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Learning and Unlearning: Ideal vs. Reality

In Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, readers are introduced to Beneatha Younger, a young Black woman in Chicago in the 1950s with a drive to be a doctor and a quick wit. The play is a snapshot of a cultural movement on the rise, with the progressive new ideas that were pushing their way into the public eye through the Black Power, Black Arts, and Black Nationalism movements shown in full force through the mind and actions of Beneatha. Michelle Wallace, a theorist growing up in the same time as the play is set, described her own experience coming across and coming to terms with these social movements herself in her essay, *Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood*. In conversation with one another, Wallace and Hansberry juxtapose what learning and unlearning society's rules in search of liberation should look like as opposed to what they *do* look like, presenting the contrasting idealistic expectations of a fictional character and the disappointing realities of a real woman. I will compare Beneatha's moments of breakage from societal expectations with Wallace's, using their confrontations with opposition and obstacles to their goals as points of connection.

One of the first memories that Wallace shares with her readers is about the conflation of hair, femininity, and race in her experience growing up. Two memories directly juxtaposed with one another set the scene for the radical change in perspective that overcame her when she first saw a counterpoint to her learned behavior:

On rainy days my sister and I would tie the short end of a scarf around our scrawny braids and let the rest of its silken mass trail to our waists... There was a time when I would have called that wanting to be white, yet the real point of the game was being feminine. Being feminine *meant* being white to us. One day when I was thirteen...I caught a brief but enchanting glimpse at a beautiful creature—slender, honey brown, and she wore her hair natural. Very few people did then, which made her that much more striking (Wallace 220).

For a young Wallace, make believe felt like the only way to achieve that feeling of femininity, but for Beneatha her method was through “mutilation,” in the words of her Nigerian suitor, Asagai (Hansberry 62). Both women felt the need to reflect the aesthetic standards of whiteness because that was the dominant form of beauty presented to them. However, when each is presented with a counterexample to whiteness as ideal, they each spring to take the opportunity to liberate themselves from the constrictions they hadn't realized they were bound by. While Beneatha weathers the onslaught of offensive retorts from George about her hair once she reveals it to him, Wallace wavered in opposition to catcalling and the fear of rape due the associations the world was making in relation to her hair and promiscuity. She even referred to reverting back to her former hairstyle as going “back to normal,” establishing the deep-seated equation of abnormality with Black women's ability to present naturally (Wallace 220). Hansberry's character received support for her endeavor to go natural from Asagai, whereas the men around Wallace threatened her safety. This factor was critical to Beneatha's willingness to defend her decision and Wallace's quick reversion back to “normal.”

The way in which each woman received and dealt with push back from Black men in their lives also contrasts the experiences described by Hansberry and Wallace. We know that

Beneatha is educated from several different indicators in the play, however the people around her are constantly questioning the legitimacy of her intelligence and her ideas. Despite her education and her drive to for success—perhaps because of it—George and Walter Lee especially do not respect Beneatha and attempt to silence her. Be it Walter Lee telling her to “just get married and be quiet” (Hansberry 38) or George telling her he wants a “simple...sophisticated girl...not a poet” (Hansberry 97), she is often demanded to shrink herself. She is even encouraged to follow along by Mama and Ruth in an effort for Beneatha to fall in line with the way she’s expected to be. In Wallace’s essay she discusses the ways in which educated Black men she encountered, especially in college, oppressed the minds and bodies of Black women who theoretically shared their same goal of liberation and freedom. She summarized her experience being an outspoken Black woman on Howard’s campus with a pithy, disappointing realization: “The black man has learned to hate himself and to hate you even more. Be careful. He will hurt you” (Wallace 224). She emphasized this point by asserting that they wanted her to be so “soft spoken...Where our voices could not be heard at all” (Wallace 222) or be at risk of facing bodily harm or verbal abuse. However, while Beneatha found the strength to retort to her brother and kick George out of the house and did not feel endangered by it, Wallace had to live her life “like guerilla warfare,” (Wallace 224) for fear of physical retaliation. It seems that Hansberry was interested in writing what she wished could be heard and seen from a Black woman when her dreams and ideas’ legitimacy are called into question, as opposed to Wallace who felt she couldn’t be vocal for so long.

When comparing the fictional character of Beneatha with the true, lived experience of Michelle Wallace it becomes abundantly clear that *A Raisin in the Sun* had the space to imagine Beneatha’s experience as a much more enlightening, hopeful journey towards a better future than what she would likely have faced in the real world. Michelle Wallace’s exposé on the trials and tribulations of a Black woman in search of liberation alongside Black men compared her experience as a “new slavery,” shifting her idea of oppression from whiteness to maleness (Wallace 223). While Beneatha complained bitterly of “assimilationist Negroes” (Hansberry 81), Wallace found a new problem to be the Black men who, in their rejection of whiteness, clung heavily to patriarchal strongholds and gender roles for their female counterparts. Hansberry and Wallace’s ideas for liberation looked different for this reason: Beneatha found hers in Blackness and her African roots, whereas Wallace found that that was not enough. The reality discovered in the juxtaposition is the importance of intersectionality. In Hansberry’s fictional drama, she could let the characters think about one form of oppression without needing to tie in the role of gender as acutely as Wallace felt it in her lived experience.

In examining Wallace’s *Anger in Isolation* in contrast to Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, I am comparing a piece of art to a slice of life. I acknowledge that Hansberry had to choose which battles to take on in her work to make the impact and tell the story she needed to tell. However, through her depiction of Beneatha with her headstrong optimism for activism and faith in social movements to overcome society’s ills, she focuses on simply one face of a multi-faceted issue. Wallace provides her own story as a counterpoint to Beneatha’s, one where her courage and strength were not enough to protect her against the violence of misogynoir and the vast and varied effects white patriarchy has on Black women. In looking at points of conflict for Wallace and Beneatha for decisions they made that went against the grain of society, I could see the distinction between the idealism imbued on a fictional character and the stubborn, inspiring perseverance of a real, tenacious woman.

Works Cited

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Wallace. "Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist." Words of Fire: an Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought (ed. Guy-Sheftall) (1995) : pp. 219-227