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The Roof of a Southern Home: A Reimagined and Usable South in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

WHILE MUCH OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE DEPICTS THE SOUTH AS A source of terror or trepidation,¹ Lorraine Hansberry, in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), gives readers a relatively positive regional perspective. She uses the Younger family's Southern history (mainly accessed through Lena Younger or "Mama") to provide her characters with a sense of grounded identity and pride that enables the family to move beyond the limitations of their current environment and into a more sustainable space.² Both the small apartment in Chicago's Southside and the mental environment of a Northern/national white culture work to limit and restrict the family's ability to grow and develop, but through the process of adopting their mother's attitude toward their shared Southern past, Mama's children gain the confidence needed to face challenges obstructing their pursuit of a sustainable future. The concept of whites adopting an identity rooted in the Southern past is well established, but too often scholars seem to ignore the ways that African Americans have claimed and embraced forms of Southern identity. Despite the history of enslavement, lynching, and Jim Crow, African Americans have a history in the South that extends well beyond abuse and subjection, and Hansberry, in her canonical play, works to reclaim that history for the Younger family and, by extension, her audience. Understanding the way Hansberry constructs Southern history as a usable past in which to root the family's identity is not only useful for those interested in Southern and African American literature, but also helps readers more fully

¹For an excellent study of this mode of representation, see Trudier Harris's *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line* (2009).

²I mean space here both in the sense of a physical space in which the family members can spread out and maintain individuality as well as a mental environment in which they can ground their identity in a history that gives them pride and a sense of belonging in the United States.

comprehend the character of Mama, who has recently been categorized as narrow-minded or tyrannical.³

Reading Hansberry's play as promoting a connection to a "Southern" history/heritage could understandably elicit some reservations, in that the very conception of the South as a discernable region is one that is fraught with complications and contentions. As recent work in Southern studies has fruitfully shown, the characterization of the region as distinct largely emanates from a long history of problematic myths and fantasies. Scholars, including Leigh Anne Duck, Michael Kreyling, and Jon Smith, have illustrated how such mythic constructions of the South lead to problematic conceptions of the region as exceptionally noble or degraded. Hansberry's play, however, offers a version of Southern identity that steers away from reinforcing the existing and problematic understandings of the region that these scholars have identified and argued against. What this means for Southern studies is that the conception of the South, as a space of white romance or white degeneracy, must in some ways fundamentally change in order to incorporate African American voices. The inclusion of black voices as historically Southern should not be mistaken for an endorsement of the deeply problematic notion of "Southern heritage," as it is commonly held, nor as a romanticization of the Jim Crow South such as Adolph Reed defines, but rather should be understood as work to understand the deeply conflicted sense of identity rooted in a place that has historically marginalized black identity, yet is an ancestral home. Houston A. Baker, Jr., explains this connection to the region in *Turning South Again* as "an indelible and shaping ambivalence," and he goes on to point out that being Southern and black works as a complicated "badge of honor in regard to tight places of youth, tight places that were my testing ground, that are my legacy" (17-18). James Cobb, in his chapter "Blackness and Southernness," further illustrates the multifaceted relationship many African Americans have with the South, both historically and currently,⁴ and he ultimately argues against the fallacy "that all southern blacks were hopelessly, totally, and eternally alienated from the place where they had seen so much injustice and hardship" (262). Thadious M. Davis

³See Harris, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors* 21-39; Matthews; Abdelmawjoud; and Brown.

⁴Cobb uses 1965 quotes from Ralph Ellison to help demonstrate a connection to the South in the 1960s (262) and polls conducted in 2001, finding that more blacks than whites self-identified as Southern (262-63).

adds to this idea in her claim that the return to the South by many blacks that sociologists are witnessing is more than a flight from the hardships of cities: "it is also a laying of claim to a culture and to a region that, though fraught with pain and difficulty, provides a major grounding for identity" (6). Southern African American authors like Baker, Alice Walker, Trudier Harris, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ernest Gaines embed in their work a sense of the South as home despite its flaws. Adding Lorraine Hansberry to this list demonstrates how the South maintains an important presence in the African American search for roots and usable histories even among authors who were born and raised in the North.

Hansberry's Northern upbringing also gives her the necessary distance and vantage point to look back on the South's legacy of racism and bigotry and see the strength of African Americans who were able to transcend and escape their Southern racial reality without losing their sense of place and history. In the play, Mama works to help her children recognize that there are reasons to be proud of their Southern past, and she urges them not to lose sight of their legacy of perseverance. As she explains to her son, Walter, "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 . . . You ain't satisfied or proud of nothing we done" (58). Throughout the play, Mama demonstrates a pride in her family's legacy of survival and dignity, and she works to share this view of the past with her children. Hansberry, however, makes it clear that an attachment to Southern history goes beyond memories of survival and "getting to the North." She illustrates that pride in the South also comes from the recognition that it was on Southern soil that black Americans first made their mark on the national culture, and that these contributions demonstrate an ability to maintain a unique and productive identity despite the attempted cultural theft and dehumanization of enslavement and Jim Crow.

Hansberry uses the blues to remind her audience of this rich history that for many black Americans extends through the South and into Africa. At the beginning of the second act, Beneatha and Walter undoubtedly experience a connection to their African past as they commune with their ancestors. Walter cries out, "Do you hear the singing of the women, singing the war songs of our fathers to the babies . . . DO YOU HEAR, MY BLACK BROTHERS," and Beneatha responds, "We hear you, Flaming Spear" (63). In this interaction, Hansberry celebrates the connection to Africa that the siblings experience; however, I think it is

at least equally important to her that the audience value what she calls “*the good loud blues*” music, which Beneatha dismisses as “assimilationist junk” and shuts off right before this exchange (60). Blues music, which originated in the Mississippi Delta, is heard throughout the play as a sort of diegetic reminder of the history that came before the family (42, 105). The music informs the audience that this family is a part of a history and culture that is voiced in the South through the instruments of black Americans and will continue long into the future intertwined with other forms of music from other continents. As LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) points out, “Early Blues” was “perhaps the most impressive expression of the Negro’s individuality within the superstructure of American society” (66). The valuing of this African American, Southern music, which expresses black individuality, reinforces the importance of remembering history and embracing what you can use from it. As Beneatha turns off the “*good blues*” to focus on her brother’s communication with their African past, the audience can feel in the lack of music the loss that results from silencing the Southern part of the family’s history, and like Mama the audience longs for Beneatha and her brother to recognize the cost of shutting off this part of their heritage. Hansberry, who was writing in the wake of Marcus Garvey and in the lead-up to the Black Arts Movement, posits that African Americans have a rich and immediate history in the South in which they can find pride, and in making this claim, she offers an alternative to those who divorced their connection to the United States in search of a more accepting homeland abroad. In the preface to Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Report from Part One* (1971), Don L. Lee claims, “people find a sense of *being*, a sense of worth and substance with being associated with *land*” (28). For Lee, this meant the land of Africa, and Hansberry, without dismissing a connection to the continent of Africa, simply adds, in *Raisin*, that there is also a sense of “being” and “worth” that can be found in the more recent history of the Southern United States.

From her home in Chicago,⁵ Hansberry had a front row seat in watching the ways that African Americans carried their Southern homes to the North as they fled the hardships of their native region. In the years of the Great Migration, millions of African Americans, including

⁵For more on Hansberry’s childhood, see Pat McKissack and Fredrick McKissack’s *Young, Black, and Determined* (1998).

both of Hansberry's parents, flooded out of the South to escape prejudice and persecution.⁶ As Hansberry undoubtedly witnessed, however, the northern cities, while providing safe havens from much of the de jure violence and segregation of the South, also presented a familiar set of challenges in the reality of de facto segregation in the North. The Hansberrys experienced this marginalization firsthand through their well-documented legal battle surrounding the right to buy a house in a white neighborhood, which would serve as the inspiration for *A Raisin in the Sun*. As Michelle Gordon points out, Hansberry grew up "amid the tensions and violence surrounding Chicago's 'series of Mason-Dixon lines,'" and this transplanted Southern environment "fundamentally shaped [her] self-consciousness, radical politics, and revolutionary art" (121).

The flight from one home and subsequent marginalization in another created a sense of homelessness for many African Americans in great northern cities like Chicago and New York. Not only did many Northern whites reject and marginalize Southern blacks, but large numbers of native Northern blacks did so as well, seeing the Southerners as potential threats to their material and social accomplishments. In order to cope with alienation, many Southern blacks built their own communities based on a blend of their old and new homes. Isabel Wilkerson explains that "Once they got to these big cities they actually clustered together and created clubs from back home representing their home towns, [such as the] Lake Charles Louisiana Club in Los Angeles, [and] the Greenwood Mississippi Club in Chicago."⁷ In these clubs, Southern blacks were able to reestablish some of the culture they had left behind without the interference or violence of white Southerners. In a sense, new, safer Souths that drew from both their new and old homes were created in the margins of these northern cities. This attachment to aspects of the South and rejection of aspects of the North illustrates why Houston A. Baker and Dana D. Nelson call for those who study the region to avoid the easy binary: "North equals Good Whites, Good Life for Blacks,' while 'South

⁶Isabel Wilkerson points out that "Over the course of six decades [1915-1970], some six million black southerners left the land of their forefathers and fanned out across the country" (*Warmth* 9).

⁷For more information on the Great Migration, see Isabel Wilkerson, "Great Migration"; for a more concentrated look at how the Migration affected Chicago, see Knupfer.

equals Bad Whites, Bad Life for Blacks” (233). Ralph Ellison, frustrated with this binary, in 1965 said, “Love of the South is glamorized by the white Southerner; but the suggestion that a Negro may love the South is usually denied as an utterly outrageous idea” (“Transcript” 441). Ellison, like Baker and Nelson, rejects the perception that African Americans do not maintain a form of affection for the South, and as these authors suggest, there is a complex relationship with one’s home that can include both love and hate.⁸ Through the character of Mama, Hansberry illustrates the reality that African Americans can form an identity rooted in a remembrance of their Southern history without embracing every aspect of the clearly problematic region. It is important to note that Hansberry stops short of calling for a physical return to the South. Instead, she appears to use *Raisin* to reclaim the Southern past as part of African American history and culture without necessarily endorsing the region as it existed in 1959. Instead, her characters embrace a useable Southern history offered by Mama, and this reimagined and reclaimed South gives the family the confidence to move forward with their lives.

One important way that Hansberry crafts her usable Southern history is by linking the Southern past to an African history. This linkage creates an unbroken chain of black pride that extends from the family’s earliest roots all the way up through their current situation in Chicago. Anne Chaney picks up on the importance of Africa to the family’s conception of a proud history, but is unable to fully reconcile Mama’s Southern character to this past. As she admits, Mama “reveals her total ignorance of African History” throughout the play (59). Hansberry, as she does with the blues, appears to use Lena Younger to draw a link between Southern and African histories, and this becomes clear through the initial portrayal of Mama. She is described in the stage directions as “*a woman who has adjusted to many things in life and overcome many more,*” yet she has not been defeated by these obstacles (27). Despite her trials, she maintains a “*noble bearing*” like that “*of the women of the Hereros of Southwest Africa,*” and she is described as having a “*face . . . full of strength,*” eyes that reveal “*wit and faith,*” and Hansberry calls the total effect “*beautiful*” (23).⁹ Like the African Herero, who suffered an

⁸Michael Kreyling, in *Inventing Southern Literature*, calls this love-hate relationship with the South the “Quentin [Compson] thesis” (100-26).

⁹For more on Mama’s characterization as an African Herero, see Matthews; M. Wilkerson; and chapter four of Cheney.

attempted genocide in 1904,¹⁰ Lena too comes from a place that had tried to wipe out her history and identity, yet she, like those who came before her, bears the weight of this suffering with “*grace and beauty*” (23). Hansberry weaves together elements of dignity and strength with roots in both the South and Africa to deliver a woman who exhibits the ability to rise above conceptions of her worth that the South (or any colonizing force) would bestow upon her, and Mama works throughout the play to convince her family to join her in fighting to reclaim the dignity of their entire history.

Mama is a convincing spokesperson for the family’s Southern history, in large part, because she was familiar and seemed real to audiences while managing to avoid the dominant stereotypes that permeated the culture.¹¹ Instead of fitting into the existing categories surrounding black women, she represents the way cultural heritage is experienced through shared yet ultimately individual lives and relationships. As Lisa M. Anderson explains, Hansberry works to “disperse” (138) the myths surrounding black womanhood and offers a Southern woman who is neither “mammy” nor a simple “matriarch” (137). Trudier Harris further explains that it is challenging to define Mama as a stereotype “because she is literally the prototype for what would later be judged to be stereotypical” (*Saints* 26). Instead of relying on old typecasts or “ante-bellum terminology,”¹² Hansberry carves out her own unique yet recognizable conception of what it means to be Southern, black, and a woman. What emerges is a large yet beautiful, strong yet graceful, domineering yet caring woman, who helps put into focus the rich heritage of many black Americans.

Lena is able to find pride in her Southernness through an understanding that the region represents the history of her family and what they have accomplished. This way of understanding the South as being inextricably connected to her family’s history and future allows her to see beyond Southern mythologies and to recognize her family’s rightful claim to the region as their own. We get a window into this way of viewing the South in a scene that takes place in the second act of the

¹⁰See Dederling.

¹¹See Morrison for more on the way Mama’s character struck a chord of familiarity with the play’s audience.

¹²Hansberry castigated the movie reviewer for *Time* for using “ante-bellum terminology” to classify Mama as a mammy (“Letters”).

play. In this interaction, the children gather to present Mama with gifts for her new home, and grandson Travis gives her a gardening hat. Beneatha protests, "Travis—we were trying to make Mama Mrs. Miniver—not Scarlett O'Hara" (108). Beneatha views the ideal for Mama as the British Mrs. Miniver, and sees the hat as inappropriate because it links Mama to the South and, worse than that, to a problematic symbol of white, aristocratic womanhood.¹³ Mama, however, is indignant and replies, "What's the matter with you all! This here is a beautiful hat! . . . I always wanted me one just like it!" The family responds by placing the hat as a symbol of the other extreme of Southern womanhood, as Walter says, "I'm sorry, Mama—but you look like you ready to go out and chop you some cotton sure enough!" Mama again defends the hat, saying, "this is the prettiest hat I ever owned" (108). The hat is, by every indication, a ridiculous accessory, and the scene is lighthearted, but Mama's defense of the gift has meaning. Hansberry makes it clear that Lena is defending the hat for the benefit of her watching grandson. She wears it with all of its Southern connotations, not because she is willing to be "turned into" Scarlett or a cotton picker, but because she does not want her grandson to see their Southern past as something to be ashamed of or denied. In defending the hat, she illustrates that a connection to the South, despite the persistent associations with problematic myths, should be understood as simply an affirmation of their family and their legacy. The hat, which is given in celebration of the family's progress, works as a symbol of her family's past that extends through the South, and despite the fact that her children can only see Scarlett or someone picking cotton when they look at it, Mama sees her family, especially her grandson, who will carry the family's banner into the future.

Mama's view of the South, where she and her family have a rightful claim to a proud history, works as a "roof" under which each member of the family can find shelter, and when the family recognizes their place under this roof, they gain the necessary confidence to go out and integrate into the community as individuals while avoiding assimilation.¹⁴ The idea

¹³See Langston Hughes' poem "Silhouette" to further understand the depth of this problematic association.

¹⁴Yomna Saber helps us to understand the difference between integration and assimilation: "Integration was not to be equated with accommodationist paradigms or cultural assimilation. . . . Integration in the 1950s . . . 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

that Hansberry uses Mama as a powerful, unifying, and positive force is not a new one. As Elizabeth C. Phillips pointed out in 1972, “The most striking embodiment of true value in *A Raisin in the Sun* remains . . . Lena Younger, known as Mama” (35). Phillips’ assertion that Mama is an embodiment of “true value” is echoed among most early criticism surrounding Hansberry’s play,¹⁵ and while there has been some recent pushback to Mama’s character,¹⁶ the evidence surrounding Mama as the moral center of the play remains compelling. Margaret B. Wilkerson explains this positive view of Mama: “Walter speaks the words and takes the action, but Mama provides the context. She, who embodies the race’s will to transcend and who forms that critical link between the past and the future, articulates and transmits the traditions of the race to the next generation” (10). While the children may represent the aspirations and potential progress of the race, Mama provides the “context” and “roots” in which that progress grows. She is the unifying voice that grounds the family under a common pride and understanding of their identity.

Hansberry uses the growth of the plant that Mama tends throughout the play to symbolize how Lena works to provide her family with this unifying sense of rooted identity. At the end of the first scene of act one, Mama, who is worrying both about how her son “done almost lost his mind thinking ’bout money all the time” and about how her daughter talks “about things [she] can’t seem to understand in no form or fashion,” turns to her plant and mourns the fact that her children are “Like this little old plant that ain’t never had enough sunshine or nothing” (36). Mama equates the weak and starved plant with the condition of her children, and she then expresses the desire to give the plant a garden “like [she] used to see . . . down home” (37). In this instance, Mama makes it clear that in order for her children to thrive they need a garden, and she connects that garden to her Southern roots. Throughout the play the audience witnesses her driving and fierce desire to provide her family with the same soil that sustains her, and while it is true that her actions, at times, are tyrannical and violent, her passion illustrates an

exclusion” (452).

¹⁵In addition to Phillips and M. Wilkerson, see initial reviews by Atkinson and Morrison.

¹⁶For more on this pushback, see Matthews. See also Gordon for the argument that the play calls for the family to recognize all of their different worldviews as equal. See Washington for another reading Mama as a limiting character.

almost desperate desire to give her children a usable space in which to root an identity.

The connection between Mama's desire to nourish her family and the South is developed further through the use of Southern foodways. In one of the first interactions of the play, Mama notices the poor condition of her grandson Travis as he tries to do his chores and get ready for the day. Mama asks Ruth what she has fed her son, and Ruth responds angrily, "I feed my son, Lena!" Mama knows that Travis is fed, but she objects to what he is being fed. She responds, "I just noticed all last week he had cold cereal, and when it starts getting this chilly in the fall a child ought to have some hot grits or something when he goes out in the cold." There are few foods more rooted in the South than grits, and Mama wants to make sure that her grandchild is fed with food that speaks to his history before "he goes out in the cold" (24). This connection between Southern food and providing someone with a sense of belonging is revisited later in the play when Beneatha's friend Asagai comes to visit the apartment; Mama says, "I spec you better come 'round here from time to time to get yourself some decent home-cooked meals" (49). As Harris explains, this desire to feed and fatten with home cooking comes from the Southern tradition of hard work and hospitality (*Saints* 38), and through this exchange with Asagai, we can see how Mama attempts to use food from "home" to take care of those around her. Much like her desire to feed Travis grits, her wish to feed Asagai is driven by a desire to share southern, "home-cooked" meals to nourish those who may be cut off from their cultural heritage and are in need of a sense of belonging.

Mama also works to provide a connection to her Southern past in the way that she fiercely defends her brand of religion. While the African American church has long been a source of comfort and stability in both the North and the South, for those like Mama, who traveled North during the Great Migration, churches provided an especially important place to build community. As Isabel Wilkerson explains, "Many of the migrants, seeking the status and security they could not get back home, filled the stained-glass sanctuaries of the mainline churches," but most "tended to favor smaller storefront churches opened up by ministers fresh from the South, where they could sing the spirituals, catch the spirit, and fan themselves like they were used to" (*Warmth* 288-89). When Beneatha blasphemes in front of her mother at the beginning of the play, she is doing more than simply taking the Lord's name in vain; she is belittling the connection to the religion that had provided Mama

and her husband a sense of community and place in their new home. In this scene, which is incredibly tense, Mama illustrates violent loyalty to this part of her heritage. She slaps Beneatha and forces her to repeat after her: “in my mother’s house there is still God” (35). The rightness of Mama’s “tyranny” (36), as Beneatha puts it, can certainly be debated, but her strength of conviction is undeniable. Mama runs over her daughter and declares that Beneatha’s lack of reverence for her family’s beliefs has no place in their home (35). Mama does not necessarily care whether or not Beneatha believes in a God; rather, she is concerned that her daughter at least admit and respect the religious heritage of their family. This scene demonstrates Mama’s defense of what Harris calls “moral fervor . . . from her religious days in Mississippi” (*Saints* 35). Mama gains strength through this connection to the past, and she desperately, even violently, wants her children to respect the traditional beliefs that had provided a sense of stability and consistency for so many African Americans.

Watching Mama violently force her daughter to respect their religious heritage is understandably somewhat troubling, but the scene illustrates an important aspect of Hansberry’s play. The confrontation demonstrates the marked difference in the way mother and daughter relate to the past. We can see the different relationship to history highlighted further in the characters’ accents. Hansberry directs for Mama’s voice to “*slur everything*” (23). Slurring is later associated with the Southern accent in Beneatha’s voice that is almost lost as a result of her education and many pursuits. Hansberry writes,

[Beneatha’s] speech is a mixture of many things; it is different from the rest of the family’s insofar as education has permeated her sense of English—and perhaps the Midwest rather than the South has finally—at last—won out in her inflection; but not altogether, because over all of it is a soft slurring . . . which is the decided influence of the Southside. (19)

Hansberry seems to use the South and the Southside of Chicago interchangeably to demonstrate the contrast between the history in Mama’s slurred voice, and the barely audible past in the words Beneatha speaks. Everything Mama says is colored by where she is from, and by the same token, Beneatha’s lack of a clear accent demonstrates her association with an unclear and ungrounded identity. Beneatha, in large part, is characterized by an ever-changing array of influences and philosophies, and this lack of clear grounding leads her to be unmoored

in her pursuits. Consequently, Beneatha gains a certain amount of freedom to “experiment with different forms of expression,” as she puts it, or “flit . . . from one thing to another all the time,” as Mama puts it (32, 31). But with freedom there is also a lack of any sense of a true self, identity, or guiding perspective. In other words, Beneatha has no roots, and like any plant without roots, she is quickly blown over.

The problem with an inability to connect to the past is illustrated as Mama and Beneatha once again confront one another after Walter spends Beneatha’s money and strips her of the funds for her latest pursuit: becoming a doctor. In this scene, we see her turn on her brother with unbridled ferocity. As Walter falls to his knees utterly broken by the experience of being betrayed and robbed by his friend, Beneatha comments, “That is not a man. That is nothing but a toothless rat. . . . There is nothing left to love” (128-29). Mama is incensed, and replies, “There is *always* something left to love. And if you ain’t learned that, you ain’t learned nothing. . . . Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is” (129). Beneatha, despite all that she has learned through her various pursuits, does not understand that one must consider the totality of someone’s history before casting judgment. In contrast, Mama, who is immersed in history and has the perspective gained from her time in the South, where the conditions crushed countless men and women, understands that Walter is the product of his environment, not simply the broken and reduced figure that stands before them. She understands that the proper response is to mourn his condition rather than attack his humanity¹⁷, and, in the play’s conclusion, she is proven correct in her reservation of judgment as Walter embraces his role as a “man” and refuses to sell the house to Mr. Lindner. Mama’s connection and ability to access the hardships of African American history allow her the sight to see beyond their current condition and project toward an emergence out of the valley that surrounds the family. At the end of the interaction with Mr. Lindner, Beneatha too recognizes that her brother is indeed a “man” (132).

Mama also relies on her connection with the Southern past to help her other child gain perspective. When Walter decides to sell the house to Mr. Lindner and the neighborhood committee, Mama is again angered

¹⁷The response of “mourning” is demonstrated as Mama asks Beneatha, “Have you cried for that boy today?” (129).

by one of her children's lack of historical understanding. She hearkens back to the Southern roots that define her as she declares,

Son—I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers—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 never been that poor. . . . We ain't never been that—dead inside. (127)

For Mama, her ancestry of slavery and sharecropping is not one of shame or a marker of her lack of worth as a human; it is, in fact, the opposite. For her, this history in the South gives her strength because it is a history of overcoming hardship and oppression. Mama and her ancestors have faced a host of Mr. Lindners and worse, and she takes pride in the fact that she and her family have survived and resisted the oppression of white Southerners. It is this undying spirit that she wants her children to embrace. Mama's desire for her children should not be confused with a simple call to romanticize the suffering of their ancestors; rather, it is a hope that they will remember that there is pride in resistance and that they are a part of a long, rich Southern history of black men and women who resisted and prevailed against the dehumanizing effects of enslavement and racial prejudice.

Ultimately, understanding his self-worth as a part of a legacy of resistance convinces Walter to lay down his capitalistic ambitions in pursuit of more lasting gains. When Mr. Lindner comes to finalize the sale of the house, Walter tells him,

What I am telling you is that we called you over here to tell you that we are very proud and that this. . . . This is my son, who makes the sixth generation [of] our family in this country. And we have all thought about your offer. . . . And we have decided to move into our house. . . . We don't want your money. (132)

By adding his son to the five generations of sharecroppers and slaves his mother identified, Walter is making it clear that he is embracing his history and using it as a source of pride and strength, in much the same way that Mama uses it throughout the play. Like Mama, he is not condoning the position the South would see him in; rather, he is reclaiming a position of pride in the South that recognizes the achievement of his people.

The reclamation of their Southern history allows both Walter and Beneatha to move past the perceived shame they had projected upon

their current and historical conditions. It is not, as Matthews suggests, that all homes (including Mama's) are treated equally; rather, it seems that in order for the home to exist at all, the siblings must reconcile with their mother's understanding of their Southern past. This is not to say that there is something mythical or magical about the Southern past. Instead, reconciliation with a specifically Southern history/identity is privileged because it connects the family to their ancestry, which is full of men and women who transcended limiting environments. Awareness of their proud past, in turn, grants Walter and Beneatha the confidence needed to continue that legacy of resistance, which will remain important as they move into an unwelcoming, white neighborhood. In the end, Mama's children, reunited in the pride of their family, appear to have moved beyond the serious conflicts that dominate most of the play. As they quibble about Africa and marrying George Murchison, Mama, wearing what we might assume to be the same hat that Travis gave her,¹⁸ assures the audience that the development at the end of the play represents the "rainbow after the rain" (135). The symbolism of the rainbow, an allusion to God's promise to Noah in Genesis to never again destroy humanity, seems to represent the play's argument that reconciliation with the past guarantees a sense of humanity that cannot be wiped out.

The reclamation of a proud history within a society works to provide a space for members of a culture to establish their identity, and for African Americans of this period, such a space was necessary to ensure survival in a world that was seemingly dedicated to the erasure of their identity. Hansberry's efforts to reclaim the black experience in the South, however, is part of an ongoing process, and US Representative John Lewis's speech at the 2006 dedication of the James Meredith monument gives us insight into how these discussions of reclamation continue as part of our present. Speaking just over one hundred yards from another monument, which commemorates the University of Mississippi's Confederate dead, Lewis spoke of a region that fills him with pride despite the struggles that occurred there. He expresses clearly that black and white Southerners "must never ever forget our history" because "On this sacred ground, here in the deep south [sic], we have cut the chains of segregation and racial discrimination" (Walker). Lewis, in

¹⁸In the stage directions, Hansberry calls for Mama to be "*Fixing her hat at last*" in the closing action of the play (134).

a way that is similar to what Hansberry does in *Raisin*, explains to the crowd that Southern history should never be forgotten because it was on this ground that men and women fought for the betterment of humanity. Recent events in Sanford, Ferguson, North Charleston, Baltimore, Charleston, and countless other places are reminders that there are many more battles to fight, but that should only enliven the celebration of those in the Southern past who endured and struggled for a better future. Hansberry anticipates what Lewis articulates, arguing in *Raisin* that there are sacred things about the Southern past, but they are not the things that have traditionally received honor. She, like Lewis, makes it clear that it is time to hear the silent voices and to celebrate the true heroes of Southern history while working for a better future.

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