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The Construction of Racial Identity in King's *I Have a Dream* and  
Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

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Even after the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920's and 1930's, the construction and expression of racial identity by African American artists was still an important issue. This essay deals with two of the milestones of that epoch before the dawn of the civil rights movement, and examines in which ways their authors showed how their coloured fellow men and women should be seen by black and white percipients.

With his most famous speech "I Have a Dream", Martin Luther King spoke out of the fullness of every black human's heart, and became an icon of the civil rights movement in the 1960's. He put into a nutshell what had been an issue that shaped the identity of generations of black Afro-Americans: The "manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."<sup>1</sup> He reminds his listeners of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation which became effective on 1 January 1863 and which promised to free several millions of slaves<sup>2</sup>, celebrated "as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity."<sup>3</sup> But, he points out, in those days in the midst of the twentieth century, a Negro's life is still determined by his origin, and the way people deal with him or her because of their skin's colour, and Negroes are still always seen as separated from others and "languished in the corners of American society,"<sup>4</sup> certainly not profiting from the concept of "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"<sup>5</sup> that is stated in the Declaration of Independence - due to Pinsker "the eloquent words" that "define our [America's] nation at its best."<sup>6</sup> But this idea that provides an identity for a whole nation does not take effect on a race that is represented by millions of individuals within that nation. King criticizes the failure of this promise: He speaks as "we" and therewith for all black people. He states that they refuse to accept their role in a white-dominated society, and he depicts his fellow men as being firm, peaceful and knowing what they want,<sup>7</sup> embodied by King himself and his words. He is sure that the "sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality[.]" that it is a beginning and not an end.<sup>8</sup> He believes in the might and power of the people he is speaking for, and furthermore King clarifies that they want a peaceful movement without any "wrongful deeds" resulting from drinking from "the cup of bitterness and hatred."<sup>9</sup> With this expression, he sideswipes the white tormentors and gives a hint that there are other ways to

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<sup>1</sup>King Jr., Martin Luther, 'I Have a Dream'

<sup>2</sup><http://www.anti-slaverysociety.addr.com/hus-emancproc.htm>

<sup>3</sup>King Jr., Martin Luther, 'I Have a Dream'

<sup>4</sup>ibid.

<sup>5</sup>The Declaration of Independence

<sup>6</sup>Pinsker, Sanford, 'He Had a Dream, and It Shot Him'

<sup>7</sup>King Jr., Martin Luther, 'I Have a Dream'

<sup>8</sup>ibid.

<sup>9</sup>ibid.

assert one's rights than with the help of violence - the "rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force."<sup>10</sup> The white men do not need to fear that black people want to assume power and suppress white people in return. They rather would like everyone to be equal and *nobody* to be lowered. By answering the question "When will you be satisfied?", he clearly shows what black people want and what they do not want. He names all injustice they have been suffering from during the last centuries, and he points out that they will stand up and fight until this lack of justice is remedied.<sup>11</sup>

The speech's most famous passage and name giver is another witness for King's brilliant oratorical construction of a racial identity, intermeshed with the nation's identity: The dream of being free and equal, of judging people by their character and not their skin colour, and - according to Pinsker - of living "a long American tradition that values the individual and places enormous emphasis on his or her democratic freedoms."<sup>12</sup> King sympathizes with this American Dream, and when he says that his dream is "deeply rooted in the American dream" in the introduction to this passage, he does not stab the white Americans in the back by telling them that their way of thinking is wrong, he rather explains that the dream his people have is the same one that they - the white people - live, a common ground and no menace.<sup>13</sup> So dreams are not only a part of a single human's psyche, but a defining and therefore important feature of history,<sup>14</sup> in this case based on the hope and faith to be able "to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope."<sup>15</sup> According to Besel and Duffy, "King's speech is now viewed as a text belonging to the nation",<sup>16</sup> and nowadays it has come "to symbolize the civil rights movement and anchors collective public memory of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Equality and of King himself."<sup>17</sup> They point out that King fully identified himself with his dream and perpetuated it by introducing it to other pieces of work written or spoken by him.<sup>18</sup> King himself became iconic and represented a black nation that was finally more successful with their struggle to be treated equal than ever before.<sup>19</sup>

So how is the identity of the black human race depicted in Martin Luther King's speech?

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<sup>10</sup>ibid.

<sup>11</sup>ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Pinsker, Sanford, 'He Had a Dream, and It Shot Him'

<sup>13</sup>King Jr., Martin Luther, 'I Have a Dream'

<sup>14</sup>Pinsker, Sanford, 'He Had a Dream, and It Shot Him'

<sup>15</sup>King Jr., Martin Luther, 'I Have a Dream'

<sup>16</sup>Duffy, Bernard K. and Besel, Richard D., 'Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" and the Politics of Cultural Memory: An Apostill'

<sup>17</sup>ibid.

<sup>18</sup>ibid.

<sup>19</sup>ibid.

Although generations of them have been suffering for decades, and their lives were marked by a despair that still sometimes shines through their optimism, coloured people nonetheless do have a positive basic setting. They believe in a just world of brotherhood and equality in which everyone is free, and they trust themselves to have the power and will to achieve these goals with a peaceful revolution.

In Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, black people are rather depicted to be in a constant victim role. The setting adumbrates a weak financial position of the protagonists. The reader learns that a family of three adults and a child shares a two-bedroom-flat and that Walter is a chauffeur. He has got the feeling that he will never be able to provide his son with wealth, he mourns that all he could give him is "stories about how rich white people live."<sup>20</sup> When his wife does not show the reaction he desires, he accuses her for being one of those "colored women [who] [d]on't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something."<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, his bitter words are not addressed to *all* women who do not support their husbands, but to women with a dark complexion, like them being the only ones who are unable to behave correctly, or, as he puts it a moment later, "a race of women with small minds[.]"<sup>22</sup> Walter has got a clear perception of how the female sex should live and he states that in front of his ambitious sister - "go be a nurse like other women—or just get married and be quiet ..."<sup>23</sup> He sees themselves as members of "[t]he world's most backward race of people, and that's a fact,"<sup>24</sup> which is countered by Beneatha with the remark that "all those prophets" would "lead [them] out of the wilderness— [...] into the swamps!"<sup>25</sup> So she claims that white people are not more capable of showing their coloured fellow men how to live a better, cultivated life, but that they would only bring ruin upon the black people. She is the only optimistic and modern forward-thinking character in the play, and she does not share that longing for better living conditions, but criticizes rich coloured people to be even worse than rich white people<sup>26</sup> - Gordon calls it a dramatizing of "cross-class tensions, gender conflicts, and relationships between race pride and impulses towards assimilation."<sup>27</sup> The others seem to be at peace about their situation. Lena, for instance, points out that they were no business people, but "just plain working folks."<sup>28</sup> She

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<sup>20</sup>Hansberry, Lorraine, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 34

<sup>21</sup>ibid., Act 1, Scene 1, p. 34

<sup>22</sup>ibid., Act 1, Scene 1, p. 35

<sup>23</sup>ibid., Act 1, Scene 1, p. 38

<sup>24</sup>ibid., Act 1, Scene 1, p. 38

<sup>25</sup>ibid., Act 1, Scene 1, p. 38

<sup>26</sup>ibid., Act 1, Scene 1, p. 48

<sup>27</sup>Gordon, Michelle, "Somewhat Like War"

<sup>28</sup>Hansberry, Lorraine, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 42

quotes her deceased husband Big Walter who thought that it were the black people's fate to own nothing but dreams and children "to make them dreams worth while."<sup>29</sup> In terms of that issue, Ruth's horizons are not much broader - she can only repeat what her husband, Walter Jr., said, which contains the opinion that for them business is gambling.<sup>30</sup> Beneatha has both a sense of origin and progress. She is aware of her African roots and is interested in tradition and culture of the continent her ancestors once came from. She wants to study and become a doctor. At the same time she is pleased about the robes and music that Asagai brings her from Africa. She seems to be utterly aware of her identity, and she does not see her belonging to the black human race as an obstacle to live her dreams and reach her goals. What Asagai may not please very well is the fact that Beneatha's identity is not only constructed of African origin, but also of her own ideas of what she likes, influenced by American beauty standards: She straightens her hair, which is seen as "mutilation" by her lover Asagai.<sup>31</sup> Her other lover, upper-class George Murchison, complains about her traditional clothes and tells her not to be "so proud of yourself, Bennie—just because you look eccentric."<sup>32</sup> The young woman cannot understand his point of view, she calls her appearance "natural" and insults George to be an "assimilationist Negro", explaining to Ruth that "[i]t means someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case *oppressive* culture."<sup>33</sup> George's cynical remark makes clear that Beneatha is right with the image she got of him.<sup>34</sup>

She is, as Mafe puts it, the "new" black woman and "the intellectual voice of female debate" who "enjoys out-of-place middle-class luxuries" and "white middle-class hobbies" - such as guitar lessons - that "clearly point to her search for a self-defined identity, something that her mother and sister-in-law (women of an older generation) find amusing[.]"<sup>35</sup> In terms of personal values, she celebrates her blackness and puts a main emphasis on a new way of black pride and national identity as well as a taste of fashion and style that is ahead of its time, combined with a liking and interest in old "exotic" music and dance.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, Mafe sees the switching-off of the blues-playing radio as a metaphor of Beneatha's rejection of the typical African American culture, and she closes her character analysis with the conclusion that

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<sup>29</sup>ibid., Act 1, Scene 1, p. 45-46

<sup>30</sup>ibid., Act 1, Scene 1, p. 42

<sup>31</sup>ibid., Act 1, Scene 2, p. 61-62

<sup>32</sup>ibid., Act 2, Scene 1, p. 80

<sup>33</sup>ibid., Act 2, Scene 1, p. 81

<sup>34</sup>ibid., Act 2, Scene 1, p. 81

<sup>35</sup>all quotes in this sentence taken from Mafe, Diana Adesola, 'Black Women on Broadway'

<sup>36</sup>Mafe, Diana Adesola, 'Black Women on Broadway'

"[r]egardless of this eventual approval Beneatha consistently distances herself from stereotypes of womanhood in general and black womanhood in particular throughout the play, advocating her 'right' to a positive self-defined image of female subjectivity."<sup>37</sup>

Her brother Walter, on the other hand, hinges success on skin colour. He tells his mother about the "white boys" he jealously watches meeting in noble restaurants and "sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars."<sup>38</sup> To him, the meaning of life is money - "Because it *is* life"<sup>39</sup> (my emphasis) and not freedom, as his mother suggests. He fancies himself in being in a position that lacks of something supposedly important and therefore makes him being poorly off. He makes fun of students and their more cultivated speech - "going to your (*British A-a mimic*) 'clahsses.'"<sup>40</sup> This seems to be a world he does not understand and he acts a little helpless and jealous with his jokes spoken in African American vernacular:

"And for what! What the hell you learning over there? [...] How to take over and run the world? They teaching you how to run a rubber plantation or a steel mill? Naw—just to talk proper and read books and wear them faggoty-looking white shoes ..."<sup>41</sup>

In his opinion, this is not the world a negro belongs to, he only knows working on plantations and mills, like his ancestors did, and he himself does no brain-work in his job as a driver.

The head of the family, Lena Younger, is - in Mafe's words - "the stereotypical matriarch of the black family, a tower of spiritual strength"<sup>42</sup> who does not allow the disparaging term "nigger" to be uttered in her household. She only wants the best for her family, which is symbolized by the little sickly plant that she cares for, and has trouble with the money she got from her husband's life insurance, for she knows that she cannot please everyone - either she would upset her son if she did not give him all the money for his liquor store, or she could not help her daughter to become a doctor. She finally decides to buy a house so that everyone does at least have a home, but here again she made a lapse and bought a house in a completely "white" neighbourhood, because her priority was "to find the nicest place for the least amount of money for my family."<sup>43</sup> She is aware of her origin and her roots, but in a

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<sup>37</sup>ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Hansberry, Lorraine, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Act 1, Scene 2, p. 74

<sup>39</sup>ibid., Act 1, Scene 2, p. 74

<sup>40</sup>ibid., Act 2, Scene 1, p. 84

<sup>41</sup>ibid., Act 2, Scene 1, p. 84-85

<sup>42</sup>Mafe, Diana Adesola, 'Black Women on Broadway'

<sup>43</sup>Hansberry, Lorraine, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Act 2, Scene 1, p. 91

different way: She emphasizes that she comes "from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers" and she has got a sense of pride when it comes to paying off their new neighbours and leave them their house - "but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We ain't never been that poor. [...] We ain't never been that-dead inside."<sup>44</sup> She is disappointed when her son announces to take the money of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association and forces him to show little Travis "where our five generations done come to."<sup>45</sup>

The episode in which the family is "begged" not to move to Clybourne Park is borrowed from the author's own experiences,<sup>46</sup> in the play embodied by Mr Lindner, whose flowery speech has got the only content that the white people who already live there do not want any black neighbours. The physical act of moving, Gordon tells us, is a metaphor for the escape of dark-skinned Americans of Chicago's black ghettos and for the "necessary mass movement to reconstruct the social order"<sup>47</sup> and she adds: "In buying the house in Clybourne Park, Mama asserts her family's right to refute the economic exploitation of Chicago segregation."<sup>48</sup> According to her, Hansberry hits the mark with this story and reveals what she calls the white Americans' "fear of integration"<sup>49</sup>, shown in the two lines:

BENEATHA What they think we going to do-eat 'em?

RUTH No, honey, marry 'em.<sup>50</sup>

Besides, Gordon points out that the whole play is about "segregation struggles in Chicago as a penultimate symbol of black oppression and resistance. In doing so, she brought local, individual struggles of African Americans - against segregation, ghettoization, and capitalist exploitation - to the national stage."<sup>51</sup> And later she adds that "*A Raisin in the Sun* insists on local and global black revolution."<sup>52</sup> So Hansberry's work is not only a depiction of a stereotypical black family, but a critical political play and an affront against white dominance in the America of the 20th century. Others<sup>53</sup> argue that the play does not deal with racial identity in particular, that the problems the protagonists are struggling with are not tied to

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<sup>44</sup>ibid., Act 3, p. 143

<sup>45</sup>ibid., Act 3, p. 147

<sup>46</sup>Gordon, Michelle, "Somewhat Like War"

<sup>47</sup>ibid.

<sup>48</sup>ibid.

<sup>49</sup>ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Hansberry, Lorraine, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Act 2, Scene 3, p. 120

<sup>51</sup>Gordon, Michelle, "Somewhat Like War"

<sup>52</sup>ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Bernstein, Robin, 'Inventing a Fishbowl'

their African American origin. Hansberry herself had been asked about that by an interviewer and gave an intelligent and clever reply, quoted in Bernstein's essay:

*Interviewer:* [...] 'This is not really a Negro play; why; this could be about anybody! It's a play about people!' [...]

*Hansberry:* Well[,] I hadn't noticed the contradiction because I'd always been under the impression that Negroes *are* people ...

How can the construction of racial identity in *A Raisin in the Sun* be summarized? In the play, several protagonists appear who have different kinds of character traits. All in all, they shape a picture of black identity in 20th century's America: Walter represents the comparatively uneducated, poor lower-class worker without prospects. His mother Lena is the typical mama who cares for her family and sees herself at the end of a row of hard-working ancestors. Ruth plays the role of the well-behaved housewife who cooks for her beloved husband and looks after the children. And last but not least: Beneatha embodies the New Negro who is curious, open-minded, modern, and interested in several cultures including one's own origin. Home is another contributory factor that helps to understand how identity is expressed: It is the place where people can behave however they desire and just be themselves. This enables the spectator to observe the characters as they *really* act in their world - healing "many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination."<sup>54</sup> The play demonstrates realistically what life as a black family in Chicago's ghettos was like, and which problems occur for them in their everyday live.

Compared to Martin Luther King's strong speech, the *Raisin* does not shy away from illustrating coloured people's shortcomings, such as frustration and desperation that derived from decade-long suppression. Lorraine Hansberry allowed the representatives of her idea of racial identity to show weakness and despair allied with hopelessness and uncertainty - the family is about to move, but what will happen in their new inhospitable neighbourhood? -, whereas King converted those negative feelings to optimism, affections and hope.

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<sup>54</sup>quotation by bell hooks, quoted in Avilez, GerShun, 'Housing the Black Body'



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