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“Assimila-who-ever?” Communication Between Characters in A Raisin in the Sun Examined Using a Double-Consciousness Spectrum
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ABSTRACT

Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness explains why internalized racism leads many African-American characters to view themselves as at once black and as black seen through the eyes of the Other. However, Du Bois’s theory cannot complexly describe those African-American characters who identify more as black than as gazed upon, or vice versa. Thus, I present a spectrum of double consciousness wherein those characters identifying more as gazed upon than black are positioned on the right side of the spectrum, while those characters identifying more as black than as gazed upon are positioned on the left. To demonstrate how this theory deepens the analysis of African-American characters, I apply it to Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun. This reading shows how communication between family members in A Raisin in the Sun is ineffective if the characters who are communicating exist at opposite ends of the double consciousness spectrum.

KEYWORDS
Du Bois; Double Consciousness; Lorraine Hansberry; A Raisin in the Sun; Communication

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was an educator, journalist, and civil rights activist who became one of the most influential black public intellectuals of the twentieth century. One of his most influential theories was his theory of double consciousness, which states that “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness” (8). Du Bois’ theory may be used to describe the way many African-Americans view themselves as at once black and as black seen through the eyes of the Other. Here, the term “Other” will refer to whites. (I will refer to this concept of “black seen through the eyes of the Other” as “gazed upon” for brevity.) This theory is limiting in that it fails to accurately describe those African-Americans who identify more as black than as gazed upon, or vice versa. Therefore, I suggest a spectrum of double consciousness, wherein those characters who identify more as black than as gazed upon are located on the left side of the spectrum and those characters who identify more as gazed upon than black are located on the right side of the spectrum. The use of this more nuanced version of Du Bois’s original theory can lead readers of literature to a deeper examination of the relative communicative abilities of African-American characters.

In this paper, I will propose that double consciousness creates a spectrum of identities: at one end are those African-Americans thoroughly assimilated into mainstream American culture who are proportionately more conscious of themselves as seen by the Other than they are of their own black heritage. At the other end are those who have subverted white expectations of blackness and have become proportionately more aware of themselves as black than as gazed
upon. To demonstrate this concept, I will use the “double consciousness spectrum” to analyze the relative communicative capabilities of characters in A Raisin in the Sun.\(^1\)

A Raisin in the Sun is a play by Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965), whose work was influenced by Du Bois\(^2\) and other Black Pan-Africanists. The primary focus of her work was to “investigate what it meant to be a black woman in post-war America” (Ghani 1). Hansberry’s work closely reflects her own experiences of living in an interracial community in Chicago. A Raisin in the Sun follows the lives of the Younger family, who consist of Walter and Ruth Younger, Travis (their son), Beneatha (Walter’s sister), and Mama (Walter’s mother). At the beginning of the play, Mama’s husband has just died, leaving her with a life insurance check for $10,000. The family, who live in a dilapidated apartment on Chicago’s south side, argue about how to spend the money. Ultimately, Mama uses the money to purchase a new house in a white neighbourhood. Although a representative from the neighbourhood attempts to buy them out to avoid interracial tensions, the family reject him and decide to move into their new home.

Communication plays an important role in this text, for the characters of A Raisin in the Sun constantly use language to shape and re-shape their identities as African-Americans. Those characters in A Raisin in the Sun who exist on similar ends of the double consciousness spectrum communicate easily with one another because their ideas of blackness are alike, and these perceptions of blackness permeate every aspect of their subconscious. But I argue that communication between family members in A Raisin in the Sun is ineffective if the characters who are communicating exist at opposite ends of the double consciousness spectrum.

Beneatha’s character is positioned on the left of the double consciousness spectrum. Her character is greatly informed by Hansberry’s own feminist views. For instance, Hansberry observed in a radio interview in 1959 that “obviously the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women” and that when they are “twice oppressed” they often become “twice militant” (“Images of Men” 160). Like Beneatha, Hansberry sought fulfillment “in areas in which men did – in artistic creation, in intellectual speaking … and in the pursuit about all aspects of life” (160). Beneatha identifies more as black than as gazed upon because of her education, and because of her relationship with Asagai. As a result of her education, Beneatha feels empowered “to be a doctor” (36). Beneatha’s aspirations indicate that she has not internalized racial or gender stereotypes surrounding women in medicine. If Beneatha did view herself as gazed upon, she would have felt inadequate and “become a nurse like other women,” as suggested by Walter (38).

Beneatha’s relationship with Asagai motivates her to identify even more as black than as gazed upon, causing her to shift further left on the double consciousness spectrum. Until she and Asagai converse, she largely associates herself with a white-washed academic culture, ending her phone conversations with “Arrivederci” and using the word “thee” in casual conversation (38, 56). Beneatha’s aristocratic behaviour implies that, while she sees herself more as black than as gazed upon, she is still heavily influenced by the Other. Beneatha recognizes that she cannot form an identity apart from the Other, so she seeks out Asagai, a Nigerian academic, to help her reconstruct her blackness. She asks to “talk with [him] about Africa” because she is “looking for [her] identity” (62).

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\(^1\) The title A Raisin in the Sun is adapted from the poem “Harlem” by Langston Hughes, which asks, “What happens to a dream deferred?” (Hughes 1).

\(^2\) While she worked at the magazine Freedom, Hansberry’s office was in the same building as Du Bois’s (“Commitment Amid Complexity” 41).
After her meeting with Asagai, Beneatha shifts even further left on the double consciousness spectrum. She begins to wear her hair naturally, she dawns a Nigerian costume, and she engages in a Nigerian-inspired ritualistic dance with Walter (76-77). Most importantly, she is invited to become a doctor in Africa, where she can accomplish her academic goals away from the homogenizing environment of Western academia. Thus, through her meeting with Asagai, Beneatha becomes empowered to fuse her academic and African-American identities and consequently shifts left on the double consciousness spectrum.

Mama and Ruth are located in the middle of the double consciousness spectrum: they identify equally as black and as gazed upon. It is evident that Mama identifies as black when she refuses to go on a trip to Europe because she “wasn’t no rich white woman” (44). Similarly, Ruth demonstrates her identity as black rather than as gazed upon when she explicitly states that she is “a coloured woman,” and that “there are coloured men who [accomplish] things” (34).

Furthermore, when given the chance to move houses, Mama immediately picks a home in a white neighbourhood, and Ruth supports her decision. If Ruth and Mama had viewed themselves as gazed upon, they would have been overcome with feelings of inadequacy and discrimination, and consequently would not have felt comfortable moving into a white environment. Conversely, Mama and Ruth equally identify as Othered. Mama is so dissociated from her blackness that she knows almost nothing of Africa and does not understand why her ignorance is harmful. Mama reveals her racial amnesia by saying, “I don’t think I ever met no African before … why should I know anything about Africa?” (57). Mama’s disconnect from Africa is a symptom of her partial identification as an Othered figure. This idea that whites view blacks as separated from their African roots is mirrored in the writings of Manning Marable. According to Marable, ignorance of racial trauma, including the Middle Passage and British colonialism, “sustains our parallel racial universes,” thereby perpetuating systemic racism (7). Thus, Mama’s ignorance of her African roots and racial heritage indicate that she largely views herself as gazed upon.

Ruth also half-identifies as gazed upon. In response to Walter and Beneatha’s Nigerian-inspired dance, Ruth calls Walter “a fool” (79). Likewise, after Beneatha changes her hairstyle to reflect her African roots, Ruth exclaims “You expect this boy to go out with you with your head all nappy like that?” (80). In both of these instances, Ruth demonstrates that she is disconnected from her racial heritage. In Ruth’s view, blackness, like “nappy” hair, is something to be corrected and concealed (80). Because Mama and Ruth alternate between identifying as black and as gazed upon, they experience a sense of “twoness … two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (9). Thus, Mama’s ignorance of her African roots and racial heritage indicate that she largely views herself as gazed upon.

At the beginning of the play, Walter is located on the right end of the double consciousness spectrum, but, as he struggles to reclaim his masculinity, he inadvertently subverts the white man’s gaze and gains a degree of racial identity, an act that allows him to migrate to the center-left end of the spectrum. At the beginning of the play, Walter identifies almost exclusively as black seen through the eyes of the Other. The hateful nature of his speech reflects internalized racist and sexist stereotypes. For instance, when Ruth explains that “there are coloured men who do things,” Walter says, “no thanks to the coloured women” (34). Further, he suggests that all black men are “tied to a race of women with small minds” and that coloured people are “the most backward race” (38). Walter’s ability to alter his behaviour by the end of
the novel is also characteristic of Hansberry’s work. Hansberry believed that “ideologies and systems were the true enemies,” not whites or men. Thus, she was careful to create complex male characters who “are caught in the web of sympathetic conditioning in male supremacy and the resulting harm they do to women and to themselves” (160).

Walter’s sexist words reflect deep-seeded fears of being emasculated by the white man’s gaze because, for him, masculinity is synonymous with money and power, and money and power are associated with whiteness. Walter is emasculated by his job as a limousine chauffeur. He laments that he must “open and close car doors all day long. I drive a man around in his limousine and I say ‘Yes, sir; no, sir; very good, sir; shall I take the Drive, sir?’” (73). He feels emasculated by his job because, in his eyes, the rich passenger is highly masculine by virtue of his wealth, and Walter is feminized by his own lack of wealth. His interpretation of femininity and masculinity also has a racial component. He claims that he wants to be like “them white boys … sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars” (74). Because Walter conflates wealth with masculinity, and because he associates wealth with whiteness, he ultimately feels that black people are masculine in an inferior way. Thus, the function of his sexist and racist comments is to distance himself from black women, who are in his view the least powerful members of society, so that he can regain some social power.

In struggling to regain his masculinity, Walter inadvertently reconnects with his black identity, subverts the white man’s gaze, and shifts left on the double consciousness spectrum. One way in which Walter regains his blackness and masculinity is by engaging in a Nigerian-inspired dance with Beneatha. During the dance, Walter calls to his “black brothers” and invokes traditionally masculine images of the warrior, including the phallic image of a “FLAMING SPEAR!” (78). Interestingly, during the dance, Walter also summons the female spirit of Ethiopia, beckoning her to “STRETCH FORTH HER HANDS AGAIN!” (77). By reclaiming his blackness and his masculinity through dance, Walter also regains his respect and appreciation for femininity. His newfound appreciation for women is evidenced by the unguarded and sensitive way he speaks to his wife after the dance. He asks Ruth “how we gets to the place where we scared to talk softness to each other?” (88).

This newfound respect for femininity drives Walter to subvert Lindner’s 3 gaze at the end of the play, thereby allowing him to shift further left on the double consciousness spectrum. When Walter begins to perform blackface in front of his family, the women “watch him frozen in horror” (144). His lack of masculinity is punctuated by Beneatha who says, “that is not a man. That is nothing but a toothless rat” (144). Immediately after this scene, Walter completely changes his behaviour and tells Lindner that “we are a proud people… and we have decided to move into our house because my father – my father – earned it for us brick by brick” (148). Because now Walter respects women, he is subject to the feminine gaze of his family. Ironically, this gaze causes Walter to shift from identifying as gazed upon to identifying as black. Thus, over the course of the plot he shifts from right to left on the double-consciousness spectrum.

Each character’s position on the double consciousness spectrum influences the success of their communication. Characters who are located on opposite sides of the double consciousness spectrum are less likely to engage in effective communication because their perceptions of blackness differ to a great degree, and these perceptions form their worldview. At the beginning of the play, for instance, Beneatha and Walter communicate ineffectively because they are located on opposite ends of the double consciousness spectrum. Walter, who is

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3 Lindner is a representative from the white neighbourhood where Mama has recently bought a house. He has been sent to try to dissuade the Younger family from moving to their community (114-119).
overcompensating for his feelings of being emasculated, degrades Beneatha whenever she mentions her aspirations to become a doctor. Beneatha can aspire to be a doctor because she identifies more as black than as gazed upon. When she drops to her knees and sarcastically begs Walter for forgiveness for using the family’s money to pay for her education, Walter asks “Who the hell told you had to be a doctor? If you so crazy ‘bout messing ‘round with sick people – then go be a nurse like other women – or just get married and be quiet” (38). This antagonistic exchange is typical of Walter and Beneatha. He is unhappy because her independence threatens his masculinity and also because she will use some of Mama’s insurance money to fund her education, an act that decreases the likelihood that he will be able to assert his masculinity by investing in liquor stores. Beneatha is antagonistic because Walter’s sexism and racism undermines her identity as a black woman. Thus, because Beneatha and Walter are located on opposite ends of the double consciousness spectrum, their desires continually clash, generating arguments and disrupting communication between them.

Towards the end of the play, their communication improves because they approach each other on the double consciousness spectrum. When Walter tells Lindner that “we don’t want your money,” Beneatha reaffirms his statement by telling Lindner, “That’s what the man said” (148). Here, Walter speaks with a new black identity that demonstrates his leftward shift on the double consciousness spectrum. Beneatha, who now shares Walter’s worldview, not only fully listens to Walter, but reaffirms his statement.

Another two characters located in the same region of the double consciousness spectrum are Ruth and Mama. Mama and Ruth’s exceptionally communicative relationship is evidenced when Walter tells Ruth that “Mama would listen to you. You know she listen to you more than she do me and Bennie” (32). Indeed, Mama and Ruth often communicate so well that words are unnecessary. Before Ruth mentions that she is pregnant, Mama understands and says, “I sure hope that it’s a little old girl” (57). Similarly, without any verbal cue from Ruth, Mama asks, “Ruth honey – what’s the matter with you – you sick?” (59). The idea that Ruth and Mama’s effective communication arises from their shared ideas of blackness is shown when, in their conversations, they sometimes view themselves as black and sometimes view themselves as gazed upon. Ruth and Mama identify as black when Ruth says to Mama, “You should take a trip somewhere … these here rich white women do it all the time” to which Mama responds “Something always told me I wasn’t no rich white woman” (44). In this dialogue, Ruth and Mama refer to white women as Other, which shows that, during this conversation, they collectively identify as black. However, when Mama initially tells Ruth about the new house in Clyborne Park, a white neighbourhood, they are at first very afraid. When Mama, “frightened at the telling,” says to Ruth that the house is “out there in Clyborne Park,” Ruth’s “radiance fades abruptly” (127). Here, another effective and wordless communication takes place. Ruth and Mama collectively identify as gazed upon, which is why they both fear moving into the new neighbourhood. Mama and Ruth’s ability to identify equally as black and as gazed upon creates a strong communicative relationship between them.

Because Ruth and Mama are located in the middle of the double consciousness spectrum, they find it difficult to communicate meaningfully with Walter and Beneatha, who, at the beginning of the play, represent the extreme right and extreme left of the spectrum, respectively. Mama explicitly states her difficulty communicating when she says that “there’s something come down between me and [my children] that don’t let us understand each other and I don’t know what it is. One done lost his mind thinking ‘bout money all the time and the other done commence to talk about things I can’t seem to understand” (52). Mama does not understand
Walter because, unlike her, he identifies so much as gazed upon that he is driven to acquire power through money. Conversely, Mama does not understand Beneatha because most of her speech concerns Africa, which Mama has completely forgotten because of her partial identity as gazed upon. Ruth also finds it difficult to communicate with Walter and Beneatha. She says to Mama that “something is happening to Walter and me. I don’t know what it is – but he needs something – something I can’t give him anymore” (42). Ruth and Walter cannot communicate effectively because, like Mama, Ruth identifies too much as black to appreciate Walter’s quest to emulate the “white boys” by increasing his power and wealth (50). Her inability to understand Walter’s drive to gain money is demonstrated when she says, “So you would rather be Mr. Arnold than be his chauffeur. So – I would rather be living in Buckingham Palace” (34). Ruth’s difficulty in communicating with Beneatha is a direct result of Ruth’s partial identity as both black and gazed-upon. When Beneatha mutters “I hate assimilationist Negros,” Ruth cannot understand and exclaims, “Will somebody please tell me what assimila-who-ever means!” (81). Ruth’s inability to understand Beneatha is not only related to the content of her speech, but also to her refined word choice, an indirect consequence of her empowered identity as a black woman. Ruth and Mama’s failure to communicate effectively with Beneatha and Walter is evidence of the correlation between one’s position on the double consciousness spectrum and the effectiveness of one’s communication with others.

The double consciousness spectrum is a useful tool for examining communicative relationships in A Raisin in the Sun. By dissecting the characters’ ability or inability to communicate effectively, the reader becomes aware of a larger theme in the play: the use of language to shape and reshape one’s identity. It is through language that Mama and Ruth affirm each other’s blackness, or Otherness. Similarly, it is by speaking with Asagai that Beneatha begins to identify almost exclusively as black. Finally, it is Walter’s speech at the end of the play that solidifies his newfound blackness. Hansberry’s play is a successful reminder that the collective identity of a diaspora is not easily defined by words alone.

Bibliography

REBECCA DOYLE is a fourth-year student at Western University, graduating in June 2015 with an Honors Specialization in Environmental Science and a Minor in English Language and Literature. In September 2015 she will begin an M.Sc. in Geography at Western where she plans to study the stable isotope geochemistry of lake sediments.