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Redefining America's Ethnicity, Gender and Race

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Redefining America's Ethnicity, Gender and Race

By Anthony Major
UCF Forum columnist
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When redefining the ethnicity, gender and race of American society, I find it is interrelated with the cultural dialogue. The African-American experience has always been tied to those topics.

In America, the concept of the “one-drop rule” – that a single drop of “black blood” makes a person a black – was founded on sub-Saharan African ancestry. That reality and its consequent marginalization led African-Americans to seek relief in any way possible.

The arts can have a widespread significant impact on illuminating and changing the perception of the people caught up in this racial divide.

The stagnation of conditions for African-Americans, throughout three different epochs, is seen in the works of Langston Hughes, “Mulatto” (the 1930s); Lorraine Hansberry, “A Raisin in the Sun” (post World War II), and Douglas Turner Ward, “Day of Absence” (civil rights era). Through their plays, these playwrights helped redefine the images and perceptions of African-Americans to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America.

In 1930, Hughes wrote “Mulatto” depicting the conflict between American apartheid and the rebellion of a young black male refusing to accept his “place” in that oppression. Inspired by “Cross” an earlier Hughes poem, it deals with the conflict between a father and son who is a mulatto, who some Americans call “light-skinned.”

Hughes’ main concern was to uplift his people. It was insightful and courageous writing in the 1930s, a dramatic play about a black man’s strengths, resiliency and courage

defying the oppressive American system in a time when hanging black men was a common occurrence.

As Hughes broke ground with the first black drama to run a year on Broadway, Hansberry became the first African-American woman playwright with a successful dramatic production on Broadway.

In “A Raisin in the Sun,” Hansberry confronted the social injustices she witnessed in America and reflected the political struggles of her people. Her plays concern the issues of racial discrimination, integration versus segregation, emancipation, slavery and colonialism. She writes about social injustice and misdirected ambition. Her plays project the importance of preserving one’s identity and cultural heritage. She points out the bitterness of the social conditions that continuously defers the aspirations of black families attempting to escape the poverty of the Chicago projects, even today.

Hansberry asks whether the dream of the play’s Younger family dries up “like a raisin in the sun” or “does it explode,” like Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem” presages.

“A Raisin in the Sun” is a celebration of black life, with all its diversity and creativity. Hansberry did not treat racial content and universality as mutually exclusive, as the “The Cosby Show” later proved on TV.

She challenged that the underlying assumption that only the lives of whites have universal significance was another of the many racial misconceptions based on the inability of a large number of whites to view blacks directly.

Hansberry created several complex, multifaceted human beings who come to realize that their real opponent is an entire system of privilege and exclusion based on many false premises.

Before “Raisin,” the black man’s internal conflicts had not been written about in a dramatic play by a woman. The play shows the complex dynamics of a black man trying to assimilate into the dominate society, believing that is what will make him a man in his household. He does not realize that the fraudulent ideologies of white racism and black assimilation he aspires to are tearing apart the family he loves.

Douglas Turner Ward said that, as Hughes and Hansberry before him, in studying informed perspectives, “you learn to write from within and focus on the realities of what you see.” In today’s world that is what some rappers say inform their work.

We must, however, be responsible for the images we are judged by.

Ward related: “To write a bad play is counter revolutionary.” He chose to use biting satire in “Day of Absence,” a version of the American minstrel format that revealed the subtle interdependence between blacks and whites. *The New York Times*, in its review, said: “Laughter can be used as effectively as anger in telling white America what the Negro had on his mind.”

These playwrights wrote about the culture of their times, through the lives of their characters and the conditions they endured to give identity to their people and their struggle to survive.

If told truthfully and without shame, it has universal appeal and significance. These writers knew when they wrote about their condition, the expression of the cultural soul of a people with human sensibilities, they were also writing about race. The two were interchangeable. Their works gave ethnic authenticity to a people who have suffered dehumanizing oppression.

They forced the necessary reappraisal and offered an opportunity to reassess preconceived images and perceptions of African-American culture.

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