

Ghetto as Heterotopia(*)

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Abstract

“To move on up a little higher” is the dream of the main characters, in both [Lorraine Hansberry](#)'s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1983) (Hansberry 55). Both works are set in Chicago ghettos which figure as stumbling blocks in the lives of the black community—represented by the Youngers in *A Raisin in the Sun*—and the Latino community—embodied by Esperanza—in *The House on Mango Street*. The reader is struck by the characters' sense of entrapment in a place to which they are expected—yet refuse to—belong; hence their aspiration and, later, attempt to cross the border of their ghettos as a way to escape this painful existence in search for a more promising future.

The present research proposes a reading of these two texts in the light of Michel Foucault's “Des Espaces Autres” (“Of Other Spaces”) (1967). Foucault's concept of “heterotopias” as “counter-sites” will be employed, attempting to explore racial and ethnic tension through examining the characteristics of “heterotopias” as present in the ghettos Hansberry and Cisneros portray. Approaching both works from this perspective, the present analysis relies on critical race theory as the conceptual framework of this research. In reading the ghettos in the texts as heterotopias, a close relationship between Foucault's concept and the postcolonial concept of

(*) Ghetto as Heterotopia, Vol. 8, Issue No.4, October 2019, pp.27-51.

“othering” will be established, paving the way for further connections between heterotopia—and what it stands for—and the basic tenets of critical race theory. In the course of my analysis, it will be argued that “othering” is predominant in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The House on Mango Street* through the confinement of the black and the Latino communities to their ghettos which can tenably be seen as “far-flung and sometimes unknown spaces, with eccentric or unacceptable human beings” (“Narrative and Social Space” 64).

Finally, in the course of the analysis, the following questions—among others—will be raised and answers to them will be attempted. Is crossing the border of the ghetto the way to salvation? How far will escape help the characters out of their dilemma?

Keywords

American drama – Lorraine Hansberry – Michel Foucault – ghetto – heterotopia – Chicano literature – Mexica-American literature – Sandra Cisneros – Critical Race Theory – ethnicity - racism

الملخص

الترقي هو حلم الشخصيات الرئيسية في مسرحية *A Raisin in the Sun* (١٩٥٩) للكاتبة الأمريكية الأفريقية لورين هانسبيري والرواية القصيرة *The House on Mango Street* (١٩٨٣) للكاتبة الأمريكية ذات الأصل المكسيكي سانرا سيسنيروس حيث تدور الأحداث في حين للأقليات في شاكاغو ويتم تصوير هذين الحين كمكانين ترفض الشخصيات أن تبقي منحصرة فيه باعتباره عائقا يحول دون تحقيق أحلامها لحياة أفضل. يقدم هذا البحث قراءة لهذين النصين في ضوء أفكار ميشيل فوكو في "عن الأماكن الأخرى" (١٩٦٧). سوف يستخدم هذا البحث مفهوم فوكو عن ال "هيتروتوبيا" ك"أماكن مضادة" كأداة

لاستكشاف التوتر العنصري والعرقى وذلك عن طريق إلقاء الضوء على خصائص الـ "هيتروتوبيا" كما هي مستخدمة في تصوير حي الأقليات في النصين. ينطلق البحث من قراءة النصين من منظور "الغيرية" من خلال رؤية أحياء الأقليات الإفريقية و اللاتينية كـ "أماكن مجهولة يسكنها أناس غير مقبولين"، و يعتمد في ذلك على النظرية النقدية عن العرق كإطار فكري يساعد في بناء صلة بين مفهوم فوكوه والعلاقة بين الأعراق المختلفة.

سوف تطرح هذه القراءة بعض الأسئلة الإشكالية مثل: هل يمثل عبور حدود حي الأقليات طريقا إلى الخلاص؟ إلى أي مدى يمكن للهروب أن يساعد الشخصيات على التغلب على محنها؟ وسوف تحاول الباحثة الإجابة عن هذه الأسئلة وغيرها من خلال التحليل.

الكلمات الدالة

مسرح أمريكي – لورين هانزبيري – فوكو – حي الأقليات – هيتروتوبيا – أدب الشيكانو – الأدب المكسيكي الأمريكي – ساندراسيسنيروز - النظرية النقدية عن العرق – التفرقة العنصرية

"We must come out of the ghettos of America, because the ghettos are killing us" (Lorraine Hansberry *To Be Young* 117).

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1983) delve deep into an issue that has long been core in the lives of the members of nonwhite communities in the American society, namely the feeling of not being accepted or treated as equals by the mainstream society. The dream of the main characters in both works can be most simply described using the words of Mrs. Johnson, one of Hansberry's characters: "To move on up a little higher" (Hansberry 118). This dream will figure in the present research as inseparable from the characters' relationship to space. Both works are set in Chicago ghettos which, through the course of the events, are revealed as stumbling blocks in the lives of their residents, namely the black community—represented by the Youngers in *A Raisin in the Sun*—and the Latino community—embodied by Esperanza—in *The House on Mango Street*. Both slum areas are portrayed as stifling to the characters. The reader is struck by the

characters' sense of entrapment in a place to which they are expected—yet refuse—to belong; hence their aspiration and, later, attempt to cross the border of their ghettos as a way to escape this painful existence in search of a more promising future, a more fulfilling life.

As one of the foremost landmarks of American literature, *A Raisin in the Sun* has been the subject of countless critical studies, with focus placed—in most instances—on the injustice inflicted on the blacks, the dramatist's condemnation of racist social norms, her belief in the necessity of resistance and in Man's ability to achieve his dreams, and the setbacks as well as the social progress which characterized the 1950s American society (Wilkerson 443). It must be acknowledged here that there are critics who commented on the role played by space in communicating the play's message. For instance, De Lois Garrett presents a study of the dream motif in contemporary American poetry. In relation to *A Raisin in the Sun*, Garrett does hint to the idea of looking for home, yet only very briefly, noting that the house in the play is a symbol of "the search for a better life" (768). In her article "Somewhat like War," Michelle Gordon also focuses on the life of ghettoized blacks in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Gordon explores Hansberry's employment of the ghetto as a dramatization of "Chicago's white supremacist social order" to express the dramatist's anti-racist, anti-segregation stance (122).

Similarly, Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* has garnered the attention of many critics. The majority of the critiques on Cisneros' novella are concerned with its dominant themes, such as gender inequities and women's struggle for achieving their dreams (Doyle) and economic and cultural subordination of minorities (Cruz). Cisneros' narrative technique has also been the subject of research. For example, in "Multiple Voices in Sandra Cisneros *The House on Mango Street*," Brunk examines the variations in the narrator's voice, and Rebecca Garonzik analyses the link between the child's narrative voice and the poetic techniques dominating the language of the novel in her article, "To name that thing without a name." As far as space is concerned, Elisabetta Careri comments on the significance of space in Cisneros' novella, noting the semiotic function of the different aspects of the setting in this work: "the places in the story form a real system of signs, a language that communicates meaning and themes that are

not directly connected with the spaces themselves” (13).

The contribution of this study, however, is approaching *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The House on Mango Street* through two methodologies. Foucault’s concept of ‘heterotopia’ will be applied to the settings in both works. Heterotopia is Foucault’s term which he uses to refer to “other” spaces in any society, spaces that societies choose to “forget.” In addition, the analysis relies heavily on critical race theory, an offshoot of postcolonial theory and one which exposes and challenges racial prejudice, trying to undermine the beliefs upon which racial discrimination is founded.

A reading of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The House on Mango Street* will be attempted from the perspective of space, primarily its portrayal as a heterotopia. The way the poor one-race emigrant neighbourhood is portrayed in both texts will be analyzed, with focus placed on the relationship between space and the characters, a relationship of simultaneous attachment and detachment, familiarity and estrangement. In the course of applying the characteristics of the heterotopia to the ghetto, concepts such as discrimination, fear, stereotyping and preconceived ideas will emerge. These concepts are central in racial tension as examined by critical race theorists. In both works, this paper argues, space is employed by the two authors as the main tool through which the experiences of the characters are unfolded. It will be demonstrated that the “ghetto”—where both works are set—occupies centre stage in shaping the lives of the characters. Through the very complex relationship between the main characters and the ghetto, the latter becomes the driving force behind the characters decisions and actions. Despite being apart in time as well as background, the characters in both texts reveal compelling similarity, namely belonging to an nonwhite community, living in slum areas where only members of their community live, being forced to lead the life of second-class citizens, owing to their ethnicity, and, finally, sharing a powerful desire to cross the confining borders of the ghetto, borders that stand as barriers between the characters and their dreams.

The premises sought to be proved here is that spatial othering—which is itself the result of racial othering—has created a heterotopia out of these slum areas. Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia” is, thus, key in reading the “othering” in the texts through space. Applying Foucault’s definition of the

heterotopia and the characteristics he gives it to the settings of both texts will give new insights into these ghettos as well as the society depicted.

In his 1967 lecture “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” Michel Foucault presents his view of space as a cultural construct. He believes that within each society, various spaces are created, and that these spaces represent the norms governing their societies. Foucault focuses on heterotopias, defining them as “real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society— which are something like *counter-sites* [italics added], a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (3).

Foucault explains that heterotopias are created to denote “other spaces,” “different places,” “elsewhere,” “outside of all places,” yet they are “real contestations of the space in which we live” (4). That is, by rendering them as different and faraway, by divorcing them from society, heterotopias are, in fact, capable of telling about the workings of the society by juxtaposition. In other words, through placing specific elements on the periphery of the society, those “other spaces” can inform us about the mainstream in that society as well as who and what it decides to exclude, or rather forget. Consequently, heterotopias represent a space/realm of contention, argument, confrontation.

These rigid boundaries between the different spaces in a society are behind Foucault’s view of societies as hostile in the sense that they do not embrace differences, and, therefore, coexistence becomes an unattainable dream. Foucault writes: “The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves ... the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a *heterogeneous* [italics added] space. We live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (3).

As such, for Foucault, heterotopias are signs of the “classification of human elements” (2). Indeed, the very idea of detaching the heterotopia from the rest of the society involves a kind of categorization where the inhabitants of the heterotopia become undesirable and, at many instances, dangerous; they come to exist on the periphery of the society because the latter sees them as sources of contagion, illness and death. By juxtaposition,

the rest of the society—away from the heterotopias—becomes the utopia, the perfect state which Foucault believes to be “fundamentally unreal spaces” (3).

A very critical and alarming idea in Foucault’s theory lies in the fact that, according to him, people regard the social and cultural norms behind the creation of heterotopias as “simple givens,” concepts that approach the level of the sacred, which makes any significations allocated to heterotopias remarkably unshakable: “life is still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remain inviolable, that our institutions and practices have not yet dared to break down” (2). In other words, the notions that gave birth to and continue to nourish discrimination and prejudice have become too intrinsic to change. This gloomy idea is presented in both works under discussion, with the main characters’ being judged and treated with disdain and apprehension by members of the society who have never known them, owing solely to their ethnic background. Disturbing as this labeling is, the action of writing these two texts is, by itself, an act of challenge to these unshakable norms, a means by which such stereotyping is exposed and criticized.

Foucault then proceeds to point out some attributes of heterotopias as he sees them. A brief reference to these attributes will be useful here, as it will elucidate the analogy between Foucault’s heterotopia and space as portrayed in the two texts under discussion. First, despite being physically separated from the city, the heterotopia still retains its conceptual proximity and connectedness to the urban setting; it came to existence as a result of constructing the belief that the kind of life it embraces is one of death, decay, and contagion.

Finally, Foucault states that heterotopias have one of two functions only one of which is going to be referred to here, as it fits the roles played by the ghettos in the texts under discussion. Heterotopias’ “role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned” (8). In other words, the very creation of the heterotopia is a manifestation of exclusion the result of which is the mainstream society existing in total isolation from what it imagines as evil and threatening, namely the occupants of the heterotopia. The outcome of this situation, according to Foucault, is “a space of illusion”: the mainstream

as a utopia. This idea of the imagined—and therefore unreal—utopia can be understood in the light of the way this space is formed. By excluding and ignoring the existence of “the other,” the mainstream lives in an imagined ideal world of its own creation and, thus, inevitably lays bare the reality of a society that voluntarily decides to forget about specific groups who are actually “real” parts of the social fabric.

Critical race theory (also referred to as CRT or the radical legal movement) provides the present research’s conceptual framework that informs my reading of space in the texts as heterotopia. In applying the characteristics of Foucault’s heterotopia to the settings in Hansberry’s and Cisneros’ works, a connection between these characteristics and the ideas of critical race theorists will be established, in an attempt to read the space of physical confinement—the ghetto—as a representation of racial othering and a tool of revealing the hypocrisy of dominant social practices.

In his introduction to his book *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado defines the theory as follows:

The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious. (3)

As a movement, the critical race theory was born in the United States of America in the mid-1970s to stress and critique the issues of race and racism in the law, attacking the marginalization of and prejudice against people of colour, through the close exploration of patterns and practices that make up different types of domination (5). Describing the purpose of the movement in the forward to Delgado’s and Stefancic’s *Critical Race Theory*, Angela Harris writes that the thinkers of the movement “seek to reveal and challenge the practices of subordination facilitated and permitted by legal discourse and legal institutions” (xx). Later, however, the movement was broadened to include disciplines other than law, among which are economics, history, education, political science, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious (Delgado 3).

Delgado points out an important feature of critical race theory, namely that it has “an activist dimension,” explaining that “it not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better” (3). The movement shares some principles with civil rights thought such as “a concern for redressing historic wrongs... [and] a sympathetic understanding of notions of nationalism and group empowerment,” both of which have their resonance in Hansberry’s and Cisneros’ works (5).

A brief reference to the basic tenets of this theory serves set the scene for the present analyses of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The House on Mango Street*. Noteworthy here is that there are certain doctrines where critical race theory thinkers are divided into schools according to how they see these specific notions. It will be sufficient, however, for the scope of this research to only point out those doctrines that are reflected in the texts, while highlighting the different perspectives of each camp of thinkers as regards to the tenet mentioned where relevant. First, the thinkers of this theory agree that “racism is ordinary, not aberrational,” i.e. racial prejudice is a usual occurring of the everyday experience of most non-whites living in the American society, yet by no means is it welcomed or regarded as normal. It is rather a deviation from the acceptable social behavior (7).

Second, this movement holds that the concept of races is a social and cultural construct. In “Situating Race,” Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan write that “Race is more a cultural and social category than a natural, genetic, or biological one. Different external traits such as skin color are not indices of separate racial identities” (961). Ian Lopez elaborates on this point, explaining that “human interaction, rather than natural differentiation, must be seen as the source and continued basis for racial categorization” (968-9). Delgado, similarly, maintains that races are “categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (7). This point of view coincides with the definition of racism presented by Anthropologist Dr. James Herron in an interview where he emphasizes the motives behind the idea of racism: “At its most basic level, racism is a lens through which people interpret, *naturalize*, and *reproduce* [italics added] inequality” (Robert Fieseler par. 5).

This point marks a division between two camps of CRT activists: the idealists and the realists or economic determinists. In contrast to the “idealists”—who believe that since race is a social construct, then “we can unmake it,” realists see this as an oversimplification, pointing out the purpose behind racism: “racism is a means by which society allocates privilege and status” (Delgado 17). The realists’ position is closely tied to another CRT doctrine which is that “dominant society racializes minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs” (8). The dominant group in the society, thus, gives itself the right to construct whatever image of any minority group in a way that best serves the former’s interests (8). Moreover, as interests are volatile, “popular images and stereotypes of various minority groups shift over time” (8).

Another feature of CRT thought is “interest convergence” or “material determinism,” meaning that “[b]ecause racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it,” an idea that closely ties with Foucault’s view of the deep-rooted notions forming heterotopias as “simple givens” (7, 2). As a reaction to this feature, critical race theorists believe in the notions of intersectionality and anti-essentialism where “Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances,” and thus, under no condition should society be allowed to draw borders within which identities and potential are to be confined (9). That is, identity is remarkably complex; no one can have one single, clear-cut identity, but rather a *mélange* of different identities. And as such, it can be tenably concluded, stereotyping becomes totally divorced from reality.

Finally, in a movement founded to examine, explore and analyse the relationship between the dominant white majority and the coloured minorities in the American society, and seeking solutions for this conflict, the issue of nationalism versus assimilation is at the centre. Different groups of thinkers associated with the movement adopt different positions as to this issue, with varying degrees of conservatism. In the proposed reading of Hansberry’s and Cisneros’ works, the positions that hold true of the experience of the characters will be touched upon, with nationalism figuring as a voluntary confinement to the ghetto—in the case of Esperanza—or a return to the homeland—as in Beneatha Younger’s case—and, conversely,

assimilation as an attempt to cross the border of the ghetto, blending in with the outer world while, inevitably, giving up part of one's identity in the process. The issue of assimilation versus nationalism will be dealt with, addressing questions like: Is it right that the ethnic minority is "a nation within a nation" and loyalty should be to that community and "only secondarily to the United States"? Should people of colour embrace and take pride in their own culture and origin? Is it right to question the majoritarian assumption that North European culture is superior? Or, conversely, does breaking the barrier in the white-dominated world contribute to the good of the minority community? (Delgado 61—62).

The main characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The House on Mango Street*, thus, figure as simply part of the collective ghetto community. In its turn, the minority slum becomes a sign of its residents' classification in society; hence, the role played by space in the categorization of the characters and, consequently, the destruction of their dreams. This separation, together with the oppressive steadfast desire on the part of the dominant community to keep the ethnic minority isolated in their allocated neighbourhoods, implies that members of the mainstream society see these neighbourhoods as heterotopias whose inhabitants represent a threat to the blissful life of the rest of the society which is, consequently, in this framework, seen as a utopia.

Previous analyses of Hansberry's play mostly deal with the presentation of segregation in the play, such as Robert Willis who reads the play as reflecting an "awareness of the changing attitudes of the Black man" (21) and Michelle Gordon who states that "*A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) directly engages segregation struggles in Chicago as a penultimate symbol of black oppression and resistance" (121). Cisneros' novella has been read from various points of view, but it can be tenable to say that conflict is a dominant theme in most of this criticism. For instance, Jaqueline Doyle deals with the conflict in the play from the point of view of gender and ethnicity: "women of color in the United States have all too often felt themselves compelled to choose between ethnicity and womanhood" (6). Regina Betz offers another point of view, offering an analysis of the play as presenting a conflict between the language of ethnicity—Spanish—and that of expression—English.

My point of departure in reading Hansberry's and Cisneros' works is that the characters' dilemmas lie in a severe sense of estrangement and confinement, a feeling that is portrayed very lucidly through Beneatha and Esperanza in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The House on Mango Street*, respectively. In both works, it will be argued that the relationship between this experience and the setting cannot be overlooked. To elaborate, both Beneatha and Esperanza have aspirations for advancement which they feel attainable through the potential they have. Yet, powerful and omnipresent as these dreams are in the lives of both characters, they are portrayed as stifled and suppressed within the limits of the ghetto. It is very difficult to escape the feeling that crossing the boundaries of the ghetto is the only way for the self-fulfillment of these characters. Thus, the ghetto with its various implications, such as segregation and capitalist exploitation, among many others noted above, are issues at stake in both works under discussion. The two texts are united by the powerful presence of the space of separation as the driving force of the two characters' lives.

The opening scenes of both texts foreground space. *A Raisin in the Sun* starts with the Youngers' depressing life, conveyed through the dismal description of the space they live in: "Weariness has ... won in this room ... All pretenses but living itself have long since vanished from the very atmosphere of this room ...it's not really a room unto itself though the landlord's lease would make it seem so" (Hansberry 51). Through their ghetto apartment, the audience gets a feeling that the life of this family has become too miserable to be described as life. In fact, the "weariness" has not only "won in this room"; it has—and perhaps more painfully—"won" in the lives of the characters. "'Rat-trap'—yes, that's all it is," says Lena Younger, consenting to her daughter-in-law's view of their apartment at a South Chicago Black ghetto where Lena's son also feels "choking to death" (69, 60). And Beneatha Younger is no exception to this feeling of abhorrence of the ghetto life and all it stands for; she is fantasizing about going *back* to Africa which she sees as her real home, despite the fact that she has never been there. The ghetto is, therefore, employed by Hansberry to dramatize her stance against urban segregation and black oppression, bringing "local, individual struggles of African Americans—against segregation, ghettoization, and capitalist exploitation—to the national stage"

(Michelle Gordon 122).

The outset of the play, thus, sets the tone for the whole work: we encounter a bitterly dissatisfied family that “got...a dream,” that “got to change [their] life,” and it is implied that this dream cannot be achieved in the minority slum area where they live (60). The rest of the play will be punctuated by this desire to cross the boundaries of the ghetto. Noteworthy is that this dream, as we know from Mama, has been deferred for long: “I remember just as well the day me and Big Walter Younger moved in here ... wasn’t planning on living here no more than a year ... We was going to set away ... We had even picked out the house ... all the dreams I had ‘bout buying that house ... didn’t none of it happen” (69). This brings us to the significance of the play’s title, borrowed from Langston Hughes’ “A Dream Deferred,” which portrays the distressing effect of postponing one’s dreams. And indeed, at the end of the play, the Youngers’ dream will be fulfilled, with yet some skepticism as to how satisfied they will be, as they move into an all-white neighbourhood where they are not welcomed.

The House on Mango Street starts in a very similar way. The heroine/narrator, Esperanza, starts off with a note of disappointment, describing her ghetto family house on Mango Street in terms of everything her dream house is not: “The house on Mango Street ... is not the house we’d thought we’d get” (Cisneros 3). Esperanza’s disappointment later gives way to feelings of estrangement toward that place: “the house I’m ashamed of ... This isn’t my house ... I don’t belong. I don’t ever want to come from here” she says to Alicia, one of her neighbours (107). Thus, again, through confinement in a space of isolation, we get a sense of a dream unfulfilled—or at least deferred—and a dejected soul yearning to cross the border out of this confinement.

Central to the conflict Beneatha and Esperanza undergo is the fact that both live in “places of exclusion,” and at the same time, they are neither embraced where they are forced to live—due to their potential, critical thought and dreams of advancement all of which are characteristics inconsistent with the stereotypes of their community—nor are they welcomed in the mainstream ‘space,’ based on their ethnicity which becomes a barrier between them and their dreams (Herman P. Meininger 24). This complex relationship between both characters and the ghettos they

live in, their problematic mismatch with both the ghetto and the mainstream spaces, can be best seen in terms of intersectionality within the structures of marginalization, a tenet central to Critical Race Theory.

Beneatha Younger is the twenty-year-old daughter of a poor black family living in a black slum area in South Chicago. Beneatha's character portrayal is challenging to the stereotypical image of poor blacks in the 1950s American society. She is more intellectual than the rest of her family and has a taste and passion for trying different activities that are not the norm within her class and race. She is in medical school, takes music lessons, and has tried play-acting and horse-back riding, things she does "not expect [her family] to understand" (Hansberry 72).

Similarly, Esperanza comes from a Mexican family living in a poor Mexican ghetto. Far from the stereotype of the submissive Latino woman, however, Esperanza is a free spirit. From the opening pages of the novella, she sets herself at a distance from the culture of her community. She says that she was named after her great-grandmother with whom she shared another thing: both women were born in the Chinese year of the horse, the symbol of vitality, freedom, independence and rebelliousness. Yet, Esperanza adds that her grandmother "couldn't be all the things she wanted to be," and adds that she "does not want to inherit her place by the window," lamenting her unfulfilled dreams (Cisneros 11). Esperanza's reluctance to face her grandmother's fate sheds light on her challenge to the dominant norms of her community, the Mexican community represented by the ghetto in the text. She refuses to live as marginalized; she refuses to give in to a culture where men "don't like their women strong," and in being so, she lives on the periphery of both the Latino ghetto and the mainstream society (10). Read in this way, the ghetto in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The House on Mango Street*—with its simultaneous physical proximity and cultural remoteness—becomes a tool of portraying these two characters' complex situation in a society where the different cultures are unequally embraced.

It can, therefore, be tenably claimed that portraying the characters in such a way is an act of anti-essentialism on the part of Hansberry and Cisneros. The intersectionality of these two characters, in fact, brings the idea of stereotypes to question. Feeling their dreams—symbolized by their physical confinement in the ghetto—Beneatha and Esperanza indeed figure

as victims of “the classification of human elements” (Foucault 2) which is—in their case—created by the cultural construction of race as a tool of social stereotyping. In his article “The Social Construction of Race,” Ian Lopez sheds light on various aspects where an individual’s life is shaped by his/her race:

Human fate still rides upon ancestry and appearance. The characteristics of our hair, complexion, and facial features still influence whether we are figuratively free or enslaved. *Race dominates* our personal lives ...*Race determines* our economic prospects. The race-conscious market *screens* and *selects* us for manual jobs and professional careers, *red-lines* financing for real state, *green-lines* our access to insurance, and even *raises the price* of that car we need to buy. *Race permeates* our politics. It *alters* electoral boundaries, *shapes* the disbursement of local, state, and federal funds, *fuels* the creation and collapse of political alliances, and *twists* the conduct of law enforcement. In short, *race mediates every aspect of our lives*. (964. Italics mine)

This paper argues that the way Hansberry and Cisneros portray the ghetto makes it a typical representation of Foucault’s heterotopia. Discussing the history of space in Western societies, Foucault focuses on the society’s allocation of places for the different communities: “There were places where things had been put because they had been *violently displaced*, and then on the contrary places where things found their natural ground and stability” (1. Italics mine). This statement implies the separation at the core of human life. There is an apparent distinction between different groups of people according to which living in specific places is “violently” imposed on certain groups. Moreover, this quotation involves a dichotomy between two spaces and, hence, two kinds of life, one determined and controlled by power, and another stable and satisfactory. Later in his lecture, Foucault describes these two opposing spaces as utopias and heterotopias. Applying this model to the two texts under discussion, the ghetto becomes representative of the heterotopia, as juxtaposed to the mainstream space, the utopia, with racism as the determining factor of this separation. According to Foucault, heterotopias stand for illness, decay, contagion and the threat of death and, consequently, have to be avoided by being kept at a distance (6).

In their texts, both Hansberry and Cisneros portray the ghetto in these terms. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the Youngers buy a house in Clybourne Park, an all-white neighbourhood, a move that—symbolically—eliminates separation, that blurs the boundaries between the ‘utopia’ and the ‘heterotopia’. This move is not welcomed by the residents of Clybourne Park due to “some ... incidents which have happened in various parts of the city when colored people have moved into certain areas,” believing that “people get along better ... when they share a common background” and that “Negro families are happier when they live in their *own* communities,” says Lindner, the representative of the Clybourne Park residents (Hansberry 132—133). Lindner stands in for the racist norms of the mainstream society that “violently” enforces separation between the different races, looking with skepticism and apprehension to the non-white race as a source of “contagion” and threat to its “utopian” existence away from and forgetting about the “other” community: “What do you think you are going to gain by moving into a neighbourhood where you just *aren’t wanted* and where some elements—well—people can get *awful worked up* when they feel that their whole way of life and everything they’ve ever worked for is *threatened*” (134).

In *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros gives a similar account of the way the community of the Mexican ghetto is seen by the rest of the society: “*Those who don’t know any better* come into our neighborhood scared. They think we’re dangerous. They think we’ll attack them with shiny knives. They are ... lost and got here by mistake” (Cisneros 28. Italics mine).

The essentialism involved in the attitude of the mainstream community and expressed in both texts through space is undeniable. This is the core of the stereotyping which CRT thinkers challenge in their second tenet which dismisses the connection between physical features and identity:

People with common origins share certain physical traits ... But these ... are dwarfed by that which we have in common, and have little or nothing to do with distinctly human, higher-order traits, such as personality, intelligence, and moral behavior. ... society frequently chooses to ignore these scientific facts, creates races, and endows them with pseudo-permanent characteristics. (Delgado 8)

Indeed, the reluctance of the residents of Clybourne Park to embrace those of the black ghetto in *A Raisin in the Sun*, as well as the fear the whites feel when they come to the Mexican ghetto in *The House on Mango Street* can be read as expressions of hostility and conflict between a utopia and a heterotopia, and those feelings are based on the ‘classification’ of blacks and Mexicans as people of violence, danger and evil. In other words, owing to “physical traits,” the mainstream part of the society “endows [blacks and Mexicans] with pseudo-permanent characteristics,” demonizing all members of these communities, and as such, confining them in specially assigned areas away from the peaceful utopia becomes a legitimate course of action, one seeking protection.

However, the two writers do not stop at the point of describing this tense relationship; they subtly undermine the truth of this essentialism, refusing to see it as “simple givens” by reversing the relationship between whites and other communities where the latter becomes the victims of white violence (Foucault 2). And in such a relationship, non-whites become the part that feels endangered.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, when Mama tells Walter and Ruth about the new house she has bought, Walter, extremely surprised, says, “So that’s the peace and comfort you went out and bought for us today!” (Hansberry 113). Later, we see the Youngers’ neighbour, Mrs. Johnson, more explicitly reiterating the same idea, telling Mama about “them colored people that was bombed out their place out there,” and warning her of moving to Clybourne Park where their being attacked is very likely: “I bet this time next month y’all’s names will have been in the papers plenty ... “NEGROES INVADE CLUBOURNE PARK—BOMBED!” (120). Noteworthy is that during Lindner’s second visit to the Youngers, Walter tells him “We don’t want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no cause, and we will try to be good neighbors” to which Lindner replies “if you are that final about it ... there is nothing left for me to say ... I sure *hope you people know what you’re getting into* [italics added],” implicitly implying the trouble the Youngers are getting subjected to as a result to getting into the ‘utopia’ where they are not supposed to be (159).

Cisneros conveys a very similar view of the hostility involved in the whites-nonwhites relationship. Despite the hard living conditions in the

ghetto and the stifling norms of Esperanza's community which she does not tolerate, Esperanza acknowledges the safety of the ghetto and its residents' being threatened from those outside: "we aren't afraid ... All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight," she says (Cisneros 28).

The fact that each social group feels endangered and perceives threat in the other gives rise to uncertainty as to the workings of the society. The above mentioned excerpts from *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The House on Mango Street* shakes what Foucault describes as "inviolable" "simple gives," i.e. the stereotypical conceptions of the society behind the formation of heterotopias, and, instead, raise questions like: Who is threatened? Where does threat come from? Does the separation of the different communities bring peace to the society? And, more critically, is there a threat in the first place? If not, whose interest is served by this discourse about danger? (2).

This sheds light on the serious impact of ghettoization, an impact that is intensely complex. Seen in the context of racial segregation, this spatial separation becomes a sign of what Foucault describes as the "classification of human elements," of creating an "other," and detaching the self—in this case the mainstream society—from this "other" stereotyping it as inferior (2). According to Critical Race theorists, this process of "classification" significantly affects the lives of the people of colour where "racial hierarchies determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best jobs, the best schools, and invitations to parties in people's homes" (Delgado 17). An expected outcome of such a situation would be the feelings of tension, apprehension and intimidation between the ghetto inhabitants—feeling oppressed and unjustly treated—and the mainstream—believing it is legitimately protecting itself.

The creation of a heterotopia, however, does not stop at this point: it results in a kind of illusion. As previously mentioned in the present research, according to Foucault, the formation of the heterotopia involves the creation of an imagined utopia where the mainstream lives in the illusion of a perfect world devoid of evil. The illusion here lies in two problematic issues. First, if the heterotopia is really a space of evil and threat, then exclusion cannot negate its existence; separation merely helps the

mainstream to forget about it, which implies a society where certain communities are utterly ignored, an absolutely opposite image of a good society.

In addition to the illusion pertaining to the perception of space, there exists another kind of illusion, that of the self-image. The fact that heterotopias exist in societies where “human life is partitioned” entails a kind of coercive power on the part of the mainstream (8). Yet, the mainstream fails to recognize this, imagining itself as threatened and taking no responsibility for the hostile relationship it has created. In their article “Situating Race,” CRT thinkers Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan refer to this idea in their definition of the people of colour as “an ethnic group whose features and whose culture exist to one side of a *mainstream that seems blissfully unaware of its own hegemony* [italics added]” (962).

Entrapped within such boundaries of humiliation and denied the right to be regarded as equal to the superior Other and the right to pursue their dreams, how do the two characters react to stereotyping? The answer proposed in the present research will be informed by the portrayal of space in both texts.

For Beneatha Younger, surrender to humiliation is not an acceptable course of action. She refuses to internalize and accept the discourse about her race’s inferiority. When Walter tells her and Mama that he is willing to accept money not to move into Clybourne Park, she sees this as death. “We’re dead now. All the talk about dreams and sunlight that goes on in this house. It’s all dead now,” she says (Hansberry 154). Beneatha stands in for what CRT thinkers refer to as the nationalist separatist position which “holds that people of colour should embrace their culture and origins” (Delgado 59). She takes pride in her cultural heritage, reflecting a nationalist, anti-assimilationist position, a position one that “question[s] the majoritarian assumption that North European culture is superior” (61). She explicitly describes herself, saying “I am not an assimilationist,” and, later when George describes her appearance in the Nigerian costume and short unstraightened hair as “eccentric,” she angrily replies: “I hate [the] assimilationist Negro ... who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case *oppressive culture*” (Hansberry 86, 102, 103).

Noteworthy is that Beneatha's pride is no empty conceit as a result of being oppressed. Beneatha draws on the history of Africa as worthy of recognition and respect: "there you are standing there in your ignorance talking about people who were the first to melt iron on the face of the earth ... The Ashanti were performing surgical operations when the English ... were still tattooing themselves with blue dragons!" (103). It can be inferred from CRT that reviving the history of coloured minorities is essential in the unmaking of racist conceptions and challenging racial stereotypes. This is based on CRT thinker's references to African history and civilization. For example, Delgado and Stefancic write that before slavery, "educated Europeans held a generally positive attitude toward Africans, recognizing that African civilization was highly advanced with vast libraries and centers of learning. Africans pioneered mathematics, medicine, and astronomy long before Europeans had much knowledge of them" (17). Such references serve to undermine the discourse about the inferiority of the black race and the essentialism that has been attached to it.

Beneatha's pride in her culture of origin and her challenge of race prejudice is inseparable from the way she reacts to space in *A Raisin in the Sun*. As previously mentioned, Beneatha detests the ghetto. To her, it is the epitome of segregation, injustice, exploitation, what she calls "the Great Sore of Colonialism" (Hansberry 147). When she insists on moving to Clybourne Park, she is, in fact, defying humiliation, standing up for her pride that was hurt by the offer proposed by Lindner. In short, it can be interpreted as a statement of resistance to othering that is represented by confinement of African Americans in black ghettos.

Nevertheless, Beneatha's dilemma is too complicated to be resolved by this move. While it is true that crossing the border of the ghetto, the heterotopia, is a dream, there is yet another dream to fulfill: finding a place where she is regarded as an individual equal to others, a dream that seems unattainable in a society where racial prejudice has become inherent in the conscience of many. What Beneatha seeks is an end to racism; to use her words, "an end to misery! To Stupidity!" (147).

This gives rise to a question that is at the core of both CRT and Foucault's theory of the heterotopia: can racism—as an ideology—be stopped? It is true that only CRT explicitly discuss this issue; yet, although

Foucault's theory of heterotopia does not focus on racism, this problem can be still dealt with in the light of his theory, as his ideas involve any kind of "classification" resulting in the "partitioning" in societies. As previously mentioned, idealist CRT activists believe that because race is a social construct, "we can unmake it" (Delgado 17). On the other hand, when Foucault implies that the norms that create heterotopias approach the level of the sacred, he is implying the difficulty of changing these norms. This gets him close to the other group of CRT thinkers, namely the realists or determinists, who are skeptic about the possibility of changing racial prejudice, based on the idea that racism is a way in which the society gives privilege and, therefore, supporting and sustaining racism is essential for many.

Beneatha seems to adopt a stance similar to the latter group. Because for generations, Beneatha's family has been suffering from racism, she does not see light at the end of the tunnel. At a moment of extreme despair, she says to Asagai "There is only one large circle that we march in, around and around, each of us with our own little picture in front of us—our own little mirage that we think is the future" (Hansberry 147). The same position is expressed by Lindner, pointing to the difficulty of changing concepts that have become deep rooted among large sectors of the society: "You just can't force people to change their hearts" (134).

That is the reason why she is willing to consider the idea of going to Nigeria and become a doctor there. Whether she will take this step or not is left open, but the idea that she is thinking about it implies that she is no longer able to tolerate either the "absolute system of residential segregation in Chicago" or the whole society which has created this system of confinement (Gordon 125). Thus, to use Foucault's words, Beneatha feels that the society where she lives is a "heterogeneous space" where there is no room for her to live with dignity, which implies that space is an illusion of a utopia. The only path left for her to try is to leave this hostile society and go back to her roots "looking for [her] identity" (Hansberry 86).

Like Beneatha, Esperanza suffers in a society that "looked with distaste upon Mexicans in terms that conflated and stigmatized their race and nationality" (Lopez 969). Similar to Beneatha too, Esperanza has a dream that is considered incompatible with the norms of her community's

culture; Esperanza wants to be a writer, a dream that does not fit into her culture due to the independence and freedom it signifies. This dream sheds light on Esperanza as having an independent mind, which makes her, as a woman, stand out as different from the rest of the girls in her community. This explains why—again like Beneatha—she seems isolated on the intellectual level. In the ghetto, ironically where she is expected to belong, she feels lonely, estranged; no one shares her feelings, dreams, or secrets. In the opening pages of the novella, Esperanza expresses this feeling of loneliness and longing for someone to whom she can relate: “Someday I will have a best friend ... One I can tell my secrets to. One who will understand my jokes without my having to explain them. Until then I am a ... balloon tied to an anchor” (Cisneros 9). Indeed, Esperanza is psychologically and emotionally “tied” to her culture that denies her independence, a culture represented in the text by the ghetto entrapping her, the heterotopia separating her from the mainstream which stands for freedom and fulfillment.

Hence, the present reading of *The House on Mango Street* connects the movement out of the ghetto to the pursuit of one’s dream. Thinking about her dream, Esperanza says: “I like to tell stories,” but what does she dream of writing about? (109). She wants to write about her life: “I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes. I say, ““And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked.’ ... I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong” (109). Nevertheless, “class and ethnic biases might [...] deter Esperanza from achieving her own literary voice” (Jaqueline Doyle7). The Mexican ghetto—representing these biases—figures, therefore, as a space of dream deferral, and that is why Esperanza ultimately leaves to realize her dream.

In “Borderlands/La Frontera,” Chicana American writer Gloria Anzaldua explores her personal life growing up along the border between Mexico and the United States in a way that elucidates Esperanza’s experience being torn between her own culture, where women have predetermined roles and are only expected to fulfill them, and that of the mainstream American society with its promise of self-realization. Anzaldua writes: “To this day I’m not sure where I found the strength to leave the

source, the mother...*I had to leave home so I could find myself* [italics added], find my own intrinsic nature *buried* under the personality that had been imposed on me” (1015).

Anzaldua’s statement highlights the difficulty of stepping out of one’s one culture, of crossing the border, a difficulty attributed to the concept of identity crisis. This is true of Esperanza who finds it necessary to leave the ghetto where she “belong[s] but [does] not belong,” feeling she is “too strong for [Mango Street] to keep [her] here forever” (Cisneros 110). When Esperanza writes a story about her life, she faces her experience in the ghetto, her life on the periphery of the society, in the forgotten place, her life as an Other, as inferior, a feeling intensified by her own culture’s values which stand as an obstacle in her way of self-realization as a Latina woman with potential. At this moment, she feels she has enough strength to leave; her ties to the ghetto are set loose by the place’s stifling influence on her. Yet, her identity is by no means totally independent from Mango Street; she has “gone away to come back” (110). Esperanza feels part of her is in Mango Street. While it is true that for her it is a place of confinement, an exile from the rest of the society, getting herself totally uprooted from there would not satisfy her. The mainstream society where not all people are equally embraced is, therefore, simultaneously a place of fulfillment and banishment. Thus, Esperanza leaves, knowing she will always come back to her roots, knowing she does belong there.

It has been the purpose of this research to establish a parallelism between the ghetto and Foucault’s heterotopia through the representation of minority slum areas in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*. Informed by Critical Race Theory, the proposed analysis of the setting in both texts presents a reading of space as a tool of portraying exclusion, marginalization, reinforcing stereotypes and cultural constructs. The ethnic minority groups living in their assigned ghettos are indeed portrayed as internally banished, forgotten and avoided. The ghetto is a sign of their expected subjugation; “nobody asked me, nobody consulted me—they just went out and changed my life,” Beneatha says (Hansberry 148). The two characters discussed express a challenge to this kind of essentialism, again through their relationship with the ghetto, that is, through their decision to leave the ghetto. Beneatha’s and

Esperanza's rejection of the space of confinement is, therefore, a rebellion against ethnic categorization and a step toward their self-realization. But does leaving mean the possibility of unmaking racism? The fact that Beneatha leaves while thinking of moving to Nigeria, and that Esperanza leaves, knowing she will come back, implies that they are aware that they are not accepted in the mainstream society. This is an implication of the hostility of the societies they live in, a characteristic of societies that create heterotopias. The fact that they are not embraced in either space suggests the illusion of the viability of human classification and questions the social discourse of stereotyping behind creating heterotopias.

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