutually constituting one another as *subjects* instead of objects outside of a framework that would suggest there is no *self* to recognize, no humanity to speak of at all. This is the tradition from which black folks come. This most essentially articulates our spirit of service to one another and our communities.

Surviving the violence of this system meant that value had to be placed elsewhere, just as selfhood had to be conceived elsewhere. Family and spirituality emerged as critically constitutive aspects of the black American experience and identity and have remained so. Black American networks of family and community can be read as antithetically related to a capitalist economy.

Most whites, including public commentators and politicians, do not understand the deep need that most blacks share for family relationships, their altruism toward kith and kin, or their nonchalance toward the acquisition of power.²⁵

This is because of a dogged resolve to disassociate contemporary American lives with an historical past that includes slavery. Capitalistic materialism is foreign to traditional black family orders because these kin relationships and communities have roots within an economy of slavery in which nothing was owned, and even selfhood was ritualistically challenged. After the Civil War, many black Americans were forced to abandon what meager items they had managed to collect, leaving behind anything that could not be carried. Subsequently, much of the non-oral cultural records were looted, burned, or destroyed, indeterminately assessed for value

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 158-9.

within a framework that did not understand the cultural meaning of such objects as quilts, dolls, drums and other musical instruments.

Our bonds and connections, even today, must be read historically, especially in response to the restriction of wealth and the impediment of accumulation. Culturally speaking, our systems of value emphasize elements of life that might seem naïve or illogical outside of the relevant historical context. This is why the decontextualization of our experience from history is so debilitating for black Americans and our communities. Without being privy to the interplay of culture and history, we cannot defend our families, cannot resituate the complex creation of systems of support so that they reflect the true genius and will to survive, as opposed to codependency or pathogenic behavior Moynihan suggested. Without understanding our history, contemporary black Americans will not know (though they may sense or feel) that a hug is revolutionary act. It is the physical manifestation of a bond between a people serially divided, hand over fist, as quickly as money could change hands for their sale.

John Blassingame points out that there was no legal existence of family in slavery.²⁶ Yet it was the experience of family, recreated as often as the sale of relations required, that was the foremost stopgap mechanism for the slave to “survive on the plantation without becoming totally dependent on and submissive to [the] master.” Cast in this light, bonds of family and kinship are revolutionary, emancipatory, and subversive.²⁷ The nuclear family as a normal image of success within the dominant culture must be reassessed within a context in which race and class dynamics are at play. The structure of the Youngers family makes sense given what they are up against. Poverty and racism would make isolating oneself from one’s family interminably challenging. A family dynamic in which everyone works (even Travis, a nine year old is willing to carry groceries after school so that he can garner wages so as not to place a burden on his mother who explains to him quite frankly that she just does not have the money to give him) ensures that an entire family is provided for given the limited access black Americans had to garner wealth. Walter Lee’s idyllic understanding of wealth eliminates the obstacles of race and class with which he is confronted in reality. It is, in essence, a dream. “Materialistic values lead to the development of a certain type of nuclear family, which in turn appears to reinforce materialism. The smaller a family unit, the larger each share of the rewards and the greater the potential for wealth accumulation.”²⁸ Within a context wherein Lena, Walter Lee and Ruth cannot surpass the service industry, there is no hope for any one of them to attain wealth alone. Instead, the Youngers collectively invest in the education of one family

²⁶ Blassingame, John. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1979).

²⁷ Blassingame, John. (Ibid., 151). Quoted here by Feagin and St. John, *ibid.*, 157.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

member who shoulders the responsibility of lifting everyone up. If and when Beneatha successfully begins to practice as a doctor, she will feel obligated to return the investment her family has made in her—it is not a written rule, but rather an expectation; for their sacrifice she will in turn make sacrifices herself. In the end, her desire to become a doctor is not predicated on the wealth that this position might afford her—her ultimate wish is to travel to Africa with Asagai where she will support efforts to erect a new foundation up from under the oppression of colonialism. Even then, neither she nor Asagai would likely imagine that she could abandon her family and not demonstrate a reciprocal gratitude for their sacrifice precisely because the bonds between them are so strong, so interdependent and supportive.

Even though wealth and power have remained largely inaccessible to black Americans historically, the dominant culture refuses, as Moynihan's report proves, to read our nonchalance toward the acquisition of material possessions as a direct challenge to the dominant order of things. Capitalism is entirely dependent upon the idea of "more for me." It pokes and prods at a self-conscious sense of *lack* in individuals, encouraging them to believe that the sense of shame or deficiency can be alleviated through the desire for, and acquisition of, something external. This is precisely the sickness that eats away daily at Walter Lee. Black Americans have historically circumvented this sickness by placing emphasis on the health and happiness of our families, our communities, our joy, our healing; black Americans, particularly at the time *Raisin* premiered, were invested in a system of affirmation. Many black Americans feel a deep frustration with the idea of "rugged individualism" or the "bootstrap mentality" because it relies on a system that denies the economic foundation of this country, namely slavery. Naturally black folks would be skeptical within that context of any economy that encourages isolation, individualism or division from communal relationships. Such relationships have historically been the major contribution to our survival as a people.

Not everyone sees the value in this process, however. Many white Americans read these alternative systems of value as evidence in support of black poverty or our exclusion from full participation in the socioeconomic governances of this country. This assessment is based on the notion that black people have "opted out" or taken "the easy road," suggesting a pathogenic reliance on a moralistic and benevolent society. In fact, our cautious engagement with capitalism is nothing short of an ontological resistance and alternate system of value that frustrates this kind of economy at its core. Our creative kinship networks within this context can be read as political rebellions against the dominant culture.

Africa: A Distant Paradigm

At the time *Raisin* premiered, black Americans—particularly amongst the intellectual elite—were illuminating correlations between their experiences and the experiences of black people living abroad in the Caribbean, South America and Africa. Around the world, oppressed people were coming into consciousness about their shared experience of subjugation under colonial rule. In Africa, as countries struggled for their independence from European powers, thousands of black Americans stood behind their efforts, admiring from afar. However, because the experience of colonial occupation of a native homeland is decidedly different from the experience of oppression in a country to which a people were forcibly relocated, much of the admiration black Americans felt was romanticized. Hansberry explores this phenomenon through Joseph Asagai and his interaction with Beneatha, representative of the African American activist intellectual. Through their conversations, Hansberry brings the burgeoning consciousness around what became known as **pan-Africanism** to the stage. In America Marcus Garvey, an activist and intellectual from the West Indies, was largely responsible for spreading the notion that all those descended from African origin are kin within a global African community. Born in Jamaica, Garvey's understanding of colonialism was more acute than what most African Americans experienced. He pushed forward the notion that all people derived from African ancestry were linked to one another in a widely dispersed but indissolubly national consciousness.

Garvey believed that all people of African descent, irrespective of where they were born, were heir to and should seek out a homeland in Africa. His efforts to spearhead this project became known in the US as the "back to Africa movement." Rich in iron ore and timber, Liberia, located on the lip of the west coast of Africa, seemed an ideal place to land and develop a society free from colonialism and the legacy of slavery. Garvey, editor of the *Negro World* newspaper advocated for black-owned businesses and community wealth, though he was clear to invite only those he considered valuable to his enterprise. He did not want to encourage the migration of criminals and focused instead on recruiting the intellectual and cultural elite to join he and his cohorts in Liberia. Famously at odds with one another, W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey went head to head on many issues, one of them being the real needs of black Americans and how they should be addressed. Garvey was closely linked with **Booker T. Washington**, a man with whom DuBois had tangled with as well. Schooled abroad in England, Garvey arrived in the United States in 1916 and began speaking around the country about his plan to relocate the best and the brightest of African descendants to this ideal homeland. Imagining a national consciousness that surpassed cultural specificity and the unique experiences of diverse groups of African descendants, Garvey constructed a tricolor flag under which all black people could be

subsumed. The colors red, green and black represented the blood uniting African people, the fertility and bounty of African land, and the skin of its people. From the early 1920s through the 1970s, the popularity of the idea of Africa took black Americans in its sway.

With *Raisin* Hansberry stresses the idea of Africa as experienced by African Americans, played out in the teasing and gentle relationship budding between Beneatha and Asagai.

ASAGAI: Do you remember the first time you met me at school? ... *(He laughs)* You came up to me and you said—and I thought you were the most serious little thing I had ever seen—you said: *(He imitates her)* “Mr. Asagai—I want very much to talk with you. About Africa. You see, Mr. Asagai, I am looking for my identity!

BENEATHA: *(Turning to him, not laughing)* Yes—*(Her face is quizzical, profoundly disturbed)*

ASAGAI: *(Still teasing and reaching out and taking her face in his hands and turning her profile to him)* Well—it is true that this is not so much a profile of a Hollywood queen as perhaps a queen of the Nile—*(A mock dismissal of the importance of the question)* But what does it matter? Assimilationism is so popular in your country.

BENEATHA: *(Wheeling, passionately, sharply)* I am not an assimilationist!

Beneatha’s search for her sense of self is real and while she may succumb to some of the more romantic notions of Africa, particularly because her introduction to Nigerian culture comes by way of the handsome and passionate intellectual new friend she has made, she is still grounded in a thoroughly African American cultural identity. Even as she allows for slight adjustment in her thinking and is hungry for information, Beneatha does not offer herself up as a blank slate upon which Asagai, or George for that matter, can write his ideal version of her. She is unwilling to allow the physical attraction they share to be the sole foundation upon which a relationship is built, even as Asagai presses that it should be enough. “I know,” Beneatha exclaims, “because that’s what it says in all the novels men write. But it isn’t. Go ahead and laugh—but I’m not interested in being someone’s little episode in America—or one of them!” She refuses to be encapsulated by a romanticized notion of the American female without understanding the ways in which she may also be boxing Asagai in. Her evocation of a novel—belonging to the world of fiction—challenges Asagai on his understanding of American women in the same way that he forces her to acknowledge her romanticized notions of Africa. She does not quiet her rebellion until he demonstrates respect evidenced by the nickname with which Asagai bestows her: Alaiyo—one for whom bread, food, is not enough. She realizes that he understands her core desires, elements of herself that surpass both her race and her gender.

As evidenced in the earlier exchange between Lena and her daughter, many black Americans were not aware of the full extent of the plight of decolonizing countries. Still, even as African Americans exhibited a romanticized view of Africa, there is real hope in reclaiming the rich ancestry described by the movement. The scene below deftly explores this paradox:

RUTH: What have we got on tonight!

BENEATHA: *(Emerging grandly from the doorway so that we can see her thoroughly robed in the costume ASAGAI brought)* You are looking at what a well-dressed Nigerian woman wears—*(She parades for RUTH, she is coquettishly fanning herself with an ornate oriental fan, mistakenly more like Butterfly than any Nigerian that ever was)* Isn't it beautiful? *(She promenades to the radio and, with an arrogant flourish, turns off the good loud blues that is playing)* Enough of this assimilationist junk! *(RUTH follows her with her eyes as she goes to the phonograph and puts on a record and turns and waits ceremoniously for the music to come up. Then, with a shout)*
OCOMOGOSIAY!

(RUTH jumps. The music comes up, a lovely Nigerian melody. BENEATHA listens, enraptured, her eyes far away—"back to the past." She begins to dance. RUTH is dumbfounded)

RUTH: What kind of dance is that?

BENEATHA: A folk dance.

RUTH: What kind of folks do that honey?

BENEATHA: It's from Nigeria. It's a dance of welcome.

RUTH: Who you welcoming?

BENEATHA: The men back to the village.

RUTH: Where they been?

BENEATHA: How should I know—out hunting or something. Anyway, they are coming back now.

RUTH: Well that's good. . . .

(WALTER LEE comes in during this performance; he has obviously been drinking. He leans against the door heavily and watches his sister, at first with distaste. Then his eyes look off—"back to the past"—as he lifts both his fists to the roof, screaming)

WALTER LEE: YEAH...AND ETHIOPIA STRETCH FORTH HER ARMS AGAIN!

RUTH: Yes—and Africa sure is claiming her own tonight.

- WALTER LEE: Shut up! I'm digging them drums...them drums move me! In my heart of hearts (*he thumps his chest*) I am much warrior.
- RUTH: In your heart of hearts you are much drunk.
- WALTER LEE: Flaming spear. Hot damn. Me and Jomo. That's my man Kenyata. OCOMOGOSIAY! Where'd she go? Come here, come here. Shh, shh. The lion is waking. Owimoweh. (*On the table, very far gone, his eyes pure glass sheets. 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 arrived.*)
- BENEATHA: Owimoweh,
- WALTER LEE: Listen, my black brothers—
- BENEATHA: We hear you!
- WALTER LEE: Do you hear the waters rushing against the shores of the coastlands
- BENEATHA: OCOMOGOSIAY!
- WALTER LEE: Do you hear the screeching of the cocks in yonder hills beyond where the chiefs meet in council for the coming of the mighty war—
- BENEATHA: OCOMOGOSIAY!
- WALTER LEE: Do you hear the beating of the wings of the birds flying low over the mountains and the low places of our land—
- BENEATHA: OCOMOGOSIAY!
- WALTER LEE: Do you hear the signing of the women, singing the war songs of our fathers to the babies in the great houses...singing the sweet war songs? (*The doorbell rings. RUTH goes to answer it*) OH, DO YOU HEAR, MY BLACK BROTHERS!
- (*RUTH opens door, admits GEORGE MURCHISON, ...cuts off music*)
- BENEATHA: (Completely gone) We hear you, Flaming Spear—
- WALTER LEE: Telling us to prepare for the GREATNESS OF THE TIME!— (*To GEORGE*) BLACK BROTHER! (*He extends his hand for the fraternal clasp*)
- GEORGE: Black brother, hell!

While this passage illuminates fictional and in some ways primitivist interpretation of African culture, the end result is a communal understanding of family different than what has besieged

the Younger's. It is a kind of healing. Walter Lee sees himself as a leader, sees revolution ahead, a fight worth dying for that is larger than any struggle he faces in America. Importantly, in Walter Lee's drunken dream-state the role that the women play is the keeper of the flame, the generational passing down of knowledge and culture to the children. The notion that there are roots of greatness to which all black people are heir awakens a national consciousness in Walter Lee, evidenced by his recognition of George as a "black brother." George's refusal to ally himself with Walter Lee is based on the class distinctions that rule American society. Asagai's presence within the Younger household engenders desire to journey back to the source, to find recognition outside of the oppressive cultural landscape in which both Walter Lee and Beneatha struggle.

When Asagai gives Beneatha the robes, and dresses her in them, she experiences a similar kind of rebirth, a finding of the cultural identity from which African Americans have strayed. His admiration of her in dressed in the Nigerian cloth is both an invitation and evocation of her right to explore this element of her ancestry. Still, the distance between the cultures is evident.

BENEATHA: What did you bring me?

ASAGAI: Open it and see.

BENEATHA: *(Eagerly opening the package and drawing out some records and the colorful robes of a Nigerian woman)* Oh, Asagai! You got them for me! How beautiful! ...and the records too! *(She lifts out the robes and runs to the mirror with them and holds the drapery up in front of herself)*

ASAGAI: Wait! I shall have to teach you how to drape it properly. *(He flings the material about her for the moment and stands back to look at her)* Ah—Oh-pay-gay-day, oh-bah-mu-shay. *(A Yoruba exclamation for admiration)* You wear it well...very well...mutilated hair and all.

BENEATHA: My hair—what's wrong with my hair?

ASAGAI: Were you born with it like that?

BENEATHA: *(Reaching up to touch it)* No...of course not. *(She looks back to the mirror, disturbed)*

ASAGAI: *(Smiling)* How then?

BENEATHA: You know perfectly well how...as crinkly as yours...that's how.

ASAGAI: And it is ugly to you that way?

- BENEATHA: Oh no—not ugly. But it’s so hard to manage when it’s, well—raw.
- ASAGAI: And so to accommodate that—you mutilate it every week?
- BENEATHA: It’s not mutilation!
- ASAGAI: Oh please! I am only teasing you because you are so very serious about these things.

Along with the call for pride in African ancestry came new interpretations of beauty. The Afro was the popular American expression of natural black beauty. When Beneatha does decide to cut her hair, the accusation from her sister-in-law is that she has “lost her mind.” George asks her what she has done to her “head,” each implying that by allowing her hair to be natural she has somehow lost the capacity for thinking rationally, further illustrating the notion that natural expressions of blackness are somehow primitive and irrational.

Ultimately the lessons Asagai brings to the play are much more epic than a romantic display of African culture. His purpose in America is to gain the education that will allow him to return to his home and liberate his people. His understanding of liberation is much more complex than donating money for missionary work. He understands that should his involvement in the decolonization process prove successful, it will ultimately call for his death. His understanding of revolution and change is such that when change is accepted it becomes hegemonic. Hegemony must be defeated at any cost, so when the activists arrive at comfort and calm, the peace must be disturbed and their throats must be slit. This is how rejuvenation and renewal occur. Beneatha is both appalled and awed by his frankness and dedication to the cause. It is this reality that ultimately urges her to embrace the full breadth of her African ancestry.

Feminism and Women’s Rights

At the time *Raisin* debuted, the feminist movement was gaining momentum. While the nation was enduring the hardship of war through the 1940s, women largely took up the call to provide service for the American economy working in factories across the country. While much of the nation’s workforce was abroad fighting in World War II, women earned wages doing work that which was traditionally reserved for men. In some instances, though these were few, women earned wages comparable to men. When the war ended, rather than get better, or even stay the same, the reality of gender inequality worsened. Women were expected to return to their homes and resume work as “mere” housewives. Those women who opted to stay in the workforce took substantial pay cuts. This punishment was indicative of the threat women posed to American capitalist patriarchy by leaving the realm of the home to participate as

“contributing” members of society. It disrupted the order imposed by the belief that women were inferior and therefore less valuable to society.

The feminist movement focused its energy on answering this sexist order with a call for equal pay and the ability to wear clothing appropriate to the labor as opposed to the apparel dictated by sexist standards meant to convey female fragility and dependence. But while white women were burning their bras in effigy and working to permeate the glass ceiling in the workforce, many were employing women of color to care for their children and household. It is an unfortunate circumstance of power distribution that white female liberation further disenfranchised women of color. Yet women of color, subjugated most evidently by virtue of their race, had historically always worked. Both Lena and Ruth work as cleaning ladies for more privileged people. All people of color, and especially African Americans, were well acquainted with the service industry. It was not because of their gender that their wages were substandard, or that they could not strive for more powerful positions, but because of their race. This perspective united men and women of color, making the sweeping generalizations about gender inequality effused by the feminist movement too simplistic to speak to their experience. Once white feminism began to acknowledge these differences and allow for a more complex experience of gender by including the experiences of women of color, the movement broadened. It is largely due to women of color that the labor involved in caretaking and housework is recognized as work at all.

Another hotly contested issue at the time the play premiered was that of reproductive rights, or abortion as it has been since recast. An interesting point of contention within the play centers around Ruth’s visit to a female doctor and the implications of a woman as a health care provider. Lena is immediately suspicious of her daughter-in-law’s objectives in visiting a woman doctor and yet Beneatha strives also to be a doctor. Through Lena, Hansberry articulates the fear that a female doctor would bring her experience as a woman to bear on the power a doctor wields, another reason why Walter Lee’s most insulting comment to devalue Beneatha’s agency is to suggest that she become a nurse. The position of a nurse made sense to a system that did not respect nor encourage women as thinkers and leaders—rather it focused the power and skill set of this position around caretaking, a way to put to use the “natural” and “proper” skills women embody. Nursing was an acceptable profession for women largely because male doctors serving as watchdogs for the system, imposing their will upon nurses and patients, mediated it.

True to the historical moment in which the play is set, Lena’s assumption that any female doctor must be code for abortion provider is eventually substantiated when Ruth reveals the nature of her visit to her husband. Hansberry explores the problems in framing of this debate as moral issue over abortion versus a civil rights issue protecting women through the

lens of class. Upon learning of her pregnancy, Ruth feels compelled to research her options only because the situation in her household is unstable—her husband’s frustrations with poverty and his inability to do anything about it has caused is what drives her to consider abortion.

Interestingly, Beneatha never weighs in on the decision except to point out that in their tiny, cramped apartment there would be no room for a new baby.

While Lena is adamant that Ruth will have the child, Walter Lee never offers his opinion, leaving the decision entirely up to Ruth. In the end, Ruth decides to have the child but only when she realizes that there will be a home large enough to accommodate the growing family, and that her husband’s focus has shifted from his individual success to the wealth and health of the family. Even Lena understands the predicament with which Ruth is faced, “when the world gets ugly enough—a woman will do anything for her family. The part that’s already living.” Her passionate feelings about Ruth’s pregnancy are directly related to the fact that she lost a child to poverty and equates the notion of an abortion to the surrender of yet another life to it as well. Her summations of a woman’s will to keep her family together include both recognition of power and the notion of choice. This is ultimately an expression of freedom.

Conclusion

A Raisin in the Sun is considered today one of the most important plays belonging to the American canon. Hansberry’s skilled synthesis of historical, cultural, experiential and intellectual themes left audiences with a complex platform from which to examine our national identity.

Upon its fiftieth anniversary many of the themes explored by Lorraine Hansberry in the middle of the 20th century are still relevant. As a nation we sit on the dawn of a new future, one wherein viable campaigns for the presidential office have been made by both a woman and an African American man. Critical to the success of both candidates has been recognition of their experiences of oppression by virtue of her gender and his race. Each has far surpassed expectations of failure largely by claiming those experiences as empowering—by sharing their stories in intimate, frank terms with the American public.

In her time, Lorraine Hansberry challenged the status quo with authentic, three dimensional, powerful and loving representations of black people. She took to task the ideologies of the day, bringing issues of labor and reproductive labor rights to the fore, illuminating race and class discrepancies, challenged notions of Africa as the “dark continent” void of critical thinking and cultural awareness, and poignantly brought to life the dreams of one American family as they clashed with racism. There is power in story. There is power in

specificity. As *A Raisin in the Sun* so beautifully demonstrates, it is through the specific that we find our way to universal humanity.