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Black Bottom

Gabriel Alexander

In Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*, the character Beneatha Younger doesn't quite have a charmed life. She lives in a ratty apartment. Her college-educated values are constantly clashing with her religious, traditionalist mother Lena. Beneatha's boyfriend, George Murchison, is an upper-class snob with precisely nothing between his ears. Throughout the play, Beneatha tries to "find herself" as an African woman with the help of her Nigerian friend Joseph Asagai, all while he tries to find love with her. Through the love triangle, the stage directions, and the interactions between characters, the play shows that one's true identity and African roots can't be created from something they're not, but only found through who they genuinely are.

One way Beneatha tries to get in touch with her African roots is by dressing in Nigerian attire. However, the stage directions reveal the hollowness of her attempts. When Beneatha tries on the clothes in private, "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" (Hansberry I.2.1479). What's important to note is that the stage directions say, "as she thinks a Nigerian woman might." Beneatha may genuinely want to have an African identity, but she's still unsure of herself and her connections to Africa, and it shows.

Later in the play, when Beneatha is more acclimated to wearing the garb, her African heritage is still an imitation. This is evident when the stage directions show Beneatha "emerging grandly from the doorway so that we can see her thoroughly robed in the costume Asagai brought. She parades for RUTH, her hair completely hidden by the headdress; she is coquettishly fanning herself with an ornate oriental fan, mistakenly more like Butterfly than any Nigerian that ever was" (Hansberry II.1.1485). Once again, the wording that Hansberry uses firmly brings

Beneatha back down to Earth. The robes Beneatha is wearing aren't called robes or clothing, but a *costume*. In other words, it's the type of thing one wears to pretend to be someone or something they are not. This pretense is further showcased when Beneatha fans herself "more like Butterfly than any Nigerian ever was." The "Butterfly" Hansberry is referring to is Madame Butterfly, a Japanese woman from an Italian opera based on an American short story, which itself was based on a French novel. Beneatha is several degrees of separation from anything close to Nigeria. While Beneatha may want to embrace her African heritage, these stage directions show that it's not really part of her identity, or at the very least, not as big of a part of her identity that she would like.

In Tunde Adeleke's 1998 article from the *Western Journal of Black Studies*, "Black Americans, Africa and History: A Reassessment of the Pan-African and Identity Paradigms," he examines the true ideals of Afrocentrism and how they clash with the inevitable realities of both modern-day Africa and of African Americans. One paragraph in particular discusses the "clear divergence between the claim of African identity on the one hand, and Black American ability and willingness to reflect this 'Africanness' in their lifestyles" (Adeleke 191). It's relatively easy for Black Americans to call themselves African, but unless they have grown up within the African culture, that statement will ring hollow. As Adeleke states, "Being African has to do with acknowledging the force and authority, and living according to the dictates of African culture" (Adeleke 191). African culture bakes in certain values and traditions that can't be replicated by dressing up garishly and belting out random words that wouldn't form a coherent sentence in any language on any continent, Africa or any other. To put it simply, Adeleke writes, "Culture is a very forceful authority in Africa. It makes demands and imposes obligations that no man-made law can undermine or challenge" (191). Being African isn't just a name you

can call yourself or a dress you can wear, it's a lifestyle that influences your every action from the moment you are born.

If one is to be African, one must be willing to submit themselves to African culture. However, Beneatha's actions show that she isn't willing to submit to any culture. By her own admission, she, "experiment[s] with different forms of expression" (Hansberry I.1.1470). This experimentation takes the form of various pursuits, such as play-acting, horseback-riding, photography, and other incongruous hobbies. She also frequently quotes passages from the Bible, despite saying that "all the tyranny in the world will never put a God in the heavens" (Hansberry I.2.1473). This is after Mama slaps her for decrying the name of the Lord. Interestingly, Beneatha's statement opposes the European apologist narrative that was used to justify the enslavement of African peoples. Supposed Black American nationalists such as Martin Delany, Alexander Crummell, and Henry McNeal Turner all "...described enslavement of Africans as a divinely sanctioned and planned episode. It was the 'hand of God' directing the affairs of nation toward the fulfillment of a divine wish" (Adeleke 186). The only difference between slavery and tyranny is a matter of scale. The existence of God does not justify the subjugation of man, nor does the subjugation of man entail the existence of God.

Even when Asagai gives Beneatha the Nigerian robes, he laments about "how much time one needs to know what one feels" (Hansberry I.2.1478). Admittedly, Asagai is referring to Beneatha's reluctance to be in a real relationship with him. However, the following exchange perfectly encapsulates the difference between the two:

BENEATHA: You never understood that there is more than one kind of feeling which can exist between a man and a woman—or, at least, there should be.

ASAGAI: [Shaking his head negatively but gently.] No. Between a man and a woman there need be

only one kind of feeling. I have that for you...Now even...right this moment...

BENEATHA: I know—and by itself—it won't do. I can find that anywhere.

ASAGAI: For a woman it should be enough.

BENEATHA: I know—because that's what it says in all the novels that men write. But it isn't. Go ahead and laugh—but I'm not interested in being someone's little episode in America or— [With feminine vengeance.]—one of them! [ASAGAI has burst into laughter again.] That's funny as hell, huh!

ASAGAI: It's just that every American girl I have known has said that to me. White—black—in this you are all the same. And the same speech, too! (Hansberry I.2.1478)

Hansberry takes great care to make sure that neither Beneatha nor Asagai are fully in the right in this scene. Obviously, the fact that there can indeed be more than one type of relationship between two people of the opposite gender has gone far above Asagai's head. However, his misconception isn't malicious in nature. Asagai spent the formative years of his life immersed in the Nigerian culture. He doesn't view Beneatha, or any woman for that matter, as a potential one-night stand. Rather, he is a man who is constantly in search of his one true love.

If that sounds like something out of a fairy tale, then you're not far off. When, much later in the play, Asagai suggests that Beneatha come with him to Nigeria, he speaks of a prophecy in which "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..." (Hansberry III.1.1512). The issue with Asagai is that he thinks any woman he develops a connection to could be that maiden, and many women just don't want that, and think of him as just another loser trying to get into their pants, which is why he is so familiar with the speech that Beneatha gives.

Beneatha, on the other hand, doesn't realize that the one feeling between them Asagai is talking about isn't lust, but genuine love. One might think to label Beneatha as flighty and noncommittal, but the truth is that she's only twenty years old. While she may be very studious, having knowledge of African people isn't the same as having lived your life as an African person. That axiom applies to knowledge and people of all stripes. Beneatha might have all the knowledge of Africa in the world, but that pales in comparison to her experience both as a student and as a woman.

While Lena, or "Mama" as she is called, is not explicitly in touch with her supposed African roots, her unconscious actions and the stage directions describing them are closer to Africa than any blustery facade. This is evident from the moment that we first see Mama. In the stage directions describing her entrance, it is said that "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" (Hansberry I.1.1466). Mama's African roots express themselves in a way that isn't some overblown declaration, but an unconscious action that she takes every day. It's certainly more genuinely African than anything Mama says outright. Case in point, when Mama first learns about Asagai from Beneatha, they share this terse exchange:

MAMA: I don't think I never met no African before.

BENEATHA: Well, do me a favor and don't ask him a whole lot of ignorant questions about Africans. I mean, do they wear clothes and all that—

MAMA: Well, now, I guess if you think we so ignorant 'round here maybe you shouldn't bring your friends here—

BENEATHA: It's just that people ask such crazy

things. All anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan—

MAMA: [Indignantly] Why should I know anything about Africa?

BENEATHA: Why do you give money at church for the missionary work?

MAMA: Well, that's to help save people.

BENEATHA: You mean save them from heathenism—

MAMA: [Innocently] Yes.

BENEATHA: I'm afraid they need more salvation from the British and the French. (Hansberry I.2.1475)

Beneatha is essentially vetting Mama to make sure that she doesn't embarrass her, but Mama wouldn't do anything that would reflect poorly on herself as a host. She didn't even want Asagai to come over because they were in the process of house cleaning.

When Mama finally does meet Asagai, she states in a chatty tone, "I would love to hear all about—[Not sure of the name]—your country. 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." In the stage directions, Hansberry writes, "The mother flashes a slightly superior look at her daughter upon completion of the recitation." Asagai's reaction, according to the stage directions, is to be "taken aback by this sudden and acutely unrelated expression of sympathy." A moment later, the tone shifts:

MAMA: [Looking at him as she would WALTER.] I bet you don't half look after yourself, being away from your mama either. I spec you better come 'round here from time to time and get yourself some decent home-cooked meals...

ASAGAI: [Moved.] Thank you. Thank you very much. (Hansberry I.2.1478)

When Mama is just parroting what Beneatha says, her sympathy comes off as obviously fake to the point where Asagai is put off by it. The whole purpose of her recitation is just to spite Beneatha, as is evident from the stage directions. However, when Mama drops the facade, she shows that she's a kind person and a welcoming host. The stage directions have her looking at Asagai like she would at her son as she tells him to come around sometime for something to eat. This is what moves Asagai: a genuine show of motherly kindness, not some blustery nonsense in which she forgets what country he's from. It's easy for one to put up a front of sympathy and even easier to let it fall, but the type of genuine strength and warmth that Mama projects isn't something that can be turned on and off like a light switch.

In Miciah Z. Yehudah's 2015 article from the *Journal of Black Studies* (not related to the aforementioned *Western Journal of Black Studies*), "Distinguishing Afrocentric Inquiry from Pop Culture Afrocentrism," he seeks to separate Afrocentrism from its popular, nonacademic definition. In the process, he brings up seven key aspects that are "common to the collective of African thought and also represent an African worldview" (Yehudah 555). These common elements are, "(a) centrality of community, (b) respect for tradition, (c) high-level spirituality and ethical concern, (d) harmony with nature, (e) the concept of the sociality of selfhood, (f) veneration of ancestors, and (g) the concept of the continuity of being" (Yehudah 555). These seven traits are said to make up the core of African identity and to serve as a mental and spiritual tether to the continent even when one is physically separated from it.

All seven of the traits of African thought are either displayed or encouraged by Mama in the Younger household, keeping the spirit of the continent alive, even if none of the Youngers recognize it as such. *Centrality of community* "refers to the importance of the collective

in driving individual activities" (Yehudah 556). Mama is constantly pushing the people around her to do the right thing for the whole family. That's why she uses the insurance money to buy the family a house in Clybourne Park rather than giving it to her son Walter to invest in the liquor store. She doesn't want her family to tear itself apart, and she doesn't want them to be in the business of getting people lost in the bottle. That's also why she entrusts the check to Walter. She knows that Walter had his heart set on the liquor store, and, "There ain't nothing worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing else...if it means it's going to destroy my boy.... I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be" (Hansberry II.2.1497). Mama gives Walter a chance to do right for the family. While he does screw it up very badly, the fact remains that she gave him a real chance.

This segues into the next aspect of African thought, *respect for tradition*. Yehudah surmises that, "...since every individual of a society is highly valued contributor [*sic*], then the traditions they initiated, helped to construct, or themselves followed, must also be respected" (Yehudah 556). Mama always tries to show respect for the decisions and contributions of others. When Beneatha decides to dump George Murchison on the grounds that he is an honest-to-God fool, Mama supports her decision, saying that she "...better not waste her time with no fools" (Hansberry II.2.1495). Earlier, Mama, along with everyone else in the family, was encouraging Beneatha to stick with George because his family was rich. For Mama to be understanding of Beneatha shows how supportive she can be. Similarly, when Travis, Mama's grandson, buys her a very large and elaborate gardening hat, "[The family] all laugh except MAMA, out of deference to TRAVIS' feelings" (Hansberry II.3.1506). Travis knows that Mama always wanted to have a garden, and even though the hat is a garish thing, she wears it because he bought it with the best intentions.

When Walter's wife Ruth plans on getting an abortion, Mama understands why her daughter-in-law would do such a thing, saying, "When the world gets ugly enough—a woman will do anything for her family. The part that's already living" (Hansberry I.2.1483). Mama may disagree with Ruth's decision, but she isn't ignorant of Ruth's situation, and she doesn't try to browbeat Ruth into changing her mind. Mama's opposition to abortion may be seen as a link to Africa's *high-level spirituality and ethical concern*. Yehudah states that "...the ethical component [is] infused into the spiritual tradition, and not the other way around" (556). To illustrate what this means to Mama, one need only look into her reaction when she finds out that Ruth is planning on terminating her pregnancy. Mama opposes the abortion not because she thinks it isn't Christian, but because she thinks it isn't moral. After she tells Walter about what Ruth intends to do, she "...wait[s] to hear [Walter] talk like [his father] and say [they] a people who give children life, not who destroys them." When Walter fails to do this, she calls him, "a disgrace to [his] father's memory" (Hansberry I.2.1484). These are harsh words, but you won't find "God" among them. She doesn't want a child to have their life snuffed out before they even get the chance to live it. She also knows that she doesn't have the right to make decisions on the personal business of family members.

The fourth aspect of African thought that Mama shows is *harmony with nature*. While it may not be as pronounced as her other traits, Mama does show an affinity for gardening. She cares for a potted plant that continues to survive despite it being in no condition to do so. One of her greatest dreams is to have a house with a garden in the back, and even though that dream has been deferred, she still holds onto some shred of it.

The fifth trait, the *sociality of selfhood*, "rests on the fundamental belief in the idea of communalism as propelling people of African descent to play their parts in creating a just and good society" (Yehudah 556). Mama

wants her children to do good in the world. She's always implicitly supportive of Beneatha's dream to become a doctor. When Walter decides to rectify his mistake by trying to sell the house in Clybourne Park, Mama is perhaps the most opposed to his decision. Even though the family would walk away from the deal with a pretty penny, she knows that none of them would be able to live with themselves if Walter kowtowed to a mealy-mouthed craven like Karl Lindner, a white man who represents the Clybourne Park Improvement Association.

The sixth trait, *veneration of ancestors*, arguably is the catalyst for the whole play. The check that comes in is the insurance money received after Mama's husband's death. When Walter is getting ready to sell their house to the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, Mama says, "I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers—but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We ain't never been that poor. We ain't never been that dead inside" (Hansberry III.1.1516). Mama holds the people in her family in high regard and views any mark on one member as a mark against them all.

Lastly, the concept of *continuity of being* "...depends on one's proximity to the Creator who for the African society personifies the ethical code" (Yehudah 556). Mama may be a Christian, but this concept still applies to her. Her morality heavily informs her Christian faith. When Beneatha insists that there is no God, Mama slaps her in the face and makes her state the opposite:

BENEATHA: In my mother's house there is still God.

[A long pause.]

MAMA: [Walking away from BENEATHA, too disturbed for triumphant posture. Stopping and turning back to her daughter.] There are some ideas we ain't going to have in this house. Not long as I am at the head of this family. (Hansberry I.1.1472)

The stage directions show that Mama takes no pride in this action. Rather, she does it because she considers taking the Lord's name in vain as a moral affront. These seven traits show that while Mama is not explicitly African, she still carries the spirit of Africa in her soul.

The differences in Beneatha's interactions with her two suitors, George Murchison and Joseph Asagai, show her true roots and identity behind all the posturing. When George comes upon Beneatha in full Nigerian regalia, he says, "Look honey, we're going to the theatre—we're not going to be in it...so go change, huh?" (Hansberry II.2.1486). Although Beneatha's attempts to get in touch with Africa might be futile, that's no reason for George to put her down like that. In contrast with this scene, when Asagai remembers the first time he met Beneatha, he recalls her search for her African identity with fondness:

ASAGAI: You came up to me and you said—and I thought you were the most serious little thing I had ever seen—you said: [He imitates her.] "Mr. Asagai—I want very much to talk with you. About Africa. You see, Mr. Asagai, I am looking for my identity!"

[He laughs] (Hansberry I.2.1477).

Asagai's playful mocking of Beneatha isn't meant to be malicious. Asagai, a native African, genuinely finds it funny that Beneatha, an American, wants to learn more about her supposed African identity. He isn't dismissive of her, either, as he brings traditional Nigerian clothing and records for her. Beneatha's African roots may or may not be as much a part of her as she would hope, but Asagai is still willing to help her try.

George, on the other hand, doesn't even want to be near what he perceives to be an utter spectacle. The conversation the two have as she tries to explain her African heritage gives a keen insight into the person that Beneatha really is:

GEORGE: Oh, dear, dear, dear! Here we go! A lecture on the African past! On our Great West

African Heritage! In one second we will hear all about the great Ashanti empires; the great Songhay civilizations; and the great sculpture of Bénin—and then some poetry in the Bantu—and the whole monologue will end with the word heritage! [Nastily] Let's face it, baby, your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts!

BENEATHA: Grass huts! [RUTH crosses to her and forcibly pushes her toward the bedroom] See there ... you are standing there in your splendid ignorance talking about people who were the first to smelt iron on the face of the earth! [RUTH is pushing her through the door] The Ashanti were performing surgical operations when the English— [RUTH pulls the door to, with BENEATHA on the other side, and smiles graciously at GEORGE. BENEATHA opens the door and shouts the end of the sentence defiantly at GEORGE]—were still tattooing themselves with blue dragons! [She goes back inside.] (Hansberry II.1.1487)

This exchange shows that Beneatha's identity lies not in her African roots, but in her status as an educated young woman. Most Africans wouldn't bring up the history of the various tribes of the continent as a defense for their people. After all, no one group of people of Africa represents the entire history of Africa. However, as a scholar, Beneatha attacks what she perceives as ignorance on George's part.

George's ignorance is what leads Beneatha to cut him out of her life. The scene begins like this:

BENEATHA: I'm trying to talk to you.

GEORGE: We always talk.

BENEATHA: Yes—and I love to talk.

GEORGE: [Exasperated; rising] I know it and I don't mind it sometimes ... I want you to cut it out, see—The moody stuff, I mean. I don't like it. You're a nice-looking girl ... all over. That's all you need, honey, forget the atmosphere. Guys

aren't going to go for the atmosphere—they're going to go for what they see. Be glad for that. Drop the Garbo routine. It doesn't go with you. As for myself, I want a nice—[Groping.]—simple [Thoughtfully.]—sophisticated girl ... not a poet—O.K.?

[She rebuffs him again and he jumps up.]

BENEATHA: Why are you angry, George?

GEORGE: Because this is stupid! I don't go out with you to discuss the nature of "quiet desperation" or to hear all about your thoughts—because the world will go on about your thoughts—because the world will go on thinking what it thinks regardless— BENEATHA: Then why read books? Why go to school?

GEORGE: [With artificial patience, counting on his fingers] It's simple. You read books—to learn facts—to get grades—to pass the course—to get a degree. That's all—it has nothing to do with thoughts (Hansberry II.2.1494).

Ignoring the obvious oxymoron of a "simple sophisticated girl," it is here where we find the difference between George and Beneatha. George is content with just accepting whatever society puts in front of him and going about his business. Beneatha tries to get to the truth of things, or at least, what she thinks the truth to be. George is the type of person who goes to school to be taught things and regurgitate them when the need arises. Beneatha is the type of person who goes to school to learn things and improve herself and the world.

When we find Beneatha at her lowest point, we learn where this desire to improve herself and the world comes from:

BENEATHA: When I was very small...we used to take our sleds out in the wintertime and the only hills we had were the ice-covered stone steps of some houses down the street. And we used to

fill them in with snow and make them smooth and slide down them all day...and it was very dangerous, you know...far too steep...and sure enough one day a kid named Rufus came down too fast and hit the sidewalk and we saw his face just split open right there in front of us...And I remember standing there looking at his bloody open face thinking that was the end of Rufus. But the ambulance came and they took him to the hospital and they fixed the broken bones and they sewed it all up...and the next time I saw Rufus he just had a little line down the middle of his face...I never got over that...

ASAGAI: What?

BENEATHA: That that was what one person could do for another, fix him up—sew up the problem, make him all right again. That was the most marvelous thing in the world...I wanted to do that. I always thought it was the one concrete thing in the world that a human being could do. Fix up the sick, you know—and make them whole again. This was truly being God...

ASAGAI: You wanted to be God?

BENEATHA: No—I wanted to cure. It used to be so important to me. I wanted to cure. It used to matter. I used to care. I mean about people and how their bodies hurt... (Hansberry III.1.1510)

It's obvious that seeing Rufus's face being put back together after being completely busted open weighed heavily on Beneatha's mind. The idea that someone or something could be made healthy again after being completely destroyed obviously appealed to Beneatha, who had lived most of her life under the dark cloud of poverty.

In fact, this desire for education and to help others heal is probably what led Asagai to be attracted to her. When we get some insight into Asagai's viewpoint we learn that he is worried about illiteracy and its consequences in his village:

ASAGAI: In my village at home it is the exceptional man who can even read a newspaper... or who ever sees a book at all. I will go home and much of what I will have to say will seem strange to the people of my village...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. Retrogression even. Guns, murder, revolution. And I even will have moments when I wonder if the quiet was not better than all that death and hatred. But I will look about my village at the illiteracy and disease and ignorance and I will not wonder long. And perhaps...perhaps I will be a great man...I mean perhaps I will hold on to the substance of truth and find my way always with the right course...and perhaps for it I will be butchered in my bed some night by the servants of empire...

BENEATHA: The martyr!

ASAGAI: ...or perhaps I shall live to be a very old man, respected and esteemed in my new nation... And perhaps I shall hold office and this is what I'm trying to tell you, Alaiyo [Asagai's pet name for Beneatha]; perhaps the things I believe now for my country will be wrong and outmoded, and I will not understand and do terrible things to have things my way or merely to keep my power. Don't you see that there will be young men and women—not British soldiers then, but my own black countrymen—to step out of the shadows some evening and slit my then useless throat? Don't you see they have always been there...that they always will be. And that such a thing as my own death will be an advance? They who might kill me even...actually replenish me! (Hansberry

III.1.1511-1512).

Asagai might be an optimist, but he isn't a fool. He wants to make things better for his village in Nigeria and the rest of the country, but he knows that it will be a long, hard road to fulfill his dream. He may be killed in his pursuit of it, or he may even become an obstacle to its fulfillment and have to be removed. However, in spite of his idealistic world view, he's comfortable with those facts. He wants to help people and better the human race.

Both Beneatha and Asagai know that things won't be perfect, but they still want to help people the best that they can. That doesn't mean that they always agree with each other. When Asagai offers to take Beneatha with him back to Nigeria, she doesn't answer:

BENEATHA: Too many things—too many things have happened today. I must sit down and think. I don't know what I feel about anything right this minute.

[She promptly sits down and props her chin on her fist.]

ASAGAI: [Charmed] All right, I shall leave you. No—don't get up. [Touching her, gently, sweetly.] Just sit awhile and think...Never be afraid to sit awhile and think. [He goes to door (*sic*) and looks at her.] How often I have looked at you and said, 'Ah—so this is what the New World hath finally wrought...'

[He exits. BENEATHA sits on alone.] (Hansberry III.1.1513)

Beneatha is a product of the New World. She's not mentally or spiritually tied to Africa and Asagai knew this for a long time. However, he still helped Beneatha in her attempts to find her true identity. Asagai also has enough self-awareness to know that their goals might not be compatible and that they could have to go their separate ways to achieve them, and he's willing to do that for both of them. Beneatha may not quite find her connections to Africa, but she is on track to finding her connections with herself.

In Kristin L. Matthews's article in *Modern Drama*, "The Politics of 'Home' in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*," she dissects the meaning of home for the various characters in the play. In one paragraph, Matthews posits the idea that Hansberry may have written Beneatha's interest in Africa as "just another identity she is trying on for size" (563). While I agree that Beneatha goes through several phases, I don't think that that's necessarily a bad thing or even something out of the ordinary. It's important to remember that Beneatha is still a college student. It's not invalid for her to try different things. In fact, it's perfectly normal. No one knows what they're going to be when they're twenty years old, and at no point does college magically make someone discover who they are or how they express that. It's something everyone has to find out for themselves, and they probably won't find it in the first thing that they do.

It's also clear that the lessons Beneatha learned from Asagai won't be gathering dust in the back of her head like the riding habit and photography equipment gather dust in the back of her closet. For one, she never breaks off her relationship with Asagai like she does with George. She doesn't even explicitly turn down his offer to go to Nigeria with him. She just takes some time to "sit down and think." Even if Beneatha never fully embraces her African roots, she's still interested in Asagai. During the final scene of the play, she is shown to be, "girlishly and unreasonably trying to pursue the conversation" about him with Mama (Hansberry III.1.1519). She hasn't fully made up her mind about Asagai, her relationship with him, or her relationship to Africa, and frankly, that's okay.

If you look at the core of Beneatha's being, you most likely won't find Africa. She hasn't lived there like Asagai has, and she doesn't unconsciously carry its values like Mama. However, Beneatha is able to find herself by interacting with these people, looking at herself, doing the best she can for the world, and just sitting down for a while to think.

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