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Performing the Academy in Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Beneatha's Place*

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Lorraine Hansberry's classic African American drama, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), the title inspired by Langston Hughes's iconic poem "A Dream Deferred," or "Harlem," has been performed globally and is well known to scholars and practitioners of African theatre. In her depiction of the dreams of African heritage in *Raisin*, Hansberry was among the first African Diaspora playwrights to convincingly imagine relationships between African Americans and Africans. The impact of the original production of *Raisin* in 1959 was noted by James Baldwin, who remarked, "in *Raisin* black people recognized that house and all the people in it and supplied the play with an interpretative element which could not be present in the minds of white people" (Baldwin, 2014: 2). The play itself has had continued longevity, having been staged at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York in the Spring of 2014, and starring Denzel Washington as Walter Younger.

The follow-up to *A Raisin in the Sun* has been dubbed the "*Raisin* cycle," which includes Bruce Norris's award winning *Clybourne Park* (2010), named after the white suburban community depicted in Hansberry's play, and Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Beneatha's Place* (2013), directed by Derrick Sanders and named for the important member of the Younger family in *Raisin*, who is reimagined in Kwei-Armah's work. *The Raisin* Cycle was staged at Baltimore's Center Stage, where Black British artistic director, Kwei-Armah, has developed a number of projects. Kwei-Armah's reputation rests on prior achievements in Black British theatre, having written some ten plays, including *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003), *The Fix Up* (2004), and *Statement of Regret* (2007).

Clybourne Park, which had its world premiere at Playwrights Horizon Mainstage Theater in New York in February 2010 and another premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in London in September 2010, won the

Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play, the Tony Award for Best Play as well as the 2011 Pulitzer Prize. The play extends the characterisations in *Raisin* to include events in the Chicago suburban community in 1959, when *Raisin in the Sun* is set, as well as in 2009, to suggest the outcome of integration in that previously predominantly white community. Clearly, Norris was motivated by Hansberry's character Karl Lindner and used him as a way of imagining later interactions. In *Clybourne Park,* Norris's Lindner makes the following remarks about community and integration, when speaking to Bev, owner of the property assumed to be purchased by the Youngers:

> I'm not here to solve society's problems. I'm simply telling you what will happen, and it will happen as follows: First one family will leave, then another, and another, and each time they do, the values of these properties will decline, and once that process begins, once you break that egg…. (*Clybourne Park,* 2011: 80)

In *Beneatha's Place*, racial issues addressed in a British context in *Elmina's Kitchen* can be found as well, but in the U.S. situation. Modeled on the Bruce Norris-*Clybourne Park* formula, *Beneatha's Place* allows cast members to play double roles in a two-act work set in 1959 and 2009. The work extends *Raisin* by including the original time frame of the late 1950s-early 60s, in Act 1; and then, in Act 2, moves over fifty years forward to 2013. Act 1 of *Beneatha's Place* develops the marriage of Beneatha Younger, the Afrocentric, somewhat Marxist intellectual African American (like Hansberry herself, perhaps) in search of identity and a future beyond Chicago's South Side, and Joseph Asagai, the Nigerian university student who courts her in *Raisin* and informs her about Yoruba culture. In *Beneatha's Place,* they return to Nigeria as a married couple, when the country is on the eve of independence. In Act 2, Beneatha, played by Jessica Frances Dukes, is a senior, noted sociologist and university dean of Social Sciences at a California institution. She returns to Nigeria with a group of her colleagues to attend a kind of conference retreat. In both acts, the setting is the residence Beneatha and Asagai move into when returning to Nigeria. In this way, *Beneatha's Place* also parallels *Clybourne Park* with a primary setting based on relocation.

Particularly in Act 2, the U.S. academy is in focus and the dialogue develops Kwei-Armah's conversation about race, especially concerning the decline of Black Studies and the ascendance of Critical White Studies as its competitor. In this way, the play is not directly about the place of performance studies within the academy, but an ironic look at race, culture, and white privilege through dramatic performance. Furthermore, the stage design of the play, the use of black stereotypical caricatures as backdrop, objects collected by Asagai and brought back to Lagos, shows how this staging goes beyond the dialogue to speak to audiences about race through visual representation.[1] The attention given in the play to Asagai's arranging of the various stereotypical objects is especially ironic, in that these figures are both a reminder of the racial divide in the U.S. and his motivation to rise beyond their symbolic limitations.

Kwei-Armah's understanding of race in the US context undoubtedly affected his decision to deal with such issues in a dramatic work. Of US race issues, he commented,

> "It is huge, humongous, the elephant in nearly every room I have entered. Only this elephant isn't quiet, this one shouts and screams and swings its trunk and will hit you full in the face several times a day if you let it….what I feel 'race talk' in the US and the UK has in common is the underlying assumption of white European supremacy. To go a step further, white Anglo-Saxon supremacy" (Kwei-Armah, 2012).

Certainly, the representation of race in dramatic works can be a challenging task as shown in a parallel context in South African drama. Kennedy Chinyowa has noted, "To engage with race, for instance, requires a post-conflict pedagogy that can bring together the 'perpetrators' and the 'victims' in the same dialogic space" (Chinyowa, 2012: 47). This concept can apply as well to Kwei-Armah's work, where the dialogic space is literally the theatrical work itself.

In writing *Beneatha's Place*, Kwei-Armah suggests that a dramatic product can be engendered through a variety of performance approaches and interventions; in this case, the extenuation of a classic through a particular moment in its plot and the possibilities of new characterisations, as in the portrayal of a Nigerian-American professor, Wale Oguns in Act 2. However, Kwei-Armah is not only "riffing" on *Raisin*, but *Clybourne Park* as well, in that he found Norris's work to have certain shortcomings. The *Baltimore Sun* reviewer Tim Smith noted Kwei-Armah's goal to "raise the same questions as Norris, but open windows that might lead to different answers" (Smith, 2014). Writing for the *Washington Post*, Peter Marks indicated, "Kwei-Armah deserves plaudits, too, for showing audiences how the conversation in one theater can extend into another. Though 'Beneatha's Place' leaves an impression that a useful dialogue has digressed into a lecture, let's hope that others adopt this playwright's impulse to keep the talk flowing" (Marks, 2014).

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[1] It would be informative to place in conversation with *Beneatha's Place* other diasporic drama of return such as Ade Solanke's *Pandora's Box* (2012), which confronts the UK-Nigeria return in the contemporary times. In her play, Principal Osun is identified as the "gangster catcher," in his role of "tak[ing] unruly boys and turn[ing] them into men" (Solanke, 2012: 68).

Kwei-Armah himself addressed his own motivation in the following manner.

> I wrote *Beneatha's Place* because I felt that *Clybourne Park*, a brilliant play that ignites wonderful debate around race and gentrification and class, but I felt that sometimes there could be connotations attached to the play, that whites build and blacks destroy, that white flight equals black blight, that somehow there was a sense of anti-intellectualism in the black characters, that were not there in the white characters. (*PBS Arts*, 2013)

To understand the creative linkage between *Raisin* and *Beneatha's Place*, it is important to return to Act 3 of *Raisin* and the dialogue between Asagai and Beneatha regarding colonialism, the independence era, and the transition period. Beneatha's exploration of the independence era suggests the challenges and pitfalls of the transition:

> All your talk and dreams about Africa and Independence. Independence and then what? What about all the crooks and petty thieves and just plain idiots who will come into power to steal and plunder the same as before—only now they will be black and do it in the name of the new Independence—You cannot answer that (Hansberry, *Raisin*, 2004: 1822).

How are Beneatha's words a signal of future Afro-pessimism and those of Asagai, the optimistic idealist, continued in *Beneatha's Place*? Asagai's intention to return to his village and combat "illiteracy and disease" is in Hansberry's play a reminder of certain stereotypical visions of the African village, but, nevertheless, his remarks become additional entry points for Kwei-Armah's characterisations in *Beneatha's Place.* In *Raisin* Asagai remarks,

> At times it will seem that nothing changes at all…and then again…the sudden dramatic events which make history leap into the future. And then quiet again. Retrogressive even. Guns, murder, revolution. (Hansberry, *Raisin,* 2004: 1822)

Beneatha's Place confronts the reality of return, not only for Asagai, who arrives to assume a principal role in the new Nigerian regime, but for Beneatha herself, who has made the decision to marry Asagai and, therefore, experience not an imagined "romanticised" Africa of colorful clothing and musical recordings, but one of conflicting political affiliations. Her other alternative choice of marriage in *Raisin* is the black bourgeois character George Murchison, who is presented as mocking African history and traditions when he speaks of the ancestral past and ancient societies that gave rise to "Ashanti empires" and "the great Songhay civilizations" as "nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts" (Hansberry, *Raisin* 2004: 1799).

The details of "returning" occupy the first part of Act 1 of *Beneatha's Place*, in which Asagai and Beneatha settle into their new home, a bungalow in 1959 Lagos. This time period is relevant to the overall tensions in the act, and the production at Center Stage was intent on informing the audience of this through supplementary materials. The playbill contains substantial background information, including the rationale of the "Raisin Cycle," a bio of Hansberry, Chicago housing policies, details on "Critical White Studies," and, especially for Act 1, a chronology of Nigerian history from 1841-1963. Called "A Rough Road to Nationhood, 1841-1963", the information concerning the independence period implies the formation of a ruling class that Asagai would have been part of, or would have confronted on his return. This information provided for the audience points to a certain interpretation of the after effects of colonial rule and nation formation, which ultimately

> …created a small class of English-speaking Nigerians to hold lower-level positions in the government and in businesses—again supplanting traditional leadership, circumventing longstanding economic and power structures, or creating entirely new and unequal ones based on a foreign set of values and standards (*The Raisin Cycle*, 2012: 6).

For the period leading up to Beneatha and Asagai's return, 1957-1960, the chronology indicates "Regional self-government begins in the East and West, a major transfer of power from the British to Nigerians," (1957), and for 1959, "Regional self-government begins in the North" (*The Raisin Cycle*, 2012: 6). This background material gives audiences a sense of time and place, but the play's actual developments in Act 1 include broader issues of African American-Nigerian relationships. The opening of the act involves a number of characters, ranging from the former white missionary tenants of the house to a US businessman, Daniel Barnes, a telecommunications executive, but seemingly connected to US clandestine destabilisation. At one point in Act 1, Barnes reveals his motivation by offering Asagai money.

> We just want to be sure post-Independence that there are principled people around that we can do business with, simple as that. I just come to let you know that you have a friend. Consider this a contribution (*Beneatha's Place*, qtd. from *A Raisin in the Sun Revisited*, 2013).

The remarks of Barnes imply the push and pull forces of the Cold War and the seeking of alliances with African nations by the US, concerned with the Soviet Union's influence in securing economic and political relations with emerging African nations.

Most important, at the beginning of the act, Asagai's unpacking of his collection of racist masks and other demeaning objects depicting African Americans and Africans allows for a visual presentation of race, shown on the wall of the bungalow, which eventually is covered with numerous stereotypical figures. The dialogue generated by these images is an ironic critique of such representations. Also, and perhaps more central to the Independence era themes is the tenuous predicament of Asagai as a returning elite. When Beneatha says, "I didn't come to Africa for you to die," she alludes to the prophecy made by Asagai in *Raisin*, regarding the possibilities of violence. The question of violence was addressed in a *Washington Post* review of the play: "This violence-racked [sic] new Old World isn't the promised land Beneatha envisioned" (Marks, 2014).

In general, Kwei-Armah uses Beneatha to inform Asagai's political reality. Asagai comes to understand the political world that has emerged and that is being influenced by Western or US intervention.

> ASAGAI: The fundamental rule of politics is there's always a better deal to be made and in my eagerness to be so modern, to be so non-tribal, I forgot that. I know these guys. Let's move (*Beneatha's Place*, qtd. from *A Raisin in the Sun Revisited*, 2013).

However, the possibilities for maneuvering beyond what Asagai considers a new modernity become limited as shown in the outcome of Act 1, where internal political factionalism results in his assassination. This conclusion enhances the Afro-pessimistic undertones that were present in Hurston's foreshadowing of neocolonial dilemmas in *Raisin*.

In Act 2, which projects forward in time and develops Beneatha as an academic involved in foundations of Black Studies, the play explores the role of black academics through the Black Arts Movement era of the sixties to the New African Diaspora of the present. The US academy becomes the focal point for the *Clybourne Park*-like conversations and interactions, where Gary Jacobs, the academic who is suspicious of the term "white privilege," verbally challenges Beneatha's status.

> I'm saying that many in this university have gotten to positions of power by legislation and not by merit. Beneatha, it is undeniable that you entered the system during the period of Affirmative Action (*Beneatha's Place*, qtd. from *A Raisin in the Sun Revisited*, 2013).

Here Kwei-Armah addresses the contemporary time period with acute awareness of those issues that arose in the sixties concerning access to higher education for African Americans. A retrospective view of the debates allows contemporary audiences to measure their own views regarding Affirmative Action, which, in the US context, has been systematically eroded as a result of various Supreme Court decisions, most notably, the 1978 Bakke Decision, where Affirmative Action was upheld but quota systems were overturned. The play's retrospective discussion of Affirmative Action implies, as the reviewer for the *New York Times* expressed it, that "The disputed territory has shifted from property to history" (Weinert-Kendt, 2014). In their argument over the historical past, Jacobs and Beneatha show its obvious relevance to the present.

Act 2 also reminds us of the *Clybourne Park* strategies in a dialogue construction, the rapid interchange of witty conversation between characters. These conversations reflect intellectual activity although a number of critics have described the act as "talky." However, Peter Marks saw opportunities in such conversation: "Though 'Beneatha's Place' leaves an impression that a useful dialogue has digressed into a lecture, let's hope that others adopt this playwright's impulse to keep the talk flowing" (Marks, 2014). Another reviewer thought Act 2 to be "especially contrived in its setting and occasionally tedious in its message delivered by a cast of pretentious academics. Their racial debate is an extension of act one's setup, but it's a distant one that robs the production of flow" (Harris, 2014).

Why did Kwei-Armah model this part on the admittedly "talky" design of *Clybourne Park*? Apparently, he wanted to reify intellectual battles in which black voices were heard as equal participants and especially around the question of "Critical White Studies," defined by Gregory Jay, one of its prominent exponents, and Khalid Yaya Long, the dramaturgy assistant for the production. According to Jay, Critical White Studies "'attempts to trace the economic and political history behind the invention of 'whiteness.'" This field also investigates how "whiteness" functions "'systematically, structurally, and sometimes unconsciously as a dominant force in American—and indeed in global—society and culture'" (*The*

Raisin Cycle, 2012: 7).

The arguments presented in Act 2 between Beneatha as Dean and Gary Jacobs also shows the gender aspects of Critical White Studies in that Beneath can be understood as a threat to white males. As John Graham reminds us, "The major threat to the great white male, however, clearly is women. He honestly believes there is a conspiracy afoot and that females are the enemy, working feverishly to take control of everything" (Graham, 1997: 3-4). Beneatha embodies the dual threat as a black woman proposing arguments that show the underlying motives of White Studies in the academy.

Conclusion

Kwei-Armah challenges the US academy in *Beneatha's Place* by addressing a twenty-first-century dilemma, when "Ethnic Studies" and, by extension, Black Studies, has been under attack. However, in choosing to emulate the *Clybourne Park* model of dramatic construction, in Act 2, especially, his work raises questions about the effectiveness of "talky" or "polemical" dialogue. However, the same might have been said for Norris's *Clybourne Park*. Were certain critics more put off by the nature of the "talk" in Kwei-Armah's play because it excavates a different kind of racial discussion, where black characters demonstrate the acuteness of their intellectual arguments? Act 1, which follows the more accepted scenario, though a fulfillment of the prophecy of Afro-pessimism, avoids the "talky" style and perhaps is a more adequate model for the intervention into *Raisin* by Kwei-Armah. Although Kwei-Armah might be faulted for following a successful model rather than inventing his own for this play, there is evidence of his own ingenuity, and that of the director, Sanders, in shaping characters and adding complexity to issues varying from post-colonial West African situations to battles within the US academy. On the whole, Kwei-Armah has shown that a playwright with a diasporic vision can extend the conversation on race, using a variety of dramatic models and that "new" plays can invent through interaction with parallel works and productions.

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