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Redefining Blackness in the Age of Whiteness: Mimicry, Ancestry, Gender Performance, and Self- Identity in Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American Literature

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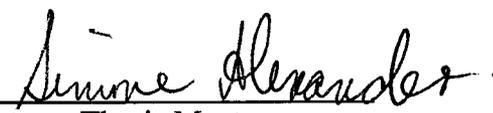
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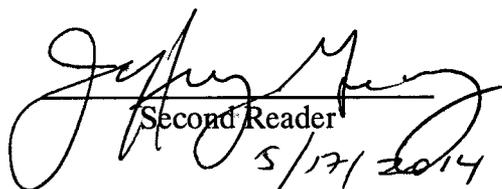
Redefining Blackness in the Age of Whiteness: Mimicry, Ancestry, Gender Performance, and
Self-Identity in Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American Literature

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When Homi Bhabha published his 1984 essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” his central argument suggested that the system of mimicry, or imitation, is an essential approach under colonial rule (Bhabha 126). This concept, as reviewed by notable philosophers such as Jacques Lacan and Edward Said, considers mimicry to be a form of camouflage—its purpose is not to become uniform with colonial rule, but to represent that power as a channel for survival. According to Bhabha, “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable *other*, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (126). Bhabha’s theories on mimicry and the *other* are rooted from the field of race and postcolonial studies, which examines the effect that colonialism and displacement has had on the development of literature and literary studies (Klages 147). When British colonizers invaded spaces to create colonies, they validated their actions by believing the indigenous peoples of the area were inferior and not as *advanced* as European lifestyles. This misconception suggests that Western culture is supreme and the rest of the world is merely the *other*. Once British colonialism spread to places like India and the Caribbean, Western practices were implemented to mold the identity of the indigenous peoples into British-like citizens. As stated by Klages, British cultural principles were upheld in these colonized areas and all other notions of culture were denounced as inferior and subordinated to Western standards (149). Once the colonized are stripped of their original cultures and modes of living, they have to quickly embrace the lifestyles of their colonizers, or perhaps face their demise.

With this shift of espousing Western principles, Bhabha’s ideas of mimicry—along with W.E.B. Du Bois’s double-consciousness theory—are put into practice. Bhabha argues that “mimicry is the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the *other* as it visualizes power” (126). The colonized *other* is forced to conform to the structures of a Westernized and dominant culture, while also grappling

with keeping personal identities relevant. Nonetheless, these colonized individuals are known collectively as the subaltern—a group of subordinated non-white, non-Western subjects under colonial rule. This mentality recycles throughout colonized domains until colonized individuals largely understand that mimicry is now the only way to survive. While colonized beings are not geographically living in Europe, the arrival of European colonizers and their values, philosophies, and cultures to non-Western areas wrongly establishes new personalities for native inhabitants.

Though some may consider individuals who use mimicry as “selling out” their authentic selves, mimicry should not be solely viewed as a form of adoption, but rather, a form of adaption. If the colonized adopt the ways of their colonizers, they approve and agree to the differences taking place; however, by merely adapting to these changes, they understand that although the colonial rules put in place have been launched, they are not theirs or a component of their native structures and institutions of being.

Wumi Raji writes about this idea of adoption versus adaption in “Imagined Transformation: Notes on a Postcolonialism of African Literature.” In his essay, Raji notes that the colonized subject struggles with displacement—either physically or psychologically. Once displaced, the colonized can either capture an alien environment or remain in his/her original environment (Raji 9). Even though Homi Bhabha agrees that mimicry is needed to survive colonial powers, he also understands that it is important for the colonized to cling on to their pre-colonized identities. Without holding on to their previous cultures, Bhabha argues that “the effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing” (126). If mimicry is used without a sense of a pre-colonized identity, the colonized is no longer using mimicry as a form of camouflage, but has, in fact, become the colonizer. When the colonized has a sense of

worth, despite being a subjugated being, s/he is still able to critique and reject certain aspects of Westernization, while celebrating otherness and hybridity. However, subjects who lose that foundation of selfhood only have faith in what colonial powers can do.

These elements associated with mimicry and colonialism are found in Elizabeth Nunez's *Prospero's Daughter* (2006), as the novel reveals how colonized subjects use mimicry to survive their colonized spaces. Keeping in mind the ideologies of Bhabha and Raji, the novel also suggests how a subject's pre-existing condition before being colonized develops agency. Comparably, while Elizabeth Nunez's novel illustrates how imitation is used by black and native Caribbeans, Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958) contextualize and exhibit Du Bois's double-consciousness theory and the struggles that black Americans experience while mimicking whiteness or Western mores. Evaluating representations of black manhood and womanhood in the United States, or more specifically, Chicago's Southside, Wright and Hansberry also reveal how race, class, gender, and religion intersect and dictate the lives of black people on a daily level. Together, Nunez, Wright, and Hansberry reconfigure the often mimicked—or performed—portrayals of black gender roles and sexuality under a white patriarchal society.

In *Prospero's Daughter*, Nunez describes race relations in the 1960s on Chacachacare, an island and former leper colony off of the coast of Trinidad. The novel opens with a letter from Ariana, the cook and personal servant of Dr. Gardner—also known as Prospero—proclaiming that Prospero's daughter, Virginia, and a black Trinidadian, Carlos, are lovers. As the novel progresses, it becomes known that Prospero, outraged that his daughter is possibly in love with a black man, wrongly accuses Carlos of raping Virginia. With these accusations against him, how does Carlos respond to the levels of victimization that he has to endure throughout the novel?

Before tackling Carlos's character, however, Ariana's opening letter deserves some scrutiny. Ariana is arguably viewed by society as disenfranchised because of her class, race, and gender, but it is her letter that sparks the novel's plot. Addressed to Mumsford, the investigator of the accusations, Ariana writes, "[Mr. Prospero] tell a lie if he say those two don't love one another. I know them from when they was children. They do anything for one another. I know. I see them. I watch them. I tell you he love she and she love him back. They love one another. Bad. He never rape she. Mr. Prospero lie" (Nunez 3). The letter is overtly signed by Ariana as well, which is important because she is not ashamed of her stance, nor is she intimidated by what may become of her. Early in the narrative, Nunez challenges colonial powers on women of color, as she situates Ariana with a powerful voice—something that normally does not occur for black women in colonized spaces. Even though Ariana is a low-class servant, she knows her worth and does not allow Prospero to dictate how she thinks. She utilizes writing—commonly viewed as a masculine, educated, and civilized pastime—to not only eradicate false notions of herself, but to also speak out against Western notions that white hegemony is always right and pure.

Ariana's use of mimicry aligns with the concept of camouflage, since she does not embrace the actions of Prospero, but imitates the persona of what Prospero expects of her. In a conversation with Mumsford about the relationship between Carlos and Virginia, Prospero states, "When I was not with them, Inspector, Ariana was always there. She was my spy" (Nunez 58). While Prospero thinks that Ariana is adhering to her "master," Ariana is acting as a witness in favor of Carlos. She uses mimicry not to flatter her colonizer, but to remove him from power.

Paralleled to Ariana, Carlos engages in mimicry to bring shame to Dr. Gardner. As the son of a white mother and black father, Carlos is ridiculed by his heritage and has to listen to several repulsive remarks about his mother's decision to be sexually involved with a black man.

Even as Prospero continually refers to Carlos's mother as a slut, Nunez challenges colonial and Western thought, as she introduces genuine love in the novel with two biracial couples—first with Carlos's parents and later with Carlos and Virginia. Prospero, as colonizer and antagonist states, "there can be no improvement of the white race from a marriage with the black race" (215), but since Carlos is able to observe the love between his parents, as well as experience that love while they raise him, Nunez dispels historical beliefs that the agenda for black men is to stain white women's honor. She reconfigures the family narrative and creates a biracial, independent, and affectionate family; a scene that does not abide by the notions of white supremacy and black suppression. Because of Carlos's solid upbringing, he is able to deconstruct colonial powers and outsmart Prospero. Carlos states, "my mother was blue-eyed, but she was not a hag. She was beautiful. The house was hers. He stole it from me" (67). Although Prospero is an Englishman and according to colonial discourse "every Englishman is a lord" (Nunez 11), Carlos knows that he is still the owner of the land Prospero has illegally controlled. After Carlos's mother dies, it seems as if Dr. Gardner will have complete authority over the property, as he makes changes to the exterior of the home and rids it of all its previous items. In fact, when considering Carlos's mother as the previous owner, Prospero proclaims, "She's finished. Nothing in here belongs to her now. All is mine. I am lord of it all" (Nunez 117). The house, now appearing to be in the sole possession of Prospero, would be another acquisition of colonization. However, Carlos debunks these colonial successes and does not accept Prospero's illicit attainment of his family's territory as fact. Carlos states:

My father thought my mother bewitching; Gardner called her a witch. I grasp at straws no doubt, but there are days I seem to need to find some logic, *something* that would help me make sense of Gardner's unrelenting arrogance, his

overweening hubris. He had come to us homeless, an unwanted lodger in the old doctor's home, and yet he believed that we should be indebted to him and not the other way around. His bold-faced presumptions still astound me to silence, that he should act as if he thought he had discovered us, as if before his arrival we had not existed at all! (Nunez 123)

With a proud sense of self-sufficiency, Carlos spends the duration of the novel using mimicry to repossess his native land. To Dr. Gardner, Carlos is naïve and looks to him for acceptance and permission. To Carlos, Dr. Gardner is misinformed by assuming that he needs his help to become a cultured and sophisticated member of humanity. Since Carlos experiences natural love from his parents, he comments that “The English had not come to save us; the English had not come to help us” (Nunez 158). Carlos knows who he is before the arrival of Dr. Gardner, so even though Dr. Gardner is now present, Carlos does not automatically submit to Gardner's principles; he outwits him. His use of imitation is displayed with such dexterity that Dr. Gardner has no awareness of Carlos's abilities. It is amazing to monitor Carlos as he completely rewrites the colonial narrative, stating:

Sometimes, baffled by Gardner's outrageous arrogance, his cool assumption of superiority over me, I would try to make sense of his behavior... Perhaps he said to himself: *I am unfreckled and pale, and Carlos is what I am not, and therefore is ugly. I am good, and Carlos is not what I am, and therefore he is bad. I speak with an English accent, and Carlos does not, and therefore he gabbles like a thing most brutish; therefore he does not know his own meaning.* (Nunez 126)

These binaries that Carlos recognizes are the foundation of colonial discourse. Nonetheless, Carlos is able to disregard these characteristics as *his* truths.

As part of the colonial mindset and argued by Klages, Westernized standards of skin color, language and food were supreme to other distinctions. According to Carlos, under Prospero, “food was to be cooked differently, not the way my mother used to cook it” (127). With this in mind, colonizers were expected to completely change the environment of other civilizations into mirroring those of Western standards. Dr. Gardner, playing the role of a colonizer in the novel, does not go against this colonialist attitude. In a letter to his brother about Carlos, Gardner writes, “Maybe I’m not altogether out of the business of improving the lot of humans, though at this moment I would hardly call the little savage human. Maybe I shall teach him to speak so at least he’ll know his own meaning. We shall see. But he makes an amusing playmate for Virginia” (76). Prospero is certain that Carlos is nothing but a savage without a proper upbringing, and is in need of his assistance in order to become *civilized*. Again, Prospero asserts, “He was speaking like the rest of them when I came here. Dat and dis and dey, as if there were no th’s in the English language. He used to say, *I’as* instead of *I do*. Now, you wouldn’t believe it. Like a proper Englishman” (Nunez 44). Prospero hopes that Carlos becomes another colonized subject, acquiescing like so many others. Prospero contends:

It was simple actually: a matter of changing the native’s sense of the beautiful, a matter of controlling the mind. Even now, the films the people rushed to see in the cinemas popping up all over the island reinforced the message: white skin was beautiful; blue, green, gray eyes were beautiful; blond hair was beautiful; straight black or brown hair was beautiful; curly hair without kinks was beautiful. Even now in the schools it was English history the teachers taught, the English way. Always the heroes were English, always the achievements and accomplishments were theirs. Give the native something to strive for: your beauty, your

accomplishments. An impossible goal for him to achieve, but his yearnings will keep him loyal. (Nunez 81)

Contrary to Prospero's personal attitudes, Nunez contests this belief about *others* and allows Carlos to not be dubious about Prospero's actions, but instead mimic the stereotypes that Prospero expects for his individual satisfactions. Carlos recognizes that if he *acts* like Prospero is his master, Prospero will continue to supply him with knowledge and skills that he can then use to deconstruct imperialism and enhance his already sound core.

Prospero does not know Carlos can initially read, but once he makes that *discovery*, he molds Carlos into his personal experiment. While many critics may view this as exploitation, Carlos does not because he is confident of his background. He realizes that instead of hating Prospero, he can become a provisional mascot for him, and sharpen his intelligence. Carlos adds, "my vocabulary, no doubt, before Gardner taught me, was inadequate, but my thoughts were clear, rational. I knew who I was; I knew what was mine" (Nunez 157). Since his character is already established, it is undemanding for Carlos to engage in mimicry. He is skilled enough to please Prospero while not losing his sense of self-worth.

Even with Carlos's confidence, Prospero continues to act upon his colonial views. When discussing Dr. Gardner, Nunez writes, "With the tips of his fingers he jabbed at spots on the map: India, China, Africa, the lands of the Turks and the Arabs, islands and continents spread apart by the great seas and oceans. His people had brought civilization everywhere, he said. 'Without us, these places you see would have nothing.'" (Nunez 162, 163). Carlos then explains, "he made me understand that my history, the history of my island and the islands in the Caribbean, began with him, began with his people. Before the arrival of his people we were nothing—wild, savage creatures who had accomplished nothing, achieved nothing, had made not

one iota of contribution to the advancement of human civilization” (168). Although Carlos refuses to believe Prospero’s claims, as the subject of a colonized space, he still must consent to some degree in order to survive. As Homi Bhabha suggests, mimicry, imitation, or masking is a powerful tool in the age of colonialism, and Carlos is able to master it:

In the years that followed, I learned to wear a mask over my face, an invisible barrier that Gardner could not see... I wanted to reassure him, I wanted him to feel secure in his presumptions, convinced of his superiority over me and people who looked like me. For he had much to teach me and I was eager to learn. I made a bargain with him in my mind; in exchange for knowledge, I would let him presume. I would let him believe that he understood me better than I understood myself, that he knew my desires before I knew them myself, that he could predict my ambitions, my dreams, the things I would want, the things I would fear, the things I would like or dislike. (Nunez 163)

Nunez’s decision to create Carlos’s character with such a grasp on his surroundings and the ways of Dr. Gardner greatly shifts the dichotomy of what has previously been written on colonized bodies and spaces. With a conscious level such as Carlos’s, who truly has the power? Normally, Dr. Gardner would easily be given that title, as he is a representation of white authority; however, as Nunez defies the effects of Westernization, Carlos unearths the flaws of this narrative. Once Carlos gains the trust of Dr. Gardner, though Gardner views him as a servant, Carlos is situated in a position of autonomy. The authentic Carlos is not who Dr. Gardner observes on a daily basis. Carlos’s mastery of mimicry allows him to deceive Gardner, while his true self is still protected. Even with all of the teachings that Gardner provides, it is not until

Carlos is isolated from Gardner that he feels fully liberated. Once he is removed from the household due to the rape accusations, Carlos states:

For the first time in my life I felt free, in control of my thoughts. For the first time I could say without hesitation that I was seeing the world on my terms, not on his terms, not through eyes that had determined that I was inferior, that had marked me, even before I was born, as less than, as incapable of being, the man he thought himself and all white men to be. (Nunez 221)

Carlos's past, and not Dr. Gardner, is responsible for his *civilization*. Dr. Gardner, not understanding that white hegemony is not desired by everyone, states "they want independence. After we've done so much for them" (Nunez 265). Nunez scrutinizes colonial thought and with her novel argues that the eastern Diaspora does not need the West to exist. To the chagrin of Gardner, he has a minimal effect on Carlos in proportion to the legacy instilled to him by his parents.

Even though both Carlos and Ariana are victims of colonization, their sense of agency separates them from typical targets of colonialism. Ariana contends that although she hates Prospero, she must still cook his food, serve him, and have sex with him. This script does not appear to be unusual to the storyline of colonialism, but Ariana's strength and determination to rebel against Prospero and produce her letter is noteworthy. Even though it is clear that Prospero views Ariana as simply a commodity and places her in only domestic capacities, Ariana only mimics these attributes, and does not limit herself to strictly those behaviors.

Prospero once states, "I had a responsibility to the natives. They should imitate me, not me them" (229). This conventional perspective by a colonist is what Carlos understands all along. Like Bhabha suggests, Carlos uses imitation for survival and to please Dr. Gardner, but he

never loses his sense of individuality. Throughout the novel, Dr. Gardner believes that both he and Virginia are superior to Carlos and other Trinidadians solely because of skin color. As a white woman, he deems his daughter to be in a higher class and at risk because of the *bestial* characteristics of black men. When speaking to his daughter, Prospero asserts, “You will be no different from Ariana if you lose your jewel... Guard it or you will have no value” (Nunez 240). What Nunez does in this narrative is completely modify the story of colonialism. It has been historically accepted that the black race is hyper-sexualized and seeks to exploit the white race. To no surprise, this stance is exemplified by Prospero. However, Prospero’s own actions are what become surprising. Although he preaches white purity and that the two races should remain separate, he defiles not only his black servant, Ariana, but his own daughter, Virginia. This tactic by Nunez deconstructs the theories of colonialism; that Western thought and lifestyles are supreme. If Prospero is so confident in his English roots, why does he migrate to Trinidad, exploit native Trinidadians, and sexually abuse his own daughter? Those deeds do not appear to be invigorating—although colonists claim that their actions are justified by their desire and commitment to *liberate* others.

By the end of the novel, it is evident that Carlos’s use of mimicry does not overcome him. If it did, he would have never accepted Virginia as his love interest because it would have been disobedient to Prospero. It can also be argued that Virginia uses mimicry as well, masking her real feelings for Carlos throughout the novel, so that her father would not know. What Virginia has ever known is Trinidad, and while colonial discourse states that the natives need the West, Virginia, as a white woman, needs Trinidad and Carlos for her own validation. Virginia states, “I belonged here, in this place. A feeling of pride surged through me like an electric current... I live here... This is home for me” (282, 283). Mimicry is used throughout the novel

by Ariana, Carlos, and Virginia in order to endure under the colonial rule of Prospero. However, at the end of the novel, Prospero dies and Virginia remarks, “It’s the ones who preach the most about such things who are often the most guilty... Father made sure I did not lose my virginity, but he took everything else” (313). Since Prospero’s actions were his true self, but the other characters were only masking, Prospero is unable to live with the state of his lifestyle. Nunez allows Carlos to become the winner here, not the white man, completely switching the roles of what colonial discourse requires.

Once European colonizers looked to African slaves to build the New World, their focus was to make them “as European as possible” without compromising that they were still inferior. They wanted to teach them that Westernized culture and thought was supreme, Christianity was the religion of the civilized, and being African was being primitive. African slaves, therefore stripped of their natural identity, were then forcefully brought to American soil to take part in a system of oppression. Although American slavery itself can be argued differently from what is known as colonialism, since Africans were not only wrongly displaced from their homeland, but viciously confined to servitude, what they found in America fits the description of a colonized and dispossessed space. Even once African-Americans faced a post-slavery society, like the characters found in *Native Son* and *A Raisin in the Sun*, they were still subjugated to circumstances as if colonization and racism were still institutionalized.

Wrestling with Americanized and complex constructions of gender and sexuality, and contemporary politics of respectability that suggest that one’s decency is attained by embracing institutions of the *civilized*, such as matrimony, purity, and religious sanctity, what happens when black Americans—either male or female—are coerced to practice these arguably reputable and traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity? On the contrary, what happens if these

men and women, hungering for something more, decide to challenge these long-established customs of gender identity set by colonialism and enslavement, and offer alternate interpretations of existence for black bodies? Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* supply the answers to the proposed questions listed above. Using the characters Bigger Thomas, Bessie Mears, Walter Lee Younger, and Lena Younger (among others) as models, Wright and Hansberry critique and reevaluate the validity of black gender roles and sexuality that have previously been determined by whiteness, colonialism, and enslavement.

Wright's *Native Son* opens not with the voice of the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, but of his mother, edgily telling Bigger to silence the morning alarm clock. Once the alarm is turned off, Mother Thomas's voice is quickly heard again, this time ordering Bigger to turn on the light in their one-room apartment and for Buddy, Bigger's younger brother, to get out of bed. While these short instructions to her sons may be simplistic in nature, they offer readers a valuable portrait of Mother Thomas's significance to the Thomas household. Although Bigger is twenty years old and in the beginning stages of adulthood, it is obvious that his mother is the provider and leader of the house and seems disappointed in the man that Bigger is becoming. Even after Bigger kills a rat that has terrorized the Thomas family's cramped living space, Mother Thomas does not appear impressed, stating, "We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you" (Wright 8) and "Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life" (Wright 9). These early conversations between Bigger and his mother commence the discussions on the intricacies of gender roles in black families. Mother Thomas's belief that Bigger is nothing but *another* irresponsible black man that must be watched and told what to do at all times forces her to no longer possess a traditional space as a mother/caretaker, but as the stereotypical matriarch. According to critic Patricia Hill Collins, "As overly aggressive,

unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands. These men, understandably, either deserted their partners or refused to marry the mothers of their children” (83). Since Mother Thomas’s deeds arguably reduce Bigger’s manhood, Bigger feels that he must escape his mother to regain his masculinity. This task is not easy, however, as Bigger must still contend with an oppressive and white hegemonic culture.

While it may seem that Bigger is the victim of his mother’s matriarchal ways, it is also worth noting that Mother Thomas is a victim as well. Revisiting “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images,” Patricia Hill Collins asserts, “Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression” (76). If readers of *Native Son* want to readily label Mother Thomas a matriarch, they must understand that she is forced into possessing that space as well. When discussing Bigger’s new job opportunity to work for Mr. Dalton, Mother Thomas states, “If you get that job... I can fix up a nice place for you children. You could be comfortable and not have to live like pigs” (Wright 11). Even as a full-time worker, Bigger’s Mother is not able to completely support her family financially. Silenced and suppressed by a racist and sexist environment, she mimics the patriarchal behaviors of whites in order to survive, which unfortunately, leads to the condemnation of Bigger’s status as a man and provider for his family. This process, as discussed by Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall in their book *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women’s Equality in African American Communities*, removes “[Black women] from the standard definitions and descriptions of womanhood. In this process, Black women [lose] their gender identity in the minds of the dominant culture in fundamental ways. Images of white women as pure, fragile, and emotional [are] juxtaposed with images of Black women as oversexed, strong beasts of burden” (107).

Both Bigger and his mother bear the weight of having to care for their family. In fact, Wright explains that “[Bigger] hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them... He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough” (10). Bigger’s decision to not accept his reality and “act tough” is simply a performing technique to stay alive and prove his worth as a man. As noted earlier, Bigger could not fully reach his manhood at home because of the lack of space for personal development and his mother’s smothering love. Going outside of the home, Bigger hopes to perform his manliness and demonstrate his masculinity by bossing around his friends and girlfriend, Bessie. However, not only is this presentation by Bigger inauthentic, it is also fueled by fear.

Bigger’s fear is caused by the thought that he will never be able to truly find his authentic self. Along with his other black male friends, Bigger feels that living in a society blanketed by whiteness will not provide him with any opportunities to grow and will eventually lead to his demise. According to critic Joseph T. Skerrett Jr., “The fear of the whites threatens Bigger’s sense of manly self-control. Amongst the gang it is that fear which creates a brutal community” (72). With this anxiety and the need to prove their worth as men, Bigger and his friends turn to violence and fantasy to reimagine their placement in Chicago’s segregated communities. Skerrett Jr. notes that for Bigger, the purpose of this reimagining is to find his identity, “an identity denied him by both his social milieu and his family situation. Bigger seeks a world in which he is not an alienated being, a world in which he can be *at home*” (74). Sadly, this sense of identity often comes when Bigger and the gang rob other blacks in their neighborhood, or when individuals, such as Bessie, get drunk and hastily sleep off their drunkenness as a form of escape.

Although questionably enjoyable, these pastimes are simply muted reactions to American racism and poverty. As the novel progresses, however, Bigger's disgust for his reality becomes more visible and malicious.

During a normal game of *playing white*, Bigger realizes that skin color affords a certain type of authority and that it is unlikely that he will reach the status of white American citizenship. After noticing an airplane pass by, Bigger tells his friend Gus that if given the chance, he could fly a plane, too. Gus responds, "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you *could* fly a plane" (Wright 17). This conversation reveals that white privilege is a concept that Bigger, Gus, and every other individual located in Chicago's Black Belt would never experience. When discussing this interaction between Bigger and Gus, critic Cynthia Tolentino argues that this conversation between two friends suggests the notion that "whites are viewed as the normative protagonists in modern American culture, [while] blacks are figured as passive consumers and bystanders" (91). Tolentino's assertion is exemplified when Bigger states "Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knothole in the fence" (Wright 20). Just like the rat found in the Thomas apartment at the opening of the novel, Bigger feels unbecoming in his own environment. Reduced to just his black body, Bigger is confined to the identity written *on* him, not *by* him. Since he is both physically and symbolically trapped in a sheltered space, how does Bigger Thomas locate his own identity? Does an authentic masculinity ever materialize?

While Bigger recognizes that he is unjustly considered inferior, the dialogue that he has with Gus is noteworthy because it offers some explanation for the problematic decisions Bigger makes en route to regaining his manhood. In “The Black Male’s Search for Identity in a Racist Society,” Aimé J. Ellis writes, “Whether or not Wright explicitly acknowledged the importance of Bigger’s relationships with other blacks, it is my contention that Bigger was immersed within a defiantly oppositional black male subculture that not only sought to insure his survival but also struggled to preserve his humanity” (84). Although Bigger becomes violent, Ellis contends that his rage is the effect of trying to redeem his masculine identity. Ellis later states that “Bigger’s deeply emotional conversations with his homeboys constitute a site of black male community that allows them to purge the psychic pain of urban blight as well as symbolize an intimate space for sharing their dreams, aspirations, and joys (85). This reading of Bigger and his friends offers an alternative to the stereotypical writings of black male bodies. Although Bigger and Gus are not able to stably and financially provide for their families or themselves, and their acts of robbery and other crimes are viewed as barbaric and malevolent, Ellis suggests that “it is from within this private and guarded space of black male homosociality that [Bigger and the gang] struggle to create a sense of agency, self-worth, and meaning, a space from which they as black men attempt to carve out their own humanity” (88). Nevertheless, if Bigger is surrounded by a community of friends that he can identify with, why is it that the murders of both Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears seem to be the only things that offer complete gratification for him?

Even though Bigger Thomas has—in the words of Professor Ellis—a black community surrounding him, he is still skeptical of their ideas of liberation and how they attain their manhood/womanhood. According to Valerie Smith, “To mitigate their frustration, Bigger’s family and friends all participate in some kind of communal activity. His mother finds

consolation in religion, his friends and his girlfriend, Bessie, in drinking. Neither of these particular techniques of evasion satisfies Bigger, although he too seeks a way of alleviating his sense of marginality” (143). To Bigger, religion and alcohol only provide a false escape from a white, patriarchal, and oppressive society. When asked why he no longer attends church, Bigger replies, “I didn’t like it. There was nothing in it. Aw, all they did was sing and shout and pray all the time. And it didn’t get ‘em nothing. All the colored folks do that, but it don’t get ‘em nothing. The white folks got everything” (Wright 355). Throughout the novel, Bigger makes similar remarks, believing that white people are like God and contain the power to alter the lives and wellbeing of others at any given moment. With this belief in mind, Bigger does not simply want to escape his subjugation, he wants to dismantle it. Since white culture mostly views black men as no more than small boys, Bigger thinks that the only way to prove his manhood is through aggression. Having in his possession a knife and a gun when among white people, Bigger creates a sadistic space that he supposes will lead to the discovery of who he truly is as a man. Unfortunately, this sense of pride is not realized until the deaths of two innocent women.

Joseph T. Skerrett Jr. maintains that “Killing Mary is thus clearly, for Bigger, a release of long pent-up aggressive tendencies that are both sexual and social. The act opens Bigger to a flood of realizations that he had managed all his life to repress with a half-conscious resistance” (76). Similarly, Lale Demirtürk notes that “Bigger’s killing of Mary has given him a chance to reverse the power relationship between Mary and himself: for the first time he has been able to destroy the dominant image of the whites” (110). The murder of Mary Dalton allows Bigger to feel freedom, control his own humanity, and take hold of his future. Bigger’s act of violence provides him with a sense of retribution on the white race, permitting him to rightfully flee his victimized identity. In other words, Bigger validates his belonging in society, feeling “a kind of

terrified pride” (106) that he has killed a white girl. Wright asserts that “The knowledge that [Bigger] had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened the score” (164). If murdering Mary Dalton supplies Bigger with a feeling of contentment, why must Bigger murder Bessie, who, like his mother, Gus, and himself, is another victimized black body?

After Bigger kills Mary, his fear of not being considered a man disappears, but only temporarily. Once Bessie rejects his request that she collect the money for the staged kidnapping, Bigger’s fear returns because he no longer trusts Bessie. However, has Bigger ever trusted Bessie? Did he ever consider her an equal partner? Right before her death, Bessie tells Bigger, “All you ever did since we been knowing each other was to get me drunk so’s you could have me... I thought I was happy, but deep down in me I knew I wasn’t. But you got me into this murder and I see it all now. I been a fool, just a blind dumb black drunk fool (Wright 230). With this statement, Bessie realizes that Bigger views her in a stereotypical manner; as a black woman, Bigger simply considers Bessie to be a sexualized commodity, which is proven by his rape and murder of her. Even though Bessie brutally loses her life, the relationship between Bigger and Bessie is meaningful because of their depictions of gender roles. In the case of Bigger, he is in search of his manhood from the beginning, and as stated earlier, seeks to control Bessie simply because of traditional beliefs of male/female relationships. In spite of this, Bessie reconfigures these traditional roles when she attempts to leave Bigger. Though Bessie drinks heavily to escape white dominance, she does not freely allow herself to be the victim of Bigger’s control. According to Betsch Cole and Guy-Sheftall, “Even though [black men] may be unable because of racism and other social factors to perform the traditional gender roles of provider and protector or display the ‘masculine’ traits of power, autonomy, dominance, and control, they still

cling to notions of manhood that permeate the larger culture (132). In other words, even if Bigger is shunned by society because of his black skin, he still possesses gender privilege because of his placement as a man in a patriarchal society.

After noticing that his fear is a result of Bessie's sense of agency, Bigger rids himself of Bessie, causing his fear to depart as well. Instead of feeling guilty for the murders of two individuals, Bigger becomes empowered. Wright notes, "In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight" (239). Although he feels this way, is Bigger Thomas truly free? Is black masculinity only achieved through death? While Bigger thinks that the deaths of Mary and Bessie will create in him a masculine figure equal to whites, his fear never completely leaves him. Bigger tries to reassure himself that through killing, he will no longer need a gun and knife to validate his toughness. However, even with these weapons, he is still empty inside, until the last moments of his life.

Wright asserts that "It was when [Bigger] read the newspapers or magazines, went to the movies, or walked along the streets with crowds, that he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black" (240). Despite all the killing, fleeing, and performing, Bigger Thomas's sole desire is to be accepted. He struggles throughout the entire novel to prove his masculinity because of societal beliefs that black men are hypersexual animals and not human beings. It is not until Boris Max enters Bigger's world that he realizes that he does not have to perform to be understood. While defending Bigger in court,

Max argues that instead of condemning Bigger, whites should try to understand his life and how his experiences are a reflection of a white, domineering culture. Max states, “Not only had [Bigger] lived where they told him to live, not only had he done what they told him to do, not only had he done these things until he had killed to be quit of them; but even after obeying, after killing, they still ruled him. He was their property, heart and soul, body and blood” (Wright 331, 32). Max implores the court to see Bigger Thomas as a human being just like they would view a white man; however, because of systematic oppression, Bigger and other black individuals are coerced into living a life that is perhaps not suitable for a pleasant living.

Even though the popular consensus is to sentence Bigger to death for his crimes, Max argues for a prison sentence. This decision is noteworthy because Max contends that Bigger was never allowed to fully live and that a life sentence in prison would, at least, create an identity for him. Although problematic, Max understands that Bigger has always felt secluded from the world and is never given an adequate chance to exercise his humanity. Throughout his entire life, Bigger Thomas is trained to think that he has to prove his manliness or face alienation. Nevertheless, in his last conversation with Max, Bigger states, “You asked me questions nobody ever asked me before. You knew that I was a murderer two times over, but you treated me like a man” (Wright 424). Unknowingly, Bigger is methodically removed from being able to experience advantages granted to white individuals. Fighting hard to enter into this white space, Bigger attempts to perform traditional gender roles in order to be accepted. Ironically, Bigger Thomas was always a man; he was just never given a fair chance as a true American. In the words of James Baldwin, “What [*Native Son*] reflects—and at no point interprets—is the isolation of the Negro within his own group and the resulting fury of impatient scorn” (42).

Without rational understanding, it is inevitable that Bigger Thomas would not benefit from the promises of American entitlement that is provided to America's *white* native sons.

Like Bigger Thomas, Lorraine Hansberry's Walter Lee Younger also struggles with proving his manhood. Just as Bigger wants to be accepted by white society, Walter wants the women in his family to completely support and trust his decisions. As a chauffeur for a white man, Walter is not given many opportunities to show his worth as an independent man. Although he is married with a son, Walter is forced to live with his mother and younger sister in an old, small, and roach-infested apartment on Chicago's Southside. Despite these poor conditions, Walter's primary concern is to perform traditional masculine roles and provide for his family.

The first instance of Walter wanting to demonstrate his worth comes after his son, Travis, asks for fifty cents before leaving for school. Initially pleading to his mother, Ruth, for the money, Ruth, understanding the family's financial uncertainties, tells Travis that he cannot have the money. Even though they truly cannot afford it, Walter criticizes Ruth for telling Travis the truth and gives Travis not only the fifty cents, but one dollar. This gesture, while small, reestablishes Walter's desire to be the man of the house. However, it appears that Ruth loses a little faith in her husband each day because of his constant need to exhibit his manliness. Driven by the habitual narratives placed on men and women, Walter believes that "A man needs for a woman to back him up" (Hansberry 32; Act I, Sc. I). Not happy with Ruth's nonchalant attitude towards his future economic plans, Walter states "That's it. There you are. Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: Eat your eggs. Man say: I got to take hold of this here world, baby! And a woman will say: Eat your eggs and go to work. Man say: I got to change my life, I'm choking to death, baby! And his woman say—Your eggs is getting cold!" (Hansberry 33-34; Act I, Sc. I). This tirade by Walter stems from his constant pleas for Ruth to accept his

proposal to open a liquor store with his friends Willy and Bobo. While Walter believes his plan is the key to getting his family out of poverty, Ruth thinks Walter is putting all of his strength into false hopes.

At age thirty-five, Walter is fascinated by the American lifestyle afforded to rich white men. Nevertheless, he feels that Ruth does not have faith in his dreams to achieve that lifestyle as well. On this subject, Walter notes, “That is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world... Don’t understand about building their men up and making ‘em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something” (34; Act I, Sc. I). Even though Walter feels like Ruth does not believe in his abilities as a man and a provider, Ruth’s character is significant because she simultaneously accepts and rejects the traditional roles of her race and gender.

Though Ruth is disappointed about the current status of her family and is tired of hearing about Walter’s plans, she still fulfills her duties as a conventional wife and mother. In spite of this, Ruth is not a silent character; she is a woman who speaks her mind and is confident in her remarks. In fact, after listening to Walter’s typical morning rant, Ruth states, “Honey, you never say nothing new. I listen to you every day, every night and every morning, and you never say nothing new. So you would rather *be* Mr. Arnold than be his chauffeur. So—I would *rather be* living in Buckingham Palace” (Hansberry 34; Act I, Sc. I). Are these the words of a loving and supporting wife? Walter might say no, but Hansberry challenges the roles of black wives via Ruth. Understanding that Walter is simply trying to assert his manhood and prove his worth, Ruth recognizes that she cannot do anything for Walter in that regard; he has to discover his masculinity on his own terms.

Ruth deconstructs the beliefs that women must perform certain qualities in order for them to be viewed as good mothers and wives. She criticizes Walter when she sees fit and even

considers aborting her child to make things easier for Walter and the family. Again, these problematic decisions reveal that the construction of gender is multifaceted and in certain instances, rebellious. Yet, if Ruth is able to reject American societal roles placed on her gender, why is Walter so determined to preserve customary masculine values?

Even though Walter's father is dead, his memory leaves a lasting impression on Walter and the entire Younger household. Knowing that his father was the epitome of the black patriarch, Walter grapples with emulating his father. While revisiting the memory of Big Walter, Lena (Mama) Younger states, "God knows there was plenty wrong with Walter Younger—hard-headed, mean, kind of wild with women—plenty wrong with him. But he sure loved his children. Always wanted them to have something—be something. That's where Brother (Walter Lee) gets all these notions, I reckon" (45; Act I, Sc. I). Speaking highly of her husband, Mama reveals that Big Walter was a lover of his children. Knowing this, Mama also believes that her son should work to imitate the deeds of his father. However, revisiting *Gender Talk*, Betsch Cole and Guy-Sheftall argue that "Being a responsible family man is only one way of conceptualizing Black masculinity" (133). This analysis by Betsch Cole and Guy-Sheftall offers a different perspective of what it means to be a not only a male, but a black male. While Mama believes her husband exemplifies masculine principles, there are also other ways for men to confirm their gender.

This theory creates a solid analysis to the last scene of Act I, after Walter has just learned that his wife is pregnant and has made a down-payment for an abortion. Mama states, "Well—son, I'm waiting to hear you say something... I'm waiting to hear how you be your father's son. Be the man he was... Your wife say she going to destroy your child. And I'm waiting to hear you talk like him and say we a people who give children life, not who destroys them—I'm waiting to see you stand up and look like your daddy" (Hansberry 75; Act I, Sc II). After hearing

the news about Ruth and his mother's words, Walter frantically leaves the apartment. Many readers of this scene argue that at this moment, Walter fails to prove his masculinity to his family, as he walks out on his wife and completely ignores his mother's wishes. However, this moment does not have to be the sole indicator of Walter's manliness.

While he is clearly frustrated, afraid, and indecisive, Walter should still be viewed as a man. Walter does not *need* to be a family man in order to prove his masculinity; in fact, this scene debatably depicts Walter exercising his manhood more than any other scene in the drama. Even though his leaving is possibly an act of despair and abandonment, it can also be seen as renewal, as Walter removes himself from a difficult situation to regain his thoughts.

If Walter's decision to leave his family at this time is perhaps an honorable act, why does Mama state that her son is a disgrace to his father's memory? (Hansberry 75; Act I, Sc II). How, as a woman, does she become an expert on how masculinity is demonstrated? Returning to Patricia Hill Collins's exceptional essay on the images of black women, Collins asserts, "Aggressive, assertive women are penalized—they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine. The matriarch or overly strong Black woman has also been used to influence Black men's understanding of Black masculinity" (85). Similar to Bigger's mother in *Native Son*, Mama's assertiveness, confidence, and boldness forces her to possess the stereotypical space of the black matriarch. As Collins suggests, the matriarch also has some input on how black masculinity is determined, which is why Mama feels that she can condemn her son for not reaching her personal perceptions of masculinity.

Once Mama makes the decision to use most of the insurance money on a down-payment for a new house, she *then* asks Walter for his feedback and approval. However, Walter, arguably feeling impotent, states, "What you need me to say you done right for? *You* the head of this

family. You run our lives like you want to. It was your money and you did what you wanted with it. So what you need for me to say it was all right for? So you butchered up a dream of mine—you—*who always talking 'bout your children's dreams...*” (Hansberry 94, 95; Act II, Sc I).

Before this moment, Mama Younger makes sure that she is respected as the leader and provider of the Younger household. However, once she realizes that her son has never been able to fully exert his freedom in the home and in the outside world, Mama defies the stereotypical belief that matriarchs take pride in stripping their sons of their masculinity.

In other words, while historical images of matriarchs simply criticize the men in their lives, Mama, unlike Bigger's mother, tries to empathize with Walter, telling him, “Listen to me, now. I say I been wrong, son. That I been doing to you what the rest of the world been doing to you. Walter—What you ain't never understood is that I ain't got nothing, don't own nothing, ain't never really wanted nothing that wasn't for you... There ain't nothing worth holding on to... if it means it's going to destroy my boy” (Hansberry 107; Act II, Sc II). This moment is highly significant in the drama because Mama finally sees Walter not only as her son, but as a grown man. After giving him control over the remainder of the insurance money, Mama pronounces, “I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be” (Hansberry 107; Act II, Sc II). With this act, Mama alters the understanding of the black matriarch. No longer stigmatized for crushing the hopes and aspirations of her son, Mama releases some of her power in order for Walter to regain his own. The matriarchal role is thus reconfigured, because while Mama Younger is forced to become a matriarch, she also willingly gives up that role for Walter to recover his manhood.

Although Mama aids Walter in his recovery, Walter is solely responsible for making sure it materializes. Once Walter disobeys his mother and eventually loses the rest of the insurance

money, he realizes that his manhood is not predicated upon financial status, but on self-worth. The same realization happens for Bigger Thomas after he discovers that he does not have to “act tough” to prove his manliness; he just longs to be accepted for who he is. Likewise, Walter simply needs the encouragement of his family. Like Mama states, Walter does not enter into his manhood until he declines—in front of the entire family—Lindner’s request that the family resell their home in Clybourne Park. Through this doing, Walter condemns the thought of acquiescing to whiteness and the stereotypical forces of gender written on his body. No longer obsessed with the notion that money is the only source of happiness and validation, Walter gives life back into the Younger household by standing his ground against racist and repressive cultural forces.

The elements associated with mimicry and masking in *Prospero’s Daughter* expose how colonized subjects use mimicry to survive their colonized spaces. Even though mimicry is perhaps needed in order to survive colonial powers, it is just as important for the colonized to maintain their pre-colonized identities. Without holding on to their previous cultures, mimicry would prove to be troubling, as the colonized subject would not be able to decipher truth from fallacy. The use of mimicry, without a sense of a pre-colonized identity, forces the colonized to no longer using mimicry as a form of camouflage, but in fact, become the colonizer. Nevertheless, when the colonized has a sense of worth, despite being a subjugated being, s/he is still able to reject and critique Westernization and celebrate otherness and hybridism. Once the colonial rule takes over, however, the colonized then engages in Western principles of colonization because there is no other way out. Marginalization, humiliation, and exploitation become the standard of normalcy.

Therefore, the traits listed above become issues for black bodies in America. Wrestling with questions of black identity in a Eurocentric America, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* provide challenging interpretations on the constructions of black gender roles. Confronting stereotypical readings of black masculinity and femininity, Wright and Hansberry explore how racism, classism, and sexism influence black lives daily. Understanding the ongoing effects of imperialism and colonialism to black American experiences, both authors assess the learned behaviors and performances that black men and women possess under a white patriarchal society. While these performances initially seem necessary for survival, Wright and Hansberry criticize the traditional narratives that masculinity and femininity are monolithic entities.

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