LORRAINE HANSBERRY: DEFINING THE LINE BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

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The 1950s was a vibrant decade for African American writers, among whom the name of Lorraine Hansberry will always be remembered. In his evaluation of the American theater in the twentieth century, Alan Ackerman looks back at the 1950s as a time that “witnessed . . . a period of dramatic canon formation (the late Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Lorraine Hansberry, Edward Albee)” (765). The decade opened with black critics urging African American writers to broaden their literary horizons in order to reach the universality of works written by other American writers. Although Hugh Gloster claimed in his 1950 essay “Race and the Negro Writer” that the African American author should not abandon his ethnic character, he strongly advocated complete integration into the larger American literary tradition. He attacked what he identified as an “obsession with race” that had long stood in the way of African American writing in major ways (369). He called for the transcendence of the ”colour line,” claiming that this was actually achieved in Ann Petry’s The Street (1946), Willard Motley’s Knock on Any Door (1947), Zora Neale Hurston’s Seraph on the Suwanee (1948), and Gwendolyn Brooks’s Annie Allen (1949).

A similar plea for an unmitigated African American integration was raised in Saunders Redding’s essay “The Negro Writer—Shadow and Substance.” Redding condemned the same Jim Crow aesthetic fetters that further imprisoned African American writing in the 1920s and 1930s in the lure of ”imitativeness,” ”dialect,” and the ”naughty peep-show.” Clinging to ethnic roots and seeing life through a racial lens was less and less attractive as African American writers introduced themselves to ”realistic idealism” and ”scientific
humanism” which enabled them to “see that values were human, not racial” and that their racial background should only serve to provide material for their more “universal” works (372).

In 1956, Arthur P. Davis wound up the whole argument and confirmed that the 1950s was a decade of African American integration with the opening sentence of his essay: “Integration is the most vital issue in America today. The word is on every tongue, and it has acquired all kinds of meanings and connotations” (141). Davis acknowledged the drastic changes that were appearing in African American literature that sloughed off the old skin of the 1940s protest tradition and the combination of sociological case-studies and naturalism in literary works. The call for integration in the wider culture prompted writers who chose African American protagonists to depict conflicts within the group instead of laying all the emphasis on interracial problems. Such works included Owen Dodson’s Boy at the Window (1951), Gwendolyn Brooks’s Maud Martha (1953), Richard Wright’s The Outsider (1953), Melvin Tolson’s Libretto for the Republic (1953), and Langston Hughes’s Sweet Flypaper of Life (1955). Other works responded more to the new trend and evaded using African American characters as William Gardner Smith’s Anger at Innocence (1950), Ann Petry’s Country Place (1947), and Richard Wright’s Savage Holiday (1954). The call for integration would confer a universal appeal on African American writings and lead eventually to full participation in all social, cultural, political, and literary aspects of the American life.

Integration was not to be equated with accommodationist paradigms or cultural assimilation. Accommodation embraced all negative implications of resigning to whites and erasing any sense of racial pride. Assimilation implied a fusion that entailed a profound and irremediable loss of one’s ethnic identity. In assimilation, the marginalized group identity dissolved into the culture of the dominant larger group: white America. Integration in the 1950s, however, had the aim of asserting black racial pride. It was an attempt to cross racial lines and not to see everything through sharp black–white dichotomies, but to form a kind of racial settlement and to end racial exclusion. Black writers were as American as anyone else in America, and they had the right to tackle “white” Euro-centric literary traditions and techniques in order to carry their works into the realms of universality and to challenge that universality as normatively white.
During the 1950s, debate over African American integration became more polarized as the increasing racial tensions and white antagonism made its achievement seem unattainable. The emergence of the Civil Rights Movement reflected the African American endeavor to integrate into American society as citizens with equal rights. Politically, it was seeking the right to vote; economically, it was the right to rise above abject poverty; and socially, it was the right to have desegregated good education, desegregated housing policies, and to use desegregated public means of transportation. African American writers increasingly reflected this huge turmoil in their writings, and although the target was still integration, it was reflected through the new prism of the Civil Rights Movement. Ironically, the same turbulent decade that opened with a white acknowledgement of African American literary achievement in giving the Pulitzer Prize to a black writer, Gwendolyn Brooks, for the first time in 1950, ended with granting Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1959, making her the first African American and only the fifth female playwright ever to achieve this honor.

This article examines the way the term “integration” changed in its resonances throughout the decade and looks in particular at Hansberry’s play. It traces the wider developments in the African American writers’ stance toward the term, as well as examining Hansberry’s response to these turbulent circumstances and the Civil Rights Movement which, as Joy Abel argues, “was a battle with which the playwright was well-acquainted and deeply concerned” (12). Hansberry is not a name that can be easily forgotten as Theresa May argues, “Hansberry is remembered for her courageous play and its indictment of segregated access to the American dream” (102). Her successful play made her one of the key African American female writers during the Civil Rights Movement who reflected that tumultuous decade in African American history. Her political consciousness is clearly traceable in her work. This article attempts to defend her against accusations of assimilation, since hers was a call for integration.

Hansberry, a marginalized voice in terms of race and gender, emerges from Chicago—which she once described as “dirty, dismal Dreiseresque”—and from the protest aesthetic landscape of Richard Wright whose impact is clear in her play (Nemiroff 87).
Many critics compare her play to Wright’s *Native Son* as both works open with an adamant alarm ringing in similar settings of Chicago’s rat-infested ghettos, both protagonists are black chauffeurs working for white masters, and both have dreams beyond their reach because they face poverty and racism. Jewell Gresham argues that “*A Raisin in the Sun* is to black drama what Wright’s *Native Son* is to the black novel” (194), and C. Bigsby also draws the connection, arguing that in both works, the “sense of desperation is the same” (*Second Renaissance* 157).

Hansberry strongly believed in Wright’s protest and wanted her work to deliver a similar message against racism and, like Wright, she held Marxist-Leninist beliefs that lingered in the background of her work. She learned the lesson of earlier disillusionment with communism from Wright and Ralph Ellison, but as Lonne Elder explains, “the god has not failed for her as He had for Wright” for she managed to create her own socialist consciousness that was irrefutably reflected in her political activism and plays, and which she kept throughout her short life” (215). Whereas Wright regarded the African American as “a psychological island” (30), Hansberry believed him to be an image that had been created in the American consciousness and kept in its place as an “image of the unharried, unconcerned, glandulatory, simple, rhythmical, amoral, dark creature who was, above all else, a miracle of sensuality” (Nemiroff 199). This image is what she held responsible for the status quo faced by blacks and their continuous exclusion from the larger American society. She felt that the time was ripe for blacks to replace this image with the real one and integrate into their homeland.

Hansberry refrained from the dark naturalism and impelling sociological framework of Wright and looked instead to Langston Hughes’s optimistic tone and racial pride which are both echoed in her work.¹ Hansberry moved with her drama into an Ibse-nesque realm of social realism arguing that:

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¹Hansberry’s racial pride does not merely stem from the writings of Langston Hughes. In *Young, Gifted and Black*, she writes about her family through whom she learnt the lesson that “we were better than no one but superior to everyone; that we were the products of the proudest and most mistreated of the races of man.” Hansberry’s parents were both political activists and her father ran for Congress in 1940. As she grew up, she saw prominent African American figures like Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Langston Hughes at parties hosted by her parents.
Naturalism tends to take the world as it is and say: this is what it is, this is how it happens, it is ‘true’ because we see it every day in life that way—you know you simply photograph the garbage can. But in realism—I think the artist is creating what the realistic work imposes on it not only what is but what is possible . . . because that is part of reality too. So that you get a much larger potential of what man can do. And it requires much greater selectivity—you don’t just put everything that seems—you put what you believe is . . . (Nemiroff 228)

Hansberry’s stance towards naturalism is behind her refusal to delineate a doomed protagonist in her play. Walter is not hemmed in naturalistic webs as Bigger, but rather embodies Hughes’s poem “Harlem” which poses the question:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?

. . . . . .
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load

Or does it explode? (1267)

While it definitely explodes for Bigger in his naturalistic end on the gallows, the question remains ambiguously answered in Hansberry’s realism, despite the allusion in the title of the play, because it is not clear by the play’s end what happens to the family’s dream of integration.

A Raisin in the Sun was an immediate success that brought fame and wealth to its creator. Written in a realistic mode, the play tells the story of a ghetto family with clashing dreams that receives a $10,000 insurance check. Though the son loses the majority of this money in a fraudulent transaction, the family proudly refuses to sell the new house that the mother bought in an all-white neighborhood and ends the play by leaving the ghetto for this new house.

Hansberry was arguably not ground-breaking in either theme or technique. She recalls watching Sean O’Casey’s Juno and the Paycock when she was seventeen and how it influenced her because “the melody was one I had known for a very long while”
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(Nemiroff 65). Her realism also suffers from resorting to the insurance check as a form of some dues ex machina that mars the plot’s development and renders an element of unrealism as the check becomes a magic wand for the family, thus making the events less credible. However, the play was the first African American work to be performed on Broadway, attracting huge numbers of both white and black audiences and much critical acclaim. The play also served as the platform from which Hansberry later pursued her short career of political activism.² Hansberry’s success can be attributed to other factors, however, which are arguably related to the time her play was released and her art of characterization.

Hansberry was effective in the literary arena of the theatre even though African American drama suffered from many drawbacks that were mainly related to playwrights and audiences. The 1950s brought about the call for integration and thus as Geneviève Fabre notes, “in large measure the dramaturgy of the fifties adopted the civil rights ideology of liberal America. Now more than ever the audience for black theatre was white; the dramatists spoke to the white audience directly, for a guilty conscience predisposed liberals to listen to the voice of the oppressed”(12). Such plays included William Branch’s *In Splendid Error* (1954), Louis Peterson’s *Take a Giant Step* (1955), and Loften Mitchell’s *A Land beyond the River* (1957). But none of these works achieved, even remotely, the success of *A Raisin in the Sun*. The reception of Hansberry’s play depended primarily on its time. As Margaret Wilkerson argues, “the time was ripe for a play that could somehow bridge the gap between blacks and whites in the US while communicating the urgency and necessity of the civil rights struggle”(*A Raisin* 444). The play opened in March 1959, putting a black ghetto family on the very threshold of integration while tackling the theme of dreaming realistically, albeit humorously, and without resorting to any violence or bleak

²Before the release of her first play, Hansberry worked as an editor in the leftist African American newspaper *Freedom* under the management of Paul Robeson. It was through the conspicuous success of *A Raisin in the Sun* that Hansberry started acting as a spokesperson for the Civil Rights Movement by appearing in interviews, TV programs, participating in fundraising events, and giving emotional speeches about the African American struggle in America and the black battles launched in Africa against European colonialism.
naturalism.\textsuperscript{3} Whites got the message of the inevitability of integration, and blacks enjoyed seeing proud characters without the exotic stigma of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as appreciating Hansberry’s ability to show that the ghettos do not necessarily always produce the likes of Bigger Thomas.

Hansberry’s art of characterization propels the story. She does not present a black–white conflict per se, but it is always there lingering in the background without sentimentality or propaganda. She explains her views concerning racism arguing that:

From the moment the first curtain goes up until the Youngers make their decision at the end, the fact of racial oppression, unspoken and unalluded to, other than the fact of how they live, is through the play. It’s inescapable. The reason these people are in the ghetto in America is because they are Negroes. They are discriminated against brutally and horribly, so that in that sense it’s always there and the basis of many things they feel, and which they feel because they are just perfectly ordinary human things between members of a family, are always predicated . . . on the fact that they live ghettoized lives. (Carter, \textit{Hansberry Drama} 45)

The one white character who appears in the play is Mr. Lindner who comes from the “welcome committee” of the new neighborhood to ask the Youngers not to move into it at all: “I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn’t enter into it. It is a matter of what people of Clybourne Park believing, rightly or wrongly, as I say, that for all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities” (90). The play introduces dual protagonists since both Walter and Lena are of equal significance in the overall plot and the subsequent actions. Hansberry approaches the stage with a legacy of imposing stereotypes that she manages adeptly to escape by painting vivid and realistic characters. As Elizabeth Brown-Guillory explains, her “perspectives and portraits are decidedly different from those of black males and white

\textsuperscript{3}In Louis Peterson’s \textit{Take a Giant Step}, a young African American moves into a white neighborhood and struggles against antagonism. He feels angry at his family for leaving the black neighborhood, and he goes through psychological ordeals till he finally gets back to his family and makes peace with them. The play could be read as a plea against integration while also tackling the theme of African American dreams. While the family is saved from disintegration, the message is that the time is not ripe yet for African American integration.
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playwrights” (229). Lena can be regarded as the stereotypical black mother figure with her strong will and ability to lead but she is much richer than this. Lena’s religion does not make her hard-hearted and she is never ashamed of displaying her emotions to her children. Hardships in life do not make her bitter, and she never gives up on life or quits dreaming. Lena also escapes subservient passivity by playing a vital role in her children’s life instead of lecturing them about how things should be, without showing them the way to achieve this. She retains her ability to dream despite all adversities and embraces life with a unique sense of humor.

In her play, Hansberry steps into the emotional black landscape by bringing marginalized figures into the center and by individualizing stereotypes. Lena’s hold on to her past shapes her dream. Having escaped the South only to live the Chicagoan ghettos, she clings to the idea of a decent house and the salvation promised by religion. She finds her children’s dreams hard to comprehend:

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. (73)

But Lena manages to bridge the gap with her children and the generational differences through her familial love. She accepts changes and acts accordingly while preserving a strong sense of pride. Knowing her son’s dream of opening a liquor store, Lena decides to put down a deposit payment for a new house in an

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4In Hansberry Drama: Commitment Amid Complexity, Hansberry does not deny the stereotypical portraits of Lena as she describes her character as “The Black matriarch incarnate: The bulwark of the Negro family since slavery; the embodiment of the Negro will to transcendence. It is she who, in the mind of the Black poet, scrubs the floors of a nation in order to create Black diplomats and university professors. It is she who, while seeming to cling to traditional restraints, drives the young on into the fire hoses and one day simply refuses to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery.”
all-white neighborhood to save her family from disintegration and to realize her own dream of providing a decent house for them. She also slaps Beneatha harshly in the face for refusing to acknowledge the existence of God in her mother’s presence. Lena is more than the rigid matriarch, however, because her nurturing ability is exceptional. As she realizes the psychological implication of her act on Walter, she immediately hands him the remaining money to open up his business and deduct a certain amount for his sister’s education. Lena builds up her son’s self-esteem and strives to help her daughter realize her dream of becoming a doctor. It is her ability both to change and accept changes that endows such distinction upon Lena.

Much of the tension in the play arises from the conflicting views of Walter Lee and Lena and, as Wilkerson notes, “Walter speaks the words and takes the action, but Mama provides the context” (The Sighted Eyes 10). Walter bears the dreams of many generations of black suffering, and he demands his place under the sun of the American dream. The power of dreaming emerges from his strong sense of pride and, as Charles Washington notes, it is mainly “his acceptance of American values, rather than stereotypes, myths, and untruths about Blacks, that enables him to dream and act in a typically American way” (114). He wants to shoulder his responsibility and his larger dream is not merely to open the liquor store and make money, but to provide his family with shelter and a decent way of living, as dictated by the paradigms of the American dream reflected in his words to Lena: “Well, you tell that to my boy tonight when you put him to sleep on the living-room couch . . . and you tell it to my wife, Mama, tomorrow when she has to go out of here to look after somebody’s kids. And tell it to me, Mama, every time we need a new pair of curtains and I have to watch you go out and work in somebody’s kitchen” (71–72). Walter’s sense of manhood is continually threatened by his confinement in this social reality, yet he never loses his power of dreaming.

Bigsby argues that Walter’s dream is predominantly motivated by a sense of “indignity and self-hatred” and compares his failure to that of Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s play because “far from rejecting the system which is oppressing him [he] wholeheartedly embraces it” (Confrontation and Commitment 158,159). However, it is difficult to see “self-hatred” in Walter’s actions.
When he takes the money and feels secure, he joyfully takes Ruth to the cinema and holds her hand while walking, and he passionately gives his mother a present. It is true that he might show much anger at times, particularly when he thinks of his menial job or when Ruth refuses to listen to his big plans, or even when Beneatha asks for her share in the money. But never does Walter resort to violence. Even when he learns the news of Harris’s betrayal and realizes that the money is all gone, he screams madly, “Man . . . I trusted you . . . Man I put my life in your hands. . . .” but there is no violence on stage, despite the intense pain of the whole family (95). Walter does embrace a system that crushes him, but what other alternative does he have? It is either the American dream or ghetto wretched hopelessness. Dismayed by the latter, he yearns for the former. Bigsby also thinks that it is a “desire for self-respect which had earlier made Walter long for a liquor store” (Second Renaissance 215). When Lindner offers to buy the house from him to prevent them intruding upon the white neighborhood, he defiantly rejects the offer. After losing his money, Walter is defeated by the huge loss and almost yields to neighborhood pressure, but his mother’s pride restores his own. He vehemently declares to Lindner, “what I mean to say is that we come from a people who had a lot of pride. I mean—we are very proud people” (103). Pride proves to be the legacy of the Youngers, and it is likely to have been one of the main elements that made the play so appealing to its black audiences.

Walter’s character emerges by the end of the play as a black "Everyman” figure who is poorly educated, living in the ghetto, and still able to dream and keep a strong sense of self-respect. He does not go to the worst extremes like Bigger. Walter’s characterization embodies Hansberry’s views on her technique of portrayal:

I happen to believe that the most ordinary human being . . . has within him elements of profundity, of profound anguish. You don’t have to go to the kings and queens of the earth—I think the Greeks and the Elizabethans did this because it was a logical concept—but every human being is in enormous conflict about something, even if it’s how to get to work in the morning and all of that . . . (Nemiroff 139)

Though Hansberry shows the profundity of humanity in Lena and Walter, this is not the case in the way she handles other
characters in her play. Beneatha’s two suitors, George Murchison and Asagai, are not fully individualized. They exemplify political issues and are meant to symbolize two different approaches in regard to the question of identity and the reaction to white oppression, and they also mirror Hansberry’s stance towards these issues.

George Murchison is the son of a well-off African American business man who enjoys the company and looks of Beneatha who finds him “so shallow” (63). His way of dressing, his haughty behavior with Walter, and his utter rejection of Beneatha’s wearing the African costume and not straightening her hair all reflect his stance towards his own ethnic background and white American oppression. Even when Beneatha accuses him of being an assimilationist, he does not try to deny it and mocks her African aspirations: “Let’s face it, baby, your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedly-assed spirituals and some grass huts” (76). George is not given any positive features; even his wealth is rejected by both Beneatha and Lena who dismiss him for a fool. Besides there are no signs of the Youngers’ desire to become white. Both Walter and Ruth are unhappy to know that the new house is in the white area of Clybourne Park, and Walter comments, “(bitterly) So that’s the peace and comfort you went out and bought for us today!” even though Lena’s choice is primarily based on price and not a desire to become white (80). Beneatha, who in many ways resembles Hansberry herself, detests George mostly because of his desire to assimilate, defining an assimilationist as “someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case, oppressive culture!” (76)

This stance against assimilation is further enhanced through the character of Asagai, the Nigerian student whom Beneatha approaches because she wants to learn more about her identity. Through stressing his African roots and racial pride, Hansberry juxtaposes two black conflicts, one against white racism in America and the other against white colonialism in Africa. Both battles are launched to attain freedom and claim a black identity. His presence in the play also poses the question of what Africans and African Americans might have in common. Asagai brings an African costume to Beneatha and thinks that her straightened hair style is a kind of mutilation, saying, “it is true that this is not so much a profile of a Hollywood queen as perhaps a queen of
the Nile. . . . But what does it matter? Assimilation is so popular in your country” (80). He manages to awaken some sort of a quiescent nostalgia in her. Hansberry comments on Asagai as a symbol of “the emergence of an articulate and deeply conscious colonial intelligentsia in the world . . . he also signifies a hangover of something that began in the ’30s, when Negro intellectuals first discovered the African past and became aware of it . . . .” She then negates any allusion to Marcus Garvey in Asagai and avows that her African infatuation remains abstract in the realm of “poetry and creative arts. I want to reclaim it. Not physically—I don’t mean to want to move there—but this great culture that has been lost may very well make decisive contributions to the development of the world in the next few years” (Carter, *Hansberry Drama* 38).

Beneatha’s choice to consider Asagai’s proposal and go to Africa with him by the end of the play indicates that Hansberry is not merely creating characters who are assimilationists. However, in Asagai’s exaggerated reaction when the family loses all the money, Hansberry seems to be betrayed by her own idealism. The scenes of soothing Beneatha and the African dance in which Walter participates with his sister hold little credibility for a realist work. In his attempt to help Beneatha while crying over her shattered dreams, Asagai is carried away by his black nationalism and gives a lecture that appears to be somewhat out of context. Asagai serves as the playwright’s mouthpiece most of the time, and the enthusiastic way he behaves throughout the play with his utopian visions and intellectual attitude and nationalist devotion impose upon him what Carter calls “the aura of a romantic hero” (*Images of Men* 161). But despite the flaws in his characterization, he remains a convincing argument against readings of Hansberry as an assimilationist.

Nikky Finney argues that Hansberry’s “uncompromising words took America by storm in 1959,” which rings true on many levels (217). Despite its Broadway success, *A Raisin in the Sun* remains a contentious work. After the family has decided to move into the new house, the final scene of leaving the ghetto is highly ambiguous. On one level, the dream of integration is realized, but on the other level, it is a bad omen of more white hostility on the horizon. Hansberry’s comments on her play only add to the ambiguity of its ending:
There are no waving flags and marching songs at the barricades as Walter marches out with his little battalion, it is not because the battle lacks nobility. On the contrary, he has picked up his way, still imperfect and wobbly in his small view of human destiny, what I believe Arthur Miller once called “the golden thread of history.” He becomes, in spite of those who are too intrigued with despair and hatred of man to see it, King Oedipus refusing to tear out his eyes, but attacking the Oracle instead. He is that last Jewish patriot manning his rifle in the burning ghetto in Warsaw; he is that young girl who swam into sharks to save a friend a few weeks ago; he is Anne Frank, still believing in people; he is the nine small heroes of Little Rock; he is a Michelangelo creating David, and Beethoven bursting forth with the Ninth Symphony. He is all those things because he has finally reached out in his tiny moment and caught that sweet essence which is human dignity, and it shines like the old star-touched dream that is in his eyes. (Washington 110)

Hansberry fully comprehends that there are no radical changes for the Youngers. Walter still works as a chauffeur, Ruth as a maid. The family is taking the same old furniture, and the unwelcome presence of Lindner remains. But whereas the question of integration remains, it is hard to argue that the play closes on assimilation. Lena is connected to her plant from her first entrance till the last exit, nurturing it with much tenderness like a member of the family. This plant becomes a life companion to Lena and resembles her dream of having a part of the earth as well as symbolizing her roots. Taking the plant to the new house implies that the Youngers do not aim to assimilate or accept any form of uprooting. Walter tells Lindner that they earned this house through their father’s hard work: “We don’t want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes—but we will try to be good neighbours. That’s all we got to say. (He looks the man absolutely in the eyes) We don’t want your money” (103). These are not the words of an assimilationist; Walter finally understands that the legacy of his father crosses the materialistic boundaries of the check to the spirit’s boundaries of pride.

Written in 1959, A Raisin in the Sun lies at the crossing point of two definitions of integration. Hansberry says in an interview preceding the play’s opening, “I told them this wasn’t a ‘Negro play.’ It was about honest-to-God, believable, many-sided people who happened to be Negroes” (Carter, Hansberry Drama 21). This quotation served as the basis for many critics to accuse Hansberry of assimilationism. It is true that this is the very same
view that was highly acclaimed at the beginning of the decade by critics who urged the African American writer to transcend the color line in order to reach the universality of white writers. Declaring that her play does not fall into the category of “Negro plays” does not necessarily entail assimilation; it can be read as choosing an oppressed ethnic group to stand for all the minorities in America, which, again, was highly praised by critics as a sign of integration. Hansberry sets the target of attaining universality in her work, and she understands that her play presents a new depiction of African American people on the American stage. She argues, “I believe that one of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay great attention to the specific. Universality, I think, emerges from truthful identity of what is. . . . So I would say it is definitely a Negro play before it is anything else . . .” (Nemiroff 114). According to Hansberry, being able to fully grasp the identity of her marginalized group and to represent it clearly is the shortest way to reach universality.

Hansberry acknowledges the importance of the white literary canon in America in relation to African American writers: “I believe that it is within the cultural descendents of Twain and Whitman and Melville and O’Neill to listen and absorb them, along with the totality of the American landscape, and give back their findings in new art to the great and vigorous institution that is the American theatre” (Nemiroff 197). This is another aspect of integration that has been held against her as a sign of betraying the black cause. However, this claim denies the interactions and connections between the traditionally white canon and the African American canon, both of which arguably influenced the other. Hansberry’s view is one that calls for this integration in depicting humane African American ghetto dwellers who deserve the reward of integration. The idea of losing black ethnic character was never among Hansberry’s literary or social agendas, as Kevin Gaines argues that alongside Mayfield and Du Bois, Hansberry “posed the question of whether black struggles for equality would transform and democratize US society, or whether blacks themselves would be remade in the image of a stultifying, inequitable, and militaristic US” (514–15). Her work accuses America of injustice and protects black roots from any winds of assimilation rather than encouraging a loss of racial identity.
Despite the success of *A Raisin in the Sun*, some critics launched harsh attacks against Hansberry’s work mainly based on her political and social notions of integration. In 1969, from the vantage point of later developments, Jordan Miller regards her as an advocate of assimilation by arguing:

Is not Lorraine Hansberry an Uncle (Aunt) Tom? Is not *A Raisin in the Sun* a sellout to the white power structure? Are not the Youngers really betraying themselves and their own? Is not their attempt to assimilate themselves into the white society, and to force themselves, however, peacefully, into the neighborhood where they are so obviously unwanted, simply a gratuitous attempt to become white? Will not the material world of the white man force them to subject themselves to even more debasing servility in order to maintain a mere token economic level within it? (160)

Harold Cruse, however, gives the fiercest critique of Hansberry’s play. Cruse categorizes the play as propaganda or what he calls “the politics of accommodation” that started with communist leadership and reared a whole generation of followers instead of leaders (269). Thus instead of trying to reflect the real status of the African American working class, this generation, in which he places the playwright, attempted to draw an African American image that met the social aims of leftwing politics. Hansberry becomes “a full, unadulterated integrationist” by choosing the wrong family to put on stage (277). This political inclination widened the gap between the African American intellectual and the working class. Cruse also is very critical of Hansberry’s background. He argues that her status as the daughter of a rich African American who owned a number of properties in Chicago’s black district negates the “assumption that she knew all about the Negro working class, of which she was not even remotely a member”(269). Therefore, Hansberry’s project, according to Cruse, merely advocates the radical leftwing politics that never touches upon real African American suffering. For Cruse, this explains why Hansberry’s characters are not accurate representations of the ghetto: “The black ghettos are the spawning ground for every psychological manifestation of spiritual alienation, and the literary mind that tries to ignore or suppress this terrible fact is simply not facing realities” (272). Instead of writing a play that would herald an African American rebellious rejection...
of white oppression, Hansberry gives her audience “a good old-fashioned, home-spun saga of some good working-class folk in pursuit of the American Dream . . . thus the Negro made theatre history with the most cleverly written piece of glorified soap opera I, personally, have ever seen on stage” (278).

Cruse’s article is written in 1969 and reflects radical changes in the black scene that clearly affected his views. Attacking Hansberry on the grounds of her family ignores the reality of her upbringing. Hansberry recalls her childhood memories in the segregated ghetto schools of Chicago saying that, “I am a product of that system and one result is that—to this day—I cannot count properly. I do not add, subtract or multiply with ease. Our teachers, devoted and indifferent alike, had to sacrifice something to make the system work at all” (Nemiroff 36). Cruse’s reading is limited to class only, which consequently limits his vision to the political dimension and moves away from the human aspect of the experience Hansberry depicts in her play. Arguing that the ghetto can only produce the most mischievous types is quite a naturalist approach. In his introductory essay to Native Son, Wright makes it clear that Bigger represents the extreme product of ghetto conditions, but Bigger is not meant to be a “black Everyman.” Besides, the one who betrays Walter and runs away with the family’s money is not a white character; he is Willy Harris, a different product of the ghetto. Ruth is also very keen on whipping Travis for being late because she is trying to protect him from what lies outside. It is equally difficult to accept A Raisin in the Sun as a soap opera because it steps away from this genre. James Baldwin regards the play’s theatrical success and unparalleled reception as historically unprecedented, arguing, “I have never in my life seen so many black people in the theatre. And the reason was that never before, in the entire history of the American theatre, had so much of the truth of black people’s lives been seen on stage. Black people ignored the theatre because the theatre had always ignored them” (xviii).

A Raisin in the Sun had an undeniable impact and ironically both its flaws and success can be attributed to its timing. It opened the door to an overflow of strong African American plays by Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Adrienne Kennedy, and others in the 1960s. Hansberry’s play also had an impact on the wider African American community during the Civil Rights Movement, which
makes Myisha Priest recall her as both “the first black playwright on Broadway,” and “a social activist” (118). This is further clarified in her letter to the playwright:

Dear Miss Hansberry,

I am one of the nine students that attended Little Rock Central High School. . . . I guess you could call this a crude try at my first fan letter. I wish all the students could have seen the play before entering Central in ’57. It would have made us prouder to enter Central because we knew we were not the only Walter Lee Younger. (Nemiroff 113)

The play continues to be controversial to this day and as Clayton Riley argues “Raisin is not a happy work. The questions it raises are more agonising and complicated than any of the answers it contains” (206). The symbol of the raisin marks a withering wish, but the Youngers do leave the ghetto by the end. They keep their racial pride which might connote that though the grape dries up in the sun and becomes a raisin, it keeps the sweet taste until the end. Hansberry regards integration in terms of being seen and acknowledged in the larger American community. She touches upon political themes and attacks any inclination towards assimilation as acculturation. Hansberry’s characters display a strong sense of racial pride and none of them wishes to be white or lose a black ethnic identity thus “underscoring the idea that the ‘ethnic’ is very much a part of the ‘universal’” as Dorothy Chansky explains (435). The Youngers are going into a white neighborhood because they have earned their new house and they deserve to improve their life like any other American. Hansberry’s play tries to locate African Americans in the American Dream. Most of the attacks against Hansberry were launched in the late 1960s, where Black Power theorists tried to dissolve the differences between integration and assimilation. However, the terms were not coterminous in her work. Hansberry did not betray the black cause, and her play reflected a deep vision of both African American and larger American realities without losing racial specificity.

Works Cited


