

INTEGRATION, ASSIMILATION, AND IDENTITY
IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *A RAISIN*
IN *THE SUN* AND BARBARA AND CARLTON
MOLETTE'S *ROSALEE PRITCHETT*

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You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones
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!
Yes, it'll be me.
—Langston Hughes

ABSTRACT

Two plays representative of the social analysis and change taking place in the United States during the late 1950s through the 1970s are Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Barbara and Carlton Molette's 1970 play *Rosalee Pritchett*. It may appear odd to discuss these two plays together. Hansberry's *Raisin* was viewed by many at the time as an integrationist play, the diametrical opposite of the Molettes' *Rosalee Pritchett*. While the playwrights are generally taken to represent opposite ends of the spectrum of African American thinking and behavior at the time, ironically, in their portrayal of responses to the challenges confronting African Americans at the time their works intersect. Both plays continue to inspire African Americans more than thirty years after their productions. Film director Spike Lee even refers to Lorraine Hansberry's play as part of African American history: "*Raisin* is still fresh, it's still relevant. Lorraine Hansberry was a visionary" (Lee xlvii). These two plays show the development of the Black Arts Movement in the theatre and the formulation of a Black Aesthetic from the sixties through the early 1970s stressing revolution in racial dynamics in the United States. This Afrocentric analysis of both *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Rosalee Pritchett* rediscovers the depth and breadth of Hansberry's and the Molette's social and political concerns as manifest in their work.

KEYWORDS: Integration, assimilation, identity, Afrocentric theatre, The Black Aesthetic, Neo-racial sensibility



La obra de teatro escrita por Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, estrenada en Broadway en 1959, y la obra de Carlton y Barbara Molette titulada *Rosalee Pritchett*, estrenada en 1970, son representativas del cambio y análisis social que aconteció en los Estados Unidos a finales de los años cincuenta y en las décadas de los años sesenta y setenta. A primera vista el análisis de estas dos obras en apariencia tan dispares puede resultar extraño, ya que *Raisin* fue visto por muchos como representante del teatro integracionista de finales de los cincuenta, mientras que *Rosalee Pritchett* era una obra separatista. Sin embargo, ambas obras tienen un nexo de unión y es que las dos ofrecen respuesta a los retos a los que se enfrentaban los Afro Americanos en este período histórico. El presente artículo analizará la temática de ambas obras teatrales desde una perspectiva Afrocéntrica, por su relevancia política y social que aún hoy sirve de inspiración a dramaturgos norteamericanos contemporáneos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Integración, asimilación, identidad, teatro afrocéntrico, a Estética Negra, sensibilidad neo-racial

1. THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AND NEO-RACIAL SENSIBILITY.

By the late 1990s African American scholars see the need to re-address the issue of the persistent racial inequality in America, and they contend that racial stratification remains a serious source of inequality in U.S. society (Brown ix). These black scholars point to contemporary allegations of “Post-race,” referring to the millions of North Americans who consider that racial difference or racial discrimination no longer exists, obviating any need to consider this category as a social factor. This line of argumentation might mislead us into thinking that the contemporary U.S. has reached its long-desired status of a colorblind society and that, given the success of the Civil Rights Movement, there is no longer any need for color-conscious policies. However, to accept that premise is to live in a state of illusion, believing that contemporary African Americans are not confronted with situations loaded with subtle racism in their everyday life. Those defenders of a “Post-racial era,” then, may live in self-deceit, just as the characters of the Molette’s play *Rosalee Pritchett* do, thinking that they are above racial prejudice only because they have reached middle-class status. Ralph A. Banks unmasks the fallacy of the colorblind theory, and encourages us to fight this fiction, suggesting that we acquire a “neo-racial sensibility” which “recognizes the persistence of racism and segregation and troubling racial inequalities” (47-50).¹ In fact, 30 years ago the Molettes’ alerted both reader and public alike to the dangers of living their lives disconnected from the truth of their own

¹ One just needs to remember the events in Norway and London and other English cities. In Oslo, at least 77 people died at the hands of a right-wing extremist, and in London, Birmingham and Manchester five people died in July and August 2011 in the riots that broke out after the police killed a young black man. In 2012 Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in Sandford, Florida, and in August 2014 Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri.

cultural sources. This is precisely the message that Toni Morrison has put forward with her project of re-memory which encourages African Americans to resist forgetting who they are and what brought them to the present through an active engagement with the deliberate act of remembering, which she claims, is an act of “willed creation” (Morrison 235). Morrison urges Black people to look into the traces of cultural memory –what Harry Elam call “a cultural engram”– which is engraved into the psyche, and stimulated by cultural materials such as plays, rituals and music.

Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* addressed the tensions implicit in being both black and female, rejecting the notion that either characteristic was limiting. She aimed at the expansion of both categories –race and gender– as markers of identity and the shift in the concept of identity among African American individuals in the post-civil right era of the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, Carlton W. Molette and Barbara J. Molette’s play *Rosalee Pritchett* clearly exemplifies the themes of Black struggle. When New York City’s *Negro Ensemble Company* presented *Rosalee Pritchett* by the young husband-and-wife playwright team, the company introduced a play that not only received excellent reviews, but fully exemplified the company’s consistent emphasis on “themes of Black Struggle.” The Molettes’ *Rosalee Pritchett* continued the analysis of the impact of white values on black society first seen in Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. But within a ten-year span the impact of white-middle class values on the African American community had changed greatly. The Younger’s dream of integration has been interpreted by both blacks and whites as an attempt to assimilate into white middle-class America. In contrast, the Pritchetts in *Rosalee Pritchett* are living with the illusion that they have already been assimilated into the white middle-class. The illusion of their successful assimilation, however, is transformed into a bitter recognition of the truth of their lives when Mrs. Pritchett suffers a brutal rape at the hands of white law officials.

Assimilation is still the driving force behind the American dream –as the recent studies of colorblind theory point out– the vehicle by which one seeks to achieve the ever-elusive American dream. Yet it is also strongly related to W.E.B. DuBois’ concept of double consciousness as he conceived it in 1903: “one ever feels his twoness –an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (45). The term double consciousness, as defined by DuBois, still aptly defines Black Americans’ struggle to identify according to their own set of values and culture, while at the same time striving to be accepted by white society in order to share equally in the fruits of the American dream.

Assimilation, a major theme in both of these plays, is an ideology that gives rise in the 1970s to its dialectical opposition, namely the Black Aesthetic. As promulgated by Addison Gayle in his volume *The Black Aesthetic* (1971) this ideology simultaneously opposed the dominant Western, European-based American cultural aesthetic and supported the aesthetics of African American ethnicity. In this context, Lorrain Hansberry was considered as an integrationist, and integrationists were simplistically viewed as assimilationists, positively so by most whites and negatively so by some African Americans. As Geneviève Fabre points out, social relations in the theatre resembled those in the larger society: for whites, domination, authority, and monopoly;



for blacks, exclusion, lack of initiative, half-silence (9). It was therefore hard to work out a compromise between the strategies for integration, which valued the white world, and those for Black self-determination rooted in African American cultural sources. The difficulties for reaching such a compromise are among the reasons why Hansberry's play gave rise to such controversy. The play's title, from Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, effectively showed how the dream of equality and civil rights for African Americans and their political and cultural goal for black self-determination was constantly frustrated. Written shortly before riots erupted in the ghettos across the nation, *Raisin in the Sun* seemed to calm down the people who feared violent uprisings, and contributed to demonstrating that life in the ghetto does not always lead to crime or disgrace. Integration within this context becomes a well-deserved reward for the moral choices the members of the Younger family have made with great effort on their part. As Harris notices, the characters of *Raisin* "made the monster of segregation appear to be not only something that could be tackled, but something that could be overcome" (22).

Raisin in the Sun, however, has been criticized for ignoring the values of the black world but in 1959 it was well received, on the one hand, "because blacks were more concerned about interracial issues than intraracial issues" (Harris 38) and, on the other, because "audiences identified with Mama Lena and her family because they recognized themselves in her or in members of her household" (21). In its resolution of conflict, black audiences generally saw an image of an African American family dealing with issues of identity and choice that were important to black people.

Hansberry's play, while hard hitting, could be read as a "pull yourself up by your bootstrap" type of play-which is one of the reasons it played so successfully on Broadway. While it contained tough messages, they were presented through figures familiar to the white American public on a superficial level.

In contrast to Hansberry, Carlton and Barbara Molette were viewed as "revolutionaries" and "militants" because their play, *Rosalee Pritchett*, directly confronted the oppressive tangle of assimilation-the ways African Americans responded to it that were in conflict with their own agency. Aimed at a primarily black audience, the Molettes' play lifted the veil covering assimilation, presenting it straightforwardly to the public. The Pritchetts and those blacks who lived by the standards and white values imposed on them by white society were seen as traitors to their own race. Black doctors and lawyers, successful black businessmen who felt superior to the poorer blacks, exhibit an arrogance that disconnects them from the roots of black folk culture. By the 1970s Black America began to question the Civil Rights Movement and the ideology that had undergirded it.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Black Americans were reclaiming their own culture. Daniel Moynihan and Nathan Glazer, in their "Moynihan Report" (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1965) to the nation, alleged that black people did not have a culture, that they only imitated whites, and therefore had no ethnicity. The Moynihan report was seen by prominent black intellectuals and politicians as racist, and they dismissed the report as an attempt to impose white, middle-class values on poor blacks whose behavior was simply different from, not inferior to the norm



Within this context, assimilation became increasingly subject to critique by those for whom such an ideology and strategy no longer made any sense. The years from 1964 to 1969 witnessed lectures, debates, and panel discussions organized by scholars, organizations, and institutions that sought to align themselves with the Black Arts Movement. The topics covered the major themes of integration, acculturation, and the relations between blacks and American culture. Black and white intellectuals engaged in a dialogue to exchange ideas and feelings, and for the first time in the history of American theatre black dramatists discussed their work with critics before a black audience. By the 1970s, black theatre began to define its audience in specific terms. It eliminated first the whites, then the black bourgeoisie, those in the black community who had internalized the values of the dominant society. Art was created and dedicated for black people. That was the beginning of Afrocentric Theatre.

The beginning of the contemporary Black Theatre Movement took place in Harlem, with Amiri Baraka (then Leroi Jones) as head of the movement with his ground breaking play *Dutchman* (1964). Baraka contended that the use of dramatic arts had to be a weapon in the struggle for black liberation. The Black Theatre Movement espoused plays dealing with race relations in the US: plays directed as much to whites as to blacks. It was a theatre used to confront the system on a cultural level: invective plays aimed at denouncing the system for the past and present injustices that it inflicted on black people. The plays accomplished one thing that both Baraka and the rest of emergent young playwrights (among which were the Molettes) declared theatre must do: raise the consciousness of their audiences about the Black experience.

Presented by the Morehouse-Spelman Players in Atlanta on March 1970, it harshly condemned the imitation of society's most meaningless bourgeois practices. By the late sixties the development of the Black Arts movement in the theatre, the increased emphasis on Black pride, and the formulation of a Black aesthetic stressing racial revolution, had created a receptive climate for black nonparticipation in the white world. Blacks felt that they had their own culture and felt proud of it, and they wanted to show it. Black drama reclaimed the unquestionable right to express a life that no white person could experience and that no outsider could properly convey. *Rosalee Pritchett*, then, is among the plays that took on the mission of warily deconstructing the tantalizing myth of the American dream and debunking the promises of integration.

By the 1970s the American dream for African Americans had dissipated, deferred and postponed for too long and too repeatedly. In its challenge to white supremacists' hegemonic ideals, the Molette's play became part and parcel of that battle, of the black struggle for racial and social equality. The female characters in *Rosalee Pritchett* were very much like the "assimilated" character of George Murchison in *Raisin*, whose dearest dream was to be en route to making it the American way:



“to get the grades... to get a degree”(83)² to which one could easily add “to marry white.” Thus, both *Rosalee Pritchett*, and *Raisin in the Sun* pondered, what had become of the American dream? *Rosalee Pritchett* clearly represented the disillusion of the Civil Rights Movement. The American dream in the post sixties had become a nightmare, since the lives of the black middle class had turned insipid. As Barksdale commented, referring to the Black ladies in *RP*, they had become “so encumbered by the meaningless values of the white middle-class that its members have lost all sense of identification with their race” (824). While Hansberry critiqued the white supremacist dream that was American reality in 1959, the Molettes attacked the bourgeois practices of the black middle-class in the 1970s.

The deferred dream Langston Hughes invoked in his great poem “Harlem” informed both *Raisin* and *Rosalee Pritchett*. If Hansberry’s play projected the possibility of that dream’s becoming a reality, the angry tone of *Rosalee Pritchett* demonstrated that the much-awaited dream had in fact, exploded. The content and performance of *Rosalee Pritchett* clearly indicated that blacks and whites inhabited separate and probably irreconcilable worlds.

2.

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

Lorraine Hansberry revolutionized Black theatre in America when her play *A Raisin in the Sun* became the first play by an African American woman produced on Broadway, running for 530 performances. This play won *The New York Drama Critics Circle Award*, making her the fifth woman, the youngest playwright, and the first black woman in America to receive such an honor.³

Raisin marked the beginning of a “serious and mature Negro Theater in America” (79). The play offered a positive portrayal of a black family to black audiences: the survival of the family as a unit in spite of living in an environment structured to oppress and exploit them. The play also raised other thorny questions relevant for the African American communities of the late 1950s: abortion, ownership of the insurance money, who was head of the household, and the quest for higher education as an important mechanism not only to obtain financial rewards but most importantly because of its intrinsic value for the black community of much needed services of health professionals. The different generations of the Younger’s family

² Further references to this work will be given within the text as RS, and will make reference to this edition.

³ Lorraine Hansberry contributed to American theatre with two other plays that were also produced on Broadway: *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (1964) and the posthumously produced *Les Blancs* (1970). Hansberry’s vision and understanding of playwriting was sociopolitical at its heart, and through her art, we perceive Hansberry as a resolute activist. Her autobiography *To be Young, Gifted and Black* (1969) references some of the events that shaped her writing.



differ in their ideas of what constitutes security for the family, but the broader theme that brings the different issues of the play together is racial uplift.

In the play, the insurance money serves as a catalyst, projecting the family into a situation that not only causes dramatic conflicts, but tests their individual characters. Hansberry wanted to explore the specifics of Black life, the ideas and urges that fueled their lives politically and personally. The play suggests that somehow apparently disparate things come together when Walter Lee refuses Lindner's offer and Lena insists that her grandson Travis stays in the room when this conversation takes place. In his speech turning down the Clybourne Park bribe, Walter brings along with him the true, life-sustaining traditions of his Black heritage embodied in his family, including his son, the next generation and future bearer of the family values. These values that emphasize community and continuity, a sense of family tradition and heritage, are rooted in a solid identification with the Black community which "offers them sustenance to keep on surviving and dreaming" (Gallego 132).

However, in the late 1950s, when the play debuted, Walter Lee was not seen as a hero by white audiences. He played the role of the angry black man, an image that many white liberals found threatening because of his aspirations to own a liquor business, and the critique of his white employer. The fact that both Walter Lee and his father were black men with jobs and part of a black household helped to debunk the belief that African American values generated households dominated by women. Lorraine Hansberry's assertion that Lena was "the Black matriarch incarnate" is highly misleading because the content of the play contradicts this idea. In the 1950s there were very few representations of black females in theatre and in the media, and almost all of them were images of black women in subservient roles to white families. The strength of Lena within her family is problematic for whites who saw a black female character's assertion of strength or independence as a threat. This prejudiced gaze would also interpret any sign of respect by an adult male family member as subservience.

The fact that Walter Lee listens to his mother who is also the elder of the family is a sign of respect in consonance with the cultural heritage of Black family life. Walter Lee does not have to follow Lena's advice because as Lena clearly states in Act II, Scene 2, "I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be" (87). The concept that Lena exerts control over her family, emasculating the male in the household is the product of white male prejudice. According to C. Molette, Walter Lee emerges in *Raisin* as a true Afrocentric hero when he changes his behavior as a result of self-realization. Rising to his legitimate status as head of the household and coming to terms with his own manhood inspired by a sense of values rooted in his own family's perception of security and advance for the race, Walter Lee opens up to a harsh world of new opportunities for himself, his family, and for the rest of Blacks everywhere in the US.

Hansberry's political and social agenda included the recovery of the Negro interest and pride in an African past that had begun in the 1930s by Harlem Renaissance writers such as Langston Hughes or Countee Cullen. She wanted to overcome the stereotyped image of Africans and to present them as they really were. Her portrayals of the ignorance of both Lena and George Mur-



chison about the different aspects of cultural memory and links between Black America and Africa illustrate her idea that both blacks and whites in America needed to be educated about the achievements and values of Africans. African Americans needed such information even more than whites did because their self-images and self-understanding depended in part upon their pride in their shared cultural heritage. However, Hansberry never intended to glorify African culture at the expense of African American culture.

Asagai, Beneatha's African schoolmate and friend, gives hope assuring that life is endless, full of cyclic renewal. From his point of view, fulfillment follows disappointment. The message is loud and clear: never surrender; keep on fighting. Asagai helps Beneatha to complete an African American identity rooted in African culture, history and beliefs—he gives her a Nigerian robe, African music, and criticizes her “unnatural” pressed hair, which he blames on “assimilationism” (49). Thus, Asagai introduces audiences to the beauty of all these vital aspects of African tradition. As Hansberry remarked in an interview, she viewed Asagai as representative of the “emergence of an articulate and deeply conscious colonial intelligentsia in the world” (Terkel 41). However, Hansberry does not romanticize the problems inherent in African patriarchy.

The Youngers are going to move into a white neighborhood not because they want to integrate, but because they have the right to do so—“it meant moving into a better neighborhood with better homes and facilities, not into a white ghetto just to snuggle up with whites” (Mayfield 267), because five generations of hardworking, honest people have made a deferred dream possible. The deep spirituality and connection with ancestry have won out over racist assimilationist attitudes. As Steven Carter points out, “integration is not the issue. Rather, the test that the Youngers face is of their willingness to take potentially fatal risks to get out of an intolerable situation and to force change upon an oppressive system” (22). What Hansberry wanted to show with her play was “the many gradations even in one Negro family, the clash of the old and new, but most of all the incredible courage of the Negro People” (Dannett 262). Baraka asserts that the concerns he once dismissed as middle-class—buying a house and moving into ‘white folks’ neighborhoods’—are in fact reflective of the essence of black people’s striving and the will to defeat segregation, discrimination, and national oppression. Baraka further suggests that “there is no such thing as a ‘white folk’s neighborhood’ except to racists and to those submitting to racism” (19-20).

Ruth, Walter’s wife, is the victim of both racism and sexism, she’s pregnant with a child she cannot afford, and her inner life is dangerously deteriorating when she falls into hopelessness which turns to self-destructive behavior. The idea of moving into a new house invigorates her inner strength, makes her forget the idea of abortion, and enables her to alleviate the misunderstandings and differences between the generations of the Younger family.

In the end, although Walter discards his original dream, he’s ready for future challenges and he gains hope. Hansberry creates substantial characters that live and grow. The Younger family symbolized the opposing systems of thought that continue to tear the country and the African American community apart, each character individu-



ally, and the family as a whole. The contest was also between the individual and the collective good. This was not a play simply about upward mobility or integration, but about the need of the African American community to embark upon a journey towards wholeness which entailed self-determination and identity, values which presented the black family “as a critical enduring site of cultural memory (Elam 46), legitimizing the Younger’s family’s right to the American dream and recognizing that “transgressing the color line is not going to be without difficulty, violence, or casualty” (Matthews 571). With her play, Hansberry identified “the seeds of what will later become the Black Power movement” warning that “continued white separatism may generate a violent separatist backlash” (Matthews 576). In *Raisin* we can appreciate the pervasive presence of racial discrimination in both job opportunities and home ownership.

3.

Black theatre is now the most vital, exciting theatre in America. Whites can enjoy some marvelous experiences... and some dreadful ones, too. But until we pay our dues, white folks must attend black theatre with humility; it's a place to learn not only about black folks, but mostly about ourselves. (James V. Hatch)

The Negro Ensemble Company officially formed in 1967 by actor Robert Hooks. It paved the way for Black Americans to present a voice that had been aggressively stifled for three hundred years. As source and sustenance for black actors, directors, and writers, *The Negro Ensemble Company* has worked to break down walls of racial prejudice through art. *The NEC* became the proving ground for some of the country’s brightest black actors, actresses and playwrights, and an expression of the Black experience in the U.S.

Rosalee Pritchett would easily fit within the company’s repertoire for the play is a moving comment on the ever changing social values of Black America. The play proves the absurdity of attempting to gratify pseudo-bourgeois tastes while North American society is suffering from a prolonged racial nervous breakdown. *Rosalee Pritchett* is a grim play: none of the characters at the end has learned anything regarding renewal and change; the message seems to be that a massive social paralysis has taken place, fixing situations into racially rigid patterns. The Molette’s aim would seem to be that the audience should leave this play perturbed and dissatisfied. All the black characters in the play have suffered a brainwashing of sorts, as they have been totally assimilated by white upper-middle class values.

Rosalee Pritchett is a play intended for an African American audience because it does include a description of experiences generally known among whites in order to inform or persuade them about African Americans. As a result, white audience members often feel that the characters were insufficiently explained, inadequately motivated or two-dimensional. As such, *Rosalee Pritchett* is a short play rather than full-length because the plot does not have to grow out of characterization, but can grow, instead, out of other environmental and experiential forces. When analyzing *Rosalee Pritchett* there is a difference of opinion among critics about what the audience



needs to be told about the characters.⁴ The Molettes have written a play informed by the principles of African American drama, exposed by Carlton Molette in his article “The Way to Viable Theater? Afro-American Ritual Drama” (1973). One purpose of this Afrocentric ritual would be the sense of community; a feeling of togetherness which in the case of *Rosalee Pritchett* turns into an absence of a sense of community. This is a strategy to isolate both characters and public, to cause estrangement in the black audience, so that the public does not identify either with the actors or with the play. Another principle of Afro-American ritual drama would be a call for authenticity, formalism being the main stylistic concern. Formalism intends to project an ideal form, so the actors do not need to pretend to be somebody other than themselves. African American aesthetic calls for “soulful behavior” which consists of the building of emotional intensity through rhythm, creating a total spiritual involvement with a proper purgation of emotions. Another purpose of the Afro-American ritual drama is to be functional, thus *Rosalee Pritchett* has deliberately sought to change the values of African Americans rather than to validate or strengthen existing ones.

Rosalee Pritchett is a one act play in four scenes, taking place in a southern city during a race riot. In the play Rose is an ultra-grand colored lady who meets with her three black friends, Belle, Dorry and Doll to play her weekly game of bridge. The action in Scene 1 takes place at Dorry’s house, where the ladies’ snobbish talk reveals their total adherence to white middle-class values. Besides the dialogue, the scene is presented with several shots of slides on rear projection screens. The production that took place at St. Marks Playhouse, New York, in 1971, under the direction of Shauneille Perry,⁵ used 300 slides on four different rear projection screens. For instance, Rose’s speech explains how she is at the hospital because she has suffered a nervous breakdown. It shows her in very middle-class social venues, including cocktail parties and art galleries events in the company of her white friends which are juxtaposed with pictures of the riot and of burning of buildings. Throughout the play’s action, which all takes place in form of flashbacks, Rosalee is sitting in a hospital room on an upstage platform participating in the dialogue and, with pantomime, in the scenes taking place below.

Rose first appears before the public in a baggy and unfashionable hospital garb, declaring that she is in the hospital because she has had a nervous breakdown as a consequence of the riots in the city. Even if her husband, Dr. Pritchett, has warned her not to go out at night because it might not be safe, she believes she is quite safe in the neighborhood where she and her friends live, since the riots are occurring in the downtown ghetto area. Talking to her friends, Rose declares that “out here, a woman is safer at night than she would be downtown in broad daylight” (826). Rose and her friends desire to detach themselves from the incidents

⁴ For instance, Arthur Sainer, reviewer of the play for the *Village Voice* in 1971, thought that “the characters are pidgin people, unable to generate their own lives. It’s too bad, because the material is potentially rich, the ideas worth exploring. But the exploration doesn’t happen.” January 28: 59.

⁵ Interestingly, Shauneille Perry, playwright and director, is Lorraine Hansberry’s cousin.



that they label as “vandalism” and the riots because they think that they belong to the middle-class white society that has nothing to do with the embarrassing events taking place downtown. Rose and her friends consider themselves above the rest of blacks in town because they have scaled the social class ladder and moved into the middle-class. The reader only suspects from the beginning that the so-called “riots” are no other than the efforts of less fortunate blacks to fight against racism and the lack of civil rights in the area. For instance, Rose’s husband, Dr. Pritchett, refuses to help cure those blacks hurt in the fighting downtown because, according to his wife, “he doesn’t want to offend his regular patients” (827).

There is a total lack of identification of the characters with the on-going struggle for racial and social equality in the country. The women are very upset because their dinner parties might not be celebrated as their black maids are frightful of going out at night during the curfew. These black maids together with the rest of blacks taking part in the riot are classified as “poor and choosy niggers” by Rose and her lady friends. These women, as one might suppose, have high expectations for their sons: they expect them to marry white—but not “trashy” white, and to marry rich. Their admiration for white middle-class values has blinded them and they hold poor lower-class black people responsible for the alleged lootings and racial violence taking place in the city. Dr. Pritchett, has even refused to attend any colored people injured in the riots, fearful that his white business associates “might interpret that he is mixed up in the vandalism” (827).

During the 1970s black play writers were more concerned with intraracial issues, a topic which is still relevant today. In *Rosalee Pritchett* the Molettes actively fight against those blacks who had no sense of an African American culture, and had distanced themselves from lower-class African Americans—activists, writers, and middle-class blacks because in trying very hard to reach the American dream, by moving into upper-class white neighborhoods, and striving to demonstrate to the white world that they were the same, that equality indeed was a fact in America, they had lost touch with the roots of black folk culture. There is also a strong commentary on family values when Rose talks about her son’s situation with her friends. The fact that her son, who is attending medical school, has been invited to join a white fraternity, is interpreted by the group as “moving up in the world” (827). By entering the white social university world, he will hopefully marry into a rich white family, thus making real the “American Dream.” We also learn that Rose is the first Negro woman to join the “Daughters of the American Revolution” (828), signifying on her own efforts to climb up the social ladder into the world of whiteness, and ironically indicating the unwillingness of the snobbish black bourgeois to join The Civil Rights Movement.

In Scene 2, we learn through Rose’s soliloquy that the town in which the characters live has had Martial Law imposed while riots are going on all around it. At this point, Rose’s presence on the stage is only represented by a small pool of light, signifying the invisibility of Rose as a character in the play, and as an African American on the larger stage of American culture. Invoking Ralph Ellison’s notion of black invisibility, the play works with the idea that African Americans are invisible people simply because white people refuse to see them. Such a notion renders Rose’s character two dimensional, as her representation moves from figurative to literal invisibility.



The Molettes take the concept of invisibility one step further in this play when they make Rose, a black character, invisible for a black audience. African Americans who have been assimilated refuse to see Rose as much as Rose and the rest of the characters in the play refuse to see themselves and other African Americans. Rose puts down members of the Black Movement whom she calls “lazy, shiftless niggers” (828), while she refers positively to the assimilationists as being responsible for the “Negro businesses.” Further, she relates how one of her friends has been shot downtown, and points out the injustice of blaming this crime on the National Guard when white police, according to Rose, are just there to protect all citizens, especially those “law-abiding citizens” like herself: “It’s no telling what those niggers might try next. Somebody had to take control of the situation, and I’m glad our governor had the courage to stand up for law and order” (828). Obviously Rose feels very secure that her husband’s professional status will protect her from the racists. However, she will bitterly find out that, as Malcolm X used to say, “they don’t mess with us because we are rich or poor, light-skinned or dark skinned, Protestant, Catholic or Muslim, white collar or blue collar but because we are black” (qtd. in Bailey 23).

Scene 3 introduces four national guardsmen who are patrolling the streets of Rose’s neighborhood, thus eluding their responsibilities to patrol the areas where they are needed, namely in the ghetto areas where the riots are taking place. The National Guard, composed of all white men, are portrayed by African American actors in white-face. This technique is used for reasons other than to convey the idea of a minstrel show-in-reverse.⁶ The playwrights’ notes to the director in *Rosalee Pritchett* explained that they used black actors to portray the white roles because they had a sincere doubt that most white actors could or would accurately portray these black playwright’s perceptions about the motivations of the white characters in this play.

Frequently, the meaning of a character in an African American play is communicated through experiences that the actor holds in common with the African American members of the audience. Whites who are often oblivious to these attitudes and values will have difficulty accepting the truth of African American reality.⁷

According to the Molettes, “one such truth that underlies African American behavior is that whites, in general, are frequently held in contempt by African American people” (209). Thus, *Rosalee Pritchett*’s inherent contradiction and the hidden powerful message of the play is that if most blacks see whites with contempt, why would they want to assimilate and emulate white, Eurocentric culture? This idea brings to the fore the absurdity of the black community that aspires to

⁶ Plays performed as minstrel shows in reverse call for an all black cast performing in white face.

⁷ For instance, when African American novelist Toni Morrison wanted to write a book about black people, in the language of black people, without having to look over her shoulder to explain her world to white people, she gave the following opening to her novel *The Bluest Eye*: “‘Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941.’” To white people, ‘Quiet as it’s kept means... ‘Quiet as it’s kept...’ but to black people,” Morrison explained, “it means a big lie is about to be told. Or someone is going to tell some graveyard information, who’s sleeping with whom. Black readers will chuckle” (Qtd. In David 40).



follow white cultural values and ideals. Thus, whites expect African American drama to exhibit what they regard

as authenticity of external detail. This usually means having African American character types who fit easily into preconceived Eurocentric notions about who and what African American people are. Therefore, pimps, prostitutes, dope addicts and petty thieves are regarded as authentically African American while doctors, lawyers, bankers or college professors for instance, are not regarded as authentically African American. (*Premise* 210)

Also implied is the question the Molettes want to send their audience: are the black ladies in *Rosalee Pritchett* “oreos”?⁸ Rose as a grand colored lady is compulsively seeking not just to enter white society but to establish an intimate relationship with a white person. In other words, the idea here is that the African American will be somebody only to the extent that he or she is able to connect his or her own goals and aspirations to the goals and aspirations of the white people they look up to.

The Guardsmen in the play are portrayed as complete racists whose only aim is to “keep them niggers in their place” (830). They are heavily armed, and they assert their manhood by ordering people around at gun point, proud of their absolute power and authority. For instance, one of the Guards, Lowe, believes in the power of the authority exerted by guns, and tells the others about his instruction in the education of his sons: “... you take my sons, by the time the oldest one is twelve, he’ll be able to shoot the warts off a frog. Believe me, that’s the way to raise boys” (829). Thus, the play problematizes the relationship between white manhood and violence, connecting this argument with issues concerning the racist attitudes of white manhood in American society during the 1970s.

The Guards suffer from a terminal case of “Afrophobia” or “Afrophobic” behavior when they demonstrate that their only way of securing an identity is by inflicting harm on blacks; “First nigger that showed his black ass, I’d shoot the shit outta him” (829) they declare. This violent white behavior, the Molettes state, grows out of values that result from a general fear of African people and African culture. The play depicts

whites who commit violent acts against African Americans [...] not [...] because they have chosen to do wrong. They are doing what seems to them to be the right thing to do at the time, no matter how misguided their actions might be. Their behavior reflects their values. (*Premise* 222)

Evil lies, and in this the Molettes agree with James Baldwin, in the system that instills racist values, not in the individual who reacts to perpetuate and defend

⁸ “Oreo” is a term of disparagement used by black people to describe a person who is black on the outside and white on the inside” (211).



them⁹ and they contend that “Black people in America exist in an environment of institutional racism” (*Premise* 221).

The play’s flashback action shows that while Rose drives home from her bridge party she is stopped on the road by the Guards who arrest her under the charge of “curfew violation.” She repeats over and over that she lives in a nice neighborhood that never had any trouble. Not paying any attention to Rose’s demands to be allowed to go home, the Guards get into her car to beat and rape Rose. The play shows us that rape is not a crime of uncontrollable sexual passion, but one used to vent misogyny and, in this case, racism and to exert physical, political, and economic control. That the perpetrators of crime here are agents of the law and lawful authority suggests that the root of rape was a violent physical assertion of white power. The rape scene in *Rosalee Pritchett* illustrates how rape continues to be the most lethal weapon used to oppress, suppress, and dehumanize black women in order to subvert their efforts to lead independent lives.¹⁰ In the case of Rose, rape emerges as a narrative strategy tragically undermining the liberatory impulses that characterizes the Civil Rights Movement happening downtown, and that the protagonist, in her refusal to accepting the struggle of the rest of the blacks in the city, also rejects. Thus, rape “functions as a narrative violence that abrogates transgressive desire and frustrates the utopian political aspirations that underlie such desire” (Barnett xii).

In Scene 4, Rose’s bridge table is joined by Thelma, a newcomer to the group, and also a social climber. The friends totally ignore what has happened to Rose, who just appears to be a victim of a nervous breakdown. Their responses to her rape are superficial, irresponsible and not at all supportive of their friend. Belle completely changes the subject not wanting to explore, in any great detail, Rose’s situation, which they qualify as “hysteria,”¹¹ and the friends keep on talking about absolute trivialities. For instance, Doll says, thinking of Rose: “Maybe she’ll recover from her hysteria in time for the luau (spring dinner)” and Dorry responds all in surprise: “Has she really been hysterical? I guess she would be after being raped like that. O well... Say! Guess where we’re going for our summer vacation...” (835). According to Mel Gussow, reviewer of the play for *The New York Times*, the point of the play is not really the rape, but the fact that the other women are unmoved by it. Interestingly, however, the action of rape is deliberately concealed in the play. The historical fact of the rape of black women by white men has been referred to so

⁹ James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mr. Charlie* provides, according to the Molettes, “an example of an African American character who chooses to confront the forces that seek to take away his human dignity.” In *Black Theatre, Premise and Presentation*.

¹⁰ Sexual violence and the rape of black women have been used by patriarchy to suppress expressions of freedom and sexual freedom. According to Pamela E. Barnett, “rape is violence not only to individual persons, but violence aimed at preserving and perpetuating social domination.” Thus we should focus on the issue of “rape’s broader cultural meanings and consequences” (x1).

¹¹ The Molettes are signifying on 19th century white conceptions of womanhood which saw any deviance from the values of the cult of true womanhood as hysterical or mentally disturbed women. The irony in the case of the play at hand is double, because black women were excluded from the definitions of womanhood established by the true womanhood code.



many times, that the Molettes feel it has lost its potency and its ability to enrage. The authors therefore concentrate on the aftermath of rape to show how the women handle it, and how the impact of Rose's sexual assault on the audience is stronger after she and her friends refuse to admit it ever happened.

At the end of scene 1, the women playing bridge are in whiteface make-up to show their acceptance as blacks of the white values they have chosen to emulate. These women suffer from total amnesia regarding the situation of racial tension and violence in the U.S. during the 1970s exhibiting an acute detachment from the values rooted in their African American cultural and social background. These upper class Negro women live with the illusion of being white, of being considered equal to whites and of being accepted as part of mainstream society. The women of the play suffer from amnesia because they fail to recognize the rape of a black woman by a gang of powerful white men as a way of putting blacks down, using sexual violence to control black womanhood, reducing them to mere sexual objects and toys.

Rosalee Pritchett is as shocking as it is provoking, causing distress to both audience and reader. At the end the curtain does not fall because nothing is over. According to the Molettes, curtain calls contradict some fundamental Afrocentric assumptions about what theatre presentations are for and the relationships that ought to exist among performers and between performers and audience. As mentioned before, one of the tenets of Afrocentric rituals, is to celebrate the affirmation of a sense of community, a feeling of togetherness, which is broken when the actor concentrates his performance exclusively on the real character he is portraying in the play—the idea of realistic mimesis—shutting off the reality of the audience's presence from his/her consciousness. It is the Molettes' opinion that the curtain call is a marketing strategy to sell the stars of the production as well as the production. Theatre in the Eurocentric context has become a commodity, and curtain calls are designed to elicit applause and thereby generate positive opinions about productions and stars. Thus, according to Afrocentric theatre, the primary purpose of curtain calls is not to provide an opportunity for the audience to show its appreciation of the performers, but to block the audience out of the actor's conscious awareness because the actor "must be able to perceive and respond to the audience behavior that occurs in response to the performance" (*Premise* 163).

The use of independent but interrelated short scenes in *Rosalee Pritchett* together with the simultaneous staging of two levels of representation (Rose and the bridge table), along with screening and pictures in flashbacks demonstrates how the playwrights and director substitute the lineal development of the story with a cyclical or circular structure that breaks the unity of time, place, and action, thereby enriching the play's potential meanings. What Bertold Brecht calls "the alienation effect" effectively captures the impact of such a polifacetic play: rapid transitions between violent and comical moments; the unselective distinction between selfishness and heartlessness, on the one hand, and rather foolish snobbery and frivolity on the other; frozen images with the support of audiovisual material (pictures, music, songs) that invite the public to think and be alert and to have a critically receptive mood to what is being staged. Rose's past and present occupy scenic spaces simultaneously in the play. The play provokes feelings of bitterness and scorn, and as reviewer Clayton Riley comments after watching the staging of the play, "there is a great sense of sorrow" to be felt at the bridge party "at the terrifying



malaise eroding the spirit of its players” (Riley column 5). As Carlton Molette points out, “the Afro-American aesthetic places a very high value upon emotionally motivated behavior,” or what he calls “soulful behavior,” and transmitting this spiritually motivated behavior is one of the major achievements of the play.

Rosalee Pritchett achieves a positive goal by focusing upon the negative. It is a clear example of an Afrocentric play that makes a useful statement to Black audiences by portraying Black characters who fail. It offers a negative portrayal of African American characters in the effort to cause African American audiences to gain the insight to avoid similar negative circumstances. The audience must be concerned with what has happened to cause such a monumental failure. The fact is that both blacks and whites live in a state of self-deception: blacks cannot see the racism of American society because they live with the illusion of having been assimilated into it, denying themselves the chance to construct a true identity. Whites, on the other hand, are unable to see blacks as full citizens, overtaken by prejudice and racism. The play is successful so long as the audience gains insights into what has generated the downfall of the protagonist.

The issues addressed by the play are more complex than whether or not the African American protagonist will prevail at the end of the play, because in real life we are as likely to learn from our negative experiences as much as from our positive ones. The issues of racism, assimilation, violence, family and friendship coexist in America with an environment of institutional racism on a continual basis, and sometimes its impact is more severe than we are able to recognize at first sight. As Mel Gussow affirms, “the struggle is not so much against white supremacy as against a more insidious form of racism—the imposition of values by whites on blacks and the acceptance by blacks of those values.” Moreover, the play condemns whites as models, and blacks as passive receivers.

4.

The history must be taught, and if not in the schools then at home. But that won't or can't be done until our home life, our families, get back on track. It's a vicious cycle. We still have a long, long way to go. (Spike Lee)

Both *Raisin in the Sun* and *Rosalee Pritchett* are open-ended, and the playwrights use this strategy to encourage the audience to arrive at their own conclusions. Although *Rosalee Pritchett* may seem more strictly interrogative in the sense that the play concludes as it begins, with the social climbers at the bridge table—and in this respect, the authors leave the responsibility of finding a solution to the problem to the viewer—Carlton and Barbara Molette and Lorraine Hansberry are aiming at a corrective reading of history, questioning what seems self-evident.

The examination of *Raisin in the Sun* and *Rosalee Pritchett* suggests different but thoughtful and enduring approaches to the themes of integration, assimilation, difference and African American identity. The two plays, however, have a connection. That connection is established by their treatment of the ideology and practice of assimilation, which was a major topic—although unstated as



such— of Black American theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. The development of the dream of integration is portrayed from the perspectives of Hansberry's hopeful view in *Raisin* as well as the Molettes negative conception of *Rosalee Pritchett*. The bourgeois practices seen in *Rosalee Pritchett* are a sign of assimilation because they indicate the black characters' need to be accepted by white society. They perform an identity dictated by the standards and values of a society they look up to but which does nothing to change those aspects of their identity and culture which oppress and dominate racial and ethnic minorities. The fictitious post-racialism displayed by Rosalee Pritchett and her circle clearly endangers the racial dynamics of American society because this case of colorblind assimilation permits a nearly willful blindness to ongoing discrimination and a clear disregard of persistent racial inequalities. Ironically, as Banks contends, the danger of colorblindness assimilation lies in the fact that it prohibits overt discrimination even though it benefits historically disadvantaged racial minority groups, while it allows covert discrimination even if it subordinates already disadvantaged groups (51). Each play expresses and examines assimilation and its impact on male/female relationships, female agency, as well as class and race issues. All of these are addressed because they are shaped by assimilation into an American dream that defines success in white middle-class terms, or that defines the issue of identity in white terms.

Contrasting *Raisin* as representative of the theatre of the late 1950s that celebrates African American culture as universal in the plight of African Americans to overcome racism and oppression, with the Molettes' initiative in the 1970s of creating a space where African American community and art yearns for separatism and independence, provides a dramatically clear example of the fundamental and revolutionary change in racial dynamics and politics taking place in North America against the backlash of oppression and racism. The change shows that the disillusion of the impact of white middle-class values on black culture and people shifted in the ten years span that separated the productions of both plays.

The American social and political spheres demonstrate the understanding and subsequent development of African American culture and values: while integration was seen as desirable by blacks in the late 1950s, as illustrated by Hansberry's play, a few aspects of it were rejected by those blacks who saw the persistent prejudice and racism in some white sectors of American society in the late 1960s coinciding with the burst of the Black Arts Movement which promulgated black pride and a raise of black consciousness as clearly stated by the Molette's play. Both plays present perceptions that are different within the same cultural scenery. Since the differences do exist, assertions will continue to be made about the diverse perspectives as to what constitutes truth in African American theatre. Both perspectives are born out of the specific political concerns of the late 1950s and 1970s and how they affected the African American community and its artistic expression. Possibly both perceptions regarding the commitment and purpose of African American drama are equally valid, legitimate, and appropriate for their own situations. Both plays are conceived by very concerned people. As Riley points out,



Their concerns are with the pitch and flavor of contemporary Black life, its ambivalences and contradictions, its emotional peaks and valleys, and the almost illogical beauty attending its rapidly changing days and nights. (*NYT* 1971)

Both *Raisin* and *Rosalee Pritchett* are born out of politically active minds engaged in finding ways to overcome racism and oppression in the larger terrain of North American life. Both plays recognize that they must use their artistic vision to show the breath and depth of the black experience on local, national and international levels. They effectively show that black people, even at the poorest levels, have great strengths as well as weaknesses. These artists offer guidance and vision on how to break through the web that racism and intolerance have woven around society while they trigger conversation and debate about workable solutions.

Reviews sent to author: 20 September 2014. Revised paper accepted for publication: 1 February 2015.

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