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A Raisin in the Sun

By Lorraine Hansberry

Directed by Lou Bellamy | Presented by RBC Wealth Management
Co-produced with The Cleveland Playhouse and Arizona Theatre Company

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Educational Tools *Penumbra Theatre Study Guide*

Greetings! Thank you for visiting Penumbra Theatre Company's **Study Guide Library**. We are so pleased that you seek to extend and engage your understanding of the drama we produce and the thematic issues it brings to the fore.

Penumbra Theatre Company occupies a very unique place within American society, and by extension of that, the world. Penumbra was borne out of the Black Arts Movement, a time charged by civic protest and community action. An artist making art by, for and about the black community was charged with merging aesthetic (artistic) principles with ethical (moral) ones. Subsequently, in this historical and political context, art had an agenda to strive toward social change. African American artists were part of, and greatly influenced, the social currents that carried people from their homes, schools and places of worship to the streets.

Bonding artistic interpretation with civic responsibility engenders an important kind of creative dissonance, a harmony of balance. It creates something neither art nor civic action could do alone. This is mission driven art, informed by a black ethos and aesthetic, which can adequately illuminate our experience. **Ensemble Theatre** in that context is the creation of a community of people committed to the telling of a story that acknowledges the experience of everyone involved. This kind of art demands that each audience member recognize his or her place in relation to the art. When that happens, we begin to think about ourselves as interactive forces in a greater social context. Our own agency becomes clearer to us; our choices and reactions start to make sense within a broader, more nuanced environment. We begin to see that others have lived with similar issues, and that their perspectives have great potential to enrich our experience and help us problem-solve. This kind of art creates and sustains community. It encourages coalition.

The function of an **Education and Outreach Program** inside an institution such as Penumbra Theatre Company is to use informed discussion and interdisciplinary tools to unpack the issues stimulated by the drama. Just as an actor must learn lines and blocking before interpreting a character, we offer our audiences the practical tools so that they may respond to the art both critically and creatively. It is our job to push conversation, critical analysis, and commentary beyond emotion toward solution.

The **Study Guides** are meant to stimulate discussion, not to present a definitive voice or the "right answer." Theatre is *fluid*, active, interactive and reactive; we must engage it intellectually that way too.

We hope to create space for the themes inspired by the drama to take root and blossom. Penumbra invites audiences to participate in the art and social action, by using our Education and Outreach tools to locate their contribution, their voice, within the larger human story we tell over and over again. We love. We fail. We begin anew. Over and over, told by countless tongues, embodied by some of the finest actors and carried in the hearts of some of the most committed audience members; we speak our human lessons through the prism of the African American experience.

PENUMBRA THEATRE STUDY GUIDE
A Raisin in the Sun

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THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

An Exploratory Essay by Sarah Bellamy

The Social Symbolic: Individuals in Society

Art is a complicated process that we rarely fully engage. It stimulates emotional, intellectual, even physical responses in audiences. Art is so powerful because it is one example of a deep and necessary connection between an individual and the collective world. To better understand the process of art, it helps to consider this connection and how it works.

The connection between an individual and society is made through complex systems of meaning and metaphor; groups of symbols created by humans that represent how we feel, think, see and understand the world in which we live. These systems represent the tie that binds us all to one another in relationships that constitute identity, and help us comprehend our human experience. Art is one such system and there are others too.

Individuals can only access these systems through the collective, social world. In order for a human child, for example, to learn to use language (really just a system of symbols, meaning and metaphor), that child must come into contact with other human beings who already grasp and make use of the faculty of language. Once the child is inducted into this social system, the symbols, meaning and metaphor common to all members of the community will eventually dominate the life-experience of that child and his or her ability to reflect upon or process that experience. In fact, these systems are so powerful, that the child will also only come to understand him or herself in relation to other community members, and only through the system of meaning and metaphor common to that group. This process is called socialization. A community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism forms its culture. Socialization does two things: it sustains culture and forms an individual's identity.

Social Commentary and the Nature of Art

Art works by tapping into a community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism to represent the experience, knowledge or reality specific to that culture. Art is ultimately the expression of an idea, emotion or experience through the creation of a symbolic structure. The artistic product does not have to have *physical structure* to be considered art. Music, story-telling, and dance are all artistic modes that are active and not permanent. Instead art is defined by its ability to recreate human experience through the point of view of the artist and affect a response within an audience. This might seem fairly simple, or even obvious. A deeper examination, however, will illuminate the special quality of art and explain why it is so important to a healthy society.

Human beings have the unique ability to critically observe ourselves. We can, in other words, reflect upon our actions, emotions and experiences. The fact that the word "reflect" can mean "to think" and "to mirror, or reverse an original image back to its source," is quite telling about the nature of art. In the most basic terms, an artist creates a piece of art as a reflection of culture. Culture is made up of individuals, their experiences and the integration of all of these things to become more than the sum of its individual parts.

Artists use many different structures, or "mediums," to communicate meaning. The artist's effort to communicate his or her intent is both informed by, and limited to, his or her cultural perspective; no individual exists completely outside of some cultural context. Within that cultural context, the artist embodies different symbols that have meaning within the culture.

His or her navigation of the cultural landscape will be informed by these symbols and will also inform the art too. This is what we mean when we talk about an artist's "voice." Even though the artistic product may not have sound (like a painting or a piece of sculpture) it was created by a particular person with a particular experience in a particular social context. The artistic product reflects those particularities (the artist's perspective or point of view) and the meaning it conveys is determined by them.

Moreover, any form of communication (like language or art) requires the use of the symbolic tools of the culture. This means that in order to reflect the culture through artistic representation, the artist has to be able to stand both outside and inside a culture simultaneously (but never be totally in either place). Only from that vantage point can the artist use the symbolic tools of a culture to communicate what he or she observes about the culture itself. This is what is known as "artistic commentary." It conveys the artist's intent, or impetus for creating something.

The Role of the Audience and the Alienation of the Artist

The process does not end with the creation of an artistic product. Art needs an audience other than the artist who created it. In solitude, the artist may marvel at his or her creation—might even be enlightened or surprised by it—but the artist will remain unfulfilled without the participation of an audience. The artist was moved to respond to cultural stimuli, the response now requires an audience to receive it, absorb it and refract it back to the artist. This is the contribution of the artistic product to the cultural landscape that inspired it. This way the artist can observe the change engendered by his or her commentary. To comment on something is to change it.

If the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret and then comment in order to change, the nature of the audience is also to observe and interpret. Because each human being has been exposed to an infinite number of symbols in widely divergent patterns and trajectories, and at different points in our lives, each spectator will "read" (or make sense of, interpret the symbols) the artistic product differently. An entire audience might have similar emotional or intellectual responses to a piece of art, but each spectator will have a slightly different experience than his or her neighbor. When the members of an audience have an opportunity to discuss their experience, the entire group is enlightened or engaged, bound by the same artistic element. This is how art creates community. A kind of spontaneous culture is fashioned by virtue of a shared experience. The culture is singular to itself because of the unique qualities of each audience member and any variance within the art.

The audience has one last critical role to play in the artistic process, and it is both enlightening and violent. The audience is invited to observe a translation of a common experience through the perspective of an artist. The audience is then momentarily able to achieve a similar distance from the culture as the artist did before creating the artistic product, but this time the audience starts at the end and works in retrospect back to the state of things to which the artist originally responded. They are afforded the benefit of the impetus for the art and the art itself simultaneously. This event illustrates the extent of, or limit to, the intent of the artist.

In order to comprehend the art, in order to feel it, the spectator must contextualize it within his or her own unique experience. Of course this experience is largely determined by the spectator's cultural context. Even as the spectator experiences the art he or she changes it, manipulates it so that it will fit within the frame of reference particular to him or her. Art encourages all who use the system of symbolism, meaning and metaphor to consider it differently. This is where the

integrity of the artist's original intent starts to break down, and it is the moment in which the artist **loses** the ability to control his or her artistic product. The artist can no longer speak for the art; the art now speaks for itself and for the artist. By virtue of its nature, an audience changes the artistic product fundamentally from the scope of what is intended by the artist to the full breadth of the potential audience experience. To claim the art is to fulfill it, it is also to sever it forever from its original intent—it is no longer defined by a striving to effect change through artistic translation and commentary, it is the reception of the comment and the realization of change. The artistic product has traveled a very great distance between the artist and the audience. It is now absorbed back into the cultural system of metaphor and symbolism and becomes another tool for communicating meaning. The artist is impotent to reclaim or control the artistic product. So to reiterate, the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret, comment and in so doing effect change. The nature of the audience is to observe, interpret, and claim.

Perpetual Motion: The Circle of Art and Culture

The manipulation, possible misunderstanding and absorption of the artistic product by the culture, is both a fulfillment and a violation of the artist. The only way for the artist to regain agency or engage his or her artistic product from this point on is to produce more art in response to the culture. This is how art is perpetual and how culture and art continually constitute one another. It stimulates growth in both arenas and so keeps a society from stagnating.

Summary

To review, an artist responds to cultural stimuli through the manipulation of symbols that the culture uses to communicate meaning. The artistic product is a blend of the system of meaning specific to a culture and the artist's interpretation of that system. The art produced is the artist's commentary. The audience functions as an agent of translation as it claims the artistic product for itself and alters it in order to access it. The culture absorbs the art and the artist no longer can change or access his or her artistic product now that it has entered the social realm of the symbolic. The artist can only create more art, using the tools of the cultural symbolic, a system that has already been altered by its absorption of the original artistic product. Thus art and culture are constitutive of one another.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

Aspects of the dramatic performing arts can be found in cultures around the world. Globally speaking, American Theater is a relatively new tradition. As theater has evolved from the **African roots** of Greek tragedy to Shakespearean epics, American stages have produced a wide range of plays, largely influenced by the diverse peoples inhabiting this nation. In its early years, American Theater reflected the lives of its proponents, namely white, property-owning, Christian men. Ironically, even as America established itself as a sovereign nation, the drama of the day came largely from Europe, which boasted a unique canon of work. Still, as early as 1821 black American artists were creating, staging and performing for mixed audiences, showcasing both existing and original work.

One of the first theater companies to approach the dramatic performing arts from an African American perspective was **The African Grove Theater** in New York City. It was founded by **William Henry Brown** and **James Hewlett**, both who had traveled by ship throughout the Caribbean, where story-telling, performance, dance and music were essential to the culture and survival of the slaves working on sugar cane and tobacco plantations, salt flats and mines. The company performed tragedies and comedies from Shakespeare to American playwrights. Eventually, the need for work that came from within the African American experience proved itself. Two years after it opened, the first play written and produced by an African American was presented at the African Grove in 1823. The play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, by Brown, played to mixed (though predominately black) audiences that year. However, many whites were adamantly opposed to the existence of such a theater and frequent police raids, harassment and threats forced Brown and Hewlett to relocate the theater several times throughout the lower East side of Manhattan. Eventually, the white opposition won out over the tenacity of the black actors, directors and producers of The African Grove Theater Company and it closed its doors permanently.¹

As Americans established a canon of their own, dominant political and social trends were addressed by the work. One of the nation's most successful and fraught enterprises was racialized slavery in the American South. Depicted on white stages, black characters often fit into stereotypical characters which would haunt American stages for decades to come. Some of the most prevalent of those were **the Sambo, the Uncle, the Mammy and the Jezebel**. These racist depictions would be reflected over and over again in the theater, usually performed by white

¹ For more information see Bernard L. Peterson Jr.'s "Introduction: The Origin and Development of the Black American Playwright from the Antebellum Period to World War II," *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers: A Biographical Directory and Catalog of Plays, Films, and Broadcasting Scripts*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 1-21.

actors in blackface. African-American artists struggled against these stereotypical images as soon as they entered the public sphere. In 1857, **William Wells Brown**, (no relation to William Henry Brown) juxtaposed a stereotypical black male character named Cato with an exemplary black male character named Glen in his play *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom*. This play highlighted the difference between an image created by black people for black audiences and an image created by white people for white audiences. It was an important statement.

Still the popularity of comical representations of black Americans continued. **Minstrelsy** was very popular in the 19th Century. This performance tradition was created as 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. The tradition would continue long into the mid-1900s. Responsible for the creation of one familiar American character, **Jim Crow**, this theatre tradition was hardly benign. Its impact had a life that extended far beyond the stage in American social, political and civil rights policy.

For many years, (largely due to the audience 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.

In Hollywood, some of America’s most revered epic films depict the early stereotypes created in the theater and in the 1920s and 30s. Black artists, writers and musicians began responding to the racist depictions and creating their own artistic representations of black life and philosophy. This period of burgeoning talent and new work is known as **The Harlem Renaissance**. In 1923, the first serious play written by a black playwright produced on Broadway. It was called *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* by **Willis Richardson**.² Still, the prevalent trend was for white artists and producers to pull from black narrative, song and dance and parody it for audiences. **Langston Hughes** and **Jean Toomer** were particularly concerned with white representations of blackness in the theater. Read below, Langston Hughes’ famous poem “**Notes on Commercial Theater**”:

² Ibid., 165.

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.

You also took my spirituals and gone
You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones
All kinds of Swing Mikados
And in everything but what's about me --
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me --
Black and beautiful --
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.³

This poem echoes one of the founding tenets of another critical moment in black theater history, the **Black Arts Movement** of the 1960s. It was during this period that some of the most celebrated black writers responded vociferously to the racism American citizens were struggling against in the Civil Rights Movement. Self-representation became a major focus of the movement—art was created by, for, and about black people. Artists such as **LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka**, **Ed Bullins**, **Nikki Giovanni**, **Harold Cruse**, **Ray Durem**, **Adrienne Kennedy**, **Larry Neal** and **Sonia Sanchez** all produced seminal work during this period of time. In 1959 **Lorraine Hansberry's** famous play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in New York City. It was the first time a play written by a black playwright, directed by a black director (**Lloyd Richards**) and written about black people was presented at this level. The next twenty years saw an eruption of African American theater companies springing up around the country, one of which was **Penumbra Theatre Company** in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director **Lou Bellamy**, Penumbra addressed issues of racial tension and misrepresentation between what were visibly separate black and white Americas. Over the last 30 years, Penumbra has provided a consistently clear message that the African American experience is rich, dynamic and critical to the American theater canon. While visiting the Twin Cities, playwright **August Wilson** said of Penumbra:

It was with the indomitable spirit associated with pioneers and visionaries that Lou Bellamy took a handful of actors over [sic] twenty years ago and challenged them

³ Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. (New York: Vintage, 1995) 215.

not only to believe in themselves but to have a belief larger than anyone's disbelief. When I walked through the doors of Penumbra Theatre [sic], I did not know that I would find life-long friends and supporters that would encourage and enable my art. I did not know I would have my first professional production, a musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. I did not know then what Penumbra Theatre would come to mean to me and that there would come a time when Penumbra would produce more of my plays than any other theatre in the world. And that their production of *The Piano Lesson* would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work. I only knew that I was excited to be in a black theater that had real lights, assigned seats and a set that was not a hodgepodge of found and borrowed props as had been my experience with all the black theater I had known. We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of PTC enlarged that possibility. And its corresponding success provokes the community to a higher expectation of itself. I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans.⁴

Through artistically excellent theater, Penumbra has sought to plumb the depths of the human experience by presenting culturally specific and historically accurate depictions of African Americans. Sadly, many of the black theater companies founded during the BAM have closed over the years, largely due to lack of funding, managerial problems and poor attendance. Penumbra's survival is a testament to all the people who believe in its power for social change. Our artists, administration, audiences and community have consistently buoyed us up and kept this important institution afloat on the occasionally stormy seas of non-profit arts administration. Today, because of our growth and the changing world, Penumbra is widely regarded as a pioneer of cross-cultural dialogue. Our template of finding the universal through the specificity of human experience has become a model for teaching, arts application and criticism. We are nationally and internationally recognized as a preeminent African American theater company.

Lou Bellamy explains that black people not only "have to be at the table" to engage in cross-cultural conversations, but host such debates as well. In an America that increasingly more often accepts oversimplified answers, we seek out nuance and enjoy disturbing the veneer. At Penumbra, we provide the table at which artists and audiences alike may sit down and rigorously engage one another with complicated questions. We are proud to have these artists in our midst and excited to produce work that circumvents a hackneyed black / white binary.

⁴ August Wilson, excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company, 1997.

INTRODUCTION

Penumbra Theatre Company is honored to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Lorraine Hansberry's Broadway premiere of *A Raisin in the Sun* with a special presentation at The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

When *A Raisin in the Sun* premiered on Broadway, it played to riveted audiences. A benchmark in American theatre, the production was the first of a play written by a black playwright, directed by a black director, and featuring an all-black principal cast. It won the New York Drama Critics Award and was hailed by critics. Revisiting the play in 2008 gives us the opportunity to contemplate our progress and lack thereof in relation to awareness and action around race and social justice.

Lorraine Hansberry was born May 19, 1930 in Chicago, Illinois the youngest of four children. Her father was a real estate broker who supported the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League. Her mother was a schoolteacher and a local community activist. Her masterpiece, *A Raisin in the Sun*, is based on the true story of her family's struggle with purchasing a home in an all-white community outside of Chicago. The situation escalated to a Supreme Court trial *Hansberry v. Lee* in which the restrictive covenants that protected the segregated neighborhood were deemed unconstitutional. While the play never reaches this historical apex, the Hansberry's spent years subjected to racially motivated threats and violence as the sole African American members of a previously all-white community.

Throughout her life, Lorraine Hansberry was fiercely dedicated to human rights activism and the struggle for equality and Civil Rights in America. Her other writing includes *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, *Les Blancs*, *The Drinking Gourd*, and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*.

Her bright and important career was cut short by pancreatic cancer, to which Hansberry succumbed on January 12, 1965 at the age of thirty-four. To this day, she is regarded as one of the most important voices in the American theatre landscape and she is owed special acknowledgement for her role in depicting authentic, socially responsible representations of African American life onstage.

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

LENA YOUNGER: (MAMA)	Sixties. Black American. Works as a cleaning lady. A widow. The head of the Younger household.
WALTER LEE YOUNGER:	Thirties. Black American. Works as a chauffeur for a white man downtown. Harbors dreams of self-reliance and security for his family.
RUTH YOUNGER:	Thirties. Black American. Works as a cleaning lady. Walter Lee's wife and mother to Travis.
BENEATHA YOUNGER:	Twenties. Black American. A pre-medical college student. Walter Lee's sister.
TRAVIS YOUNGER:	Nine years old. Black American. Walter Lee and Ruth's son.
GEORGE MURCHISON:	Late twenties. Black American. An upper class suitor of Beneatha.
JOSEPH ASAGAI:	Twenties. Black African. A Nigerian exchange student and suitor of Beneatha.
BOBO:	Thirties. Black American. Walter Lee's good friend.
KARL LINDNER:	Forties. White American. The representative from Clybourne Park sent to talk the Youngers out of moving into their recently purchased house, thus integrating the neighborhood.

SYNOPSIS: A SCENE BY SCENE BREAKDOWN

SCENIC BREAKDOWN

Act I

- Scene 1: Friday morning, 7:30am.
- Scene 2: The next morning
- Scene 3: Later the same day. Evening.

Act II

- Scene 1: Friday night, a few weeks later.
- Scene 2: Saturday, one week later.
- Scene 3: An hour later

SETTING

The Younger's tenement apartment on the South side of Chicago, Illinois in the early 1950s.

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.”⁵

— 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*?⁶

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

⁵ Harlan, *ibid*.

⁶ 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**.⁷ 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.

⁷ 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.⁸ 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."⁹ 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.¹⁰

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

⁸ Davis, Ronald. "Creating Jim Crow." Online resource:
<http://www.jimcrowshistory.org/history/creating2.htm>

⁹ Davis, *ibid.*

¹⁰ 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!¹¹

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 "Harlem," 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

¹¹ 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.”¹² 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.¹³

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

¹² Brown, Justice Henry Billings. Online resource: <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=163&invol=537>.

¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ 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.

¹⁴ Harlan, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Davis, *ibid.*

¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷

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."¹⁸

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

¹⁷ Davis, Ronald. <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/surviving2.htm>

¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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

¹⁹ 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.²⁰ For his silly mimicry, Rice is credited as the “father of **minstrelsy**,” a

²⁰ 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.²¹

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

²¹ 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..."²²

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.

²² 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.²³

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.

²³ 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."²⁴ 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

²⁴ 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.

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."²⁵ There is a "built-in mutual aid system for the welfare of its members and the maintenance of the family as a whole."²⁶ 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."²⁷ 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]."²⁸ If contemporary black Americans are made aware of this history, it seems

²⁵ Ibid., 152.

²⁶ Ibid., 153.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ 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.²⁹

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

²⁹ 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 a 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.”³² 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

³⁰ Blassingame, John. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1979).

³¹ Blassingame, John. (Ibid., 151). Quoted here by Feagin and St. John, *ibid.*, 157.

³² *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 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 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 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.

SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW: THE DIRECTOR

by Stephanie Lein Walseth: August Wilson Fellow
with *A Raisin in the Sun* director Lou Bellamy
February 13th, 2009 at Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota
Transcribed by Annie Bruss

LEIN WALSETH: Given that this production of *A Raisin in the Sun* is being presented as a commemoration and celebration of the 50th anniversary of the play's Broadway debut, what do you think it means to do this play *now*? How does it resonate with a contemporary audience? How do you think the world has or has not changed in the past 50 years, especially now that we have an African American president who did community-organizing work in the very neighborhood that Hansberry depicts in this play?

BELLAMY: I wish I could say that I had planned it! In American theater before *A Raisin in the Sun*, there was only one black play which both reached larger audiences *and* depicted a complicated portrayal of an African American family – Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*, written in 1937. Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin*, was for a new generation some forty years later, white America's first peek into the movements, the nuance, and the culture of a black family. Although this black family [in *Raisin*] is rather scrubbed up to be presented to the nation, it is still intact with all of the cultural nuances that inform the way the family exists. It is, one might argue, stereotypical in its matriarchal construction. Still, the manner in which the family share—for example—child rearing is so, so black. The little boy receives some corporal punishment for acting badly. Those kinds of things let you know that this is a black family.

Now, when I say it was the first time most of America peeked into that black family life, this was during the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. So when black people were presented to the public it was largely in that context – either in the sort of menial positions that they were working, or in a confrontational mode over these Civil Rights issues that were coming to the fore. So, this play was unique in that it gave this complicated and sympathetic view of a family, a family that dreams for the same sort of fulfillment that most Americans do.

Compare that situation 50 years ago to this particular time when we are again peeking into the inner workings of a black family with Obama being President. We're watching the way they live, we're watching the clothes they choose, we're watching the way they interact with their family, what sort of pets they buy, what sort of dolls they have. So again, 50 years later a black family and its interaction is at the center of America's attention. The Obama family is emblematic of the challenge to the status quo, in the same way that the Youngers were challenging the status quo. So there are, I think, lots of parallels.

Certainly inflation has taken us to a place where ten thousand dollars doesn't sound like that much money, although it is to you and I. [laughter] Still, it is the tension point, the crucible in which this family is tested. And the economy is forcing us again to make those kinds of choices about money and well being – economic well-being versus perhaps a kind of spiritual renewal and understanding of who we are. So, it's an interesting comparison. And of course *I knew* all of that was going to happen and chose the play for that reason. No! [laughter] But really, it speaks to the way good art will find a way to be relevant and meaningful and vibrant for any generation.

LEIN WALSETH: Speaking of vibrancy and meaningfulness, how do you think that our current situation as a nation has changed what's possible for African Americans pursuing this idea of the American dream and what impediments do you think still remain?

BELLAMY: Well, I think the impediments have not been removed. To use a sports analogy, we, in America, have at various times placed our hopes and our dreams inside of, on top of, the black body. We did it with heavyweight boxing when Joe Louis was sent out to fight Max Schmeling and in a very real way represent the United States against the German empire. We did it again with Jesse Owens. We do it to some degree with Serena and Venus [Williams]. And we've done it again with Barack Obama. This president is *phenomenally* popular all over the world because he again represents a hopeful America. In every one of the those cases that I mentioned, however, the life and condition of the rest of the people was not significantly changed when that one individual was singled out and became the gladiator that went out to fight for the country, to protect it, and to represent its nationalism. So, one hopes that in this case, with the journey that Barack Obama made to the White House, that he forged a path, or at least taught us where the stones are to step on to improve ourselves as well. But I don't hold out a lot of hope for that. I may be pessimistic but I'm old enough to have seen this sort of thing happen before. Certainly the same sort of institutional racism that makes for a sort of understanding between the 'good 'ol boys' will change because he's in the room. But it remains to be seen how far that trickles down, and I hate to use that Reagan analogy, but trickles down to the rest of us.

LEIN WALSETH: I hear you speaking to the social and material realities of both historical and contemporary moments, and I think it is so critical to look at the continuity between the two. It's certainly easy, to some degree, for us to see a play like *Raisin* and think that social problems like poverty and racism are relegated to the past in a "that was the 50s, we're doing so much better now" kind of way. But I think you needn't look very far to find that these are persistent issues here in the Twin Cities in 2009, and that while legal segregation may no longer be in place, social attitudes and issues of class still keep people in separate neighbors. Some of my good friends, a white couple, were looking for a house in North Minneapolis where one of them works and they had to go through three realtors before they could find someone who would sell them...

BELLAMY: Before they would even show it to them, yes-yes!

LEIN WALSETH: ...yes, thinking of course they wouldn't want to live in this predominantly black...

BELLAMY: I know, I know...

LEIN WALSETH: ...and poor neighborhood. So, I wonder how you think, or hope, that your audiences might connect what they're seeing in this play with the current realities of the living, breathing city around them?

BELLAMY: I think arts function to make us *remember*, and this play *will* make us remember. I don't have to be *that* specific as an artist. I think what we have to do is present the human condition, present the possibilities, present the interactions and then once all of that's aroused in an individual, I have the faith, the confidence that it will live on and be applied in all kinds of ways. If we're too specific and attempt to proscribe for them how to apply it: "this is for the house in North Minneapolis on Plymouth between and such and such and such and such," then we limit the scope and reach of the play. But, if we talk about the human condition, about finding ourselves in the Younger family, about understanding that we *all* have dreams, then I've

got to believe that it engenders respect for one another and changes us as a society. I would rather not be as specific as you're suggesting, I'd rather be more, I guess spiritual in my hope for a reaction. Because certainly the intellectual dimension is taken care of by Lorraine Hansberry, those words are there. Our job, while those words are being spoken and the audience is processing them in an intellectual way, is to sneak up and put the emotional wallop on it so it can never be forgotten, so those two things are always paired for the audience, *forever*. That's good art. [laughter] You know?

LEIN WALSETH: Yeah! Speaking of good art, let's talk about Penumbra's mission of 'Art for Social Change' in relation to Lorraine Hansberry's motivations for artistic creation. You've just articulated some of the tenants of how you understand change working in and through this piece, and I was struck when doing research on Lorraine Hansberry about her political activism. There's a lot about her that I don't think general audiences might know – the fact that she was a lesbian and a feminist, that she wrote for Paul Robeson's journal *Freedom* and worked with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and that she spoke out against the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

BELLAMY: And yet was married to a white Jewish man. She's complicated isn't she? Her best friend was James Baldwin. To complicate it even more, when she talked about the play she said, "It isn't a black play. It isn't a Negro play." She *said* that. She said, "It is a play about *people* who *happen* to be Negro." Yet in her writing, it's so interesting, in her writing she *writes* a black play, and perhaps she could do nothing else. It's got that universal sort of feel to it, but it *is* specific to the black community. Now some will argue that this community is euphemistically treated. There are no dope dealers, there's relatively small crime, and most of the time the rat scene is cut from the play. So you get a sanitized version of these people in terms of both race and class. People like Harold Cruse in *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* says, "My God, who *wouldn't* want to live next to the Youngers? They're perfect!" [laughter] And to some degree that's true. Yet the people will speak for themselves. Hansberry's treatment of Asagai, and her understanding of colonialism and post-colonialism is still instructive and absolutely wonderful. So, in spite of herself and her choice of doing a certain thing with the play, it's interesting that she can't slip the bonds of her culture and her upbringing. They still inform and seep through and speak to us. Whether or not she meant to, it's still *in* there.

LEIN WALSETH: Interesting. So, what do you make of that phrase, "It's not a black play. It's not a Negro play. It's just a play that *happens* to be about black people."?

BELLAMY: I think that it speaks to an integrationist sort of perspective. It's *okay* to be a black play. If it is truly, deeply, unintentionally perhaps, a black play, and speaks to an honesty and truth about that experience, it will be a universal play. I'm not white, but I don't think white people sit down and say, "I'm going to write a white play." You know? I think they write a play that reflects their understanding, their perception of the world through the cultural membrane within which they find themselves.

Now, it turns out that when one does that, the words one uses, the descriptions, and the perceptions one chooses place him or her in a particular polemic posture. To set out to be universal and to believe that that universal is Eurocentric, to me, starts out from a position of weakness. And I say that speaking English, right? [laughter] So, I'm already beat [laughter], but at least I understand that. I think that Chekov is *Russian*, you know, he's *Russian*. Ibsen, all these people are *very, very specific* in all of their writings and when one just sheds who one is and says, "This isn't what I'm going to do, this isn't who I am," I think that's a position of weakness. And it's also old-fashioned in that it seeks to *erase* color, to *erase* cultural difference, and I hope that we've evolved to a place now where we want to *recognize* cultural difference and find humanity

inside of that. We don't want to *homogenize* everyone. Look at what we've done in that way – I mean, we take away language, we take away culture, we cut people's hair, we make them – you know we do these things to them in an attempt to *not see* those differences. And what we have to do now, in my humble perception, is to teach people to *see* those differences again and find humanity and worth inside of them. That's the challenge.

And so, to give that up from the start is like tying one arm behind your back and getting into the ring with a heavyweight boxer. I mean it cripples you, it hobbles you, it makes you *vulnerable* to everything out there that's coming at you because you can't use your entire arsenal of cultural specificity.

LEIN WALSETH: I wonder if part of what Hansberry was getting at with her statement has to do with her specific moment in the history of African American theatrical literature?

BELLAMY: Of course it does.

LEIN WALSETH: And, as you teach in your classes, though Hansberry and August Wilson are some of the most known and often produced playwrights, they are certainly not the *only* black playwrights. You mentioned Theodore Ward and *Big White Fog*, for instance, and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how you understand this play as fitting into a broader framework of plays by African American authors, which may speak to that idea of what a Negro play is or was during the 1950s and 1960s?

BELLAMY: Most of the time the black playwright is charged with whether or not they want to take on the mantle of correcting the common thinking. If they show complicated African Americans inside of the society they're being rather revolutionary because most of the depictions of African Americans have been pretty simple and stereotypical. The challenge is to present a reality on the stage that has its own rules of engagement, its own cultural nuance, its own language or way of talking, its own meaning, and so forth that cannot be apart from the influence of the society. I mean, we can't *not* be where we are. We're constantly influenced by where we are, by essays that are written, newspaper articles, all sorts of popular entertainment, wars. All of these sorts of things affect our thinking and so a piece will be affected by those things. It is the human condition presented with those realities, and to truly understand the texts you have to place them within their historical realities.

Look for instance at Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Okay, when did he write it and what were the sorts of the things that were going on? McCarthy was going crazy. Now, Miller places the play at the time of the Salem witch trials, but he was influenced tremendously by what was going on during his own time. Lorraine Hansberry says that this is not a Negro play, yet who else has these kinds of covenants placed against them where they can't move and have to live in certain sorts of situations and neighborhoods? In what other families does everyone work in domestic positions? You know, [with the Youngers] the mother cleans houses, the wife works in the kitchen, and the husband is a chauffeur. Well, that says something about the strata that she's writing in and about.

Where I think Hansberry fits, is that she came along at a time when this story *could be* shared, when we were *interested* in this story. I know *tons* of other family stories, black family stories that were not picked up and disseminated to the same extent. So, to that degree it has to do with what the country is ready for, who will buy tickets and all those sorts of things. She did present a complicated, intact black family, although a matriarchal one, you know, that grandma is there. I think that set the stage. Once we had that good, honest, straightforward family out there, then I think black playwrights started to say, "Well, what's behind all that? Who's on the other side

of that door? We've seen this part of it and its solid and it worked and it made money and people loved it and all that. But let's see where Bobo comes from." [laughter]

We've got the Black Arts Movement coming right after this, where the function of art is truly prescribed and is *really linked* to a political movement just as *A Raisin in the Sun* is, whether or not Hansberry meant for it to be, *linked* to the Civil Rights Movement. These are people moving into white neighborhoods and changing things. So, as I look back on it, it seems that once this solid ground was there people could riff on it and go in some different directions, and they certainly did and have. So much so that you get a George C. Wolfe, for instance, satirizing the 'momma on the couch' play, or more specifically the 'momma on the couch' play done badly. Still, that kind of play has now reached a place where you can shoot at it rather than being afraid to criticize it, because at one time it was the only sort of black thing that was out there.

You see that in politics as well. Look at some of the people who have risen to high political places...Jesse Jackson, for instance. I mean, there are some people who would have criticized him more insightfully and soundly, as well as other black political figures and they wouldn't have gotten perhaps as far as they did were they not "the one." Or, they may have been vetted in a manner which prepared them better for the national arena. So, it's an interesting thing and I think this play might have played a similar role, provided a similar function.

LEIN WALSETH: Definitely. That speaks a lot to the politics of the piece and what Hansberry was trying to do. I'm also interested in the *form* of this piece – social realism was, at that moment, very strong...

BELLAMY: Oh yeah!

LEIN WALSETH: ...and now we find ourselves in the post-modern moment where realism gets critiqued as an effective method of expression and representation. And so, I am wondering how you, as someone who I would say is a master at directing this kind of work...

BELLAMY: But look, before you go there, look at who she's *watching*. She's watching Clifford Odets. She's seeing the power of that naturalistic wave and she's riding on it. Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, that's what she loved and wrote after. It's the first thing that touched her, so she's riding on that.

LEIN WALSETH: Yeah, yeah! Well [laughter] it's great to see you get so excited because I think of you as a master of directing this kind of work and so I'm curious to know how you understand the power and the benefit of realism.

BELLAMY: Well, I think that all these –isms, surrealism, expressionism, naturalism, etc.....you know, all of them are an attempt to express this human condition in an informed manner. I've heard people say that naturalism is the result of too many subway rides [laughter]. You know, all of us get into this expressionistic sort of stuff and we go, "Where's the narrative? How am I supposed to apply this?" All of these forms are attempts to describe a world where all kinds of things are coming at you at once, and the feeling is that naturalism or realism can't express that, and so you look for another way to express it. But, I think that to discard any of it is an error. You don't decide to talk about your nose and cut off your hands so that you can do it.

LEIN WALSETH: [laughter from both] Okay...

BELLAMY: You know what I mean?

LEIN WALSETH: Yeah.

BELLAMY: We need *all* of these things. When I direct realism, and I guess I would call it a sort of a stretched naturalism really (some want to call it “magical realism”), it isn’t real. In reality, things come too fast [*snaps quickly to demonstrate*]. So, what you have to do as a director is control things, and slow them down, emphasize certain things, and slide by others. I try to make the blocking, the pace, all those sorts of things take on a poetic significance so that it makes an audience relate to stimuli in a *different* kind of way. I try to make them fill a *gap*.

Take for instance, the moment in *Raisin* when the actor playing Walter Lee has to get down on his knees and go through that monologue, “Maybe I’ll get down on my black knees and I’ll...” Well, when Sidney Poitier did that it was too cleaned up for me, and when Danny Glover did it he sunk so low that I couldn’t go there with him. I mean, he was slobbering all over himself. This is a moment where you, as a director working in a naturalistic way, can complicate a simple gesture and make it have *way* more impact than any kind of expressionism or any other way of working.

What I worked with David Alan, the actor playing Walter Lee in our production, to do in this scene was to find a moment when he could *discover himself on his knees*. In that moment he has to *recoil* from this thought and this position, so he jumps up, he stands up quickly and he says, subtextually, “Oh, s**t! I didn’t mean to go there.” So, as directors and actors you can’t just go with the flow of the words, you’ve got to make them comment in different kinds of ways that inform and complicate understandings of this specific human situation. When you can do this, it allows an audience to peer into the experience in a different kind of way. If audiences or critics don’t like realism or naturalism, it’s often because they’re used to seeing *bad* naturalism and *bad* realism, where it’s almost somnambulistic. But when it is treated as an *active* art rather than as a museum piece it *lives* and we are affected by it.

I just read a review from a guy in Phoenix and, it’s so funny, he says, “I’ve seen one show a week for twenty years ‘cause I’m a reviewer and that must mean that I’ve seen a thousand shows...” or something like that and he said, “I have *always* in all those years *resisted* that urge to rise stupidly as some audiences do and jump to their feet and give a standing ovation to a play. I’ve just never been affected to that point, until I saw *A Raisin in the Sun* and I was up with all the rest of them.” Because it can *reach there*, it can *do it*. You know what I mean? It has to be controlled. If you let it slip too far it jumps into melodrama and we step away from it, or it can even become funny. But you’ve got to keep that discovery and that interest there. You can’t let the audience get ahead of it. You have to challenge ‘em, you can’t *do it all* for them. You stop just short and then let them finish and sometimes jump to another place and they connect it. And then they go, “Wow [*laughs*], yeah that was deep. I liked that.” You know what I mean? It’s manipulative, *of course*. That’s what we do. But I think it can be done well.

LEIN WALSETH: In a bit of a different direction, but still in terms of making connections, one of things that you’ve done in a lot of your interviews and in the classes that you teach, is to weave in stories about your own family, your own childhood growing up and its relation to the work. I wondered if you had any particular stories for this piece that you talked with the cast about or have been thinking about – perhaps ways that your family situation was similar to or connected with the Younger family’s situation as Hansberry depicts it in this play?

BELLAMY: Just so many, I mean just as Lorraine Hansberry couldn’t get away from who she was, I can’t either. In the beginning of the piece, Ruth is sitting in the kitchen in the dark and we see the sunrise come through the kitchen window. She’s drinking coffee and presumably thinking about pregnancy and whether or not she is going to let the baby go to term and all

that. And she is dressed in a nightgown with a robe over it, and the robe is open. So, we get the feeling that we're peeking into something. We are seeing something that we shouldn't see, this robe is open, she's alone, she's considering life. And I remember my mother used to do that. She'd get up, and you'd come in sometimes in the middle of the night, and she'd just be sitting, in the dark, thinking. It's so feminine to me to see that, to see a woman thinking like that.

So, anyway that begins the play. The play really starts as the audience comes in, and they're drawn into that moment, I hope. The alarm goes off and the house lights start to dim and so the audience wakes up *with* the play. And it's really fun to watch them. They get it, that tremendous – I have to be careful or I'd cry – that immense belief in the young people that they're gonna be better. It's *so black*. And it's something that is sometimes lost because we buy all these depictions of what blackness is and it's so negative. But within this play and within the community there's this *high* placement of education and what it can do and a belief in the younger people. When I was a kid they used to call me "professor." I didn't know I was gonna be one [*laughter*] – I was a little kid! And now I *am* a professor. I don't know, maybe that did something, you know what I mean? But I was *expected*, there was *no question* that I was going to go to college. And I'm the first one to go to college in my family, the first to get advanced degrees. But that was always expected of me, and that's inside of this play. Walter Lee says of his sister, "That's my sister, she's going to be a doctor" [*laughter*]. You know it's just *expected* that the next generation is going to make it better. So, that's there, those strong women.

There's a moment that, for me, is the most beautiful moment I've *ever* seen in a play. And it's again where you can complicate the naturalistic. It's a moment during the dance that Walter and Beneatha do to Babatunde Olatunji's music. The way I described to them what I wanted them to do is that they're playing around, dancing, and the drums start, and it begins to put them *in sync* with each other. They begin to move in a kind of a way that is really the creation of another world, of another society, and there's *power* in finding that connection. And for a second there they are *one*, and all of those people (and by extension, having taken part in the ritual, us) are *together* and they're all ...it just trips me out when they do it, you know? And out of that he comes up, in that one expressionistic little moment in the play, he comes up and says, "Do you hear me my black brothers?" And it's gotta come out of that sort of male-female community, and music and rhythms and it impels an individual to *be better* [*laughter*] and you really see it there. And you could just have a dance, you know? But you can *talk* about what that is while it's going on rather than just having it, you know what I mean? You can layer the meaning. And so, I think those are the opportunities to engage the material in a *live* way.

LEIN WALSETH: Last question, as I want to give you some time to eat your lunch before you go back into rehearsal. These points you bring up about moments of togetherness, moments of unity, seem to define, for you, the heart and maybe the success of this piece. When the play was first produced on Broadway its success was defined in large part by the fact that it was created by a black female playwright, directed by a black director, Lloyd Richards, featuring an all black cast...

BELLAMY: Designed by a black designer who never got into the union, incidentally....

LEIN WALSETH: All of which served to make it a monumental achievement in the late 1950s. Now this production of the play is touring to regional theaters, spaces which often afford that similar sense of "hitting the big time," if you will. But I think what you're talking about is defining the success of this piece and the brilliance of it and the ability of it to connect to people in a different way. I wonder, then, what *is* your hope for this production? What have you seen so far with the run in Cleveland and Arizona, and what do you hope its success will be here in the Twin Cities?

BELLAMY: This play is constructed around *hope*, and it allows us to share in that hope. It is not pessimistic. Right now there seems to be such an emphasis on money and material possessions as a measuring stick for success, and this play transcends that standard. The Youngers have lost the money, but in so doing they've found something out about themselves that equips them to survive in an atmosphere that the money couldn't protect them from. They've found something better, and we all want that. Look at the way we talk about cutting back and living more simply. We *yearn* for that sort of discovery that this family makes together, where these kind of ties matter, where morals are more important than dollars. And Hansberry does it right in front of you, you watch it happen. So that's why, for me at least, I want people to resonate with those kinds of issues and then when they do I think they'll recognize the goodness in themselves and other people and we'll get better because of it.

Vocabulary of Important Terms

- Apartheid** was a system of legalized racial segregation enforced by the National Party government of South Africa between 1948 and 1994. Apartheid had its roots in the history of colonization and settlement of southern Africa, with the development of practices and policies of separation along racial lines and domination by European settlers and their descendents. Following the general election of 1948, the National Party set in place its program of Apartheid, with the formalization and expansion of existing policies and practices into a system of institutionalized racism, and incidental Afrikaner domination. Apartheid was dismantled in a series of negotiations from 1990 to 1993, culminating in elections in 1994, the first in South Africa with universal suffrage.
- Blackface** is a tradition of minstrelsy in which performers darken their faces, widen their mouths and don tattered clothing in racist imitation of black Americans. Blackface, as a theatrical tradition, was started by white performers but became so widely popular amongst white audiences, that for some time the only work African Americans could get in theatre or film was in blackface.
- Civil Rights Movement** (1955–1968) refers to the reform movements in the United States aimed at abolishing racial discrimination against African Americans and restoring suffrage in Southern states.
- Color Line, The** Frederick Douglas described what he called a clear social, cultural and political line between white and black people in the US which outlined who had rights and access to resources and kept the country divided.
- Confederacy** also known as the Confederate States of America was the government formed by eleven southern states of the United States of America between 1861 and 1865 in response to the push for abolition of slavery within the Union. They elected their own president, Jefferson Davis, and even printed their own currency—both treasonous crimes according to the Union. The capital of the CSA was Richmond, VA where today monuments still stand to honor its legacy. The Confederacy fell after the surrender of Robert E. Lee to Ulysses S. Grant at Fort Sumter in the spring of 1865.
- DuBois, W.E.B.** (February 23, 1868 – August 27, 1963) William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was an African American civil rights activist, public intellectual, Pan-Africanist, sociologist, educator, historian, writer, editor, poet, and scholar. The Editor-in-Chief of *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, publications circulated by the NAACP, an organization he helped found. Du Bois wrote and published over 4,000 articles, essays and books over the course of the 95-year life. Among his most significant works are *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *John Brown* (1909), *Black Reconstruction* (1935), and *Black Folk, Then and Now* (1939).

- Dunbar, Paul Laurence** (June 27, 1872 – February 9, 1906) was the first African-American poet to garner national critical acclaim. Born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872, Dunbar penned a large body of dialect poems, standard English poems, essays, novels and short stories before he died at the age of 33. His work often addressed the difficulties encountered by members of his race and the efforts of African-Americans to achieve equality in America. He was praised both by the prominent literary critics of his time and his literary contemporaries.
- Feminist Movement** (also known as the Women's Movement or Women's Liberation) is a series of campaigns on issues such as reproductive rights (including abortion), domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.
- Fourteenth Amendment** to the United States Constitution is one of the post-Civil War amendments (also known as the Reconstruction Amendments), first intended to secure rights for former slaves. It includes the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses, among others. The amendment provides a broad definition of United States citizenship, superseding the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that had excluded slaves imported from Africa and their descendants. The amendment requires states to provide equal protection under the law to all persons within their jurisdictions and was used in the mid-20th century to dismantle racial segregation in the United States.
- Garvey, Marcus** (August 17, 1887 – June 10, 1940) Perhaps best known for his “Back to Africa” movement that encouraged American blacks to abandon the US and the culture of segregation that oppressed them, Marcus Garvey was a journalist, a publisher and an originator of black nationalism and the pan-African movements. Garvey came to the United States from Jamaica and was well-versed in colonial rule. He was the founder of Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and African Communities League (ACL) both organizations geared toward empowering and uniting black people.
- Harlem Renaissance** was a flowering of African American art, literature, music and culture in the United States led primarily by African Americans in Harlem New York City. Langston Hughes’ work was seminal to the movement.
- Hughes, Langston** (February 1, 1902 – May 22, 1967) One of the Harlem Renaissance’s most celebrated writers, Langston Hughes was a poet, novelist, short story writer and playwright. He also frequently submitted articles for newspapers and journals. Two of his most famous poems are “Harlem” (which inspired Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*) and “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Hughes also wrote Black Nativity, a tribute to the black American gospel tradition. Keenly aware of his voice as representative of an entire race of people, (See “A New Song” in which Hughes writes: “I speak in the name of the black millions. . .”) Hughes concerned himself largely with issues of social justice, representation and racism.

- Jim Crow** Jim Crow law was the enforced, at one time legal, separation of the races in the United States based on racial prejudice and assumptions of racial superiority that was contested largely in the public realm as it pertained to people of color accessing social services such as public transportation, public drinking fountains and bathrooms, schools, theaters and stores. Segregation also influenced miscegenation (interracial or interethnic marriage or dating) hiring practices, legal representation, voting practices, medical care and housing. Citizens, business owners, state and federal officials, terrorist mob groups and the KKK enforced segregation. The Civil Rights Movement spurred the US Supreme Court to declare segregation officially unconstitutional in 1954. Its retraction throughout the country proved both slow and very violent.
- Johnson, James Weldon** (June 17, 1871–June 26, 1938) was an American author, politician, critic, journalist, poet, anthologist, educator, lawyer, songwriter, early civil rights activist, and prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson is best remembered for his writing, which includes novels, poems, and collections of folklore. Johnson composed the lyrics of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." This song would later become to be known - and adopted as such by the NAACP - as the *Negro National Anthem*. He was also one of the first African-American professors at New York University. Later in life he was a professor of creative literature and writing at Fisk University.
- McKay, Claude** (September 15, 1889 – May 22, 1948) was a Jamaican writer, humanist and communist. He was part of the Harlem Renaissance and wrote three novels: *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and *Banana Bottom* (1933). McKay also authored a collection of short stories, *Gingertown* (1932), and two autobiographical books, *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940). His book of poetry, *Harlem Shadows* (1922) was among the first books published during the Harlem Renaissance. His book of collected poems, *Selected Poems* (1953), was published posthumously.
- Minstrelsy** or the Minstrel Show is a kind of performance that combined music, dance, comedy and storytelling and in America was performed by white actors in blackface. [See *blackface*, above] Popular especially after the Civil War, minstrelsy relied on racist depictions of black people for the entertainment of white audiences. Minstrelsy was used to reinforce the idea that black Americans were inferior. It celebrated the old plantation South in which black people were enslaved and often served to convince audiences that black people were not worthy of full and equal rights.
- Misogynist** one who hates or finds women contemptible. In the late 20th century, feminist theorists proposed misogyny as both a cause and result of patriarchal social structures.

NAACP	Founded in 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was created to provide legal, educational, and infrastructural support to black Americans and black communities within the US. Key aspects of the organization's mission have been the eradication of race, class or caste prejudice in the US, to ensure suffrage (the right to vote) for people of color, to protect their right to fair and balanced trial and legal services, to promote and establish secure systems of education for people of color, and to ensure the right to employment based on ability. Founded by W.E.B. DuBois the NAACP is America's oldest civil rights institution and boasts over a half a million members today.
Oblate Sisters of Providence	are a Roman Catholic order, founded by Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange, OSP, and Rev. James Nicholas Joubert, SS in 1829 for the education of children of color. It has the distinction of being the first Roman Catholic religious order made up of entirely African American women.
Pan-Africanism	is the belief that all people with African ancestry are related to one another in diaspora. The "back to Africa" movement in the United States, led by Marcus Garvey, was built upon the notion that all black people had ancestral roots in Africa and should return to their ancestral homelands. Today, the term refers to an attempt to unify both native Africans and those of the African diaspora, as part of a "global African community."
Patriarchy	The systemic oppression of women by way of exclusion, restriction to resources, objectification, sexual violence, and gender descriptions that privilege and value men over women. It describes a society that is structured around the notion of men as breadwinners, leaders and representatives of the society. This kind of society is marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family and the legal dependence of wives and children. Additionally, a patriarchal model traces birth lineage back through the father's bloodlines, which often determines inheritance. In more broad terms, patriarchy describes the control by men of a disproportionately large share of power over the rest of society.
Plessy v. Ferguson	is a landmark United States Supreme Court decision in the jurisprudence of the United States, upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation even in public accommodations (particularly railroads), under the doctrine of "separate but equal."

Red Summer	coined by author James Weldon Johnson, is used to describe the summer and autumn of 1919. Race riots erupted in several cities in both the North and South of the United States. The riots were sparked by postwar tensions of racism, unemployment and inflation. In 1919 it was estimated that 500,000 African Americans had immigrated from the South to the North and Midwest industrial cities for work during the period bookmarked by World War I. During the war, African-American workers filled many jobs left empty by whites who had joined the military, or new ones created by the war mobilization. In some cities, they were hired as strikebreakers, especially during strikes of 1917. This increased resentment among the white working class. Following the war, rapid demobilization and a lack of price controls led to inflation and unemployment. The resulting competition for jobs between whites and blacks was fierce. European-American workers resented the changes that made them feel displaced, including the many new African-Americans added to the rapidly growing cities. According to a period analysis of the events, there were 26 separate riots in communities and cities across the United States where blacks were the victims of physical attacks. The three with the highest number of fatalities happened in Chicago, Washington, D.C. and Elaine, Arkansas.
Restrictive Covenant	is a legal obligation imposed in a deed by the seller upon the buyer of real estate to do or not to do something. Such restrictions frequently "run with the land" and are enforceable on subsequent buyers of the property. Examples might be to maintain a property in a reasonable state of repair, to preserve a sight-line for a neighboring property, not to run a business from a residence, or not to build on certain parts of the property, or to prevent specific populations from moving into the property or area.
Segregation	Segregation, or "Jim Crow law" the enforced, at one time legal, separation of the races in the United States based on racial prejudice and assumptions of racial superiority that was contested largely in the public realm as it pertained to people of color accessing social services such as public transportation, public drinking fountains and bathrooms, schools, theaters and stores. Segregation also influenced miscegenation (interracial or interethnic marriage or dating) hiring practices, legal representation, voting practices, medical care and housing. Citizens, business owners, state and federal officials, terrorist mob groups and the KKK enforced segregation. The Civil Rights Movement spurned the US Supreme Court to declare segregation officially unconstitutional in 1954. Its retraction throughout the country proved both slow and very violent.
Separate Car Act	is a law passed by the Louisiana State Legislature in 1890 which required "equal, but separate" train car accommodations for black and white Americans.
Thirteenth Amendment	Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution officially abolished and continues to prohibit slavery.

Underground Railroad	a network of clandestine routes by which African slaves in the 19 th Century United States attempted to escape to free states, or as far north as Canada, with the aid of abolitionists. Other routes led to Mexico or overseas. It's estimated that at its height between 1810 and 1850, between 30,000 and 100,000 people escaped enslavement via the Underground Railroad, though U.S. Census figures only account for 6,000. The Underground Railroad has captured public imagination as a symbol of freedom, and figures prominently in Black American history.
Washington, Booker T.	(April 5, 1856 – November 14, 1915) was an influential educator, political leader and author working at the turn of the century. He was the founding principal of the Tuskegee Institute. He is perhaps most famous for his autobiography <i>Up From Slavery</i> and his 1895 address in Atlanta wherein he suggested that the best way for African Americans to participate within US society was to redirect efforts to end segregation in order to focus on education and developing a skilled labor force. His debates over this with W.E.B. DuBois, who considered Washington an apologist, are well-known.
Wilson, August	(April 27, 1945—October 2, 2005) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning African American playwright. Called "one of the most important voices in the American theater today" by Mervyn Rothstein in the <i>New York Times</i> , August Wilson's authentic sounding characters have brought a new understanding of the black experience to audiences around the country. For example, <i>Fences</i> , tells the story of a black baseball player who broke national records by leaps and bounds but was prevented from playing outside of the Negro Leagues. <i>Fences</i> opened on Broadway in the spring of 1987 to enormous critical acclaim and earned Wilson his first Pulitzer Prize. Wilson's work gives audiences the opportunity to go back and reexamine American history through characters that are epic, poignant and defiantly struggling against the institutionalized legacy of racism in this country.
Yoruba	a large ethno-linguistic group or ethnic nation in Africa; the majority of them speak the Yorùbá language. The Yoruba constitute approximately 30 percent of Nigeria's total population, and around 40 million individuals throughout the region of West Africa. While the majority of the Yoruba live in southwestern Nigeria, there are also substantial indigenous Yoruba communities in Benin, Ghana and Togo, as well as large diasporic Yoruba communities in Sierra Leone, Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Trinidad, the Caribbean, and the United States.

TOOLS FOR TEACHING

The following are a series of questions you may use to prompt discussion, critical analysis or dialogue about this play. They may be used either before or after the play, either to guide audiences toward specific issues as they watch or, to stimulate conversation about topical issues afterward.

Penumbra Theatre Company now offers Lesson Plans that use the script, the production, and the study guide to investigate specific themes! Developed by high school teachers and curriculum consultants Kimberly Colbert and Kaye Peters, these questions are intended to meet the state standards for High School Language Arts and Literacy set by the Board of Education. (Grades 9 through 12). Each plan can run from approximately 15 to 45 minutes for discussion. Please contact Penumbra Theatre's Education Director for more details:
sarah.bellamy@penumbrateatre.org

A Guide for Teaching Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

Overview

This guide provides a broad framework in which teachers may anchor their own classroom practice. For easy reference, lessons have been divided into three strands (literary, thematic, and literary criticism). Teachers may choose to follow one strand for the unit or weave together elements and/or lessons from the various strands. A broad essential question for the entire *A Raisin in the Sun* unit is suggested, as well as more specific essential questions aligned with strands. The essential question provides a foundation for study, with guiding questions for study imbedded in each lesson which will allow for a range of critical thinking and analysis within both English/language arts and social studies content areas. Anchor, or suggested, lessons are provided for each strand along with resource readings and classroom tools we have found effective in our own classrooms.

The suggested lessons are designed to meet high-school level Minnesota Reading and Literature and Writing standards and Minnesota Social Studies standards for Institutions and Traditions in Society. The standards are noted by the possible lessons in boldface type. The numbers and letters refer to the specific standard.

LA – is Language Arts standards
SS – is Social Studies standards.

Teaching the Play

Unit Essential Question:

Should art educate, inform, organize, influence, incite to action?

(Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*)

Literary Strand Essential Question:

In what specific ways does the dramatic structure of *A Raisin in the Sun* allow us to understand the “truth” of a segregated America?

Theme Strand Essential Question:

The American Dream is rooted in the belief that everyone in America is free to live up to their abilities. How does this ideal shape our dreams and what does the Younger family show us about the American Dream?

Literary Criticism Essential Question:

Is the relation of art to the spectator something that can be diversely interpreted, or, on the contrary, does it rigorously obey certain laws that make art either a purely contemplative phenomenon or a deeply political one? (Boal)

Suggested Summative Assessments for Each Section

1. The **guiding questions** associated with each strand provide good essay questions for a final unit assessment.
2. Students could present a scene from the play with an analysis of the scene and support for their interpretation of the scene and its significance. Presentation could be assessed on how well they supported their interpretation.
3. Research paper on the myths alluded to within the play.
4. Passage analysis.

Literary Strand: Dramatic Structure

Essential Question: In what specific ways does the dramatic structure of *A Raisin in the Sun* allow us to understand the “truth” of a segregated America?

“Realists replied that because they were depicting conditions truthfully, they were acting morally, truth being the highest form of morality.”

Oscar Brockett, *Essential Theatre*

“The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”

Steven Biko, journalist, South African
Anti-apartheid activist

“Structurally, Lorraine Hansberry remains essentially within the bounds of the conventional realistic well-made play, something almost anachronistic amidst the styles of the 1960s.... The straightforward telling of a story remains a thoroughly honorable literary accomplishment, and Miss Hansberry has practiced this ancient dramatic art with eminent respectability. Moreover, the scene, incident, and dialogue are almost Ibsenesque, avoiding overt stylization for its own sake and performed within the standard box set that progressively becomes more rare.”

C.W.E. Bigsby, *Confrontation and
Commitment: A Study of Contemporary
American Drama*

Lorraine Hansberry has been compared to the likes of playwright Henrik Ibsen, the “founder” of modern realism, and Arthur Miller. Ironically, her work -- written at the height of the Jim Crow era and the onset of the Civil Rights Movement -- employs the dramatic form of the dominant, oppressive culture to deliver the message of “the oppressed.” In other words, Hansberry’s writing allowed her to hold up white society’s own mirror to itself.

In this unit, students will examine the Eurocentric nature of the play’s dramatic structure and how it plays a major role in developing important cultural themes.

Dramatic Structure and “Truth”

Sample Lesson: 4-5 Days

This lesson is designed to follow reading of the play, although the preparatory set could precede study and be reviewed throughout the study.

LA Standards: I B; D1, 13

Guiding Questions:

1. What is significant about the sequence of events in *A Raisin in the Sun*?
2. What is the significance of an African American playwright delivering a message about an oppressed culture to a white audience using a European dramatic form?
3. How does this sequence and form help us to understand what it is like to live in a racist society?

Preparatory Set:

As sequenced below, have students research the following theater vocabulary. This can be done with photocopies of the definitions as they appear in this guide or through other classroom resources. Words can be divided among small groups of students for research and then shared with the class, or individually, depending on teacher and student needs.

Vocabulary: (from C. Hugh Holman’s, *A Handbook to Literature*)

box set: a stage set that realistically represents a room with a ceiling and three walls the “forth wall” being imagined as existing between the audience and the actors.

character: a person in a fictional story

deus ex machina: any device whereby an author solves a difficult situation by a forced invention. (Taken from “god from the machine,” a technique used in ancient Greek theatre. The abrupt but timely appearance of a god. . . used to extricate the mortal characters of the drama.)

mise en scene: the stage setting of a play, including the use of scenery and properties, and the general arrangement of the piece.

plot: a pattern of events

realism: fidelity to actuality in its representation in literature

spectacle: a scene, action, or event that is large, lavish in detail, unusual, or striking, and usually employed as much for its own spectacular effect as for its role in the work.

setting: The physical, and sometimes spiritual, background against which the action of a narrative takes place.

theme: the central or dominating idea in a literary work.

dramatic structure: a set of divisions which represent phases of dramatic conflict

- **exposition:** (or introduction) creates tone, gives the setting, introduces some of the characters and supplies other facts necessary to the understanding of the play.
- **rising action:** (or complication) is set in motion by the “exciting force” and continues through progressive stages of conflict.
- **climax:** a turning point in the action.
- **falling action:** the activity of the forces opposing the hero; the trend of the action [which leads] logically to the disaster with which the tragedy is supposed to close.
- **denouement:** (or catastrophe) a natural outgrowth of the action: a resolution of events.

Materials: paper, markers

Lesson Outline:

1. Set up (Day 2). Divide class into small groups of no more than three. Each group should have a leader (who will facilitate the activity), a recorder (who will write down ideas) and a reporter (who will present group work to the class).
2. Ask students to identify and create a list of significant events in *A Raisin in the Sun*. These events should mirror the elements of dramatic structure (exposition, rising action, etc.) Students should be clear as to why they feel these events are important and should support their ideas with textual evidence from throughout the play. Students should address the guiding questions set out at beginning of lesson as they explore play's plot.
3. Consensus. Once students have completed their lists, instruct each group to come to a consensus on at least five events that represent each element of the dramatic structure of the play.
4. Presentations (Day 3). The teacher should facilitate a round robin reporting session, allowing each group reporter to present their lists as well as their group's rationale as it relates to the guiding questions. After each group report has been presented, help the class reach consensus about which events best represent the play's dramatic structure.
5. Dramatic Structure Visual (Day 4). Divide the class into five groups by pairing two or more of the small groups.
6. Give each of the five groups one poster-sized piece of paper, each marked with one of the five elements of dramatic structure (e.g. exposition). One member of each group should record the agreed-upon event that represents their element, the textual evidence used for support and notes on the effect of the text and structural element in relation to the guiding questions. (For example, if a student said the check was an part of the exposition, they would cite where it appears in the play and explain how it sets up their understanding of the racism depicted in the play and its effect. What is the effect of the check being introduced in the beginning of the play?)

When students have finished with their posters, hang them on the wall for reference.

Quotation Discussion

In four groups, students should discuss the following quotes and answer the associated guiding question. Students should support their answers with textual evidence.

1. **“The Greek word for ‘theater,’ *theatron*, means ‘seeing place,’ and plays performed in the theater engage their audiences largely through visual means. Less than a century ago, live plays could be seen only on the stage; today, most of us see drama in a variety of media; on film and television as well as in the theater.”** (Worthen, 3)

What is the advantage to seeing *A Raisin in the Sun* in person rather than on television or on film? What is the effectiveness of each medium in helping us to understand what it’s like to live in a racist society?

2. **“In fact, the great playwrights of the late nineteenth century – Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, August Strindberg, and even the young Bernard Shaw – carved a space for themselves as dramatists by writing plays in opposition to the values of their contemporary audiences and to the practice of their contemporary theater – a strategy that would have seemed unimaginable to Aeschylus, Shakespeare, or even Moliere. To bring their plays successfully to the stage, new theaters and new theater practices had to be devised and a new audience had to be found, or made.”** (Worthen, 7)

What is the significance of an African American playwright delivering a message about an oppressed culture to a white audience using a European dramatic form?

3. **“In about 335 BCE, Aristotle’s *Poetics* set down the formal elements of drama, and the influence of Aristotle’s description has been massive: Today we still speak of dramatic form in terms of its plot, characters, language, theme, and its performative elements, what Aristotle called music and spectacle. Any student of drama can profit by thinking about how these formal elements function in a given play.”** (Worthen, 9)

How do these elements of dramatic form work together to help us understand what it was like to be African American in the late 50s/early 60s? What significant themes do these elements develop?

4. **“The literary and theatrical approaches to drama and theater share the assumption that plays are not fully meaningful in themselves; they share the sense that the meaning of drama emerges from the kinds of questions we ask of it, the contexts – literary, historical, theoretical, theatrical – in which we can make it perform, and make it mean something in particular.”** (Worthen, 10)

Record three questions you believe are “asked” by this play. Begin your questions with, “Why might,” and/or “How might.” Once you have composed your questions, exchange them with those of another group. Answer that group’s questions taking care to support your answers with textual evidence.

Final Reflection – Journal

Students should respond to the quote first in writing, and then if there is time, in a large-group discussion.

Consider the quote by Miller about a specific structural element of the play, the deus ex machina. How does the placement of the check at the beginning of the play help you to answer the essential question: In what specific ways does the dramatic structure of “A Raisin in the Sun” allow us to understand the “truth” of a segregated America?

“If any segment of Hansberry's well-made play technique is open to question it could well be the deus ex machina of the \$10,000 insurance check in A Raisin in the Sun. . . The situation here, however, is saved by the expedient of setting all the action after the fact, so that to condemn the insurance check is, to all intents and purposes, to condemn the entire play. The insurance money is expected and cannot under any circumstance serve as the sudden reverser of fortune . . . (Miller 165)

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Theme Strand: The American Dream

Essential Question: **The American Dream is rooted in the belief that everyone in America is free to live up to their abilities. How does this ideal shape our dreams and what does the Younger family show us about the American Dream?**

“What then of this new figure (Walter Younger) who appears in American drama in 1958; from what source is he drawn so that, upon inspection, and despite class differences, so much of his encirclement must still remind us of that of Willy Loman (*Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller)? Why, finally, is it possible that when his third-act will is brought to bear, his typicality is capable of a choice which affirms life? After all, Walter Younger is an American more than he is anything else. His ordeal, give or take his personal expression of it, is not extraordinary but intensely familiar like Willy's. The two of them have virtually no values which have not come out of their culture, and to a significant point, no view of the possible solutions to their problems which do not also come out of the self-same culture. Walter can find no peace with that part of society which seems to permit him and no entry into that which has willfully excluded him. He shares with Willy Loman the acute awareness that something is obstructing some abstract progress that he feels he should be making; that something is in the way of his ascendancy. It does not occur to either of them to question the nature of this desired “ascendancy.” Walter accepts, he believes in the “world” as it has been presented to him. When we first meet him, he does not wish to alter it; merely to change his position in it. His mentors and his associates all take the view that the institutions which frustrate him are somehow impeccable, or, at best, “unfortunate.” “Things being as they are,” he must look to himself as the only source of any rewards he may expect. Within himself, he is encouraged to believe, are the only seeds of defeat or victory within the universe. And Walter believes this and when opportunity, haphazard and rooted in death, prevails, he acts.”

— Lorraine Hansberry, “Willy Loman, Walter Younger and He Who Must Live.”

In the above critical essay Hansberry wrote on *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959, the year it opened on Broadway, she draws a clear parallel between Walter Lee Younger, arguably the protagonist of her play, and Miller's Willy Loman, another protagonist for whom the American Dream went wrong. She asks whether it is Willy and Walter who have failed or whether they should have asked another question: Is the nature of the dream a flawed one? She also notes the irony that she has chosen, in Walter, to have the disenfranchised African American prevail where Miller's white middle-class male fails and ultimately takes his own life. While Willy looked outward for affirmation and found none, Walter looks inward at the end of the play.

A Raisin in the Sun, now viewed as a classic of American theater, has been depicted as a bellwether of the Civil Rights movement, a study in poverty and self-hatred, and even a feminist play, but its title ties it to Langston Hughes' poem “Harlem” and Hansberry in her essay inextricably ties that dream to the American Dream, a concept specific to American culture and universally understood, if not experienced, among its people regardless of race or ethnicity.

According to the Library of Congress, the term was first used by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* which was written in 1931. He states: “The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European

upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position," ("American Dreams").

In addition to the American Dream, other possible themes to study are:

- **Pan-Africanism:** What is the significance of Asagai in the Younger household?
- **Feminism:** How do Ruth, Mama and Beneatha represent the plight of women, particularly African-American women in the mid Twentieth Century?

The American Dream and the Younger Family

Sample Lesson: 2-4 days

This lesson is designed to be taught after the play has been read to look at the larger thematic issue of the American Dream. Familiarity with the play's plot and characterization are necessary.

LA Standards: I.C. 4, 5, 7; I.D. 1, 3, 5, 10, 12

SS (Peoples and Cultures) Standards:

- A. Identifying societal concepts that influence the interaction among individuals, groups, and institutions in society.**
- B. Examining tension between individuality and conformity.**

Guiding Questions:

1. What is the American Dream?
2. How does it define us as a country?
3. How does it define the way we see the world and our place in it?
4. Is it achievable for all Americans?
5. How is the American Dream represented in *A Raisin in the Sun*?
6. What effect do their dreams have on the Younger family?
7. Is the Younger family's experience representative of that of African Americans?
8. Is the American Dream a positive or negative one for Americans and why?

Preparatory Set:

1. Ask students to define the American Dream.
2. Share Adams' definition from above. What do they think?
3. Discuss: How does the dream define the way Americans see the world and their place in it?

Materials:

Paper and writing utensil for each student
Copy of the play

Lesson Outline:

1. Set up: Jigsaw. Student will be divided into four "expert" groups to analyze the dreams of the main characters: Walter, Ruth, Mama and Beneatha. (Asagai could also be included to look at the dream of the immigrant and African to create a fifth group.) Each group will look at one character, addressing the following (write on board or overhead):
 - Define the character's dream.
 - Find three textual examples that develop and support the defined dream.
 - How does the dream fit or differ from the American dream?
 - What obstacles does he or she have in achieving his/her dream?
 - Is the American dream valuable or hurtful to this character?
2. Count off students by four and send to their designated area of the room to address above five bullets. Students should take notes throughout. Optional: Teacher can collect sampling of notes from teaching groups to hold groups accountable. (30 minutes)

3. Students will count off by number in each expert group and re-form into teaching groups by number (all 1s together, all 2s, etc.). In these groups, they will each have five minutes to present their interpretation and supporting text on their character. (The teaching part of the lesson will probably occur on the second day. Allow 25-30 minutes.)
4. Once each member has presented to their new group, ask the students to consider in their groups:
 - What effect do their dreams have on each member of the Younger family?
 - Is their experience representative of the African American experience? Why or why not?
 - Why did Walter Lee refuse Lindner's money? What is the significance of his choice?
5. Students will journal on the final guiding question in preparation for a class discussion: Is the American Dream a positive or negative one for Americans and why? Encourage students to consider effects on other ethnic groups and themselves as well as African Americans.

Reflection:

What does the Younger family show us about the American Dream?

Students will discuss in full class their responses to the journal question, taking notes on discussion. Students may also want to read James Baldwin's essay, included in this packet ("The American Dream and the American Negro") as part of the final discussion and write a final reflection on the essential question after discussion. The question could also provide a final unit assessment.

Works Cited in Theme Strand:

Hansberry, Lorraine. "Willie Loman, Walter Younger and He Who Must Live." *The Village Voice*. Vol. IV. August 24, 1959. 7-8.

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Baldwin, James. "The American Dream and the American Negro." *The Price of the Ticket*. New York: St. Martin's, 1985. (attached)

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

Literary Criticism – Critical Lenses

Essential Question: Is the relation of art to the spectator something that can be diversely interpreted, or, on the contrary, does it rigorously obey certain laws that make art either a purely contemplative phenomenon or a deeply political one?

—Augusto Boal

The Classical Lens

Classical, or Aristotelian, literary theory begins with Aristotle's *Poetics*, which examines the "objective" features of contemporary Greek epics and drama, says Stephen Cox, professor of humanities at the University of California, San Diego. He adds:

In Aristotelian analysis, the text-making intentions are understood as distinct from social influences and psychological motives. Aristotle appreciated the fact that Greek playwrights derived their themes and stories from the commonly held attitudes and commonly recounted myths of Greek society. He also knew that playwrights might be motivated largely by the desire to win prizes and other forms of public recognition. A psychologist or sociologist might perform an interesting analysis of these background influences on a play – without even beginning to explain and access the choices that its author made to produce the specific effects that he intended. (Cox)

At its root, classical theory deals with literature as a defined art form with rules that are set out in Aristotle's formative work. Literary analysis, then, requires the identification of literary device and its effect. Adherents to classical theory further maintain that Shakespeare and Aeschylus, along with modern playwrights such as Ibsen and Chekhov, are artists who work with intent and one only has to study the literature to figure out that intent. Classical theorists argue that the art form surpasses culture and time period. If *Hamlet* is a piece of the early Renaissance, so goes the argument, then how could it remain relevant to modern audiences?

Postcolonial and Marxist Lenses

On the other end are the more modern theorists who argue that context forms every piece of art through the social influences and values of not just its time but its specific culture. Freud's psychoanalytic theories have been applied to literature and Reader-response theory dictates it is not what the author intended but what the reader/audience interprets that is significant. Marx offered perspective into the literature of dominant and oppressed societies. Even more recently, scholars of postcolonial studies maintain that looking at art through a universal lens causes us to "demote or disregard" key differences of an artist's background that make up the essence of a work.

Economic theories by theorists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels focus on creating a classless society. Marxist criticism uses the lens of class to examine art and literature.

... All the same, Marxist literary criticism maintains that a writer's social class, and its prevailing 'ideology' (outlook, values, tacit assumptions, half-realised allegiances, etc.) have a major bearing on what is written by a member of that class. So instead of seeing authors as primarily autonomous 'inspired' individuals whose 'genius' and creative imagination enables them to bring forth original and timeless works of art, the Marxist sees them as constantly formed by their social contexts in ways which they themselves would usually not admit. This is true not just of the *content* of their work but even of *formal* aspects of their writing which might at first seem to have no possible political overtones. (Barry, 158)

Emerging as noteworthy in the 1990s, postcolonial theory provides a lens to look at literature from people who lived under colonial powers until the mid twentieth century. Like Marxist theory, it emphasizes differences and requires a reader to consider contextual elements when forming an interpretation of a work.

One significant effect of post colonial criticism is to further undermine the universalist claims once made on behalf of literature by liberal humanist [aka classic] critics. If we claim that great literature has a timeless and universal significance we thereby demote or disregard cultural, social, regional and national differences in experience and outlook, preferring instead to judge all literature by a single, supposedly 'universal' standard. (Barry, 192)

The following lessons are "intended" to help students be aware of this tension that exists between the intent of the artist, how s/he is influenced by her or his culture and the meaning his or her work may have to an audience.

Literary Theory Through Critical Lenses:
How Do We Know What the Author Intended?
Sample Lesson: 2-4 Days

This lesson is designed to bracket study of the play and provoke students to critically evaluate both the text and their responses to it. It opens up that touchiest of literary questions: Can we know what the author meant?

LA Standards: I.D.1, 4, 7, 14

Guiding Questions:

1. Can we know what an author means when we read literature? How?
2. What forms our interpretation of literature?
3. How can we recognize our own values and biases in how we interpret *A Raisin in the Sun* and how do those affect the validity of our interpretation?
4. How could you recognize Hansberry's intent through the lenses of
 - a) classical literary theory,
 - b) Marxist theory and,
 - c) postcolonial theory?
5. Can you identify cultural and class markers from Hansberry's experiences as an African American woman in the mid twentieth century within the work? What is the effect of those markers on the work? Do they limit it? Do they expand it? How?
6. What makes *A Raisin in the Sun* relevant to audiences in the twenty first century? Try to answer this question by looking at the story through the various critical lenses you have studied.

Preparatory Set:

Three poems provide an interesting opening into a conversation about authorial intent and also an introduction to Hansberry's play: "Harlem" by Langston Hughes, "If We Must Die" by Claude McKay, and "We Wear the Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar. You could choose one ("Harlem" carries the line "a raisin in the sun") or use all three.

1. Have students mark up one poem at a time, looking for specific textual markers of the poet's intent. Tell them to write down what they think the poet's message or intent is and be prepared to support it with specific references to the poem.
2. Put students into groups of no more than four (4) and have each group choose a facilitator. Each person will give their interpretation as previously written without interruption in a round-robin format. (If using more than one poem, could split among groups, having two groups do each poem. Have everyone mark up all first.) Explanations of authorial intent must be supported with text and an analysis of how the text supports their interpretation of the author's intent.
3. Students can share out their groups' responses: Did they all agree or not?
4. Check in with groups. If variations or disagreements over interpretation occur, ask: What accounts for the differences in interpretation? Discuss as a class.
5. Have students respond to the following questions in writing:
 - What are your dreams? (list 2-3)
 - Do you think you will achieve your dreams?
 - Do you think anyone supports you in your dreams?
 - Do you usually get what you want in life?

- How do your answers to the above questions possibly affect the way you read the poem?
- 6. Students should finally reflect on what they discovered about the author's and their role in making meaning of literature. How do they know what the author meant? What kinds of issues (e.g. race, economic status, gender) do they believe influenced the writer(s)?

Keep reflections for reference after study play.

Lesson Outline:

Following the preparatory set, study play with an awareness of how interpretations are formed and the way these interpretations come about through various critical lenses . Ask for students to draw on their studies of Jim Crow and the Civil Rights movement to try to understand the era in which Hansberry wrote. The following lesson may be taught after the play is fully read.

Set up. Hand out six different passages of no more than a page in length (possible passages are attached), numbered 1-6. It would be valuable to strategically hand out the passages to ensure heterogeneous groupings by ethnicity and gender. Students are to mark up the passages, looking for devices (figurative language, allusions or as basic as word choice) that they think develop meaning in the passage or larger play.

1. After mark up (as homework or in class) students should get into the group for the passage they marked up (1-6).
2. Students will discuss the following (place on overhead) in groups, taking notes:
 - a. What is the meaning and significance of the passage to the play?
 - b. What forms your interpretation of the passage?
 - c. Could you recognize Hansberry's intent? How? What is it?
 - d. Can you identify cultural and class markers from Hansberry's experiences in the mid twentieth century within the passage? What is the effect of those markers on the work? Do they limit it? Do they expand it? How?
 - e. How do your own biases or experiences affect your interpretation?
3. As a class, discuss:
 - a. Can we know the author's intent? (Refer to individual group discussions for support.) If not, why not? If so, how?
 - b. What factors affect the way your group members interpreted the passage?
 - c. Is *A Raisin in the Sun* still relevant today? Why? How?
4. Students may summarize their thoughts and discussion in a reflection or essay.

Suggested passages from *A Raisin in the Sun*

#1: Act I, Scene 1

WALTER LEE: [*Straightening up from her and looking off*] You see that? Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: Eat your eggs. [*Sadly, but gaining in power*] Man say: I got to take hold of this here world, baby! And a woman will say: Eat your eggs and go to work. [*Passionately now*] Man say: I got to change my life, I'm choking to death, baby! And his woman say – [*In utter anguish as he brings his fists down on his thighs*] Your eggs is getting cold!

RUTH: [*Softly*] Walter, that ain't none of our money.

WALTER: [*Not listening at all or even looking at her*] This morning, I was lookin' in the mirror and thinking about it . . . I been married eleven years and I got a boy who sleeps in the living room – [*Very, very quietly*] and all I got to give him is stories about how rich white people live.

#2: Act I, Scene 1

WALTER: [*Senselessly*] How is school coming?

BENEATHA: [*In the same spirit*] Lovely. Lovely. And you know, biology is the greatest. Yesterday I dissected something that – [*looking up at him as the sarcasm builds to a final sharp thrust*] looked just like you!

WALTER: I just wondered if you've made up your mind and everything.

BENEATHA: [*Gaining in sharpness and impatience*] And what did I answer yesterday morning-and the day before that—?

RUTH: [*From the ironing board, like someone disinterested and old*] Don't be so nasty, Bennie.

BENEATHA: [*Still to her brother*] And the day before that and the day before that!

WALTER: [*Defensively*] I'm interested in you. Something wrong with that? Ain't many girls who decide –

WALTER and BENEATHA: [*In unison*] to be a doctor.

#3: Act I, Scene 2

MAMA: I don't think I never met no African before.

BENEATHA: Well, so 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: [*Indignantly*] Why should I know anything about Africa?

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

MAMA: Well, that's to help save people.

BENEATHA: You mean save them from heathenism—

MAMA: [*Innocently*] Yes.

#4: Act I, Scene 3

GEORGE: [*To BENEATHA*] Look honey, we're going to the theatre –we're not going to be *in* it . . . so go change, huh?

[*BENEATHA looks at him and slowly, ceremoniously lifts her hands and pulls off the headdress. Her hair is close-cropped and unstraightened. GEORGE freezes mid-sentence and RUTH's eyes all but fall out of her head.*]

GEORGE: What in the name of –

RUTH: [*Touching BENEATHA's hair*] Girl – you done lost your natural mind? Look at your head!

GEORGE: What have you done to your head – I mean your hair!

BENEATHA: Nothing – except cut it off.

RUTH: Now that's the truth – it's what *aint't* been done to it! Lord, Lord, Lord. You expect this boy to go out with you looking like that?

BENEATHA: [*looking at GEORGE*] That's up to George. If he's ashamed of his heritage –

GEORGE: Oh, don't be so proud of yourself, Bennie – just because you look eccentric. Get dressed.

#5: Act I, Scene 3

RUTH: When we moving?

MAMA: [*Smiling at her*] First of the month.

RUTH: [*Throwing back her head with jubilation*] PRAISE GOD!

MAMA: [*Tentatively, still looking at her son's back turned against her and RUTH*] It's —it's a nice house too. [*She cannot help speaking directly to him. An imploring quality in her voice, her manner, makes her almost like a girl now*] Three bedrooms . . . nice big one for you and Ruth . . . Me and Beneatha still have to share our room, but Travis have one of his own — and — [*With difficulty*] I figures if the — new baby — is a boy, we could get one of them double-decker outfits . . . And there's a yard with a little patch of dirt where I could maybe get to grove me a few flowers. . . And a nice big basement . . .

RUTH: Walter honey, be glad —

MAMA: [*Still to his back, fingering things on the table*] 'Course I don't want to make it sound fancier than it is. It's just a plain little old house —but it's made good and solid and it will be *ours*. Walter Lee — makes a difference in a man when he can walk on floors that belong to him . . .

RUTH: Where is it?

MAMA: [*Frightened at this telling*] Well—well—it's out in Clybourne Park — [*RUTH's radiance fades abruptly, and WALTER finally turns slowly to face his mother with incredulity and hostility*]

RUTH: Where?

MAMA: [*Matter-of-factly*] 406 Clybourne Street, Clybourne Park.

RUTH: Clybourne Park? Mama, there ain't no colored people living in Clybourne Park.

MAMA: [*Almost idiotically*] Well, I guess there's going to be some now.

#6 Act II, Scene 1

MAMA: I've helped do it to you, haven't I, son? Walter, I been wrong.

WALTER: Naw, you ain't never been wrong about nothing, Mama.

MAMA: Listen to me, now. I say I been wrong, son. I been doing to you what the rest of the world been doing to you. [*She stops and he looks up slowly at her and she meets his eyes pleadingly*] Walter — what you ain't never understood is that I ain't got nothing, don't own nothing, ain't never really wanted nothing that wasn't for you. There ain't nothing as precious to me . . . There ain't nothing worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing else—if it means—if it means it's going to destroy my boy. [*She puts her papers in front of him and he watches her without speaking or moving.*] I paid the man thirty-five hundred dollars down on the house. That leaves sixty-five hundred dollars. Monday morning I want you to take that money and take three thousand dollars and put it in a savings account for Beneatha's medical schooling. The rest you put in a hecking account—with your name on it. And from now on any penny

that comes out of it or that go in it is for you to look after. For you to decide. [*She drops her hands a little helplessly*] It's ain't much, but it's all I got in the world and I'm putting in your hands. I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be.

WALTER: Mama - [*Stares at the money.*] You trust me like that, Mama?

MAMA: I ain't never stop trusting you. Like I ain't never stop loving you. . . .

TRAVIS: What's the matter, Daddy? You drunk?

WALTER: [*Sweetly, more sweetly than we have ever known him*] No, Daddy ain't drunk. Daddy ain't going to never be drunk again.

#7 Act II, Scene 2

WALTER: [*Looking down at his toes once again*] And my father . . . My father almost beat a man to death once because this man called him a bad name, you know what I mean?

LINDNER: No, I'm afraid I don't—

WALTER: [*Finally straightening up*] Yeah. Well, what I mean to say is that we come from people who had a lot of pride. I mean — we are very proud people. And that's my sister over there and she's going to be a doctor — and we are very proud —

LINDNER: Well — I am sure that is very nice, but —

WALTER: [*Starting to cry and facing the man eye to eye*] What I am telling you is that we called you over here to tell you that we are very proud and that this — Travis, come here. This is my son, who makes the sixth generation of our family in this country, and that we have all thought about your offer—

LINDNER: [*Holding out the pen, anxious to get the signature and get out*] Well, good . . . good---

WALTER: And we have decided to move into our house — because my father — my father— he earned it for us, brick by brick. [*MAMA has her eyes closed and is rocking back and forth as though she were in church, with her head nodding the amen yes*] We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes and we will try to be good neighbors. That's all we got to say. [*He looks the man absolutely in the eyes*] We don't want your money. [*He turns and walks away from the man*]

Work Cited for Literary Criticism Strand:

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Cox, Stephen. "Foundations Study Guide: Literary Theory." *Objectivist Center*.
3 August 2008. <http://www.objectivistcenter.org/showcontent.aspx?ct>.

Poems for Lesson:

Harlem (1959)
by **Langston Hughes**

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*?

If We Must Die (1953)
by **Claude McKay**

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
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!

We Wear the Mask (1895)
by **Paul Laurence Dunbar**

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 over-wise,
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 otherwise,
We wear the mask!

A Raisin in the Sun: A Bibliography of Select Works for Further Reading

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