"Africa Claiming Her Own": Unveiling Natural Hair and African Diasporic Identity in Lorraine Hansberry's Unabridged *A Raisin in the Sun*

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ABSTRACT: *In the phantasmagoric performance that begins the second act of Lorraine Hansberry's classic* A Raisin in the Sun *(1959), Beneatha Younger emerges with a short "close-cropped" natural style after cutting off her straightened hair offstage. Although this is a seemingly minor theatrical moment, hair in this scene and Hansberry's work and life serves as a powerful dramatic signifier, a political tool for self-understanding and liberation, and a cultural bridge between African and African diasporic identity. Drawing from archival material concerning the original 1957 playscript, Tracy Heather Strain's 2017 documentary* Sighted Eyes/Feeling Hands*, and recent scholarship, this article examines how Beneatha asserts her own body politics and corporeal scripting in her interactions with two romantic prospects, Joseph Asagai and George Murchison, to argue that her relationship with each suitor represents the complicated ways she wrestles with the meaning of the African diaspora. By embracing her natural hair and making deliberate aesthetic self-fashioning choices, Beneatha reclaims an ancestral African identity and cultivates a global Black consciousness that ultimately exceeds specific performances of dress, dance, and hair.*

KEYWORDS: *Beneatha, Black hair, big chop, diasporic romance, African ancestry, global Black consciousness*

> [E]ach piece of our living is a protest.
>
> Lorraine Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1969)

When Beneatha Younger cuts off her straightened hair and embraces her natural texture before the second act in the original stage script of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), her action culminates a period of research into her African ancestry.[1] Twenty-year-old Beneatha, intellectually

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gifted and acerbically witty, has studied the cultural markers of language, music, clothing, and most significantly, the interlocking histories of African colonialism, enslavement, and ensuing freedom movements. Her upending of racialized, gendered social norms of courtship, marriage, and labour (domestic, reproductive, professional) emerges as a captivating subplot.[2] Hansberry positions Joseph Asagai and George Murchison as Beneatha's ideologically divergent suitors – symbols of a romanticized African past and aspirational African American middle-class future, respectively – to illustrate how her semi-autobiographical character challenges societal mandates of mid-century Black womanhood. Beneatha asserts her fervent, if at times naïvely self-indulgent, desire to possess her ancestral history as she proudly dons her natural hair and wraps herself in African fabrics gifted from Asagai. Draped in a newfound diasporic identity, she lays claim to African history, which she considers central to cultivating global Black consciousness.

Critical reappraisals of Hansberry's influential work and life underscore the playwright's radical, activist commitment to social justice. Scholarship during the last thirty years has afforded readers a more nuanced appreciation of Hansberry's life than early reviews of her best-known play did. Mary Helen Washington places Hansberry under the feminist mantle of "1950s black Left radicalism" (25), and Daphne Brooks summarizes Hansberry's intersectional identities with the appellation "black queer Marxist feminist playwright" (128). Literary biographer and theatre scholar Margaret B. Wilkerson has also emphasized Hansberry's "political radicalism and artistic innovation" ("Political" 40). Beneatha's character serves as a key dramatic catalyst for these wide-ranging scholarly reinterpretations that broaden the vision of Hansberry as an innovative playwright activist.[3]

Tracy Heather Strain's 2017 feature documentary *Lorraine Hansberry: Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart* enlarges our understanding of the playwright beyond the historic success of *Raisin* by focusing, counter-intuitively, on her hair: "I started with the notion that people did not know who Lorraine Hansberry was. […] I didn't either, really. You see these pictures, she's wearing the pearls, her hair's all done. She's an icon, the picture of success during the civil rights movement" (qtd. in Tillet). Imani Perry likewise mentions Hansberry's changing hair, mostly photographed in coiffed perfection and rarely in carefree stages of undone, as one indicator of her multidimensionality: "Elegance in one photo gives way to the *boyish charm* and mussed hair of another" (2, emphasis added).[4] Photographs and archival film footage from Hansberry's private life show a relaxed, makeup-free woman, casually dressed in denim pants and a loose-fitting sweater, strolling through nature with her dogs at her Croton-on-Hudson residence, free to transgress late 1950s' gender binaries. Both Strain and Perry point to the seemingly minor detail of

Hansberry's shifting hairstyles as evidence of broader personal and political commitments.

This renewed critical attention occasions revisiting the figure of Beneatha, "a mild parody of the author of the play" and, as I argue, an early theatrical avatar onto whom Hansberry projects her radical activist commitments (Wilkerson, "Beneatha" 32). In a 1959 radio interview with broadcaster and historian Studs Terkel, Hansberry explains how she considers Beneatha "very autobiographical" and "an expression of conceit" who "is myself eight years ago, you know." "She's precocious, she's over outspoken, she's everything, you know, which tends to be comic," she adds, then clarifies, "But I also feel that she doesn't have a word in the play that I don't agree with still today" (Terkel). Hansberry's artistic decision to vivify questions of identity around the unveiling of Beneatha's natural hair in the beginning of Act Two's break with realist conventions forecasts what Kobena Mercer calls the "semiotic economy of the ethnic signifier" of Black hair as it simultaneously informs and announces evolving notions of social, political, spiritual, and cultural self-fashioning (49).[5] It also signals Hansberry's foresight in crafting Beneatha's epiphany around an act of transformative styling contemporarily referred to as the "big chop" in the twenty-first-century parlance of natural hair communities.[6] Beneatha's shearing of her straightened hair – an autonomous act of bodily defiance removed from the Broadway stage and Columbia Pictures film productions – strikes a prophetic note that foretells linkages between the Black Power movement and the deliberate aesthetic, sartorial, and renaming conventions that announced Black consciousness. Yet, even in Hansberry's unedited playscript, this climactic transformation occurs offstage between the first and second acts, leaving the reader to imagine the impulses fuelling Beneatha's aesthetic metamorphosis.

When Beneatha shears her straightened hair offstage, she rejects Western beauty standards and challenges what Dina Yerima and others term "imperial aesthetics" (641) and racialized gender norms privileging straight, long hair as the quintessence of feminine beauty. This symbolic act of restyling – cutting off the straight hair and leaving behind only the "new growth," or hair in its natural state – at once transports Beneatha to a heightened cultural consciousness and enables her to enact racialized and gendered performances of political dissent. As Susannah Walker argues, the commodification of Black beauty culture by the 1940s and 1950s "came [with] the expectations that, in order to be beautiful, black women needed at the very least to straighten their hair" (*Style* 143). To Beneatha, to wear her hair in its naturally kinky texture is to rebel; this, too, reflects one of Hansberry's axioms of daily life in Southside, Chicago, posthumously published by her former husband and literary executor, Robert Nemiroff, in *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*: "[E]ach piece of

our living is a protest" (45). Beneatha's adopted short natural style signifies a diasporic ritual celebration and spiritual rebirth. Yet, in her earnest striving for cultural awakening in this experimental scene, Beneatha unwittingly rehearses exoticized fantasies of Africa even as she eschews colonial discourses. While the recent critical turn in Hansberry scholarship urges us to grasp a more holistic portrait of the artist's life and corpus, this article revisits the Younger family's bustling activities on one Saturday morning, dramatized in Act One, scene two, and Act Two, scene one, to apprehend the seeds of her future radical work in the far-sighted character of Beneatha. Through the lens of Beneatha's bold act to "untangle the roots" of Black hair, to borrow a phrase from Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, this essay focuses on the unabridged playscript and the extent to which disparate artistic interpretations of these scenes in the stage and film versions of Hansberry's play forge illustrative routes to African diasporic identity.

Contextualizing the history of deletions, omissions, additions, and revisions to the script and ensuing stage or film productions – including Hansberry's 1957 original unabridged playscript, the 1959 Broadway stage script, Hansberry's two rejected unfilmed screenplays, the 1961 Columbia Pictures film, the restored twenty-fifth-anniversary playscript, and the 1989 PBS American Playhouse televised revival – exposes how Hansberry's artistic innovations have been imbricated in institutional hierarchies of Broadway and Hollywood studios. As one of the first Black women to write in these historically white spaces, Hansberry produced multiple iterations of *Raisin* based on editorial notes that foregrounded, censored, or suppressed Beneatha's natural hair journey as a legible signifier of the cultural awakening that the character defines as "African."[7] Although similar to the original stage script, the two unpublished film scripts vastly differ from it (Carter xii). In this essay, I reexamine the unabridged scripts to pinpoint the cuts made in the stage and film productions related to Beneatha's physical and psychic transformation. As Wilkerson explains, many of these deleted scenes convey a "sharper political edge;" thus, "the revolutionary import of *A Raisin in the Sun* eluded the FBI" ("Political" 46). Columbia Pictures excised the majority of Hansberry's revisions to her screenplays and produced a film nearly identical to the redacted Broadway stage play.[8] However, Nemiroff defends the original Broadway excisions by providing context:

> Under these circumstances, the pressures were enormous not to press fate unnecessarily. It is one thing to present a three-hour (or longer) drama by Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, or Arthur Miller but a first play by an unknown Black woman? By common consensus, some things – philosophical flights about the human condition, nuances of the Black experience, character stagings – would have to be sacrificed. ("First Vision" 6)

The theatrical sacrifices concerning "the nuances of the Black experience" cast in high relief Hansberry's prescience in writing a play with a Pan-Africanist sensibility that displays the layered cultural and political ties, or "fundamental connection," to borrow Perry's phrase (66), binding Black people in Africa and across the diaspora. In the unedited original playscript, Beneatha removes her headwrap to reveal a close-cropped natural in the second act while the "big chop" happens offstage. Her action predicts the centring of Black women's hairstyling choices in political, personal, and sociocultural debates that straddled public and private spheres from the 1960s to the present. Hansberry further frames Beneatha's aesthetic and spiritual transformation within a dilemma of marital choice as she must imagine a future with each male suitor, an imposed heteronormative mandate from which the playwright herself managed to escape. Refusing to transform Beneatha's moment of cutting off her straight hair into a spectacle, Hansberry denies the audience the voyeuristic pleasure of witnessing this action only alluded to in parenthetical stage directions. The oblique reference to the act of transformation was later removed from the 1959 Broadway stage production and 1961 film version. How, then, do we account for the twenty-five-year erasure of this pivotal offstage action in the theatrical history of *Raisin*?

THEATRE AND BLACK HAIR POLITICS

Written at the dawn of the civil rights movement and in the full swing of African independence movements, Hansberry's play dramatizes social exchanges and political collaborations between continental Africans and African Americans through the characters of Asagai and Murchison, exhibiting what Lloyd W. Brown calls an "ironic grasp of Black American's duality" (241). Amiri Baraka famously re-evaluates the play's visionary "essence," situating hair and diasporic relationships at its core: "The relationship of African Americans to the Africans. The liberation movement itself and the gnawing necessity of black self-respect in its many guises (e.g. 'straightened' hair vs. 'the natural') […] the part of the text in which Beneatha unveils her hair – the 'perm' cut off and she glowing with her original woolly crown – precedes the 'Afro' by a decade" (9, 14–15). Beneatha's struggle for cultural understanding predicts complex theorizations of the relationship between Africa and her diaspora in Black liberation struggles. "The inclusion of the African character," Wolfe argues, "is clearly reflective of Lorraine Hansberry's sophisticated worldview" (Young 416). This international worldview was undoubtedly shaped by interactions with her uncle, William Leo Hansberry, founder of African studies and African history professor at Howard University, and her "spiritual and political" mentor, W.E.B. Du Bois (Wilkerson, "Sighted" 9; Perry 66, 179). Hansberry foresees the politicized salience of Black hair in the

sixties and beyond; it is one of the play's striking predictions that has solidified its intergenerational relevance. The contention between "straightened" hair and "the natural," which was yet to take on its iconic status as a fashionable marker of racial pride, and which might be dismissed as trivial, in fact lies at the crux of Beneatha's negotiation of her African diasporic identity.

Yet, since the rise of the Afro's popularity, scholars have destabilized the presuppositions linking natural hair with an "authentic" connection to Africa. Indeed, early detractors deemed it too masculine for women (Walker, "Black" 538–544, 550). Tanisha C. Ford contends that the "Afro hairstyle" was the most visible symbol of "a transnational soul style aesthetic" of the 1960s and 1970s, noting that despite its status as both a "fashionable hairdo and a political statement" in Africa, "others read the style as no more than a cultural by-product of Western imperialism and capitalism" (176). Tanzanian writer Kadji Konde strongly opposed the Afro hairstyle, as Ford observes, considering it "a cultural invasion from imperialist and capitalist America" (176) and sparking African women, according to Ford, to cast aside "elaborate plaiting styles unique to their specific ethnic group" or a closely cropped natural in favour of the commercialized Western import (177). Beneatha's agential self-styling – before her short natural style would be called the Afro by the mid-1960s – predicts the conflation of natural hair with a new-found consciousness of African identity in the decades to come, when the Afro would become "the most powerful symbol of Black Power style politics" (Kelley 339). As Noliwe Rooks puts it, "The Afro was understood to denote black pride, which became synonymous with activism and political consciousness. This sentiment moved sharply against the prevailing integrationist ideology and evidenced a belief that the gains of the Civil Rights Movement were not broad-based enough" (6). At the start of the second act of the unedited playscript, Beneatha unveils an elegant short-cropped Afro style, joining the circle of the 1950s' Black women artists whose natural hairstyles were dismissed as an "eccentric" reflection of their creative lives rather than an intentional political declaration of racial pride and Black consciousness (Hansberry, *Raisin* 80; Walker, *Style* 180).[9]

The crucial question is not whether Asagai represents another fleeting experiment for Beneatha but what their Pan-Africanist dialogue represents on the Broadway stage. In her disavowal of 1950s' African-American social and beauty respectability politics, Beneatha privileges racialized performances of identity – natural hair, cultural garb, and musical tastes – in which she ironically reifies Africa as a mystical, unknowable dark Other. While Robin Bernstein asserts that Asagai's character "emphasizes a particularity within a particularity" in contrast to frequent claims for the play's universality (20), I further argue that his character enables Hansberry to

highlight important variations in class, origin, culture, and beliefs, thereby dispelling the misperception of Black people as an undifferentiated mass. Hansberry harmonizes Beneatha's romantic conjuring of African history with Asagai's measured didactic responses; the two characters form an ideological dyad of the playwright's internationalist political orientation. Indeed, Hansberry shared the greatest affinity with Asagai, "her favorite character," who "gives the statement of the play" to pursue freedom at all costs (Terkel).

It is curious, but not surprising, that in the first Broadway production of the play in 1959, the passages in Hansberry's original playscript referencing Beneatha's natural hair transformation – "the first ever on the American stage (Wilkerson, "Beneatha" 32)" – were excised (see Farber). This omission, according to Nemiroff, was caused by Diana Sands, who was playing Beneatha and received an unfortunate haircut that week that would have undermined the importance of the scene ("Notes" xvi). Nemiroff explains in his notes to the restored silver anniversary edition of the play script that Sands's haircut into a short natural before the opening "was not properly contoured to suit her: her particular facial structure required a fuller Afro, of the sort she in fact adopted in later years. Result? Rather than vitiate the playwright's point – the beauty of black hair – the scene was dropped" (xvi). In "The First Vision: Unabridged *Raisin in the Sun* on TV," Nemiroff re-explains the original cuts in light of the 1989 film for television:

> The scene in which Beneatha (Kim Yancey) unveils her natural hairdo is an example. In 1959, the rich variety of "Afro" styles introduced in the mid-60's had not yet arrived; the very few Black women who wore their hair unstraightened cut is [*sic*] very short. When the hair of Diana Sands (who created the role) was cropped in this fashion, she looked awful; her facial structure required a fuller cut. Rather than invalidate Hansberry's point – the beauty of Black hair – the scene was dropped. (6)

The passive voice – "the scene was dropped" – reveals little about the underlying power dynamics concerns about the reception of a scene depicting natural Afro-textured hair for the first time on the Broadway stage. The behind-the-scenes critique of Sands's hair reproduced the scrutiny endured by Beneatha, the character she plays. Although the 1961 Columbia Pictures film version, directed by Daniel Petrie, extended Black life outside the domestic in several scenes, it ignored Hansberry's increasingly politicized Beneatha, instead faithfully replicating the 1959 Broadway production and "softening a too defiant black voice" (Lee xlvi). Thus, the link between Beneatha's cultural awakening and her hair transformation remained unrepresented on screen for several decades.

"MUTILATED HAIR AND ALL"

When the audience first meets Asagai, the "African boy" who has been "studying in Canada all summer," his intellectual discourse catalyses Beneatha's cultural awakening (56). Through Asagai, Hansberry harkens back to Africa to confer majesty and a revolutionary spirit on her African-American characters. Before Beneatha sarcastically announces her family's "acute ghetto-itus" to Asagai, she paints the Nigerian university student as erudite and cultured: he is described in the play's stage direction as "*a sophisticate*," a composite of several African students Hansberry encountered during her undergraduate studies (59–60). According to Alex Haley, the presentation of the "educated African" character in front of a "large audience" helped to dispel the racist "myth of the 'cannibal' African with a bone in his hair" (279). Haley surmises, "It also must have been the first time a mass audience had even seen a black woman gracefully don African robes or wear an 'afro' hairstyle" (279). Although the early criticism often restricts *Raisin* and its political ambitions to domestic social commentary about integration in Chicago's South Side, Beneatha's anti-colonial concerns and transnational vision situate *Raisin* within global Pan-Africanist discourses. Hansberry's final play, *Les Blancs*, as Joy L. Abell argues, simultaneously focuses on liberation from colonialism in Africa and offers "a commentary on race relations in early 1960s America" (459). Steven R. Carter calls it "Hansberry's most detailed and penetrating analysis of colonialism and neocolonialism in Africa, greatly expanding the commentary begun by Joseph Asagai in *A Raisin in the Sun*" (102). Beneatha's cultural awakening begins with her hair as an aesthetic key that unlocks the origin of *Raisin*'s larger Pan-Africanist themes.

Asagai opens up a transatlantic world beyond the cramped quarters of the Younger family's Hyde Park apartment, priming Beneatha's re-evaluation of her hairstyle choices. On the Saturday morning of his unexpected visit, Beneatha warns her mother about asking him "a whole lot of ignorant question about Africans. I mean, do they wear clothes and all that" (57). Beneatha corrects her mother when she asks if Asagai's homeland of Nigeria is "the little country that was founded by slaves way back," impatiently responding, "No, Mama – that's Liberia" (56–57). This curt exchange signals, on the one hand, Beneatha's own anxieties about her knowledge of African history and geography and, on the other, Mama's understanding of the founding of Liberia, a national history that ties freed Africans in the United States to West African soil in a complicated story of American colonization. Mama awkwardly attempts to connect with Asagai by mimicking Beneatha's earlier speech: "I think it's so sad the way our American Negroes don't know nothing about Africa 'cept Tarzan and all that. And all that money they pour into these churches when they ought to be helping you people over there drive out

them French and Englishmen done taken away your land" (63–64). Mama tries her best to telegraph Beneatha's Pan-Africanist leanings, lamenting the inadequate knowledge African Americans possess about the history of Africa while advocating for African liberation. A devout Christian, Mama critiques the money "American Negroes" give to the church, a surprising reversal since she earlier rebukes Beneatha and slaps her "*powerfully across the face*" for proclaiming that "[t]here simply is no blasted God – there is only man and it is *he* who makes miracles!" (51, emphasis in original). Just as Mama demands Beneatha repeat "in my mother's house there is still God" (51), Beneatha ingrains key issues related to African liberation movements that Mama now imitates. Mother and daughter enforce their respective dogma through recitation. Whereas Beneatha represents the New Negro as her brother Walter attests, rejecting orthodoxies and focusing on anti-colonial resistance in Africa, Mama represents a liminal figure, connected both to the Youngers' multigenerational history of slavery and freedom in the US South and the migration to the North, expectantly forging new terrain.

Although archetypal, Asagai embodies the cultural identity, African history, and political engagement that Beneatha seeks. In his representation of a glorious African past and independence movements of the present, Beneatha envisions a future. When Asagai bestows Beneatha with the Yoruba sobriquet, *Alaiyo* – which he roughly translates as "One for Whom Bread – Food – Is Not Enough" (65) – he recognizes her quest for cultural consciousness, identity, and connection to an ancestral African past. For Beneatha, Asagai symbolizes a lost past and an oracle to summon. To convey the cultural distance between the two characters, Hansberry represents the Yoruba words using phonetic orthography to indicate Beneatha's efforts at pronunciation. When Beneatha asks for a definition of Alaiyo, Asagai notes the untranslatability of the word and explains, "The sense of a thing can be so different when it changes languages" (65). The impossibility of translating faithfully between languages, histories, and ways of life to impart "the sense of a thing" echoes the cultural disjunctures that even an embrace of natural hair, African robes, dance, and music fail to suture. Upper-middle-class comfort that a marriage to George – "a man with some loot," as Walter jests (150) – could provide cannot quench Beneatha's desire for profound cultural kinship. Figuratively, she becomes the one for whom bread is not enough, precisely because George's "bread" or material wealth does not fulfil Beneatha's longing, rooted in Black radical critique, for a life of freedom. Asagai, on the other hand, not only loans her his sister's personal robes, a sign of intimacy and trust, and a gesture welcoming her into his family. He also begins to introduce her to the traditions, music, and language of the Yoruba people. Beneatha later practices Yoruba language in the experimental opening of the second act, when she

sings the words along with one of the records he has given her. The African clothing momentarily transforms her into a "well-dressed Nigerian woman" (76) as Asagai crowns her a queen of the Nile. She re-envisions herself as royalty when Asagai ceremonially renames and refashions her. By conflating Nigeria and Egypt, Asagai incorporates Beneatha into this illustrious royal lineage as Beneatha recalls an ancestry she never knew, longs for a place she has never seen, and tries to utter the words to a language she has forgotten many generations ago. Although their scenes together were truncated, the intriguing ties between these two characters presented "positive awareness and intellectual consciousness" of an African and African-American pair "not broadly typical" on the American stage (Ward 225).

This transformative cultural shift centres the politics of Beneatha's hair, which emerge most vividly in the dialogue after Asagai gifts her "*some records and the colorful robes of a Nigeria woman*" (60). As Beneatha "*runs to the mirror*" in excited anticipation of her new appearance with the beautiful garments and "*holds the drapery up in front of herself*," Asagai offers a double-edged compliment. After praising her in Yoruba, he offers a stinging comment that launches her hair transformation: "You wear it well … very well … *mutilated hair* and all" (60, emphasis added). Turning to the oft-quoted dialogue in this scene illuminates the link between Beneatha's quest for cultural identity and an African past through her hair:

BENEATHA: (*Turning suddenly*) My hair – what's wrong with my hair?
ASAGAI: (*Shrugging*) Were you born with it like that?
BENEATHA: (*Reaching up to touch it*) No … of course not.
(she looks back to the mirror, disturbed)
ASAGAI: (*Smiling*) How then?
BENEATHA: You know perfectly well how … as crinkly as yours … that's how.
ASAGAI: And it is ugly to you that way?
BENEATHA: (*Quickly*) Oh, no – not ugly … (*More slowly, apologetically*) But it's so hard to manage when it's, well – raw.
ASAGAI: And so to accommodate that – you mutilate it every week?
BENEATHA: It's not mutilation! (61)

In this fascinating moment in front of the mirror, Asagai urges Beneatha to behold herself anew.[10] Hansberry's original 1957 draft script with its annotations and strikeouts is instructive. In it, a stage direction, which is eliminated in the published script, provides a critical insight into Beneatha's interiority when considering Asagai's question about the texture of her hair at birth: "*Embarrassed and a little demure to discuss the Great Hair Question*" (Original playscript 1:2–8). This excised line registers the instrumentality of Beneatha's hair choices, rendered with its capitalized first letters as a crucial ontological

dilemma. Asagai's probing represents the "Great Hair Question" because it transcends the merely aesthetic by showing how "black women link hair to broader social and cultural ideas" (Banks 4). The logic is that any modification from one's hair as it grows *naturally* from the scalp at birth is tantamount to capitulation to Western beauty standards. By subverting typical "good" versus "bad" hair texture and style value judgements, Asagai critiques Beneatha's hair not because it is nappy or kinky but because it has been straightened, reversing denigrating judgements that Black women's kinky hair disqualifies them from romantic interest. Indeed, the straightened hair, Asagai's blithe questioning insinuates, is incongruous with the Nigerian robes. A stage direction informs us that Beneatha touches and pulls at her hair in the mirror, triggered by Asagai's controversial declaration that straightening kinky hair represents a form of self-mutilation. His choice of the term *self-mutilation* is, of course, a provocation that limns Beneatha's hair-straightening as an intentional act of self-harm, simultaneously inflicting psychic and corporeal damage. Here, Asagai seems to psychoanalyze Beneatha following Frantz Fanon's notion that "the first encounter with a white man oppresses him with the full weight of blackness" (150). Beneatha's seriousness is met with Asagai's disarming laughter; the 1957 script indicates that "*he folds over and roars*" with laughter after recalling her expressed interest in Africa – "I am looking for my *identity*!" – when they first met (Hansberry, Original playscript 1:2–9; *Raisin* 61). Asagai's hearty laughter uncovers the humour in Beneatha's process of self-discovery while his teasing inquiries tether her hairstyling choices and her politics.

When Asagai further probes if Beneatha was "born with it like that," he signals an interpretation of natural hair as a cultural birthright and marker of African ancestral lineage. When Beneatha concedes that her natural mane is as "crinkly" as Asagai's, the parenthetical stage directions and numerous ellipses in her speech illustrate her slowly unfolding realization that her hair and quest for cultural identity are entwined. Even as Beneatha becomes aware of the public significance of her hairstyling choices, she admits she considers her inherited natural hair "raw" and "hard to manage," indicating that despite her cultural consciousness, she has internalized Western value judgements of the innate inferiority of "crinkly" hair as it grows naturally from her scalp. Asagai's suggestion that Beneatha has enacted violence on her hair, interpreting the act of straightening it as regularly inflicting irreparable damage, horrifies Beneatha and prompts her to reconsider the belief that "raw" hair in its natural state is unrefined and only hair that has undergone a straightening process is well-groomed.

Even as Asagai attempts to soften his critique of Beneatha's hairstyling as "mutilation," stating that he was "only teasing" her because she is "so very serious about these things" (61), Beneatha wrestles with the suggestion that she is

the very person routinely destroying a defining feature of her cultural identity. When Beneatha inspects her hair in the mirror, she seems to conclude that by straightening it, she has conformed to societal standards and rejected her African ancestry. Reconfiguring her relationship with the past to understand her place in the present reflects a central theme of the play. Thus, when Asagai declares her hair "mutilated," he defamiliarizes it, rendering Beneatha's body and appearance suddenly strange to herself. This moment of estrangement compels Beneatha to identify her rhetoric around the unmanageability of "crinkly" hair as a residue of the colonial past. Asagai chortles when he recalls Beneatha's naïve request to speak urgently with him "[a]bout Africa" in her attempt to locate her identity (61), and he points out how she approaches him as if he were her personal soothsayer, able to unlock her idealized version of the past. In this revealing moment, Beneatha renegotiates her self-identity against the dominant society's perceptions of kinky hair, illustrating Stuart Hall's notion of "practices of representation" in the powerful way she makes and transmits meaning vis-à-vis her hairstyling choices. As Hall argues, signifying practices and meaning-making are based on shared understanding within a culture. Hair, then, becomes a "*visual* language" (Hall 9, emphasis in original) through which meaning is at once constructed and extracted, though often in ambivalent and shifting terms.

In the midst of Asagai's lighthearted teasing of Beneatha's straightened hairdo, he announces his romantic intentions for her. The elaborate gesture of sending for and bringing the robes from his sister's personal collection presages his language when he welcomes Beneatha back to her ancestral home. Although Asagai mocks Beneatha about the seriousness of her quest to find her identity, he reintroduces the discussion: "We have a great deal to talk about. I mean about identity and time and all that" (62). Interestingly, their conversation around liberation takes on a twofold meaning relating to questions of sexual liberation and freedom from colonial rule. Encouraging Beneatha to return to her natural hair as a critical part of her Africanization, Asagai welcomes her as a compatriot in colonial resistance and situates African independence movements within larger Pan-Africanist liberation struggles (e.g., when she remarks that the greatest threat against the American Negro is the Ku Klux Klan). Nonetheless, Asagai's willingness to discuss identity with Beneatha is also transactional; he does so in exchange for her "time" and the "only one kind of feeling" that exists "[b]etween a man and a woman" (62). For all the provocative ways in which Asagai urges Beneatha to re-examine her relationship to her hair, he still represents a patriarchal figure, judging her physical appearance according to his standards of beauty. As Deborah Grayson explains, "the choices Black women make about hairstyle or body appearance often mean the difference between acceptance or rejection by groups or

individuals. Our choices also shape and affect how we feel about ourselves" (13). While Murchison initially voices his opposition to Beneatha's natural hairstyle, Asagai, conversely, ridicules her straightened hair as "mutilated." Thus, Beneatha finds herself in this tension between celebrating her own self-styled image and resisting the two men who intend to mould her into their desired image through their patriarchal standards.

The conceit of the mirror, moreover, serves as a dramatic touchstone for both Beneatha and Walter. As Walter clamours for the $10,000 insurance money from their father's death to invest in his liquor store venture, Beneatha travels in search of her identity as a parallel narrative arc. Just as her brother describes looking at himself in the mirror at the beginning of the play as a profound moment of crisis prompting him to reassess what his thirty-five years of life have amounted to, Beneatha, too, stands before a mirror, scrutinizing her identity, holding up a Nigerian dress to her body. As the stage direction notes, "*She sets the headdress on haphazardly and then notices her hair again and clutches at it and then replaces the headdress and frowns at herself. Then she starts to wriggle in front of the mirror as she thinks a Nigerian woman might*" (65). Beneatha inspects herself, and her reflection now appears jarring; she "*clutches at her hair again and squinches her eyes as if trying to imagine something*," trying on a new cultural identity (66). Culturally pantomiming a Nigerian woman, Beneatha now finds her hair and the robes incongruent. She emphasizes her diasporic membership through mimetic performance that hinges on the big chop of her straightened tresses, reasserting that Black hairstyles reflect cultural expression. When Mama questions her destination as she hurries out of the house, Beneatha cryptically states, "To become a queen of the Nile!" (66). Not only does she reiterate Asagai's flattering evaluation that her profile looks like an Egyptian queen, but she also uncritically embraces it, associating a natural hairstyle with regality. His critique leads Beneatha to reconceptualize the possibilities of Black hair, beauty, and her role in international Black liberation struggles, or what Harry Elam, Jr., calls "a purposeful connection to Pan-Africanism" (682). Indeed, engagements with Pan-Africanist thought become, as Kristin Matthews argues, "possible sites of resistance and change" (562). Although Beneatha succumbs to cultural fetishization at times bordering on reductive appropriation, what she nevertheless reclaims in those Nigerian robes is a sense of African cultural pride and a connection to Black internationalism.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO YOUR HEAD—I MEAN YOUR HAIR!"

It is no coincidence that the lexicon of Black hair encodes both styling choices and fraught linguistic associations. Straightened hair that is exposed to moisture, rain, or sweat begins to return to its natural curl pattern; this

phenomenon is known colloquially as "reverting" or "going back," idioms laced with negative connotations. When Beneatha fancies herself "a well-dressed Nigerian woman" (76) and adopts a natural hairstyle, she metaphorically reverts to and proudly reclaims an ancestral African identity. However, this aesthetic metamorphosis functions as both reversion and spiritual conversion, enabling her to move beyond the perpetual "*weariness*" (23) of her family's living conditions to apprehend the diasporic ties between US civil rights and the African independence movement.

The theme of African diasporic identity emerges in the play's first description of Mama: "*Her bearing is perhaps most like the noble bearing of the women of the Hereros of Southwest Africa – rather as if she imagines that as she walks she still bears a basket or a vessel upon her head. Her speech, on the other hand, is as careless as her carriage is precise – she is inclined to slur everything – but her voice is perhaps not so much quiet as simply soft*" (39). It is through Mama, who proclaims before meeting Asagai, "I don't think I never met no African before" (57) in the restored playscript, that Hansberry introduces the question of heritage. A crossed-out line in the original playscript exaggerates Mama's lack of understanding – "I don't see how I got nothing to do with Africa or no Africans" (1.2–3) – seemingly contradicting Mama's knowledge of the founding of Liberia, though she confuses it with Nigeria. Notably, the stage direction in the original annotated playscript has Mama "fixing a bandana on her head in honor of the forthcoming labors of the day" (1.1–14). The bandana is excised in the published version, perhaps to disassociate Mama from the "Mammy" caricature. What remains is a portrait of a regal figure, "*full-bodied and strong*," "*her face is full of strength*," and "*a beautiful woman*" (39). Far from a domineering matriarch, Mama, as valiant family protector, resembles a noble southwestern African woman; her "*dark-brown face is surrounded by the total whiteness of her hair*" (39). By invoking images of ancestral African women, Hansberry contextualizes Mama's beauty and confers nobility onto this family the world seeks to degrade. While Mama's physical appearance evinces African royalty, her diction is infused with the distinctive consonant slurs of Chicago's South Side, the quotidian poetry of "Negro speech" (Terkel). Beneatha, like Mama, attempts to navigate these "*indestructible contradictions*" of culture, geography, and heritage (23). Yet, the play begins to dismantle these binaries between the women of Hereros (present-day Namibia) and the women of Chicago's South Side, illustrating how both identities reside within Mama and Beneatha.

The regality of Beneatha's adopted natural hairstyle is tied up with public perceptions of her marriageability and her evolving sense of her position in the world. Ingrid Banks's ethnographic research in *Hair Matters* (2000) reinforces the important ways in which Black hair is inextricably linked to

group identity. Banks argues that "hair shapes black women's ideas about race, gender, class, sexuality, images of beauty, and power," and hair provides a specific lens through which one investigates how "social and cultural ideas are transmitted through bodies" (3–4). Both Asagai and Murchison use verbal critique to influence Beneatha's attitudes about her hair. According to Bertram Ashe, "it is all too common for men in this country to use hair as a site at which to control women" (583). Hairstyling practices codify an intersection of factors that constitute conscious decisions around the body politic, cultural, social, beauty, and political matrices. In her conversation with Ruth, a young mother beset by domestic concerns, Beneatha asserts: "Listen, I'm going to be a doctor. I'm not worried about who I'm going to marry yet – if I ever get married" (50). Although Beneatha later concedes that she "probably will" get married, she asserts, ever the polemicist, "first I'm going to be a doctor" (50). Her disavowal of Walter's infamously sexist line – "If you still crazy 'bout messing 'round with sick people – then go be a nurse like other women – or just get married and be quiet" (38) – precedes her defiant renunciation of Christianity and Mama's slap (51). Beneatha finally chooses science over religion, prioritizes professional pursuits over marriage, and undermines her mother's moral authority.

In the experimental beginning of the second act, Beneatha re-emerges as a resplendent queen of the Nile. Yet, as Perry posits, "Beneatha's enthusiasm for the continent is sophomoric" (140). Indeed, stage directions expose her imperialist fantasies as she fans herself with an "*ornate oriental fan, mistakenly more like Butterfly than any Nigerian that ever was*" (76). Even as Beneatha rejects Ruth's taste in "*good loud blues*" as "assimilationist junk" (76) and embraces her African heritage through elaborate pantomime, she conflates cultures, committing the same imperialist blunders she opposes in her dispute with Murchison. "*Enraptured*," on her journey "*back to the past*," she relies on essentialized notions of Nigeria as she enjoys the dance of welcome and offers an improvised, comical performance (76). Although Yi-chin Shih highlights the "hybrid" qualities of the dance that "retains both tracks of African culture and American culture" (280), Beneatha retreats to stereotypes, and cultural identity becomes a garment to don and discard like the extracurricular activities she dabbles with and abandons. Driven by her keenness to grasp a pre-colonial African history that predates Mama's memory of lynching and the Great Migration, she equates Asagai's culture with beautiful robes and spirited dance performances. Similarly, through her hair transformation, Beneatha deliberately gains agency. However, Beneatha fails to question problematic notions of cultural authenticity that reduce Blackness to a tenuous performance in which one must wear a distinctive cultural costume and hairstyle as proof of racial solidarity.

The frenetic energy of this phantasmagoric scene – an early playscript draft included a modern ballet – registers Beneatha and Walter's performative catharsis and hopeful envisioning of the future vis-à-vis a collective psychic journey "back to the past." In a striking tonal shift from the play's realist mode, Beneatha becomes an Egyptian queen while an inebriated Walter joins the kinetic performance: "ETHIOPIA STRETCH FORTH HER HANDS AGAIN!" (77). Marked by stifled dreams, Walter narrates their imagined past as the siblings perform this memorial play-within-a-play, or what Elam calls "atavistic communion as they conjure the spirits of Africa past" (684). An excised remark from Mama in the original playscript reveals that Walter's interest in African politics predates Beneatha's nascent geopolitical awareness: "For a while there he was all interested in these people who get out on the streets on them ladders and talk about Africa all the time" (1:2–4). Here, it is the drumming that transports Walter to their shared mythical incantation as he assumes the role of a warrior called FLAMING SPEAR, wielding an imaginary weapon, shouting and thumping his chest. Within this extended fantasy, he envisions himself as "a leader of his people, a great chief, a descendent of Chaka," and a compatriot of Jomo Kenyatta, a Kenyan anti-colonial activist, ready to lead his Black brothers to victory over colonialism (*Raisin* 78). Beneatha and Walter are majestically transfigured, jettisoning the constraints of their lives and the tired South Side Chicago apartment. Beneatha defers to her brother's imagination as he embraces a larger notion of global Black brotherhood. In this romanticized Africa, Beneatha and Walter trade the oppression of their everyday lives for the agential majesty of a primordial ancestral identity (see Rose 33). In *Raisin*, Hansberry not only centres Africa; she also locates the Youngers' claims to dignity in a stirring reclamation of African history.

Although Beneatha has approached Asagai "looking for her identity," she realizes she must come to understand her past without a man instructing her (61). George's arrival dissolves the enchantment of ancestral imagination and transports brother and sister back to the present. The dramatic unveiling of her natural hairstyle appears in the parenthetical stage directions: "BENEATHA *looks at him and slowly, ceremoniously, lifts her hands and pulls off the headdress. Her hair is close-cropped and unstraightened.* GEORGE *freezes mid-sentence and* RUTH'S *eyes all but fall out of her head*" (80). Although deleted in the produced playscript and the Columbia Pictures screenplay, the 1989 three-hour television production features the slow unveiling of Beneatha's perfectly round Afro (Nemiroff, "First Vision" 6). This moment of headdress removal resonates with W.E.B. Du Bois's famous proclamation that Black life occurs "within the Veil," a sentiment Hansberry repeated in relation to her own writing (Rich 247). The playwright imbues her wilful

character with the ability to escape, if only for a moment, the double consciousness of this metaphorical "vast veil" to bask in her natural hair and claim an African identity (Du Bois 8). In response to Ruth and George's question, "what have you done to your head – I mean your hair!" – slipping into African American vernacular – as if her entire head is somehow errant or defective, Beneatha simply responds, "Nothing – except cut it off" (80). As she assumes her queenly persona, her natural hair becomes her crowning glory.

This lexical slippage belies George's persona as a practised, bourgeois college boy who hails from a family of "honest-to-God-real-*live*-rich-colored people" image (49, emphasis in original). He uses *head* as a metonym for hair in the same way Ruth does when she scolds her son Travis: "[I]f you don't take this comb and fix this here head, you better!" (29). Ruth continues her mild admonishment: "'Bout to march out of here with that head looking just like chickens slept in it! I just don't get where you get your stubborn ways … And get your jacket, too. Looks chilly out this morning" (29). Clearly, an unkempt "head" – or uncombed hair – is one that could shame the family in the public sphere, and a Black child who has not brushed his hair and enters the public "ungroomed" is a direct indictment of the mother. In this rhetorical spirit, Ruth ponders aloud: "You expect this boy to go out with you with your head all nappy like that?" (80). Ruth's motherly tone in chastising Beneatha's natural look upholds social respectability body politics. Black women's hair signifies more than a simple hairstyle choice. It is a political or spiritual statement often policed by playful or injurious judgements. Beneatha participates in her own corporeal scripting, generating new aesthetic and political meanings through her natural hair metamorphosis. In this conversation with George, who harshly critiques Beneatha's hair, she subverts the judgemental gaze by pronouncing him an "assimilationist Negro" (80) and "ashamed of his heritage" (81).

George, in turn, depoliticizes her action by calling her natural hair "eccentric" (80), suggesting that neither is it aesthetically desirable, and nor does it align with straightened coiffure of the era. A staunch adherent to respectability politics, he equates straight hair with an elevated societal position. In the 1957 script, George undercuts Beneatha's hair transformation, alleging that she is merely following the latest trend of the "thousand other people running around Greenwich Village trying to be different" (2.1–4). Ruth reiterates George's sentiment, appalled by Beneatha's "nappy" hair, which she intends as an insult and not the reappropriated term of the late twentieth century. Interestingly, the descriptive *nappy* was added to a later draft and does not appear in the original playscript: "Lord, lord, lord … this child is gone. (*She sits down and just looks at her sister in law*.) You expect this boy to

go out with you with your head looking like that?" (2.1–4). Her hair is not eccentricity but ideology.

As an early adopter of the hairstyle that would become known as the natural, and later the Afro, Beneatha opposes not only white beauty standards but "the African American beauty industry and dominant beauty standards in African American society" (Walker, *Style* 180). As Carol Bunch Davis argues, Beneatha challenges "racial uplift ideology and its implications for African American identity, particularly in its narrative of race progress and black assimilation into American culture" (44). Beneatha's construction of feminine beauty hinges on received ideas of African women's beauty. The sometimes-playful in-group shaming around hairstyling choices presupposes a direct correlation between hairstyle choice and racial pride. As Banks explains, "Whereas the assimilationist standpoint views hair and its relationship to appropriate grooming practices as a positive factor among African Americans, nationalists view any hairstyling choices that alter black hair as signifying self-hatred" (8). The turn away from politicizing Black hair in the contemporary natural hair movement endeavours to destabilize the dichotomy of assimilationist versus nationalist, which limits creative aesthetic expressions for Black women's hair.

What, then, can be done about Beneatha's head? Are her headiness and intellectual curiosity *curable*? The repetition of the colloquialism identifying Beneatha's head as problematic more broadly connotes a young woman marked by her wilfulness and brilliance. Her head remains an issue even at the conclusion of the play when Walter admonishes, "Girl, if you don't get all them silly ideas out your head!" (150). After Murchison discredits the concept of "our Great West African Heritage," minimizing the achievements of the Ashanti and Songhay empires, and thereby echoing the remarks of early twentieth-century historians who would claim African Americans had no history or past beyond "a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts," Beneatha, empowered by her natural hair and imaginative time travel with Walter, points out Murchison's "splendid ignorance" (81). Murchison, in his overt capitalist strivings and rejection of diasporic connection to African history, is a foil to Asagai and an exemplar of the oppressive mental trappings of assimilation. After Beneatha changes into a cocktail dress and returns, she becomes the focus of Walter's joke when she re-emerges with her natural hair visible: "What's the matter with your head?" […] "Well, I'll be damned. So that's what they mean by the African bush" (85). To soften her brother's insult, George admits that he now likes her hair and calls it "sharp" (86). Beneatha's ecstatic cultural performance, historically situated amid the US integration battles and the African liberation movements, casts aside Western beauty standards to presage the proud Afros of the 1960s and 1970s

and the politics that reclaim Black beauty, self-actualization, independence, and resistance. Beneatha is caught in the double bind of constructions of gender and race as both Asagai and George (and her family) insistently police her hair, whether in its straightened or natural state. Asserting her agency through aesthetic scripting, she chooses to be "an embodied black woman," as Melissa Harris-Perry argues, "to know joy, subjectivity, pleasure, and the latent capacity to enjoy being seen; to, in a sense, transcend invisibility and to resist erasure" (ix).

"WE WILL PRETEND THAT …YOU HAVE ONLY BEEN AWAY FOR A DAY"

When Asagai promises Beneatha an ancestral homecoming, the possibility of diasporic return is dramatized as "a romantic reunion between Negro American and black African," to borrow Harold Isaacs's phrase (329). Temporalities collapse in this idyllic fantasy. Traumas and tragedies of the Middle Passage are erased. Return is realized in an African Edenic homecoming. "[W]e will pretend that – (*Very softly*) – you have only been away for a day," Asagai rhapsodizes in this beautiful vision of return to the land of the ancestors, before a kiss, "*which proceeds to passion*" (137). In his vision, Asagai recovers Beneatha from the New World, blending romantic and revolutionary aims.

Beneatha and Asagai's intellectual discourse is a focal point in the final scene of each version of the script. However, their final dialogue dominates Hansberry's unfilmed screenplays, highlighting the playwright's emphasis on Beneatha's burgeoning diasporic identity. Overcome with despair over her squandered inheritance, Beneatha, in the 1957 script, questions the meaning of life itself and the effectiveness of resistance to colonial oppressors in Africa. Revising her earlier convictions, she disparages Asagai's attempt to "cure the Great Sore of colonialism with Independence" (Original playscript 3.2–5). In response, Asagai intones, "But I will teach and work and things will happen, slowly and swiftly. 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" (3.2–8). The published restored text of the twenty-fifth-anniversary version diminishes the revolutionary dialogue and instead foregrounds his adulatory proposal to "come home" to the woman he calls a "young creature of the New World" (136). Asagai's romantic overture draws on Beneatha's fantasies of return: "Three hundred years later the African Prince rose up out of the seas and swept the maiden back across the middle passage over which her ancestors had come" (137). Playing into her fanciful notions and perhaps emphasizing his amorous intentions, Asagai indulges in his own image-making: "Nigeria. Home. […] I will show you our mountains and our stars; and give you cool drinks from gourds and teach you the old songs and the ways of our people – and, in time, we will pretend

that – (*Very Softly*) – you have only been away for a day. Say that you'll come" (137). With these honeyed promises, the Asagai of this restored playscript attempts to enchant Beneatha with seduction rather than social activism, mitigating the squandering of her medical school funds with a transoceanic journey back to Nigeria, which Hansberry insists we imagine as an illusory Door of Return.

By understanding *Raisin* as "a play that presaged, to an extent few could have foreseen when it opened in 1959, the revolution in Black and women's consciousness and the revolutionary ferment in Africa that exploded after her death in 1965" (Nemiroff, "First Vision" 6), we can see Hansberry enacting her own directive to "make new sounds" (Terkel). The sonorous timbre of her dramatic composition finds generations of audiences eager to hear anew.

If Walter's question – who am I in relation to my late father? – animates a concern about what he might bequeath to his own son, Travis, then Beneatha struggles to understand who she is in relation to her ancestors and reclaimed lineage of African foremothers. Isaacs argues that the play concludes with "the unresolved subject of Africa" and leaves the dramatic tension, "George versus Asagai […] America or Africa, hanging in the air, rustling and sounding there after they'd gone" (332). Through Asagai, symbol of a nostalgic ancestral African past and postcolonial struggle, Beneatha divines an alternative future, stretching the boundaries of social norms. Asagai symbolizes a way in which Beneatha might be free that Murchison, allegory for Black emancipation through capitalism, forecloses. Beneatha's changing relationship to her hair affords her a more expansive vision of her possibilities in the world.

While the primary conflict resolves with Walter nobly reciting his lineage and electing to relocate, however dangerous, to Clybourne Park, to resist Chicago's restrictive neighbourhood covenants, Beneatha's attunement to global anti-colonial struggles broadens the scope of the play. Although Beneatha's ultimate decision remains a mystery, the link between her ideological transformation, self-styling, and representational politics of her hair, which becomes "a symbol of African American female identity," to borrow Rooks's integral phrase (136), continues to resonate profoundly with twenty-first-century audiences precisely because its open-endedness enables us to imagine innumerable paths for the character's future. Perhaps the most consequential decision of the play is how Beneatha learns – through intentional choices in cultural self-styling – that she may, after all, grasp a stronger sense of diasporic identity, companionship, and career. She only has to ask herself. Beneatha embraces her natural hair and, in doing so, is ready, like Hansberry in her childhood games, to take "one giant step" to embrace the stars (*To Be Young* 49–50).

NOTES

1. Citations from *A Raisin in the Sun*, abbreviated *Raisin*, refer to the 1995 Vintage double edition (*A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*) and are cited by page number.
2. Hansberry views the absence of a central protagonist in the main plot and its "dramaturgical incompletions" as "an enormous dramatic fault if no one else does" ("Author's Reflections"). See also Terkel; J.C. Washington.
3. For more on the genius of Hansberry's life and work beyond the classic play, see also Carter, Higashida, Colbert, Chapman, hooks, and Gordon.
4. Contrast the "boyish charm" of Hansberry's casual look with her "freshly hot-ironed" hair and carefully selected ensemble for the 1959 *Vogue* magazine shoot. One reviewer, Ted Poston, likens her to a young boy or "tousle-headed gamin" while the FBI file on Hansberry describes her "Italian hair cut," which was a popular style in the 1950s (see Perry 102–3).
5. While rejecting essentialist notions of racial difference, I employ the terms *Black women's hair*, *Black hair*, and *natural hair* to emphasize the continued politicization of this racial and cultural signifier and to highlight the personal empowerment cultivated in processes of agential self-presentation. Given that the lexical transposition of the colour Black signifies type and texture of hair (Patterson 60–61), donning *natural hair* signals *Africanness* and Black pride throughout the diaspora. For an illuminating discussion of Black hair symbolism in art, see Wilson.
6. I advisedly use this contemporary term, often likened to a physical and spiritual conversion, to show how Hansberry's classic play engenders fresh meanings for new generations.
7. Nemiroff repeatedly denied the cuts in the original production were made "to dilute or censor the play" ("First Vision" 6). For an overview of all four scenes omitted from the Broadway production, see M.H. Washington (306n16).
8. Hansberry adds a provocative scene, later cut, where Walter, Asagai, and Murchison hear a Black nationalist race speech on the street (Perry 115). For editing rationale, see Ingle; Lipari.
9. By the late 1960s, some Black women refused to accept beliefs that linked their Black consciousness with their hairstyle or dress ("Black Models").
10. In a deleted production note from later in the same scene, Beneatha "*comes in brushing her hair*" (Original playscript 1.1–10), which is described as

"*long*" (1.1–21). Her thick hair stands "*wildly about her head*" (1.1–21), a visual cue of this character's brewing transformation.

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