

Cultural Identity in African-American Women Writers' Work: Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks and Lorraine Hansberry

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Abstract: The paper explores the causes and consequences of forced cultural alienation in the particular case of the United States and contrasts the *melting pot* concept to that of the *salad bowl*, linking the latter to harmonious personality development and rejecting the former as oppressive. It also revisits stereotypical cultural misrepresentations of Africa and African-Americans with a focus on their negative impact on the black female psyche. Meant to coerce black women into adopting artificially constructed identities so as to estrange them from their culture and keep them locked into subordinate positions in all institutions of American society, distorted images of black womanhood are seen as a vile and despicable attempt to convince the public that black women themselves, through their supposedly cultural and moral shortcomings, and not discriminatory practices of any kind, are responsible for their marginalization.

Key-words: cultural identity, assimilation, stereotypes, black women, African heritage, cultural diversity.

Central to a person's construction and perception of reality, *culture* "resides deep," as Carol Hoare remarks, "in the conscious and unconscious of the self"¹ (Hoare, 2003: 21), being, therefore, inseparable from personal identity. Comprising the language, art, traditions, beliefs, and moral values of a particular group of people, culture is simultaneously creation and creator. Whereas it originates with people's creative spirit and their need for something to bring them together and, at the same time, set them apart

¹ Carol H. Hoare, *Psychosocial Identity Development in United States Society: Its Role in Fostering Exclusion of Cultural Others*, in Elizabeth Pathy Salett and Diane R. Koslow (eds.), *Race, Ethnicity and Self: Identity in Multicultural Perspective*, Washington: NMCI Publications, 2003, p. 21.

from others, it also determines the cognitive structures and perceptual lenses through which they sense and interpret the world around them.

Identification with a specific culture is of critical importance, as it provides one with feelings of belonging and security which highly contribute to the overall coherence of the self. Moreover, by granting people access to a network of shared values and aspirations, cultural identity can help break down barriers and create a sense of unity in diversity. Conversely, excessively strong cultural identity manifested as intolerance towards other people's culture may become the source of a majority/minority conflict within a multicultural community. Interpreted by V. Crapanzano as "epistemological vertigo"² (Hoare, 2003: 17), the confusion felt when one's culture is understood as a distortion is mainly triggered by the majority's belief in the false supremacy of their culture. The unjustified illusion that one culture, or system of beliefs, may in any way be superior to other cultural representations is a dangerous practice not only for the members of the underrated culture, who consequently feel devalued and excluded from society, but also for the majority group members, whose need to construct their identity by forcing others to lose theirs is clear evidence of their identity fragmentation.

Cultural identity, on the other hand, does not necessarily have to be exclusive, meaning that people may identify with different cultures under different circumstances, as well as with more than one culture at the same time. However, this ability to harmoniously integrate various cultural heritages into a coherent one requires a certain degree of tolerance, and a well-balanced sense of self on the part of the multicultural individual. Additionally, there is the problem of inclusion and acceptance within the mainstream society. In the particular case of the United States, for instance, where most citizens are conveyors of more than one cultural tradition, cultural identity is most often shaped through the experiences of both coherence and dissonance. Unlike homogeneous cultures which have never had difficulty in infusing their specific into their citizens, the heterogeneous United States have long presented assimilation to the dominant culture as a substitute for a common cultural grounding. As a result of their being indirectly forced to give up their traditional ways in favor of the dominant culture, blacks and persons from other excluded groups have equally experienced symptoms of identity deprivation.

² V. Crapanzano, *Tuhami*, quoted in Carol H. Hoare, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

A college experiment conducted by professor David Schoem, who asked his Black, Jewish, and Latino students to write on their feelings about their identities and group relationships, showed alienation, loss, confusion, and anger to prevail among their emotional responses to assimilation: “The consistent themes throughout these snatches of autobiography are, first, that many of the students had two separate and conflicting identities, one cultural and the other societal. Second, these young writers reported confusion and anger at society’s prevailing prism, which debased their cultural identity. Many of these young adults traced personal histories of once coherent self-images and worthy self-esteem that collided with society’s devaluation”³ (Hoare, 2003: 27-28). Thus, not only that cultural assimilation has not resulted in the happy mono-cultural individuals that the *melting pot* concept envisioned, but it has also triggered an identity crisis in the heterogeneous population of America, making it clear that enforced separation from one’s culture leads to anger, frustration, and self-alienation rather than successful integration. Accordingly, with the civil rights movement and the women’s movement in the sixties and seventies, a new term and a new view were coined. The *salad bowl* concept, also known as the *cultural mosaic* model, suggests that the various cultures of the United States residents combine like salad in a bowl but without merging together into a single homogeneous culture. By keeping each culture’s distinctive characteristics intact, this approach creates the possibility of coexistence, and gives individuals of different cultural backgrounds the opportunity to celebrate their cultural diversity and, at the same time, share feelings of belonging to one and the same nation.

While some residents of the United States favor the assimilation perspective and others support the cultural mosaic model, there is still a category of people who find no difference between the two. Their position, though, is terribly unfair to the millions of long culturally excluded immigrants, or simply people of a mixed descent who, in their direct experience of cultural identity deprivation, have proved that there is a powerful relationship between acceptant inclusion of cultural others and their ability to develop healthy, harmonious personalities. Through their loss and pain, awareness has been raised of the complex nature of identity. Ultimately, personal traits, society, and culture depend

³ David Schoem (ed.), *Inside Separate Worlds*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991, quoted in Carol H. Hoare, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

on one another, mould one another, and proceed together as equally important aspects of individual identity.

Stereotypical Cultural Misrepresentations of Africa and African-Americans

“Only if the myth is stripped away can the reality of Africa emerge”⁴
(Walker, 1997: 28).

In their joint effort to ensure integration success and maintain the supremacy of the dominant culture, the commercial and educational media in the United States have not merely ignored African culture, but they have devalued it, and even worse, they have distorted it by continuously portraying inaccurate and derogatory images of both Africa and people of African descent. Such images, in addition to misinforming the public, have perpetuated destructive, negative stereotypes which have had, and perhaps still have, a strong political and social impact on the lives of African-Americans and non-African-Americans alike.

Myths about Africa and African-Americans have been created, popularized and perpetuated by various means from slavery to present day. The unjust designation of all black women as *sexually depraved, immoral, and loose*, for example, is deeply rooted in the slave system. Therefore, the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women has not only “crushed their sexual integrity for economic ends,” as critic bell hooks draws attention, but it has also “led to a devaluation of black womanhood that permeated the psyches of all Americans and shaped the social status of all black women once slavery ended”⁵ (hooks, 1992: 52). Deemed whores, sluts, and prostitutes based on white women’s wrong, but convenient, assumption that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with their masters, black women continued to be seen, even long after slavery ended, as sexually permissive, as available, and eager for the sexual assaults of

⁴ Paul Bohannon, *The Myth and the Fact: Africa and Africans*, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1964, quoted in Sheila S. Walker with Jennifer Rasamimanana, *Tarzan in the Classroom: How “Educational” Films Mythologize Africa and Miseducate Americans*, in Janis Faye Hutchinson (ed.), *Cultural Portrayals of African Americans: Creating an Ethnic/Racial Identity*, Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1997, p. 28.

⁵ bell hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Boston: South End Press, 1992, p. 52.

any man, whether black or white. Similarly, in the same effort to discourage inter-racial marriage and reinforce white supremacy, black men were assigned the part of the *savage beast* or *rapist*. As neither myth was true to life, black women and men attempted to change the denigrating stereotypical image imposed upon them by adopting those values and behavior patterns which were roughly considered acceptable by the white society. To no avail though, because, as bell hooks further records, it was precisely “those black women [who] suffered most whose behavior best exemplified that of a ‘lady.’ A black woman dressed tidy and clean, carrying herself in a dignified manner, was usually the object of mud-slinging by white men who ridiculed and mocked her self-improvement efforts. They reminded her that in the eyes of the white public she would never be seen as worthy of consideration or respect”⁶ (hooks, 1992: 55).

While with the racial integration in the second half of the 20th century the myth of the rapist black man ceased to exist, no significant change occurred in the negative portrayal of black women. Unlike black men, whose marriage to white women was considered to pose no real threat to white patriarchy, since white women were seen as powerless when not supported by white men, black women continued to be regarded as unsuitable marriage partners for several reasons. Most importantly, had black women married white men and legally adopted their status, they could have endangered the existing social hierarchy and the foundation of white patriarchy. Additionally, critics have also argued that having always been granted unlimited access to the bodies of black women, white men have not really been motivated to make these relationships legitimate. Then, there was also the black women’s reluctance to such unions, given the harassment and persecution they were sure to face afterwards at the hands of both black and white people. To black men, a black woman who married a white man was but an example of race betrayal, in the sense of a black person joining hands with a racist oppressor. Their own behavior, on the other hand, was legitimized in their eyes by the, supposedly, innocent victim status of white women.

With the television and the movie era, new stereotypes emerged. Thus, black women characters, whose facial features were distorted by excessive make-up, were projected on screen as *ugly*, singularly *unattractive*, and *undesirable*. Contrastingly, their white

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

counterparts, whose features were not altered in any way, were blonde, beautiful, extremely attractive women. Constantly ridiculed and fed on such negative images, black women came to internalize the stereotype and perceive themselves as unpleasant and repulsive, which eventually killed their self-confidence and lowered their self-esteem.

When not concerned with the looks of the black women, movies portrayed them as *religious, maternal figures*, who sacrificed their interests and wishes for the sake of their families. Positive in itself, the image quickly metamorphosed, labeling the hardworking, responsible black women *matriarchs*. Able to provide economically for their children and perform tasks that were culturally defined as male work, black women threatened to give white women ideas about social equality between the sexes, which, in turn, endangered white male supremacy. Consequently, working black women came to be seen as the man of the house, an image which would later serve to keep white women at home, away from the possibility of building up a career and advancing within the social hierarchy. Brainwashed into thinking that any kind of work outside their households dispossessed them of their femininity, white women stuck to their kitchens and joined white men into their systematic devaluation of black womanhood. Though false, as not even in single-parent homes did black women assume a leading position, it being shifted onto their male children or male relatives, the matriarch myth was readily accepted by black people as well. While black men didn't reject it because it gave them a justification for their unemployment and helped them force their wives into traditional passive roles, black women embraced it because, of all the labels they had been marked with, this one seemed to acknowledge their efforts, and their contribution to the black family. Wrapped up in the illusion of power which the new stereotype created, black women failed to see its perversion: it was, actually, encouraging divisiveness between themselves and their black partners with their own help.

Close to the matriarchy theory, the myth of the *Amazons* was equally based on fantasy. Not in the least interested in building a male-free society, black women came to be associated with this image for the same reason they had previously been represented as matriarchs: their ability to work hard, to endure and survive. Again misinterpreted, black women's "superhuman" strength in fact stemmed from their acceptance of things and situations beyond their power and control.

Contrary to the black matriarch and the black Amazon myths, the *Aunt Jemima* stereotypical image presented the black woman as a passive, submissive mother-like person who knew her place in the world and loved the white people she worked for. Discussing the origin of the black mammy figure, bell hooks sketches out her portrayal: “Considering white male lust for the bodies of black females, it is likely that white women were not pleased with young black women working in their homes for fear that liaisons between them and their husbands might be formed, so they conjured up an image of the ideal black nanny. She was first and foremost asexual and consequently she had to be fat (preferably obese); she also had to give the impression of not being clean so she was the wearer of a greasy dirty headrag; her too tight shoes from which emerged her large feet were further confirmation of her bestial cow-like quality. Her greatest virtue was of course her love for white folks whom she willingly and passively served”⁷ (hooks, 1992: 84). The embodiment of the affectionate nurturer, Aunt Jemima soon became the prototype of acceptable black womanhood, in contrast with the wicked, stubborn and hateful *Sapphire* black woman who was always dissatisfied with her condition. Highly popularized by American books, magazines, radio and television shows, each of these stereotypes aimed at forcing black women to adopt artificially constructed identities that would serve white people one way or the other.

Their character distorted so many times and to such an extent that who they were became problematic even to themselves, African-American women, and men, for that matter, were further confused and alienated from their culture by the movie industry which, despite obvious political, social, and economic progress, persisted in presenting *Africa* either as a dark, hot, lost continent, or, much worse, as a poor, primitive country, populated with savages who lived in villages and spent most of their time throwing spears and dancing half-naked to drum music. Whereas such overgeneralizations clearly ignored Africa’s being three times the size of the United States and its consisting of more than fifty countries and over a thousand distinct ethnic cultures, they also strived to cast black people in a negative light as opposed to the civilized, white Americans who were constantly praised for “what they had done for and given to Africa,” as critics Sheila Walker and Jennifer Rasamimanana notice, rather than “what they had done to and

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

continue[d] to do to Africa or get from Africa”⁸ (Walker, 1997: 32). In mentioning nothing of the transatlantic slave trade, or of the American support of the apartheid system in South Africa, Hollywood movies, then, generally reflected distorted images of African history and culture, meant to manipulate African-Americans into thinking that America was the all-embracing mother who had saved them from their primitive lifestyles, and had given them a chance to adopt its culture and leave savagery behind. Robbed of their cultural heritage and, hence, denied the positive self-feelings they could have developed in their close relationship to their rich African tradition, black people in the United States soon became subject to unemployment, drug addiction, and illiteracy.

Associating the equally false media projections of Africa, of African natives, and of people of African descent with the behavior of African-Americans, and their treatment by the misinformed Americans, critics provided a logical explanation for why such consistently inaccurate, negative, and denigrating images were created in the first place, and why they continued to be systematically perpetuated despite the availability of accurate information that clearly contradicted them. Thus, as early as 1933, African-American historian Carter G. Woodson argued that the American media, as well as the American system of compulsory education had been deliberately misrepresenting reality so that African-Americans “would be induced to deny and negate their ancestral heritage”⁹ (Walker, 1997: 39). Similarly, A. G. Hilliard explained some forty-five years later that the fundamental issue had always been and still was the creation and maintenance of a cultural image that would justify the continued exploitation of Africans and oppression of African-Americans: “The history and culture of colonized or dominated people is usually destroyed or distorted. This enables an oppressor to hold a view of the oppressed which will justify self-serving interventions by the oppressor. It also serves the function of confusing the oppressed group regarding its own identity and resources, thus limiting its ability to respond to oppression. The worldview and cultural information of the oppressed group is manipulated, and truth becomes a scarce commodity”¹⁰ (Walker, 1997: 40). Therefore, instead of teaching Americans and African-

⁸ Sheila S. Walker with Jennifer Rasamimanana, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

¹⁰ A.G. Hilliard, *On Equal Educational Opportunity and Quality Education*, quoted in Sheila S. Walker with Jennifer Rasamimanana, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

Americans to esteem each other's cultural heritage, so as to put an end to racial tension and violence, the American media and entertainment industry joined hands to denigrate African culture and transform African-Americans into something they were not and could not be. In the end, the stereotypical cultural misrepresentations that the white American society created and promoted in order to render assimilation successful turned out devastating for both sides, as they didn't bring people together but rather widened the already large gap existing between them. Nor was there any way one could get anything positive out of such a negative, destructive campaign. Besides, the cultural factors involved in the construction of a person's identity are so many and diverse that people can very seldom, if ever at all, choose or change who they are and where they come from. An impossible project from the very beginning, the attempt to do away with the African culture represented at that point, and has in so far remained, one of the most tragic and unnecessary insults to the African-American people who had been through much as it was.

Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks' Response to American Myths and Misconceptions about
African-Americans

The first African-American writer to win a Pulitzer prize, Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks has been frequently hailed by both white and black criticism as a universal poet. Dealing mostly with the ambivalent aspects of everyday life in the urban black ghetto, her poetry exposes the contradictions at the heart of the American society, and explores the joys, troubles, and concerns of African-American men and women alike. Largely inspired by her personal experiences with black women, the multitude of female images that Brooks creates entails far more diversity and complexity than the stereotypes she seeks to dismantle. Ranging from passive to aggressive, from submissive to assertive, Brooks' black female characters oppose the monolithic black woman of the American stereotypes. Although they share a painful past and a common heritage, black women are presented, as critic Beverly Guy-Sheftall remarks, "as individuals with different priorities and values, different levels of tolerance for misery, and different ways of dealing with

problems”¹¹ (Guy-Sheftall, 1989: 163). In populating her literary creation with such diverse female types, Gwendolyn Brooks firmly proves that just as white women are too many and too different to be described in one word, so is the black female experience too large and too complex to permit stereotyping.

Included in Brooks’ first volume of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, which chronicles the everyday lives, hopes, expectations, and disappointments of the black Americans living in the Chicago neighborhood Bronzeville, *obituary for a living lady* depicts an unnamed black woman, who, although as a girl has been “interested in a brooch and pink powder and a curl”¹² (Brooks, 1971: 9), as a young lady refuses to wear perfume, or lipstick and does not permit sexual intercourse between herself and the man she loves. By the time she decides to say “yes,” the courtship ends and the man turns to a woman who dresses in red, as opposed to the protagonist who dresses in white. Traditionally associated with the promiscuous, good-time woman figure, the color red is positively used here to contrast one woman’s lively, cheerful character with the other woman’s purity and paleness of spirit. Rejected because of her reserved lifestyle and steadfast attitude about sex, the woman in white gives up her romantic dreams of love and turns to religion for consolation and support: “...Now she will not dance/ And she thinks not the thinnest thought of any type of romance/ And I can’t get her to take a touch of the best cream cologne”¹³ (Brooks, 1971: 18-19). While the poem’s title clearly alludes to the main character’s refusal to fully enjoy life, her exaggerated self-control and restrained attitude towards make-up and sex are highly suggestive of the strong negative impact that the *immoral, sexually loose black woman* stereotype has had on black women’s identity. Struggling against the false label enforced upon them, many black women went to the opposite extreme and resolved to live a life devoid of fun and joy for fear their behavior might otherwise offer the malicious stereotypical image justification. Unfortunately, not only were their efforts unsuccessful, but in their attempt to rise above the simplistic, ignorant common perception of the black woman, they denied themselves the chance at happiness and self-fulfillment.

¹¹ Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Women of Bronzeville*, in Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith (eds.), *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989, p. 163.

¹² Gwendolyn Brooks, *obituary for a living lady*, in Gwendolyn Brooks, *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971, p. 9.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 18-19.

Unlike the woman in *obituary for a living lady*, Cousin Vit in *the rites for Cousin Vit* has not allowed sorrows and disappointments to cause her withdrawal from the world, but has chosen instead to live her life to the fullest. So much she has enjoyed the small pleasures of life, that even in death she refuses to be confined: “Kicked back the casket-stand. But it can’t hold her,/ That stuff and satin aiming to enfold her,/.../ Even now, surmise,/ She rises in the sunshine. There she goes,/ Back to the bars she knew and the repose/ In love-rooms and the things in people’s eyes./ Too vital and too squeaking”¹⁴ (Brooks, 1963: 58). Whatever the social stereotype, or the moral standard of society, Cousin Vit has assumed responsibility for her choices and has lived life her way. Ironically, her determination and independent spirit make her seem more alive in death than the spiritually dead, but otherwise very much alive, woman in the previous poem.

A response to both *the American housewife* and *the American black woman* stereotypes, *Mrs. Small*, in *The Bean Eaters*, describes an amusing encounter between a black housewife, mother of ten, and a white insurance man who has come to collect. Busy making coffee and baking apple pie, Mrs. Small distractedly offers her visitor her coffee pot instead of money and accidentally soils his immaculate white shirt “with a pair of brown/ spurts (just recently boiled)/ of the ‘very best coffee in town’”¹⁵ (Brooks, 1963: 83). Quite comic in itself, the incident bears great significance. Associated with female rituals of nurturance and cooking, Mrs. Small is to the insurance man but a clumsy representative of the domestic world of women, which is in no way related to the business world he comes from. Additionally, her being black determines his perception of her as less than human, let alone woman. The stereotypical cultural misrepresentations of the day blind him to Mrs. Small’s subtle wisdom and make him see her in terms of what he knows black women ought to look like: “half-open mouth and [the] half-mad eyes/ and [the] smile half-human”¹⁶ (Brooks, 1963: 82). It is noteworthy from this perspective that Brooks’ choice of her heroine’s name is not accidental. While the woman’s surname hints at “the gender-based stereotype that women’s lives are narrow and that women are preoccupied with unimportant matters,” as critic Maria Mootry rightly argues, her first

¹⁴ Gwendolyn Brooks, *the rites for Cousin Vit*, in Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963, p. 58.

¹⁵ Gwendolyn Brooks, *Mrs. Small*, in Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963, p. 83.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

name, Delphine, “suggests her hidden complexity and power by associating her with the ancient oracle of Apollo at Delphi”¹⁷ (Mootry, 1989: 181). Impatient, superficial, and interested in money only, the insurance man misses not only the black woman’s true character, but also the symbolism in his *white* shirt stained with *brown* coffee. Indicative of the failed interracial communication, the image is part of a larger picture which fundamentally signifies upon the American misconceptions about women in general and African-American women in particular – misconceptions that Brooks fights back by making her protagonist a black woman who is a smart, perceptive housewife: “‘I don’t know where my mind is this morning,’/ Said Mrs. Small, scorning/ Apologies! For there was so much/ For which to apologize! Oh such/ Mountains of things, she’d never get anything done/ If she begged forgiveness for each one”¹⁸ (Brooks, 1963: 83). Well-aware of the overall meaning of their encounter, Mrs. Small does not apologize for being black and female, but pays the man and resumes “her part of the world’s business”¹⁹ (Brooks, 1963: 84), small as it is seen, but essential as she knows it to be.

Chiefly concerned with the white people’s distorted perception of the residents of Bronzeville, *I love those little booths at Benvenuti’s* changes the perspective in that it turns the mirror away from the urban black community and faces it to the white audience in and of the poem, so as to force it to confront its misconceptions and illogical expectations, as well as its own reflection in the eyes of a black American. Spoken by a third-person narrator who objectively describes an evening at a restaurant in the black neighborhood of Chicago, the poem portrays whites who come to Benvenuti’s expecting the “colorfully incorrect”²⁰ (Brooks, 1963: 59) to behave as if they were all clowns and savages. Apparently siding with neither of the two groups, “the voice of the poem takes the same position in relation to the white tourists (so to speak),” as critic Zofia Burr writes, “that they take in relation to the colored people: they go to Benvenuti’s to

¹⁷ Maria K. Mootry, “Tell It Slant:” *Disguise and Discovery as Revisionist Poetic Discourse in The Bean Eaters*, in Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 181.

¹⁸ Gwendolyn Brooks, *Mrs. Small*, in Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963, p. 83.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

²⁰ Gwendolyn Brooks, *I love those little booths at Benvenuti’s*, in Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963, p. 59.

observe”²¹ (Burr, 2002: 128). Contrasting the white people’s secret wish to have fun watching blacks give a bad account of themselves to the latter’s unexpectedly civilized behavior, Brooks actually aims at breaking down the racist black stereotypes that white people have industriously created and perpetuated despite their complete lack of evidence.

The opening lines of the poem reveal the little booths at Benvenuti’s to be particularly attractive, as they serve to both hide and keep separate the white people that come here to uncover “truths” about colored folks who are supposed to act differently at home than they usually do outside Bronzeville: “They get to Benvenuti’s. There are booths/ To hide in while observing tropical truths/ About this – dusky folk, so clamorous!/ So colorfully incorrect,/ So amorous,/ So flatly brave!/ Boothed-in, one can detect,/ Dissect”²² (Brooks, 1963: 59). The poet’s choice of the last two words in this stanza – *detect*, *dissect* – is strongly suggestive of the sheer ugliness and cruelty of white people’s intentions as they make up their mind to have a cheap evening out in Bronzeville. The circus-like world they fantasize and seek to further spice up comes to life with the poet’s insight into their innermost thoughts: “One knows and scarcely knows what to expect./ What antics, knives, what lurching dirt; what ditty -/ Dirty, rich, carmine, hot, not bottled up,/ Straining in sexual soprano, cut/ And praying in the bass, partial, unpretty”²³ (Brooks, 1963: 59). A summary of the numerous negative images commonly related to black people’s behavior, the lines vaguely list white people’s expectations. Nevertheless, as they are eagerly waiting for the “show” to start, “their interiors sweat”²⁴ (Brooks, 1963:59) with the awareness that nothing happens, nor will happen.

Whereas they expect to witness scenes of brutal violence and anger, they are amazed and disappointed to find the people and the place to be annoyingly ordinary and uncomplicated. Because the restaurant does not fulfill the promise of entertainment that they have envisioned, white people feel refused and betrayed. Moreover, since “nobody

²¹ Zofia Burr, Reading Gwendolyn Brooks Across Audiences, in Zofia Burr, *Of Women, Poetry, and Power: Strategies of Address in Dickinson, Miles, Brooks, Lorde, and Angelou*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002, p. 128.

²² Gwendolyn Brooks, *I love those little booths at Benvenuti’s*, in Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963, p. 59.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

here will take the part of jester /.../ [and] the colored people will not clown”²⁵ (Brooks, 1963: 60), they are forced to leave empty-handed, that is with no new story or incidents to marvel at and comment upon with other people, and, perhaps, use to give birth to yet another stereotype: “But how shall they tell people they have been/ Out Bronzeville way? For all the nickels in/ Have not bought savagery or defined a folk”²⁶ (Brooks, 1963: 60). The white people’s final awareness of their inability to define black people entails awareness of their misjudgments and, hopefully, the possibility of a new beginning.

The poem closes with the description of the black folks’ politeness and refined manners, which are firmly contrasted to the *clowning* expected of them, and the absolute stutters of the astonished white audience. Moving from white people’s initial enthusiasm to their eagerness, disappointment, and ultimately to their failure to delineate black people’s character according to their knowledge, the poem exposes white people to themselves and dissects many of the stereotypes that have been used to define and typify black people. By means of this poem, and her literary creation on the whole, Gwendolyn Brooks “seeks to short-circuit a certain kind of voyeuristic pleasure and warns her audience,” as Zofia Burr remarks, “not to take up the persons depicted there as entertaining ‘characters’ and not to take her as a tour guide to the hidden curiosities of Bronzeville”²⁷ (Burr, 2002: 129-130).

Far from being a people of *performers* or *potential entertainers*, as Brooks’ warning cautions her readers, blacks cannot and shouldn’t be reduced to the status of curiosities meant to amuse white viewers on their bad days. Similarly, as a representative of her people, the poet cannot and shouldn’t be mistaken for an exposé, or a “painter” of the colorful world of Bronzeville to the delight of white people. Indeed revelatory in itself, her poetry does not aim at taking a snapshot of the world of the Chicago black neighborhood, but rather at exposing the true impact of inequality on life in Bronzeville. While it may be that stereotypical images and beliefs about black people have not been fully eradicated, it is due to the work and shared effort of such African-American writers as Gwendolyn Brooks that they have largely ceased to exist. No longer or, perhaps, not so

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Zofia Burr, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-130.

much burdened with inaccurate cultural representations and false identities forcibly projected upon them, but with the vivid memory of the painful past behind them, black Americans have slowly regained control of their lives and of their cultural heritage.

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*: Lena Younger between the Black Mammy
Figure and the Black Matriarch Stereotype

One of the first playwrights to create realistic portraits of African-American life, Lorraine Hansberry became, in 1959, the fifth woman and the only black writer to receive the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. Selected as the best play of the year from among Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet*, Tennessee Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* explores the tension between America's white and black community in the 1950s, and poses difficult questions about poverty, assimilation and integration, cultural and racial identity, discrimination, marriage and abortion, race and gender relations. Often acclaimed as a modern classic that has changed American theater forever, the play does not at all encourage full integration, as it has been initially misinterpreted based on a misquote that actually expresses the very opposite of the artist's philosophy, but rather celebrates black culture and black resistance to white oppression, being an important cultural document of a crucial period of time in American history.

Inspired by a line in Langston Hughes' famous poem *Harlem*, which deals with black people's need to express their dreams and act on their desires and ambitions, and the impossibility of such achievement within the oppressive American society, the title that Hansberry has chosen for her play emphasizes the struggle her characters commit themselves to in their attempt to realize their individual dreams, which, though different, share the same purpose, being all connected to black people's common dream of equality in America. "What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / Like *a raisin in the sun*? /.../ Does it stink like rotten meat? /.../ Or does it explode?"²⁸ (emphasis added, Hughes, 1991: 51) is the question that Langston Hughes asks in his short, incendiary

²⁸ Langston Hughes, *Harlem*, in Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, in Mary Remnant (ed.), *Plays by Women*, Volume 5, London: Methuen Publishing Ltd., 1991, p. 51.

poem, and Lorraine Hansberry has tried to answer in her complex, visionary play about the efforts, and the inner conflicts and frustrations of a working-class black family striving to make it out of their small, roach-infested apartment in a Chicago ghetto.

Allowed to indulge in the illusions of the American dream of success that comes with the ten thousand dollar life insurance policy that Lena Younger, or Mama, is about to cash at the beginning of the play as a result of her husband's death, each of the adult members of the family sees the money as potential fulfillment of a private dream. Walter Lee wants to enter business by becoming a partner in a liquor store; his sister, Beneatha, aspires to become a doctor and wants to save the money for her college education; his wife, Ruth, wants their son to grow up in a decent home in a quiet, safe neighborhood; and his mother, Lena, wants to fulfill an older wish she has always shared with his father, Big Walter, who has literally worked himself to death trying in vain to accomplish it, that is buy a larger house with a backyard that will bring her family not only more space to fill in and fresher air to breathe in, but psychological freedom and the hope for a better future as well. Too little to stretch far enough to please everybody, the money goes as quickly as it comes. The legal beneficiary of the life insurance policy, Lena holds back a part of the money for Beneatha's education and uses the rest of it to put a down payment on the only nice, good, solid house she can afford: one in an all-white neighborhood. When she realizes that her decision has brought her son on the brink of self-destruction, she entrusts the remainder of the money to him, asking him to place some of it in a savings account meant to give his sister a good start in life. In his selfish, inappropriate, though to a certain extent well-intended, act of trusting one of his business partners with all the money, Beneatha's part included, Walter ends up disillusioned and, most importantly, penniless. Tempted to take Lindner's offer, who, in the name of the Clybourne Park Association, is ready to pay him and his family as much as it takes to keep them away from the white neighborhood, he comes to fully realize the implications of his acceptance and subsequently rejects the unfair, humiliating proposal.

Because of her strength throughout the play and her ability to push her children in the right direction whenever at a loss, Lena Younger has often been interpreted by literary critics as either a mammy figure, or a black matriarch. While indeed large, dark, fussy, authoritarian, gruffly affectionate, and deeply religious, Lena does not fit the *mammy*

stereotype for two main reasons. *First*, she neither loves, nor fears white people, which is why she does not allow them to influence her moves and define her place in the world. Therefore, she buys a house in a white neighborhood although she all too well knows she is not wanted there. Similarly, when Walter confronts her with his decision of giving in to Lindner's pressures, she doesn't encourage him, but she doesn't pull him back either. Instead, she reminds her son that nobody should be permitted to decide on their behalf, and that without pride and dignity one has nothing left to cling to: "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 ain't never been that poor. (*Raising her eyes and looking at him*) We ain't never been that dead inside"²⁹ (Hansberry, 1991: 101). A living example of courage and human dignity, Lena teaches her children to defend their choices and fight for their rights, instilling in them a philosophy of life which in no way resembles the mammy's resignation about her possibilities, or her dumb joy and general contentedness with her inferior status in relation to the all-powerful white folks.

Secondly, Lena is not a conservative, but quite the contrary. In placing her own life, her grandchild's, and her children's lives on the firing line at Clybourne Park, she is unmistakably progressive. A strong supporter of change and innovation then, Lena is neither passive, nor submissive, as one would expect a mammy figure to be. Critical of the racist system and its law, she does not hesitate to call Booker T. Washington a *fool* when his idea of education comes against her more liberal views of the matter. Initially cut in the original production, but later reinserted for the important insight it offers into Lena's character, the dialogue between Lena Younger and Mrs. Johnson, the snobbish neighbor who has come to warn of the risks in the family's ambitions, serves to reveal the two women's feelings about working for white people and to contrast one to the other as supporters of different ideas and political strategies: "JOHNSON: Ain't nothing wrong with being a chauffeur. MAMA: There's plenty wrong with it. /.../ My husband always said being any kind of a servant wasn't a fit thing for a man to have to be. He always said a man's hands was made to make things, or to turn the earth with – not to drive nobody's car for 'em – or – (*She looks at her own hands*) carry their slop jars. And my boy is just

²⁹ Lorraine Hansberry, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

like him – he wasn't meant to wait on nobody. JOHNSON (*rising, somewhat offended*): You sure one proud-acting bunch of coloured folks. Well – I always thinks like Booker T. Washington said that time – 'Education has spoiled many a good plough hand' - MAMA: Is that what old Booker T. said? /.../ Well, it sounds just like him. The fool. JOHNSON (*indignantly*): Well – he was one of our great man. MAMA: Who said so? JOHNSON (*nonplussed*): You know, me and you ain't never agreed about some things, Lena Younger"³⁰ (Hansberry, 1991: 84-85). Unlike the mammy figure, who loves white people and is happy to serve them, Lena firmly rejects such work as undignified and utterly humiliating. Furthermore, her criticism of Booker T. Washington's opinions indirectly "aligns her," as critic Margaret B. Wilkerson writes, "with Washington's intellectual opponent, W.E.B. DuBois"³¹ (Wilkerson, 1990: 127-128).

While both Washington and DuBois struggled to obtain full citizenship for black Americans, the ways they understood to fight for it were significantly different. Against Booker T. Washington's philosophy of accommodation to white oppression, whereby blacks were advised to accept the fact of white supremacy, to work hard, save their money, and purchase property but, at the same time, keep themselves as socially separate from white people as possible, DuBois expressed his strong belief that persistent agitation, political action, and academic education were the right means to achieve their goal. One of the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization which led an intensive campaign against segregation and discrimination, W.E.B. DuBois criticized and opposed Washington's program precisely because it devalued high education, it perpetuated segregation, and it ignored the economic exploitation of the black masses, three things that Lena does not approve of either. Whereas the black mammy stereotype is, beyond any doubt, in keeping with Washington's strategy, Lena's dismissal of his views equates her with the revolutionary spirit of DuBois' position and most clearly delineates her from the passive, meekly obedient character of the mammy figure. Progressive, courageous, strong, determined, and militant, Lena Younger simply cannot be mistaken for the silent, submissive, and inoffensive black mammy that white people expect and want her to be.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 84-85.

³¹ Margaret B. Wilkerson, *A Raisin in the Sun: Anniversary of an American Classic*, in Margaret B. Wilkerson (ed.), *Nine Plays by Black Women*, New York: Demco Media, 1990, pp. 127-128.

If the black mammy identity has been wrongly attributed to Lena Younger by literary critics, their misinterpretation of Lena as representative of *the black matriarch* largely stems from Lorraine Hansberry's own description of her protagonist as "The Black matriarch incarnate: The bulwark of the Negro family since slavery; the embodiment of the Negro will to transcendence. It is she who, in the mind of the Black poet, scrubs the floors of a nation in order to create Black diplomats and university professors. It is she who, while seeming to cling to traditional restraints, drives the young on into the fire hoses and one day simply refuses to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery"³² (Carter, 1991: 52-53). Yet, however clear about Lena's being a black matriarch, the portrayal also shows that Hansberry's concept of black matriarchy shares nothing with the popular black matriarch stereotype. Nowhere does she mention the failed mammy, the mammy gone bad, who has spent too much time away from her children, or the black-widow spider like castrator of her husband and sons. Rather, the reference is to the strong black woman whom slavery and racism have forced to assume control of her family by relegating black men to a position inferior to white men and white women alike. Revealing racism and not black women to be the true castrator of black men, Hansberry further warns, in a generally omitted part of the same quotation, of the mistake of getting such women confused "with Freudian concepts of matriarchal 'dominance' and Philip Wylie's Momism and all that business. It's not the same thing. Not that there aren't negative things about it, and not that tyranny sometimes doesn't emerge as part of it. But basically it's a *great* thing. These women have become the backbone of our people in a very necessary way"³³ (Carter, 1991: 53). Given the playwright's positive view on matriarchy, Lena cannot possibly be assimilated to the false image of the supposedly aggressive, unfeminine, emasculating black woman that the myth of the black matriarch has tried so hard to perpetuate.

Perhaps Lena Younger's best defense is the play itself. After all, Lena has only become in charge of her family shortly before the play's opening scene as a direct consequence of her husband's death. There is no doubt whatsoever that while he was living, Big Walter was the head of the Younger household. His drinking habit, his always

³² Lorraine Hansberry, *The Origins of Character*, quoted in Steven R. Carter, *Hansberry's Drama: Commitment amid Complexity*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991, pp. 52-53.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

having been “kind of wild with women”³⁴ (Hansberry, 1991: 62), and his forceful, hardheaded personality indicate that he had a mind of his own which, though equally strong-willed, Lena could never have ordered about. Besides, her being a devout Christian would most certainly have prevented her from challenging the traditional male superiority in marriage. This is not to say that Lena defended, or by any means approved of her husband’s behavior, which she must have questioned more than once, but rather acknowledges her submissiveness to her male relatives as a fundamental part of her and her family’s upbringing.

Significantly enough, except for the house down payment that she makes against her son’s wish, Lena never does anything on her own but shifts control and responsibility onto Walter. She hands him the remainder of the money to use it as he likes and “steps down,” allowing him to decide whether or not they should take Lindner’s offer which might reverse her action and bring back the money she has spent on the house. It may be that Lena continues to express her feelings and beliefs out loud in her attempt to help her son realize the full consequences of his choices, but the final call is no longer hers to make. In a sense, nor has it ever been, since not even the purchasing of the new house is a decision that she makes alone or a matriarch-like gesture. Indeed she acts contrary to Walter’s wishes, but she does it only because she knows that this is exactly what Big Walter would have done, had he been alive and had the means to: “I remember just as well the day me and Big Walter moved in here. Hadn’t been married but two weeks and wasn’t planning on living here no more than a year. (*She shakes her head at the dissolved dream.*) We was going to set away, little by little, don’t you know, and buy a little place out in Morgan Park. We had even picked out the house. (*Chuckling a little.*) Looks right dumpy today. But Lord, child, you should know all the dreams I had ‘bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back...”³⁵ (Hansberry, 1991: 61-62). Similarly, the values that she is struggling to pass on to her children and grandchild are those she has held in common with her husband. When Beneatha claims God to be nothing more than an idea which she refuses to accept, Lena responds by

³⁴ Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, in Mary Remnant (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 62.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 61-62.

slapping her and forcing her to repeat “in my mother’s house there is still God”³⁶ (Hansberry, 1991: 64). In mentioning the trouble that she and *Big Walter* went to in order to get their children to church every Sunday, Lena reveals her violent outburst to be motivated not only by her daughter’s atheism, or deliberate denial of the existence of God, but also by her implicit defiance of her father’s lifelong principles and effort. Despite her husband’s many faults and flaws, Lena cherishes his memory and, by constantly turning to his spirit and reflections for guidance, she demands that her children cherish it too: “God knows there was plenty wrong with Walter Younger. /.../ But he sure loved his children. Always wanted them to have something – be something. That’s where Brother gets all these notions, I reckon. Big Walter used to say, he’d get right wet in the eyes sometimes, lean his head back with the water standing in his eyes and say, ‘Seem like God didn’t see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams – but He did give us children to make them dreams seem worthwhile.’ (*She smiles.*) He could talk like that, don’t you know”³⁷ (Hansberry, 1991: 62).

Although completely absent in the play, Big Walter looms large in Lena’s words and his family’s moves. So much do his beliefs and values influence the course of events throughout the play, that the powerful impression of his being still present and in charge simply leaves no room for doubt concerning the assumption of Lena’s being a matriarch. Empowered by her Christianity, which many critics have misjudged as being basically conservative when black churches actually supported and encouraged racial progress, Lena also derives strength from her husband’s vivid memory, which prompts most of her words and actions. Making both a crutch and a club of her religiousness, acting on Big Walter’s behalf, commanding respect for his authority, and expecting Walter to be his father’s son and the head of the family, Lena cannot be farther from the black matriarch stereotype. Were Lena Younger a castrator, Big Walter’s name wouldn’t be so often mentioned in their house and Walter Lee wouldn’t be given any money, nor would he be understood and supported upon his foolish betrayal of his mother’s trust. Perhaps the mistake in misinterpreting Lena as a black matriarch comes from the different meaning that the word *matriarch* has evoked to black people as compared to what white people

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

have meant by it. Whereas white Americans have made up and perpetuated the stereotype so as to portray working black women as essentially aggressive, masculine, and emasculating women, black women have ignored the negative aspects of the concept and have embraced it as empowering them. Seen from this perspective, Lena is and is not a matriarch. Strong, active, courageous, progressive, affectionate, beautiful, and self-sacrificial, Lena fits the black women's sense of the word, and fails to conform to white people's definition of it. Nevertheless, to avoid confusion, it is probably safer to reject matriarchy, be it black or white, as merely an illusion and describe Lena as *the black woman incarnate*, striving to make her way up in a society which seems to have its mind set on pushing her backwards.

As the product of a specific social and historical context, identity both reflects and affects *culture*. People are embedded in culture and, conversely, the traditions, beliefs, norms, and moral values they hold in common are filtered through their cognitive structures and perceptual lenses. Instilled in early childhood by means of interweaving everyday habits and rituals with bedtime stories and special family occasions, cultural awareness allows identification with past generations, helps transcend stereotypes, increases cultural sensitivity, and develops tolerance and respect for difference. Not problematic in homogeneous societies where people's lives are naturally colored with meaningful sounds, rhythms, images, smells, and tastes, *cultural identity* is more difficult to achieve in a heterogeneous community whose members have mixed heritage and are, therefore, struggling to balance two or more cultures at the same time. More often than not, the continuous devaluation of their image, as a common strategy designed to make their ancestral way of life appear socially inferior, ridiculous, and not worth preserving, has led to cultural disintegration instead of ensuring cultural cohesiveness and assimilation. Pressured into abandoning their languages and traditions for those of the dominant culture, minority groups are, in fact, robbed of their cultural identity. Plagued with feelings of disempowerment, frustration, anger, and confusion, many turn despondent, lose pride in their heritage, and become self-alienated. As opposed to the concept of assimilation, *inclusion*, based on unconditional acceptance of cultural others, gives the individual a choice, allows space for diversity, supports cultural survival, and fosters a sense of social justice. While there

is no such thing as a prejudice-free society, the challenge lies in finding ways to correct cultural biases and move closer to a healthy community built on understanding, trust, and mutual respect.

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