

# Black British Theatre: A Transnational Perspective

Volume 1 of 2

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines post-war black British theatre through a transnational lens. It argues that the hitherto prioritization of a national paradigm in discussions of black British theatre is not sufficiently complex to chart the historical processes that have shaped it and the multiple spatial, cultural, and political contexts in which it has been generated. This thesis finds that a transnational optic exposes a network of connections – physical, ideological and psychic – between blacks in Britain and other global black communities which have shaped and transformed the lives of Britain's black communities and their cultural production.

The thesis is divided into three chapters: the USA (chapter 1), the Caribbean (chapter 2), and Africa (chapter 3). Each chapter represents a specific geo-cultural-political space with which black British theatre has an important relationship. Each chapter follows the same broad structure: the first half of the chapter establishes a particular transnational process and mode of analysis which frames the ensuing historical discussion; the second half is devoted to an analysis of two contemporary black British dramatists.

The USA chapter examines black British theatre through the lens of Americanization and Black Power. The first half traces the influence of black America on black British theatre's formation, organization and expression in the post-war period. The second half examines works by Kwame Kwei-Armah and Mojisola Adebayo.

The Caribbean chapter applies the process and theory of creolization to a discussion of the rise and consolidation of Caribbean culture in black British theatre. The chosen case studies for this chapter are Roy Williams and Bola Agbaje.

Finally, the African chapter discusses the recent flux of immigrants from Africa since the 1990s and, using the concept of diaspora as an analytic model, explores the impact this has had on black British theatre. The second half focuses on works by Inua Ellams and Debbie Tucker Green.

Dividing the thesis into the spaces of the USA, the Caribbean and Africa allows one to filter and track the origination and circulations of particular sets of ideas, practices and / or people. The divisions reiterate that I am looking at complex heterogeneous material informed by multiple strands of influence. Nevertheless, connections between the chapters emerge, which illustrate historically embedded circuits of influence and exchange that have routinely transgressed national borders. Taken as a whole, the thesis supports the idea that black British theatre not only merits a transnational approach, but is, in fact, a transnational practice in itself.

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# Introduction

An intricate web of cultural and political connections binds blacks here to blacks elsewhere. At the same time, they are linked into the social relations of this country

(Gilroy, 1987: 156).

## Historical and Scholarly Context

Since the end of the Second World War, British society has expanded and diversified. In part, this is due to a significant growth in immigrants of Caribbean and African origin, who bring with them new social and cultural practices which continue to complicate the terms 'black' and 'British'. While some theatre practitioners such as Felix Cross define themselves as black British, finding it 'a perfectly reasonable convenient expression' (qtd in Davis, 2006a: 22), others, like Peter Badejo, reject the term:

I hate using the word 'Black' in this country. To me, the word 'Black' has meant a lot of deprivation, and it should not be that way [...] So I am reverting, recoiling into my Africanness. First and foremost, I am an African from Nigeria, I live in Britain and I am British (qtd in Zhana, 2006: n.p.).

On the other hand, Kwame Kwei-Armah argues that the term 'black British' allows the African or Caribbean person 'to perceive themselves as having arrived somewhere, as having a home' (qtd in Davis, 2006a: 23). The tensions raised here between black and British, home and hostland, continue to lie at the very heart of debates around black British culture and attendant issues of racism, nationality and belonging. They also raise questions regarding theatrical traditions. How are these tensions reflected in black theatre's form and content? To what extent do the cultures of African and African-origin people impact upon black theatre practitioners in Britain? How far does their work perpetuate practices from Africa or the Caribbean? What analytical approaches would best register these complexities?

This thesis attempts to demonstrate that a transnational optic that incorporates an understanding of the social, cultural and political networks that connect black people across the world is best suited to analyzing black British theatre. It will argue that these diasporic affiliations are not just empathetic, they have resulted in a network of connections – physical, ideological and psychic – which have shaped and transformed the lives of Britain's black communities and their cultural production. However, in order to root the discussion in a material and

lived reality, the space of the nation will also form a central part of the investigation as a site that shapes our understanding of black theatre in Britain.

### **Black People in Britain from 1948**

Although the black presence in Britain has a long history, it was the post-war period of the 1950s that saw a substantial increase in the number of black immigrants to Britain. This large-scale immigration was due to a combination of political and economic factors, notably the availability of work in Britain and the disintegration of its Empire, which had recognized its former colonial subjects as British citizens. At this time, the majority of black immigrants came from the Caribbean, in particular Jamaica. Indeed, the docking of the Empire Windrush on the 22 June 1948 at Tilbury, Essex with its 492 Caribbean (mainly Jamaican) passengers, following the promise of work as Britain began to re-build itself after the war, has become the symbolic starting point for historical narratives of black British settlement.<sup>1</sup>

Table showing the estimated black Caribbean population of Britain, 1951-2001<sup>2</sup>

<b>Year</b>	<b>Caribbean Birthplace</b>	<b>British-born of Caribbean-born (est.)</b>	<b>Best estimate black Caribbean population</b>
1951	17,218	10,000	28,000
1961	173,659	35,000	209,000
1971	304,070	163,210	467,000
1981	295,179	250,565	546,000

<sup>1</sup> For histories of the black presence in Britain, pre- and post-‘Windrush’, see Kenneth Little (1948), Sheila Patterson (1965), Edward Scobie (1972), James Walvin (1973), Folarin Shyllon (1974, 1977), Peter Fryer (1984), David Killingray (1994), Gretchen Gerzina (1995), Norma Myers (1996), Ron Ramdin (1999), Mike and Trevor Phillips (1998), and Tony Sewell (1998).

<sup>2</sup> Statistical data from 1951 to 1991 is taken from Peach (1998: 211). Figures for 2001 are taken from Bosveld and Connolly (2006: 33). It was only in 1991 that a question on ethnic origin was introduced into the Census. Previous estimates gauged the size of the black Caribbean population by equating a Caribbean birthplace with an African Caribbean ethnicity. This, as Peach states, ‘is only partly true’ as the Caribbean-born population includes a number of other ethnicities including whites and South Asians (1996b: 26-7). The total figures for 1991 and 2001 are the official Census estimates of the *black* Caribbean population. The 1991 row figures do not add up to give the best estimate because some of the black Caribbean population was born in places other than the Caribbean or the UK (Peach, 1998: 211). Furthermore, of the 58,106 people who claimed a ‘Black Other’ identity in 1991 it is ‘likely’ they were predominantly of Caribbean origin which would raise the total estimated population size from 499,964 to 558,070 and the UK-born population to 326,424 (Peach, 1998: 211).

1991	264,591	268,318 to 326,424	499,964 to 558,070
2001	238,126	327,495	565,621

Mass migration from the Caribbean to Britain as part of the post-war reconstruction reached its peak in the 1960s ‘and was effectively over by 1973’ (Peach, 1996a: 28). The decrease in immigrant arrivals from the Caribbean was the result of legislation aimed at restricting Commonwealth migration to the UK; The 1962 and 1968 Commonwealth Immigration Acts and the 1971 Immigration Act (as well as the 1981 Nationality Act) successively redefined the rights to claim British citizenship. By 1971, through the introduction of ‘patriality’ into the law, only people with a parent or grandparent born in the UK had an automatic right to citizenship (Carter, 2000: 133-4).

By 2001 the majority of the black Caribbean population was born in Britain (58 per cent), followed by Jamaica (23 per cent), Barbados (3 per cent), Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Grenada (each c. 2 per cent) (Bosveld & Connolly, 2006: 33). A profile of the population according to age reveals three distinct generations with peaks at around sixty, thirty-eight and sixteen years of age, with the largest group being the predominantly British-born second generation (Bosveld & Connolly, 2006: 33). In terms of geographic settlement, the majority of black Caribbeans live in England (99 per cent) with the highest population located in London (61 per cent) followed by the West Midlands (15 per cent) (Forsyth & Gardener, 2006: 55). Despite the overwhelming majority of the black population residing in England, the acknowledgement of an English identity remains uncommon.

Although the black African presence in Britain has a long history, substantial African migration to Britain occurred later than the mass migration of blacks to Britain from the Caribbean. Caribbean migration began in earnest in the 1950s and peaked in the mid 1960s. On the other hand, migration from Africa gained momentum during the 1960s but has increased exponentially since the 1990s.



Table showing the estimated black African population of Britain, 1991-2001<sup>3</sup>

<b>Year</b>	<b>African Birthplace</b>	<b>British-born of African-born (est.)</b>	<b>Best estimate black African ethnic population</b>
1991	135,912	76,450	212,362
2001	321,411	163,372	484,783

In the post-war period and up until the late 1980s, African migration to Britain occurred at a steady rate of around 5,000 a year. During the 1990s, the total figure reached levels of 20,000 in some years and in the first decade of the twenty-first century, immigrant numbers have remained at approximately 30,000 a year (Owen, 2009: slide 5). The fact that, by 2001, the gap between the African and Caribbean-origin black population had significantly narrowed to within a difference of 100,000 points to the growing need to acknowledge the African presence in Britain. It is likely that, by the time the results of the 2011 Census are published, the number of black Africans / British will exceed the black Caribbean / British population. Estimates published in 2009 by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for England and Wales place the total number of black Caribbeans at 615,000 and black Africans at 799,000 (Population Ethnicity Religion and Migration Research Group, 2009: n.p.).

The reasons prompting African migration to Britain are different to those that brought the majority of Caribbean immigrants to Britain in the 1950s. In the immediate post-war period, a principle motive drawing African migrants was not employment opportunity, but educational improvement (Daley, 1996: 44-6).<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s and early 1980s, a number of wealthy West Africans who could

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<sup>3</sup> Statistical data from 1991 is taken from Patricia Daley (1996: 47). Figures for 2001 are taken from Bosveld and Connolly (2006: 34). In estimating the black African-born population in Britain prior to 1991, one is confronted with similar problems faced by the interpretation of statistical data for the black Caribbean-born population in the UK. Daley draws attention to the difficulty in separating black Africans from white and Asian Africans in earlier birthplace statistics (1998: 1703). For instance, the 1971 and 1981 Censuses recorded 176,000 and 267,252 African-born people living in the UK respectively; however, Daley concludes that 'one can assume that a significant proportion of these were White' (1996: 46). Likewise, a number of East African-born people of South Asian origin would also form a substantial part of these figures.

<sup>4</sup> A significant number of Africans, particularly West Africans, in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s were students who intended to return (many did) to their natal lands. This was a continuation of a trend of West African elites being sent to Britain to study that had been gathering in momentum since the early 1900s but dates back to the eighteenth century. For a detailed discussion of the history, experience and political activities of West African students in Britain from 1900 to 1960 see Hakim Adi (1994, 1998).

afford the British lifestyle (especially Nigerians who prospered from the oil boom) came to Britain and remained when the economic and political situation in their homelands declined (Daley, 1998: 1705). Economic decline and political instability following independence in a number of countries has also driven migration. This has resulted in a number of refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants arriving in Britain. Between 1980 and 1991, Daley cites 53,262 asylum applications, with only 8,500 of them being granted refugee status and leave to remain (1998: 1705). These figures rose dramatically the following decade. According to Owen, 'there was a total of 171.5 thousand asylum applications from African principal applicants over the period 1998 - 2007' (2009: slide 7). More recently, shortages in the British labour market in areas such as nursing have also drawn African migrants (Barou, Aigner, & Mbenga, 2012: 26). The majority of African immigrants come from Commonwealth nations, reflecting how 'the historical colonial ties between Britain and Africa largely shaped African migration to Britain' (Barou et al., 2012: 30).

In terms of the 1991 Census, about 60 per cent of black Africans were of West African origin. By 2001 the black African-born population in Britain was more diverse. The majority (63 per cent) were born in Africa and included Nigerians (16 per cent), Ghanaians (10 per cent), Somalis (8 per cent), Zimbabweans (4 per cent) and Ugandans, Sierra Leoneans and Kenyans (each 3 per cent) (Bosveld & Connolly, 2006: 34). In comparison with the Caribbean-origin population, the African population in the UK mainly comprises first-generation immigrants and has a younger age profile with a median age of twenty-eight (Bosveld & Connolly, 2006: 35). In terms of geographic settlement, the majority of black Africans live in England (98 per cent) with the highest population located in London (78 per cent) followed by the south east (5 per cent) and east (3.5 per cent) of England (Forsyth & Gardener, 2006: 55).

Daley argues that, although the reasons for migration were very different for Africans and Caribbeans,

once settled in Britain, economic restructuring and discriminatory practices have placed them [black Africans] in precarious livelihood

situations and in poor housing. These form the principal explanatory variables for their pattern of spatial concentration and segregation. Even with their different migration history, their social, economic and spatial trajectories seem to mirror that of the Black-Caribbean group (1998: 1704).

However, such opinions have added to a general homogenization of the black population by seeing them only in relation to the dominant white British. Examining how these new immigrant communities have formed in Britain – both in relation to the established black British population and the dominant population – have important implications for our understanding of contemporary black Britishness.

The growing mixed-race population in the UK also highlights important shifts in how blackness is defined and experienced in Britain. Mixed ethnicity categories were first introduced in the 2001 Census, which recorded an overall mixed population of 677,117. With more than 50 per cent of mixed-race people below the age of sixteen, this section of the population is ‘the fastest growing ethnic minority group in Britain’ (Choudhry, 2010: 30). In England and Wales, those of white and black Caribbean parentage were the largest mixed group (237,420) compared with those of white and black African parentage which was the smallest group (78,911). (Gardener & Connolly, 2005: 5).

In terms of mixed black / white people in Britain, Barbara Tizard and Ann Phoenix’s study of mixed-race youth conducted in the early 1990s (and revised in the early 2000s) revealed that, increasingly, mixed-race people in the UK were claiming a ‘dual identity’ (1993/2002: 4). However, historically, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, a number of mixed-race people in Britain have identified with being black. This reflects a politically resistant ‘non-white’ identification as well as the way in which non-whites were homogenized as black. In terms of the latter, such classification paralleled the ‘one-drop’ rule in the USA, which meant that individuals who were part black, no matter how slight the proportion, were automatically categorized as ‘black’. As Anne Wilson argues, writing in the late 1980s, mixed-race British children were likely to

'consider themselves full members of the black community, since any attempt to adopt a white identity is likely to bring conflict and rejection' (1987: 1).

Stringent racial categorization into black / white groups was not patrolled by whites alone. During the 1960s, with the rise of the Black Power movement and 'Black' consciousness, mixed-race individuals were encouraged to self-identify as black. Tizard and Phoenix highlight the important contribution that the 1960s American Black Power movement made to 'raising black self-esteem' in Britain; however, they also draw attention to its totalizing discourse which also impacted on black British identity formation:

[...] paradoxically, the rise of the black consciousness movement led to a renewed insistence on the 'one drop of black blood makes a person black' rule, this time on the part of black people. They argued strongly that pride in being a person of colour should lead people of mixed parentage to regard themselves, and be regarded by others, as black. Any other identity was seen as a betrayal, a rejection of their black ancestry (1993/2002: 4).

However, more recently, with the recognition of 'mixed' as an ethnic category in the Census, those of dual heritage are increasingly embracing their hybrid identities in a way that exposes and undermines discrete racial categorization and, therefore, previously held notions of black and white Britishness.

### **Blackness and Britishness: Discourses of Belonging**

*The experience of the black communities forms a cultural and political backdrop and mediates the discourse of black performance in theatre and representation in Britain*

(McMillan & SuAndi, 2002: 122).

Benedict Anderson described the nation as an 'imagined community', whereby:

the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (1983/1991: 6).

What binds a nation's members is the belief, facilitated by mass-media, that they share fundamental traits such as culture, language and religion. Thus, the nation-state achieved cohesion by aligning itself with ethnicity and politicizing it in the form of nationalism (Waters, 1995/2001: 165). However, there is an inherent paradox in the way nations operate. Because belonging is predicated on a sense of shared core values and culture, it can be achieved through means other than birthright. Thus, naturalization is possible, but only if accompanied by acculturation. As Anderson points out, 'from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be 'invited into' the imagined community' (1983/1991: 145). Yet, as Anderson also notes, this community is seen as sharing a common history as well as culture: 'Seen as both a *historical* fatality and as a community imagined through language, the nation presents itself as simultaneously open and closed' (146). The black immigrants arriving in Britain in the immediate post-war period from Africa and the Caribbean were not confronted by this double-bind. Those arriving from British colonies already had citizenship. Furthermore, they shared a common history and culture through their colonial education and participation in British national events and holidays that had been carried over into the colonies. Many colonial subjects had also committed politically to Britain's national ideals by fighting on her side during the Second World War (see Rush, 2011).

Nevertheless, the experience of blacks in Britain was marked by marginalization and exclusion from a sense of belonging to the national imaginary because of their race. Although hostility towards immigrants was nothing new (for example, the experience of the Irish), the non-white presence in what had fundamentally been a racially homogenous island precipitated a crisis, as the 1958 race riots in Nottingham and Notting Hill testified. Black people did not fit in with the nation's sense of self and, despite being *in*, they were not regarded as *of* the nation.

Imperial racism, based upon the premise that black people were biologically different, was replaced by 'new racism', whereby discrimination was based upon cultural differences (see Barker, 1981). Black people were defined as alien / other and a threat to the values that 'Englishness' represented (Gilroy, 1987: 46). Issues such as lack of housing, school overcrowding and violence came to be blamed on immigration. Black people became the scapegoats for the economic and social failures of the British political system whereby '[t]he 'alien' cultures of the blacks are seen as either the cause or else the most visible symptom of the destruction of the 'British way of life' (E. Lawrence, 1982: 47). Ensuing immigration laws successively narrowed the definition of the rights to claim British citizenship. By 1971, only people with a parent or grandparent born in Britain retained the right to automatic citizenship. This 'colour ban' on immigration meant that the words 'immigrant' and 'black' became interchangeable (Gilroy, 1987: 46).

The association of blackness with non-Britishness ran much deeper than birthright, as the speeches of Conservative MP Enoch Powell in the 1960s highlighted:

The West Indian [or Asian] does not by being born in England, become an Englishman. In law, he becomes a United Kingdom citizen by birth; in fact he is a West Indian or an Asian still (Eastbourne, 16 November 1968, qtd in Gilroy, 1987: 46).

As a result, the black experience in post-war Britain was characterised by alienation from belonging to the imaginary community, the daily confrontation of institutional and individual racism and an overarching perception which saw blacks as a threat to an essential and homogenous British national identity.

Black British cultural theorists in the 1970s, in particular the pioneering work carried out by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) under the leadership of Stuart Hall, began to examine the causes of British racism. The CCCS, as Kwesi Owusu notes, changed the way that race was analyzed, moving it away from a sociological towards a cultural perspective. It was the pioneering work of the CCCS that 'opened up new dialogues on Black cultural

identity, effectively challenging the notion that British culture was quintessentially 'white' (Owusu, 2000: 3). It was the linking of race politics to cultural studies that exposed the latter's Eurocentrism and silent nationalism, and created the 'epistemological break' that gave birth to black British cultural studies (Owusu, 2000: 2). A central component of the CCCS's position, encapsulated by a popular racist slogan that was used as the title of Gilroy's seminal book *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), was to draw attention to the challenges faced by blacks (first- and second-generation) to gain acceptance into the nation, not just legally, but culturally. During the 1970s and within the context of the economic recession, the CCCS explored the way in which racism was enmeshed with British national identity through an analysis of public institutions. They highlighted how representation of blacks maintained a sense of them / us through the construction of blacks as outsiders and, especially in representations of male youth, as dangerous, dysfunctional and a threat to society:

Blacks become the bearers, *the signifiers* of the crisis of British society in the 1970s [...] This is not a crisis *of* race. But race punctuates and periodizes the crisis. Race is the lens through which people come to perceive that a crisis is developing. It is the framework through which the crisis is experienced. It is the means by which the crisis is to be resolved – 'send it away' (Hall qtd in Mercer, 1994: 8).

The work of Hall and the CCCS also aimed to 'decouple' the notion of ethnicity 'from its equivalence with nationalism, imperialism, racism and the state' (Hall, 1988: 29). To do so, they drew attention to how a sense of Britishness was constructed through imperialism (see Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), 1982). At the same time, they provided an historical revisionism, which demonstrated the closely intertwined relationship Britain had with black cultures and how they had shaped British culture in the process:

It is only in the last phase of British imperialism that the labouring classes of the satellites and the labouring classes of the metropolis have confronted one another directly 'on native ground'. But their fates have long been indelibly intertwined. The very definition of 'what it is to be

British' – the centrepiece of that culture now to be preserved from racial dilution – has been articulated around this absent / present centre. If their blood has not mingled extensively with yours, their labour power has long since entered your economic blood-stream. It is in the sugar you stir: it is in the sinews of the infamous British 'sweet tooth': it is the tea leaves at the bottom of the 'British cuppa' (Hall qtd in Gilroy, 1996: 223).

The point of this revisionism was to expand the notion of Britishness and to unpack it from its automatic association with ethnic and racial purity. Britishness and the nation were not under attack per se, but rather how they were defined in the imaginary.

The non-white presence in post-war Britain forced a redefinition of national identity and culture – a project that continues to this day. The situation of belonging came to a head with the maturity of a generation of blacks who were born in Britain. Their entitlement through birthright and the adoption of the descriptor 'Black British' sent a message to the Establishment that blacks and Asians born in Britain or with British citizenship were '*here to stay*' (Mercer, 1994: 8). The 1970s and 1980s also witnessed a high level of black politicization, which was particularly inspired by American post-Civil Rights politics. Indeed, the adoption of the term 'Black' was borrowed from African American Black Power politics that emerged in the late 1960s. (Although the term was used somewhat differently in the British context to refer to people of African, Caribbean *and* South Asian descent). During this period, former anti-racist political organizations that had been multi-racial now became made up of non-white ethnic minorities working together against racism. The Bristol Bus Boycott in 1963 led by Paul Stephenson drew attention to racial discrimination in the work place. Not long after in 1965, the Race Relations Act was created outlawing racial discrimination in public places. An amended Act was passed in 1968 which made racial discrimination illegal in housing and employment. A more robust Act was implemented in 1976 along with the establishment of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), which would serve as a watchdog to ensure that the Act was followed.



However, institutional racism remained entrenched and blacks faced persistent discrimination, in particular from the police. The controversial 'sus' (suspected person) laws mainly targeted black male youth, and race-related riots in 1976 (Notting Hill Carnival), 1980 (St. Pauls), 1981 (Brixton, Chapelton, Handsworth, Moss Side, Toxteth) and again in 1985 (Handsworth, Tottenham) made visible the level of indignation. The Scarman Report, commissioned after the 1981 Brixton riots, found the cause of the riots to be the result of unequal levels of social and economic disadvantage among Britain's urban black population. However, although Scarman located a lack of trust in the police, the report claimed that 'institutional racism' was not a factor and that 'racial disadvantage' was the culprit (McGhee, 2005: 22).

Although the Scarman Report paved the way to the end of the 'sus' laws, it was only in 1999 with the Macpherson Report, which concluded that institutional racism was an important factor in the mishandling of the Stephen Lawrence murder, that the 1976 Race Relations Act was amended in 2000. The amended Act meant that public organizations were bound by law to promote race equality, equal opportunity and eliminate discriminatory practices (Marangozov, 2011: 172).

However, black solidarity and attendant notions of the 'Black community' operating in unity against white racism began to be challenged, particularly from the mid-1980s. 'Blackness' as a collective term of solidarity that included Asians began to dissolve. Blackness came under scrutiny and internal difference was emphasized, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality. In order to argue convincingly that ethnicity or Britishness was an historical and political construct that could be reconfigured to include black people in its conceptualization, it followed that 'Blackness' also had to be understood as similarly constructed:

You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject (Hall, 1988: 28).

Up until the 1980s, much theory concerning race politics and black culture was rooted in a discourse which tended to challenge Eurocentric racism through

Black solidarity. This approach, however, simply replaced the essentialist and racist attitudes of the white West with a different set of essentialist and racist attitudes. Thus, the first phase of challenging monolithic Britishness as nationalist and racist through a unified 'Blackness' gave way to an examination of ethnicity itself, or what Hall called 'the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' (Hall, 1988: 28). As opposed to challenging a centre which immediately creates a periphery, Hall argued that there was no centre:

[...] the splitting of the notion of ethnicity between, on the one hand the dominant notion which connects it to nation and 'race' and on the other hand what I think is the beginning of a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery (Hall, 1988: 29).

Hall sees blackness as being occupied by different ethnicities, each affected by a number of 'positionalities' such as gender and sexuality, all of which are marginal in relation to each other. It is through their heterogeneity (as opposed to the prior stance that saw homogeneity as a place of strength) that the dominant position of Britishness may be challenged (Stein, 2004: 13). The new African arrivals have also highlighted the internal difference within the black British 'community' and the questionability of a unified 'Blackness'. Another high-profile case, the murder of Damilola Taylor in 2000, drew attention to intra-racial violence and the conflict between blacks of Caribbean versus those of African origin. (As did the race riots in Birmingham between youth of African Caribbean and South Asian origin in 2005).

The emphasis on heterogeneity within the black 'community' echoes the shift in the government's response to ethnic diversity. The acculturation model, which assumed that immigrants and their children would, over time, adopt the culture of the host country, gave way to a more pluralist view of national identity. As early as 1966, Home Secretary Roy Jenkins stated in a speech to the national Committee for Commonwealth immigrants:

I do not think that we need in this country a 'melting pot', which will turn everybody out in a common mould, as one of a series of carbon copies of someone's misplaced version of the stereotyped Englishman. I define

integration, therefore, not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance (qtd in McGhee, 2008: 87).

Although multiculturalism has never been officially codified in Britain (unlike in Canada and Australia), as Anne Phillips notes, Britain has seen a process of 'multicultural drift' – a series of smallish adjustments and accommodations that added up to a quite substantial practice of multiculturalism' (2007: 5). This was particularly so with the arrival of New Labour in 1997 which sought to redress the alienating effects of the Conservative government who had held power since 1979.

There are debates as to what multiculturalism means. Whereas some perceive it as a policy that encourages intermixture, others argue multiculturalism preserves / promotes separatism. Since 9 / 11, the 2001 race riots in Bradford and the 7 / 7 bombings in London in 2005, however, critics of multiculturalism have become more vociferous. The emphasis placed on foreigners to accept the homeland's values and way of life have become increasingly strong in discourses around immigration and national unity:

These issues have also been influenced by political fears that the transnational affiliations of migrants and their descendants might make it impossible for these people to feel sufficient respect for and undivided national loyalty towards the British state, its laws, and its monopoly on force. Thus, cultural diversity and transnational affiliations are seen to always harbour a danger of unruliness and political unreliability (Lindner, Mohring, Stein, & Stroh, 2010: xxxii).

In September 2005, black Briton Trevor Phillips, as chair of the then CRE, sparked the debate over multiculturalism versus integration with his speech entitled: 'After 7 / 7: Sleepwalking into Segregation', in which he argued that in Britain 'we've focused far too much on the 'multi' and not enough on common culture' (qtd in McGhee, 2008: 87). In 2006, Tony Blair reiterated this sentiment in his speech entitled: 'The Duty to Integrate: Shared British Values' (see Julios, 2008: 153). On 20 April 2008, black Briton Trevor Phillips, as chair of the

Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), gave a speech entitled 'Not a River of Blood, but a Tide of Hope: Managed Immigration, Active Integration'. In his speech, given forty years after Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968 and delivered from the same venue in Birmingham, Phillips continued to advocate a turn away from multicultural policy, highlighting Britain's need to pursue 'a positive policy of active integration' in the fight against racism (2008: n.p.).<sup>5</sup> More recently David Cameron gave a speech on 5 February 2011 in which he also criticized multicultural policy for encouraging separatism, and allowing 'the weakening of our collective identity' (2011: n.p.).

The terms assimilation and integration are not necessarily synonymous. There seems to be a shift in the discourse that acknowledges difference yet demands an underlying nationalist cohesion. Thus, although multiculturalism continues to be invoked, 'it is certainly true that government discourse has expressed increasing anxiety about the viability of multiculturalism and its commensurability with the integrity of the nation-state' (Lindner et al., 2010: xxxii). Arguably, in this case, it is no longer race which lies at the heart of the lines that separate those that can and those that cannot belong to the imagined community, but rather culture which has once again become the determining factor.

### **Mapping Black British Theatre Criticism**

Academic research into black British theatre is increasing. However, it remains an underrepresented and fragmented field of inquiry. In terms of scholarship, alongside a handful of journal articles and chapters in books, five books have been published that deal specifically with black British theatre: Gabriele Griffin's *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain* (2003); Geoffrey Davis and Anne Fuchs' edited volume *Staging New Britain: Aspects of Black and South Asian Theatre Practice* (2006); Dimple Godiwala's edited volume *Alternatives within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres* (2006a); Lynette Goddard's *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance* (2007b); Colin Chambers' *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain: A History* (2011).

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<sup>5</sup> In 2007, the CRE was subsumed by the newly formed EHRC. The EHRC is responsible for a broad spectrum of equality issues pertaining to age, disability, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation.

Davis and Fuchs and Godiwala's books comprise a collection of essays offering a broad overview of aspects of black theatre history, performance / textual analysis and interviews with practitioners. Of the remaining monographs, Griffin and Goddard both focus on black women playwrights / performance artists and Chambers' history provides details of activities by performers, playwrights and companies from the mid- sixteenth century up until the early twenty-first. The essays and articles scattered over time and across journals and edited volumes tend to focus upon specific playwrights or interviews with practitioners.

Despite the pioneering efforts of scholars, the field remains shaped by a number of (hampering) issues which impact upon the way knowledge is accrued, framed and disseminated. The first issue is one of access. In terms of primary sources, archived material pertaining to black theatre does exist, but records remain incomplete and holdings are scattered and, on the whole, inaccessible. Archives, in various states of completion, exist for several black theatre companies including Temba, Black Mime and Talawa (housed by the V&A Theatre and Performance Department), and Nitro and the activities of the Black Theatre Forum (both housed in the Future Histories: Black Theatre and Carnival Archive (1970s – 2000) held at Goldsmiths, University of London).<sup>6</sup>

Historical contextualization and clarification remains central to discussions on black theatre in post-war Britain. New initiatives are emerging to document and make archived information publicly accessible. For example, the Black Theatre Archives project at the Royal National Theatre (with Sustained Theatre) aims to catalogue and provide on-line access to information for every play written by a black British playwright (including dates and places of first performances, cast lists and images of posters and programmes).<sup>7</sup> Due to past performances not being recorded or archived (an issue entwined with lack of funding), approaches based on performance analysis tend to focus on more

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<sup>6</sup> A book-length study of black British theatre companies is yet to be done. Chambers (2011) provides the most thorough discussion of the activities of black theatre companies in post-war Britain. The only book-length investigation into a black British theatre company is David Johnson's unpublished PhD thesis, *The History, Theatrical Performance Work and Achievements of Talawa Theatre Company, 1986-2001* (2001). In terms of published chapters devoted to black British theatre companies, Alda Terracciano (2006) and Victor Ukaegbu (2006) have written essays focusing on the history and activities of the Black Theatre Forum and Talawa respectively, and Goddard devotes a chapter to Black Mime's Women's Troupe in her book (2007: 133-153).

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.blackplaysarchive.org.uk/>

contemporary works. Criticism is also weighted in favour of playwrights and invariably combines a text-based approach where viewing a particular performance is not possible. As Osborne notes, women editors in particular have been vital in publishing collections of black plays (2006b: 78). However, on the whole, publishing houses' reticence to publish black plays has also resulted in the disappearance or late arrival of important scripts, which has impacted upon the choice of plays that have been critically discussed and the framing of the black British drama canon in ways that has not always been based on a play's quality and / or significance.

The issues associated with access have impinged upon the visibility of black theatre scholarship. For instance, both books of collected essays by Davis and Fuchs and Godiwala are published by fringe publishers. This reiterates the status assigned to black theatre in Britain as a practice relegated to the margins of cultural production (cf. Osborne, 2011: 505). Until recently, books which claim to map British theatre have also persistently ignored the contribution of black practitioners. Historical overviews have either not alluded to black theatre at all, or have provided only fleeting accounts. Volume three of *The Cambridge History of British Theatre* (2004b) edited by Baz Kershaw, which purports to give an overview of British theatre since 1895, briefly looks at black theatre; however, it is placed under the chapter 'Alternative Theatres, 1946-2000' and sits alongside gay and lesbian, women and physical theatre genres, and is treated as an(other) theatre subsidiary to British theatre proper. Significantly more questionable, as Godiwala (2006b: 6) highlights, is Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright's *Changing Stages: A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (2000) which barely acknowledges the existence of black theatre in Britain. More recently, discussions of black theatre have entered books that survey contemporary British theatre such as Amelia Howe Kritzer's *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain* (2008) and David Lane's *Contemporary British Drama* (2010). The inclusion of essays on black playwrights in edited anthologies of British theatre is relatively recent, such as Rebecca D'Monte and Graham Saunders' (Eds.) *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s* (2008), which includes a chapter analysing plays by Zindika and Bonnie Greer, and Sierz's (Ed.) *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British*

*playwrights* (2011), which includes essays on debbie tucker green, Kwame Kwei-Armah and Roy Williams.

This brings us to the next issue of focus. Essays on black British theatre have been housed under a variety of areas. Some are subsumed within books that focus on West Indian / Caribbean or African theatre, or world or postcolonial theatre. Bruce King's *The Internationalization of English Literature* (2004) places black theatre in Britain alongside prose and poetry, and examines it as literature, largely ignoring theatre's distinctive performative aspect.

The exploration of identity politics has also dominated the critical interrogation of black British drama at the expense of other elements, especially aesthetics, dramaturgy, influences and tradition. Furthermore, the privileging of black women practitioners has unbalanced the field in favour of a predominantly gendered study of identity politics. The focus on black women's plays means that the contribution of male black practitioners has been somewhat overlooked. This has impacted on the critical exploration of the diversity of thematic and aesthetic explorations that have characterized black British playwriting.

Because the majority of black theatre practitioners in Britain (specifically playwrights and artistic directors) have been of Caribbean heritage, it is unsurprising that black British theatre scholarship has focused on work produced by this sector. The critical appraisal of black theatre in Britain charts the journey from immigrant to indigenous –an echo of American discourses which map the journey from slave to citizen. It is a journey, such scholarship argues, that is reflected as much in the themes of plays as black British theatre's position within the British theatre landscape as it moves from 'margins to mainstream'.<sup>8</sup> Analyses that focus on first-generation Caribbean dramatists are few and far between. Only Matura has been given detailed attention.<sup>9</sup> Overwhelmingly, the academic eye has been focused on second-generation playwrights and practitioners, born and / or raised in Britain and who, in the main, identify as black British. Existing analyses reveal a trend to divide the

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<sup>8</sup> *From Margins to Mainstream: The Story of Black Theatre in Britain* (2012) is a documentary film produced by the Octavia Foundation and Nu Century Arts, Birmingham and made by young people in London and Birmingham.

<sup>9</sup> For analyses of Matura's work, see Stone (1994: 167-173), Joseph (1995), Schaffner (1999), and Peacock (2006a).

second-generation cohort into two groups: playwrights who emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, and those whose work has been produced since the late 1990s and in the first decade of the new millennium.<sup>10</sup> In terms of the first group, Caribbean origin playwrights such as Caryl Phillips and Winsome Pinnock have received the most attention.<sup>11</sup> Roy Williams, Kwame Kwei-Armah and tucker green have been the focus of the second group.<sup>12</sup>

The terms 'black' and 'British' and the tension between their significations lie at the heart of critical discussions of black culture in Britain. Both terms have been extensively interrogated with the aim of extricating them from notions of essentialism and homogeneity. 'British' is a broad umbrella term to house multiple ethnicities (English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish). The success of black activists has been to force an acknowledgement that Britishness does not only incorporate multiple ethnicities but also races.

Following the lead of black cultural theorists such as Hall and Gilroy, analyses have tended to favour discussions of the ways in which black British theatre has mirrored (and contributed to) an interrogation of Britishness and British theatre. Scholarship has persistently revealed how, through a dramatic text's themes and performance, black British theatre challenges dominant nationalist discourses by staging an alternative yet indigenous cultural identity, which re-inscribes Britain as a multicultural and multiracial nation. Although the degree to which this has been achieved is highly contested, the idea that black British theatre contributes to the racial and cultural re-framing of Britain and the theatre landscape concludes the vast majority of analyses. Dahl believes that black

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<sup>10</sup> Generational categorisation is sometimes defined by age as opposed to immigrant status. This can lead to confusion when playwrights such as Roy Williams or debbie tucker green are referred to as 'third-generation' in relation to a 'second-generation' writer such as Winsome Pinnock. In fact, all three playwrights' parents were born outside of Britain, making them second-generation black Britons.

<sup>11</sup> For analyses of Phillips' work, see Stone (1994: 173-179), Schaffner (1999), Rahbek (2001), Ledent (2006), and McLeod (2009). For Pinnock, see Sakellariou (1998, 2011), Goddard (2004), Griffin (2006), and Marzette (2006). The relatively numerous analyses of black women's theatre centre around discussions of playwrights such as Trish Cook, Jackie Kay, Valerie Mason-John, Maria Oshodi, Winsome Pinnock, Jacqueline Rudet and Zindika. See, Dahl (1995), Joseph (1999: 119-125), Ponnuswami (2000), Griffin (2003), Stahl (2002), Godiwala (2006c), Stark (2006), and Goddard (2007a, 2007b).

<sup>12</sup> For analyses of Williams' work, see Barry and Boles (2006), Peacock (2006b), Sierz (2006a), Derbyshire (2007), Scafe (2007), Kritzer (2008: 80-83; 159-161), and Osborne (2011). For Kwei-Armah, see Kasule (2006), Lucas (2007), Kritzer (2008: 90-94), and Goddard (2011b). For tucker green, see Goddard (2007b: 181-192; 2009), Osborne (2007b), Peacock (2008: 59-63), and Aston (2011).



British dramatists' 'tactical command of theatre's disciplines, and their diverse strategies are [...] producing visions of culture and of the new Britain that – like their histories – will not be contained, repressed, or denied' (1995: 53). After an analysis of Matura's work, which she sees as representative of black British playwriting, Joseph states that Matura's 'project is to infuse a measure of 'Blackness' into the infamously lily-white (and red and blue) Union Jack' (1999: 109). Davis, in his introduction to the collected anthology, states that the prominence of black British drama in the beginning of the twenty-first century 'bear[s] witness to a remarkable process, itself a product of the transformation of Britain into a multicultural society, which is in turn changing our idea of what we mean by British theatre today' (2006a: 16).

First-generation writers such as Matura and second-generation playwrights from the first wave have been identified as focusing on issues of 'origin, migration, displacement, diaspora, arrival and otherness that have produced new narratives of identity, gender, sexuality and nationality' (Peacock, 2008: 48). Titles such as 'Postcolonial British Theatre: Black Voices at the Centre' (Dahl, 1995), *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (M. Joseph, 1999), 'West Indies versus England in Winsome Pinnock's Migration Narratives' (Goddard, 2004) and 'The Remains of the British Empire: The Plays of Winsome Pinnock' (Griffin, 2006) highlights how this group has been examined under the microscope of discourses which favour the interstitial and the hybrid such as postcolonialism and diaspora. Dahl, for instance, chooses to describe black British theatre as postcolonial as opposed to immigrant theatre, as the term acknowledges the multiple cultural occupancies of black Britons – their links to the colonial past continue to inflect their experience of marginalization in the 'centre' and, at the same time, their work challenges notions of British racial / cultural homogeneity and revises its terms (1995: 52-3). Joseph, borrowing from Arjun Appadurai's concept of '-scapes', places movement at the heart of the black British condition, demonstrating through her reading of play texts how they challenge neatly bound singular notions of nation and citizenship and how they present 'the dilemma of being Black and British' (1999: 95) and forge 'a diasporic identity of Britishness' (96).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In his essay 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy' (1990/1996), Appadurai proposes the idea of '-scapes' to conceptualize complex overlapping cultural and

Postcolonial theory has been highly instructive in theorizing the redefinition of Britishness. The same methodology that has been used to describe the way in which the formerly colonized resist the culture of the colonizer has been applied to the cultural realignment of Britain brought about by the settlement of former colonial immigrants in the imperial centre. As a result, terms such as 'hybridization' and 'syncretism' emerge frequently in black British theatre criticism. In line with postcolonial theory, these terms are invoked to describe how black British theatre and its performance of an alternate, yet nonetheless British, identity creates a counter discourse, which undermines essentialist claims of British racial and cultural homogeneity.

The use of African or Caribbean cultural traditions and practices is identified as a key technique in black British theatre's resistance of Eurocentric as well as heterosexist hegemonies. The insertion of these performance traditions, histories, languages and cultural practices (music, food, dress etc) are semiotically decoded in readings that highlights how cultures of the homeland are re-inscribed within Britain to create new hybrids which break down notions of a fixed and pure Britishness and, in the process, re-inscribe what it means to be British.<sup>14</sup> The use of postcolonial theory in Britain has been used by a number of theorists who, like McMillan and SuAndi quoting Comez-Pena, argue that 'colonized cultures are sliding into the space of the colonizer, and in doing so, they are redefining its borders and culture' (McMillan & SuAndi, 2002: 125). Some perceive the increasing pluralism and hybrid British cultures that are emerging in a positive and celebratory manner (Peacock, 2008), while others argue that black British theatre remains marginalized (Scafe, 2007). The (im)balance of power along centre / margin binaries remains a primary concern to such interrogations. Likewise, the interstitial space in between binaries is explored as a space that forces a re-appraisal of both terms on either side of the divide.

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social interactions in an increasingly globalized world as a result of the movement of people ('ethnoscapes'), capital ('finanscapes'), politics / beliefs ('ideoscapes'), information (mediascapes), facilitated by technology ('technoscapes').

<sup>14</sup> Osborne argues that being a black playwright in Britain is in itself subversive: 'Black writers write for black actors. Unlike white writers who tend to assume the normative of whiteness without interrogating its correspondent privilege, black writers comment upon the dominant culture's failure to acknowledge this by staging issues of race, ethnicity, and colour as an explicit accompaniment to the thematic content of their work' (2006a: 86).

Concerning the scholarly representation of the neo-millennial playwrights of the second-generation / wave, their work is seen by some to have moved away from issues of diaspora and its effects:

In the drama written by second-generation dramatist since the end of the twentieth-century, the focus has shifted to the exploration of the politics of identity in the here and now, whose starting point is not the West Indies, but London, and sometimes encompasses white characters. It is a recognition, as Hall suggests, that cultural identities are hybrid and 'undergo constant transformation' (1990: 225). Crucially the issues of identity are not just about blacks but whites and how these issues have reflected the need to redefine Britishness (Peacock, 2008: 62-3).

As opposed to analyses that use transnational and transcultural analytic frameworks such as diaspora and postcolonialism, Osborne argues for more locally-grounded approaches:

Drama produced by indigenous Black British writers slides out of the neatness of the postcolonial framework and its reliance upon definitions of hybridity to account for indigenous populations whose antecedents were immigrants two or more generations before. Responding critically to the cultural output of indigenous Black Britons reveals the partial vision of traditional discursive arenas. It demands the forging and acknowledging of new points of references, a scope of crucial receptions which in turn reveals the limitations of mainstream theatrical and academic conceptualising (2006a: 96).

However, new millennial plays by Caribbean-origin writers continue to engage with the Caribbean and similar themes of (un)belonging and migration found in the plays of the first-generation and first wave second-generation plays of the 1980s and 1990s emerge.

Where Britishness' underlying essentialism has been exposed, blackness has also been interrogated and its internal differences explored. The demise of the

idea of a 'Black community' based upon assumptions of experiential, ethnic and historical uniformity has resulted from a more critical examination of blackness:

What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature' (Hall, 1988: 28).

The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of black theatre companies and plays which explored and challenged Blackness from different perspectives, especially through the prism of gender and (female) sexuality. In particular, the postmodern and feminist impulse applied to race derailed the idea of a black community by revealing it as a concept operating along lines of power which privilege heterosexual middle-class black men.

In response to the emergence of a number of plays which presented black women's experience (heterosexual and lesbian), feminist critics explored how drama and performance by black women challenged Western notions of feminism and methodologies of patriarchal resistance (Aston, 1995; Goodman & de Gay, 1996). However, perspectives also focused on black women's theatre not only as a challenge to white theatre and heteronormativity but also in terms of how such interventions challenged blackness. Goddard (2007b) examines what she finds to be the dominant assumption that black women's theatre is inherently feminist and challenges critics who automatically assign a counter discourse to black women's plays. Her analyses of plays / performances explore the degree to which black women's theatre challenges black and white heterosexist hegemonies, finding that a number of plays by black women focus on the experience of gender and race, and often sideline sexuality; thus, reproducing 'a dominant perspective of what it means to be black and female in late-twentieth and twenty-first-century Britain' (1). In conclusion, she argues that:

black feminist aesthetics achieved through the inclusion of lesbian sexualities, mixed-race identity, multi-racial contexts and / or experimentation with form holds the greatest promise for reshaping archetypal notions of black femininity, and that any such feminist potential must be realised through production choices (196).

Thus, the dominant thrust of academic attention has orbited around the politics of representation and a concomitant exploration of black identity and belonging.<sup>15</sup>

Post-black discourses which emerged in the 1980s but have gained in currency in the new millennium, particularly in the USA, have complicated previous assumptions of black identity. According to Touré in his book *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What it Means to be Black Now* (2011), blackness can no longer be defined in relation to past injustices and oppression. Instead, the right to entitlement and equality is taken for granted. As a result, blackness is still a space of cultural identity, yet one that is not constricted by the shadow of the past, positive projection of the 'race', or the sense of a unified community with social, cultural and political cohesion. Post-black thus describes a condition whereby the individual is rooted in and proud of blackness, while simultaneously rejecting it as a coherent, determinable signifier.

The term 'post-black' has made a tentative entry into black British theatre analyses. Theorists have begun to highlight the emergence of work that cannot be distilled into a black versus white approach, no longer focusing exclusively upon themes of racism or identity politics and which does not present an automatically positive representation. Instead, such plays explore black characters and issues of relevance to anyone, yet seen through a black perspective. Work, particularly by debbie tucker green, has begun to be described as being grounded in the black experience yet does not draw attention to the past and cannot be located within an easily identifiable 'Black' approach:

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<sup>15</sup> For an article that discusses black masculinity in performance, see McMillan (2004).

debbie tucker green in her plays does not foreground issues of race, individual or cultural identity. Instead, she offers, as a black British woman, a perspective on the emotional lives and psychology of her characters (Peacock, 2008: 59).

The black African British contribution to post-black discourses in theatre has not yet been analyzed. First-generation black Africans who come from a majority black environment bring new perspectives to traditionally racist and minority inflected themes in black Caribbean British drama. Second-generation African British playwrights also bring perspectives to bear, which do not necessarily carry the weight of the black British struggle for inclusion. Likewise, dramas by or about mixed-race Britons also complicate traditional discourses of both blackness and whiteness.

The trope of diaspora in particular is invoked to explore black British hyphenated identities and double consciousness rendered by the experience of dual belonging and / or the different occupancies of subjectivity. In the same way that the arrival of black immigrants has been seen to re-define notions of pure Britishness, the condition of in-betweenness revises notions of fixed identity and thus homogenous blackness and whiteness. Griffin (2003) has provided the most in-depth study of the diasporic condition as expressed thematically through women's drama. Griffin bases her analysis of plays by black and Asian women on Avtar Brah's theory of diaspora, defined as '*multi-locality* within and across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries' (1996: 197). For Griffin, the result of this in-between or '*entre-deux*' positioning (Griffin borrows H el ene Cixous' term) is a space which allows for the flourishing of 'multiple subject positions' where 'fixity of origin becomes indeterminate and identity equivocal':

This 'liquid condition of modernity', as Zygmunt Bauman has termed it, is the condition in which plays by contemporary Black and Asian women playwrights in Britain have been forged, and they bear the marks of that condition (Griffin, 2003: 9).

However, Griffin's aim is not to delineate a post-national space, but to root her analysis within Britain. Her mainly thematic analysis, therefore, focuses on issues that the plays under consideration raise in relation to life in Britain (9) – in other words, how the texts express the '*entre-deux*' condition of black and Asian women and what this reveals about black and Asian women's identity and contemporary Britishness. She, therefore, houses her reading within Britain which, again following Brah, is defined as a 'diaspora space', where 'migration impacts not only on those who migrate but also on the communities into which they migrate' (8-9). While acknowledging the relationship to 'home' imagined or otherwise, Griffin insists on the unsuitability of categories such as postcolonial or intercultural to describe black British women's theatre which persistently draw attention to 'historical divisions by exploring 'the other' as *other*' (9). She argues that these works are not written by people who see themselves as 'other', but as British:

I want to argue that although the plays under consideration bear the mark of those divisions, the work itself is produced by writers who do not necessarily view themselves as 'other' within Britain and who are now claiming their place at the table of British high culture. Their points of reference – in theatrical terms – are thus not the rituals, performances, or theatre works that are prevalent in the West Indies, parts of Africa, India, or Pakistan, but those of contemporary British theatre. These works do not, in other words, readily fit the categories of postcolonial, intercultural, or world theatre as these are currently understood, but should be viewed as part of British theatre now...as such this work comments on the lived conditions of diasporic peoples in contemporary Britain, giving voice to their preoccupations and experiences (9).

In such instances the parameters of the nation are stretched and outer-national cultural practices and ties become important. Yet, despite highlighting differentiated subject positions informed by outer-national influences, arguments invariably have bound their perspectives to an optic which favours the nation. For example, by adopting Brah's concept of 'diaspora space', Griffin argues in favour of re-positioning the discourse away from the historical frames of colonialism / postcolonialism and immigration and, instead, focusing on 'the

here and now' (7). Britain as a 'diaspora space' therefore becomes, in Brah's words, a location where:

multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition (Brah, 1996: 208).

In this way the discursive boundaries between diaspora and postcolonialism merge and diaspora is rendered more or less synonymous with hybridity / syncretism. In other words, there is a tendency with scholarship that employs diaspora as a critical framework to be more concerned with cultural intermixture and instances of resistance and redefinition within the host society than with other key aspects of diaspora, such as a maintained connection with the homeland and transnational relationships with other members of the same diaspora.

Griffin's interpretation of diaspora as a condition defined by in betweenness or the '*entre-deux*' can be further complicated. If we take into account the diasporic subject's relationship not only to their home and hostland, but with other members of the diaspora in different locations and what unites them, i.e. a common ancestral homeland, diaspora can be seen to encompass a triangular relationship or *entre-trois*. Furthermore, diaspora also draws attention to the complex relationship the subject has with time as well as space. The diasporic experience is defined by the tensions between the 'here and there' and the 'then and now' (Gilroy, 2000: 125).

The arrival and reception of non-whites from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia in Britain in the post-war period has provided the dominant context against which black British theatre has been analyzed and discussed. As Goddard states: 'The arrival of Windrush marks the beginning of mass-scale voluntary black immigration from the West Indies to England in the 1950s and early 1960s and is therefore regarded as a defining moment in contemporary British race relations' (2007b: 58). Terms now being used to describe black British theatre



include 'indigenous' and statements – such as Peacock reflecting on the work of debbie tucker green – which imagine a time in the not-too-distant future when 'the designation '*black* British drama' will no longer be relevant' (Peacock, 2008: 63)<sup>16</sup>. As more 'colour blind' casting is implemented and playwrights begin to write plays that incorporate more ethnically diverse characters, the categorization of black British theatre could be seen to become more arbitrary.

Ultimately, these issues highlight the difficulty in defining *black* British theatre in a meaningful way. Felix Cross, artistic director of Nitro, reveals the quandary of answering the question: what is black theatre?:

Is it when Black actors get on the stage? Is it when a Black writer writes a play? Is it when the company's owned by Black people? Is it when it comes from a certain sensibility? Is there a style? Is there a different kind of language? Is there a different play structure? I don't know (qtd in Davis and Fuchs 2006: 224).

Cross' frustration is shared with many black theatre practitioners. While some artists identify their work as being black British, others would prefer the emphasis to be upon what they do rather than what colour they are. Theatre companies such as Talawa pride themselves on being 'Britain's primary Black-led Theatre Company' which gives 'voice to the Black British experience' (Talawa Theatre Company, 2012). Some, such as Winsome Pinnock, feel more strongly that the addition of 'black' continues to separate artists from the mainstream of British theatre while reflecting a racist reality:

such labelling creates a segregation within theatre that I, personally, am opposed to, and yet it reflects and articulates the reality of a division within theatrical institutions in which black or 'other' performers are viewed solely in relation to their supposed difference (1999: 29-30).

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<sup>16</sup> Goddard summarizes this narrative succinctly: 'Plays by first-generation playwrights tend to focus on the earlier migration experiences, whereas plays by second and third generations are more concerned with notions of a dual heritage, the clash of cultures or identity issues of British-born diasporic subjects' (2007b: 58-9).

By defining theatre as 'black', is this pandering to racist discourses that seek to make 'other' and sequester to the periphery? Yet, if no differentiation is made between black and white theatre, does this not risk ignoring the structural inequalities faced by black practitioners in a white dominated mainstream while validating the normative assumptions of whiteness? In the past, Roy Williams expressed an ambivalence in terms of being identified as a 'black' playwright:

I stopped worrying about labels long ago. Once there was a big thing about whether to be called a black playwright, and I thought, do what you like, just don't miss out the word playwright! If you want to worry about the label black, go ahead, but I'm not (qtd in Sierz, 2009).

However, Williams has re-examined his personal identity and role as a playwright. In a recent interview, Williams stated that he now identifies with the label 'black British playwright'. In light of recent political and economic events and the prospect of funding cuts in Britain, Williams stated, 'I think we need that [Black British] phrase more than ever' and 'we need to do whatever we can to jump up and say we're here' (Pearce, 2010). This anxiety belies Williams' belief that British society remains inherently prejudiced and indicates that there is much work to be done in achieving equality.

As Stein points out, for now it would be unfair to assume that the black minority operate on a level playing field (2004: 11). But is the only point of defining black theatre about equal rights and opportunity? Can blackness only ever be defined in relation to whiteness? 'Black theatre' may be useful as a distinctive label that forces affirmative action; however, at the same time, it places pressure on the artist to adhere to a positive representation of blackness – what Mercer describes as the 'burden of representation' (1994: 233-258), and even thematic and aesthetic approaches. As Osborne states:

Although there has been an increased mainstream presence for black playwrights' work, it is apparent that certain themes and topics tend to be rewarded with mainstream development and programming, to the detriment of the possible scope and aesthetic experimentation desirable for developing innovative work (2010: 205).

If this pressure of racial conformity exists for black artists, it is equally relevant to academic approaches. Scholarship that persistently sees racism and resistance as the unifying element that binds black theatre is in danger of imposing what John Ball describes as a 'Eurocentric hermeneutics' by forcing a 'common agenda' upon a group of heterogeneous people and texts (2004: 12). For example, in his chapter on black theatre in Britain under Thatcher, Peacock describes the issues facing black theatre in establishing a theatrical and dramatic discourse:

The question of whether there is a theatrical and dramatic discourse that will both reflect black cultural experience and communicate directly with a black audience has haunted the limited existence of black theatre in Britain (1999: 174).

The obstacles Peacock raises which have hampered this coalescence include the lack of cultural commonality among the black population, the difference in experience and identification between first and second-generation black Britons and differing political approaches of separatism or integration. Following Jatinder Verma's definition of black theatre (the Artistic Director of the British Asian theatre company Tara Arts), Peacock concludes that a coherent definition of black theatre emerges from a sense of opposition to hegemonic mainstream British theatre and, therefore, has the same aims of constituency theatre in general, such as women's or gay theatre (183). Verma stated the aims of black theatre were:

'independence from white control'; 'opposition to the 'mainstream' – perceived as white and racist'; 'the presentation of 'Black' work – plays either dealing with contemporary realities or with the history of Britain's relationship with its colonies'; 'the assertion of the right to public funds on a par with white companies' (qtd in Peacock, 1999: 183).

Thus, in describing black theatre in constituency terms, black theatre is perpetually defined as dualistic. King on the other hand, asserts that interpretations of black British literature (including drama and poetry) based

upon a model of resistance borrowed from postcolonial approaches obscures the fact that, unlike the subjugated colonized, blacks came to Britain willingly and in search of opportunity (2004: 5). Their primary struggle, therefore, has not been motivated by revolution, but by the desire for acceptance and integration. King dismisses 'micro-nationalism' or separatist approaches and attendant 'alternative Englishes, double consciousness, and cultural claims' as superficial:

Cosmetic re-ethnicification is an assertion of identity and uniqueness, and part of the process of demanding a revision of nationality to include former outsiders' (7).

According to King, although the struggle has yielded a reconceptualization of Englishness - 'the making of a new England (9) - reflected in literature through the introduction of a diversity of themes and subject matter, it has ultimately acquiesced in the face of formulaic approaches:

Those who argue that modernization imposes western modes on other peoples are basically correct. Multiracialism and multiculturalism in the new literature of England are primarily in subject matter and attitudes to which, at times, other culture markers, such as dialect, are added (323-324).

However, opposition to white Western cultural models has driven and continues to influence black theatre production. It is therefore necessary to examine black British theatre in relation to wider black cultural, political and intellectual traditions in order to determine the extent to which black British theatre remains politically active. Secondly, by examining black British theatre in relation to other black theatre (and to some extent white / Western theatre), this thesis looks at black aesthetics and content from elsewhere in order to determine how they have impacted upon and shaped approaches to black British theatre production. Finally, an historical approach frames the discussion in order to contextualize the processes that have led to the emergence of various cross-cultural and political interactions.

## Transnational Black British Theatre: Conceptual Framework

The difficulties blacks in Britain have faced in trying to gain acceptance into the nation have engendered strong ties with other global black communities with similar experiences of racial oppression. As Gilroy argues:

The assimilation of blacks is not a process of acculturation but of cultural syncretism [...] Accordingly, their self-definitions and cultural expressions draw on a plurality of black histories and politics. In the context of modern Britain this has produced a diaspora dimension to black life (1987: 155-6).

Blacks in Britain, therefore, claim the UK as 'a site of identity' while also embracing and retaining a number of cross-cultural and transnational affiliations (Petropoulos, 2006: 106). Thus, when examining black British theatre and its output, we are confronted by a practice that is rooted / routed within and without the nation. We are also reminded that 'black' does not refer to a homogenous group with a singular history and culture. Instead, as Stein suggests in his reading of black British literature, black cultural production should be understood in terms of 'plural alliances' (2004: 17).

By adopting a transnational optic, this thesis aims to problematize the way in which black British theatre has been historicized, theorized and interpreted. The predominant focus on the *British* aspect of black British theatre in scholarship – in other words the analytic reliance on a national paradigm - has disallowed a more textured understanding of the multiple factors which have shaped it historically, and continue to influence it in the contemporary. In the main, analyses have tended to focus on how black theatre is impacted by and reflective of the black experience in Britain. As a result thematic explorations of (un)belonging, racism and identity are prominent. Yet, black British theatre's relationship with wider global black cultural practices and politics has not been thoroughly explored.

Dahl (1995), Joseph (1999) and Griffin (2003) have taken a less nation-centric approach. In these instances transnational linkages are highlighted by the

adoption of diaspora or migration as a critical framework, or by using a postcolonial methodology. This thesis is indebted to these pioneering studies; however, the need for a comprehensive investigation into the complex ties that have developed between black Britain and global black cultures, and their impact on black British theatre remains. Furthermore, existing critiques which employ diaspora as a critical framework or make use of postcolonial methodologies tend to become confined by dualisms of home / hostland or periphery / centre, and limited to a discussion of themes of migration and / or inter-cultural practices, while ignoring the circulation of ideology and aesthetic exchange. On the other hand, the movement of people, ideas and products between different nations that the term 'transnational' understands, allows for broader and more dynamic interpretive possibilities.

Transnationalism is by no means a recent phenomenon; yet, transnational critical approaches are increasing across diverse fields of enquiry, particularly in sociology, anthropology, politics and history.<sup>17</sup> As the nation becomes seen as increasingly too narrow a paradigm to describe cultural production, transaction and consumption in an increasingly globalized world, transnational methodologies have gained in prominence in discussions of film, literature, poetry and music. Such approaches have also been specifically applied to black British cultural production.<sup>18</sup>

However, transnational approaches to British theatre in general remain underdeveloped. This perhaps has to do with the fact that theatre is so often thought of as site-specific, as opposed to music or the novel which travel more easily. Nevertheless, theatre, too, should be regarded as a medium characterized by its capacity to move beyond national borders, not only in terms of touring productions, but also in its presentation to diverse audiences, the circulation of scripts, choice of subject / setting for plays, and practitioners' appropriation of aesthetic traditions and exposure to international ideas.

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<sup>17</sup> For key texts about transnationalism and transnational approaches in theorizing culture, see Appadurai (1996), Hannerz (1996), Ferguson and Gupta (1997), and Vertovec (2009).

<sup>18</sup> For discussions of black Britishness and black British culture from a transnational perspective see Hall (1990), Gilroy (1993), and Hesse (Ed.) (2000). For examples of transnational discussions of black and Asian British literature, see Ball (2004), Stein (2004), and Lewis (2011). For poetry, see Ramazani (2009). For music, see Zuberi (2001).

This thesis does not argue that transnationalism is a new phenomenon in black British theatre. On the contrary, this thesis argues that black British theatre has always been characterized by both national and transnational impulses. Thus, in large part, this thesis is a mapping of a trend that has always been in existence. At the same time it poses the question: what does a transnational perspective yield when applied to black British theatre? The following section will explore different aspects of transnationalism in order to build a framework for how the term will be understood and applied throughout the rest of the thesis.

### **Transnationalism and Theory**

Globalization, which describes the various (often inter-related) economic, political and social relations that occur at a worldwide level as a result of reductions in world-space and world-time, has changed the way in which we operate in the world (Steger, 2003/2009: 22). Technological advancements have been closing the gap between places, knitting distances together to create what McLuhan famously termed the 'global village' (1962: 43). The movement of people and products has stimulated the transfer, adoption and adaptation of cultures, resulting in the persistent global impingement on the local.

Although transnational perspectives describe relationships that occur between and across nations, as opposed to globalization which adopts a singular global unit of analysis, transnational processes are facilitated by globalization, and a transnational perspective emerges from the development of what theorists such as Robertson (1992) and Waters (1995/2001) have described as a 'global consciousness'. Thus, in tandem with the consolidation of globalization as a 'buzz word' in the 1990s, since the end of the twentieth century, transnationalism has provided 'a new analytic optic which makes visible the increasing intensity and scope of circular flows of persons, goods, information and symbols triggered by international labour migration' (Caglar qtd in Vertovec, 2009: 13-14).

Transnationalism, however, is not to be confused with internationalism. This thesis follows Vertovec's distinction between the two processes. According to

Vertovec, the transnational differs from the international in that the latter implies 'national government interaction and the back and forth movement of peoples and goods', while the former 'sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders' (2009: 3).

The earliest usage of the term 'transnational' possibly occurred in 1916, when Randolph Bourne used it to describe the USA a 'trans-national' nation, created and shaped by its diverse immigrant communities (Frassinelli, Frenkel, & Watson, 2011: 2). For Bourne, transnationalism was fundamentally linked to the movement of people and described a social characteristic that today is more commonly referred to as multiculturalism. The terms, however, are not synonymous. Nevertheless, today transnationalism remains, although by no means exclusively so, tightly associated with describing migratory associated phenomena.

In particular, the notion of borders is central to transnationalism. However as opposed to sites of separation, a transnational perspective draws attention to borders as sites of confluences and crossings. Furthermore, movement across borders is not restricted to people, but also includes the circulation of products and ideas. As a result, transnational practices and processes can be perceived to operate within and through physically rooted communities. Thus, transnationalism understands that in a globalized world characterized by increased mobility, human relationships and social practices are not determined solely on account of one's geographic location or close proximity to other people (Waters, 1995/2001: 5). Transnationalism is frequently used to describe the maintained connection immigrant communities sustain with their original homelands. For this reason, there is much slippage between the more recent term 'transnationalism' and the classically originated term 'diaspora'.

The study of diasporas is linked with a transnational approach, whereby diasporic communities provide exemplary models of social practices and relations that cut across national borders. The word 'diaspora' literally translates as 'the scattering of seeds' from the Greek *speiro* (to sow) and *dia* (over), and was initially used to describe the dispersion of the Jews from Israel. As a result, typologies of diaspora have taken the Jewish experience as a starting point in



defining its characteristics. For instance, Safran argues that the notion of a homeland – material and symbolic – underlies all diasporic communities: their (forced) separation from it, desire to return, continued nationalism, shared myth of a homeland and their marginalization / self-separation in the host country (Safran, 1991-4).<sup>19</sup> More recently, however, the term has come to be applied to immigrant communities in general who share a sense of collective identity.

Contemporary diasporas may be characterized by some, but not all, of the above criteria. Not every diaspora has the desire to return to a homeland, nor do all diasporic subjects experience marginalization in the nation of residence. Dispersion from the country of origin may or may not be the result of a painful experience (Reis, 2004: 45). The transatlantic slave trade entailed the forced removal of black people from Africa to the Caribbean and the USA, thereby creating what is referred to as the African diaspora. However, the migration of blacks to Britain that has occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century has seen the formation of contemporary diasporas created as a result of multiple factors, including people seeking improved economic opportunity, fleeing persecution as asylum seekers / refugees or other social imperatives such as marriage. In this sense, the Caribbean immigrants who came to Britain in the post-war period can be seen as a double diaspora, as their presence in the Caribbean may be traced back to slavery whereas their movement to Britain stemmed from the search for economic opportunity. And, while blacks in the Caribbean and the USA share a common historical diasporic moment, the black diasporic communities in Britain do not. Thus, although contemporary immigrant communities in Britain who originate from Africa are a diaspora, they are unrelated to the historical event of the slave trade which created the original African diaspora. It is worth remembering that the black presence in Britain is largely a result of people seeking a better life (cf King, 2004). Comparisons with the majority of the African American population – a diaspora formed from slavery – must therefore be treated with caution.

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<sup>19</sup> For foundational diaspora scholarship, see Safran (1991), Clifford (1994), Cohen (1997) and Sheffer (2002). For a collection of essays which bring together the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism, see Bauböck and Faist (Eds.) (2010).

The importance of the homeland has long been a focus for those studying diasporas. However, Tsagarousianou argues that by stressing the overlying importance of a homeland to diasporas, the term becomes limited to references of nostalgia and ignores other influences which inform their experiences:

Diasporas should better be seen as depending not so much on displacement, but on connectivity, or on the complex nexus of linkages that contemporary transnational dynamics make possible and sustain (Tsagarousianou 2004 : 52-55).

The notion of connectivity is useful in that it draws attention to the 'in-between space' that forms a bridge between two places: home and hostland, at the confluence of which the diasporic subject is positioned (Bhabha, 1994: 4). In this light, a major characteristic of diasporas is the way in which they articulate a hybrid culture or identity, drawing influences from both home and host lands (Kalra, Kaur, & Hutnyk, 2005: 71).

Because of this double heritage, diasporas are seen to share similar traits with post-colonial subjects, whose positioning between the culture of the colonizer and their local, traditional culture has been thoroughly discussed.<sup>20</sup> Thus, studies of diasporic cultures tend to use the same words that have developed in postcolonial theory which similarly focus on cultural intermixture. In particular, terms such as hybridity, creolization, metissage and syncretism dominate the discourse. Furthermore, contemporary African and Caribbean diasporas in the UK are made up of post-colonial peoples, and their formation is tied up with the history of British imperialism.

In-line with post-colonial theory and frameworks that employ hybridization and syncretism, diasporic cultures are also often perceived as oppositional to dominant discourses / hegemonies. Through the articulation of these hybridized identities, cultural theorists have argued that diasporas undermine essentialist notions of a 'pure culture', a claim which lies at the heart of racist and nationalist

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<sup>20</sup> For foundational postcolonial texts / discussions, see Said (1978, 1993), Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989, 1995), and Bhabha (1994, 1990). For discussions specific to drama, see Gilbert and Tompkins (1996), and Balme (1999).

discourses (Kalra et al., 2005: 72). Diasporas are seen not only to challenge notions of fixed identity but also provide a counter-discourse to established and dominant narratives of collective cultural identity. Thus, the term diaspora has also come to be applied not only to migration-related processes but also as a metaphor which expresses a hybrid condition of modernity, which challenges Eurocentric assumptions (see Hall (1990) and Bhabha (1994)).

However, there is a danger of using terms like 'hybridity' and 'diaspora' as a trope to describe the modern traveler, unhampered by borders and belonging to multiple places, and as a celebration of cultural heterogeneity and difference. As Clifford argues, this does not take into account the often painful experience of dislocation that produces diasporas, and often defines minority experiences in the hostland:

Theories and discourses that diasporize or internationalize 'minorities' can deflect attention from long-standing, structured inequalities of class and race [...] Moreover, at the level of everyday social practice cultural differences are persistently racialized, classed and gendered. Diaspora theories need to account for these concrete cross-cutting structures (1994: 313).

While, on one hand, diasporic hybridity is a useful tool in dismantling 'immutable' hegemonies, on the other, it is important to ground the diasporic experience in the (dis)location of the new home; thus, emphasizing that diaspora does not equate to rootlessness, but rather encompasses uprooting and the process of laying new roots down. As Brah states: 'home is both a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination [...] on the other hand, home is also a lived experience of a locality' (1996: 192). In the case of second and third generation black Britons, many of whom have never been to the country of their (grand)parent's origin, they are part of a diasporic community; yet one that is defined by their uniquely British experiences. It should also be noted that blacks have also had an impact on the host society. Brah highlights this reciprocity in her concept of 'diaspora space', where those that have relocated are impacted by and have an impact on those that were already located (1996: 208).

In the main, discussions of the black British as a diaspora tend to discuss diaspora in dual terms of home / hostland, usually the Caribbean / Britain. However, the relationship with other African diasporas, particularly the USA, and with Africa itself, is often not explored in great depth:

One of the hallmarks of diaspora as a social form is the 'triadic relationship' between a) globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups; b) the territorial states and context where such groups reside; and c) the homeland states and context whence they or their forebears came (Vertovec, 2009: 4).

Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) provides an important model that attempts to describe the triadic relationship that has been created among blacks in the diaspora. Unlike other transnational models, however, which maintain the integrity of the nation, Gilroy's concept dispenses with the nation. He chooses, rather, to locate his analysis in the 'post-national' triangular space between Africa, the Americas and Europe which he calls the Black Atlantic. For Gilroy, the metaphor ('chronotope') of the ship is central, as it evokes the transnational movement of people, ideas and products, as well as references the slave trade, which Gilroy identifies as the starting point of the African diaspora. Thus, he insists that the African diaspora began with rupture and in movement, and the resultant cultural and political formations that have developed should be perceived in terms of 'routes' and not 'roots' (133). Indeed, he aggressively attacks cultural and political discourses that emphasize the idea of 'roots' which he sees as a legacy of Euro-American nationalist ideology:

the intellectual heritage of Euro-American modernity determined and possibly still determines the manner with which nationality is understood within black political discourse. In particular, this legacy conditions the continuing aspiration to acquire a supposedly authentic, natural, and stable 'rooted' identity (30).

Instead, borrowing Du Bois' notion of 'double consciousness' (1903/2008), Gilroy sees black Atlantic identity as '[s]triving to be both European and black'

(1). This condition encapsulates the tension 'of weighing the claims of national identity against other contrasting varieties of subjectivity and identification' (30). Thus, black culture and politics should be read as occupying a space between absolutist views of ethnicity and nation. The Black Atlantic is therefore defined as a transnational 'political and cultural formation' (19), characterized by 'this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity' (19). Ultimately, analyses of black politics and culture require an interrogation of 'whether nationalist perspectives are an adequate means to understand the forms of resistance and accommodation intrinsic to modern black political culture' (29).

One of the most interesting aspects of Gilroy's argument is that he is opposed to essentialist types of 'Black' politics, what he calls a 'brute Pan-Africanism' (31), that claim authenticity and purity. However, he is equally critical of the opposing, pluralist position which, seeing blackness as 'an open signifier', 'seeks to celebrate complex representations of a black particularity that is *internally* divided: by class, sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, economics, and political consciousness' and thus reject the 'unitary idea of black community' (32). He argues that:

The difficulty with this second tendency is that in leaving racial essentialism behind by viewing 'race' itself as a social and cultural construction, it has been insufficiently alive to the lingering power of specifically racialised forms of power and subordination (32).

Gilroy maintains that identifying a 'unifying dynamic or underlying structure of feeling in contemporary black cultures' remains important to theorizing black identity and exploring the similarities and differences between black cultures (80). He argues that, despite differences, there are 'fragile psychological, emotional and cultural correspondences' (81) and that 'affiliations can be identified' (81). He likens his project to feminism, which, he identifies, has 'formulated stimulating conceptions of the relationship between identity and difference in the context of advancing the political project of female emancipation' (81). Likewise, the Black Atlantic becomes a way of exploring

difference, yet remains a model that is based upon racial solidarity borne from the experience of political oppression and resistance.

The Black Atlantic provides a model that allows one to conceptualize blackness in terms of solidarity forged historically through social, cultural and political interaction and exchange, without purveying essentialist and homogenous notions. It is a model that is important to this study, in that it allows us to focus not only on cultural intermixtures, but on the historical contexts which have enabled them. Gilroy's model also draws on and exceeds the parameters of a diasporic optic or postcolonial methodology by stressing not just the politics of culture, but also the politics of race. Finally, Gilroy also rejects notions of a homeland and of an authentic rooted self and collective culture in favour of a culture and identity that has developed in perpetual motion and thus one that disrupts notions of fixity and essentialism.

A transnational framework for black British theatre is one that must necessarily draw on diaspora, postcolonialism and Black Atlantic theory in its conceptualization. However, transnationalism does not only provide a theoretical frame, it describes a lived experience and complex identity.

### **Transnationalism and Migration**

Traditionally, immigration models were oriented around the assumption that immigrants would eventually settle permanently in the host community. According to such views, over time and through subsequent generations, immigrant communities would fully acculturate into the nation. Although a psychic and cultural connection to the homeland, particularly among first-generation immigrants, was acknowledged, more material connections were considered to be disrupted.

Recently, however, studies have emerged which analyze the way in which connections to the homeland are maintained, not only by the first but also by subsequent generations. Late twentieth-century advancements in transport and communication technologies, along with the liberalization of the world economy, have significantly impacted immigration trends and experiences. Rapid

globalization has redefined how people inhabit spaces, whether physically, psychically and / or virtually. For many immigrants and their children, maintaining ties to the homeland and the wider diasporic community has become increasingly possible. In such instances, identification with a single nation is rendered more tenuous. Furthermore, although ties to multiple nation spaces are becoming a more visible feature of contemporary immigrant experiences, studies have begun to reveal that such transnational connections have existed well before the late twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

Although a key struggle in British race relations has been to disassociate the words black and immigrant, it is worth re-instating the link without denying blacks a claim to Britishness. After all, citizenship – imagined or material / legal – need not be confined to the singular. Moreover, acknowledging that black settlement in Britain remains a very recent phenomenon allows one to consider the legacy of immigration, which continues to shape much black theatre as well as account for recent arrivals that continue to diversify the black British demographic.

A number of first-generation immigrants who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s are still alive and have strong relationships with their British-born (grand)children. A transnational perspective places emphasis on inter-generational transfers of knowledge and the impact of this on identity formation and cultural expression (Quirke, Potter, & Conway, 2009: 14). It allows for an investigation into the continuities and cleavages between generations since the point of migration, which communities with a much longer history of settlement simply do not have. It also keeps alive the maintained connection with the homeland by first and later generations. These ties find concrete expression through return migration / visits, economic (through the form of remittances) and political involvement with the (ancestral) homeland, as well as through psychic and cultural links. In terms of theatre, these issues continue to inflect plays in a number of ways, from plays

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<sup>21</sup> For seminal discussions of migration using a transnational framework, see Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc (Eds.) (1992), and Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc (1993). For a discussion of the history and application of transnationalism in relation to migration, see Nieswand (2011: 14-36). For a collection of essays exploring Caribbean migration through a transnational lens, see Gowricharn (2006). For a discussion of African immigrants in the USA that uses a transnational framework, see Arthur (2010).

set in the homeland, plays that explore inter-generational themes and plays which draw on cultural practices from the homeland for their aesthetic.

Furthermore, the black population in Britain continues to be redefined by the arrival of new immigrant communities. This problematizes the notion of indigeneity that has begun to emerge in discussions of black British theatre (see Osborne, 2006a: 96). Where 'indigenous' discourses relegate the mass migration of blacks to Britain to the immediate post-war period, the substantial African migration that has occurred since the 1990s becomes conveniently ignored. Although the term indigenous and its implication of irrefutable belonging has merit as an argument for black inclusion, the term is uncomfortably entwined with nationalist discourses. Invoked to differentiate those of the nation from the 'other', it ironically reinstates and repeats the them / us binary that disallowed blacks from being seen as British in the first place. Thus, the term's use to describe second and third-generation black Britons problematically distinguishes blacks born here from those who were not, but who nevertheless have grown up in the UK. It gives British-born blacks a measure of authenticity and a stronger claim to entitlement over new arrivals. In turn this begs the question: where do new arrivals sit within existing histories of black Britain which take the Windrush-generation of the 1950s as their starting point?

Deciding on who is British becomes difficult when it comes to those who immigrated to the UK as adults. Some naturalized. Others did not. Can one escape Britishness by electing not to take citizenship but nevertheless living permanently in the UK? Mustapha Matura and Biyi Bandele are both first-generation immigrants. The former arrived in Britain as an adult in the 1960s and the latter in the 1990s. However Matura is considered a black British playwright, while Bandele is not. Since immigrating to the UK, Bandele has written a number of plays set in Nigeria and England. He is firmly entrenched in the Nigerian canon as a novelist and playwright, yet his work is never discussed as British. Should Matura and Bandele's work be compared because of their experiences as first-generation immigrants despite a thirty-year difference in



date of arrival? Or is it more appropriate to compare Bandele with second-generation Roy Williams, with whom he shares a similar age?<sup>22</sup>

Those who belong to the 1.5-generation, i.e. those who were born in one country but immigrated at a very early age, further complicates how Britishness is demarcated. Caryl Phillips for instance was born in the Caribbean but grew up in the UK since the age of six months. More complicatedly, Oladipo Agboluaje was born in the UK and is therefore second-generation. However, he grew up in Nigeria and returned to Britain as an adult where he has since written a number of plays set both in Britain and Nigeria. These transnational biographies problematize how we define Britishness and destabilize the term indigenous as a valuable descriptor.

A transnational model also problematizes the linear historicism of black British theatre analyses. The genealogy of black British theatre is typically discussed in the following way: the first generation of playwrights who emerged between the 1950s and 1970s retained strong connections with their countries of origin. Their plays were often entirely set in their homelands or, when set in the UK, focused on themes of alienation, (un)belonging, disillusionment with the 'Mother Land' and expressed a nostalgic yearning for home. Their British-born children (the second generation), writing in the 1980s and 1990s, focused on issues of identity wrought by their in-between status as both British-born and children of immigrants, yielding dominant themes of inter-generational culture-clash, (un)belonging, self-discovery and racial marginalization. Although there are no third-generation playwrights as yet, the second generation, writing since the millennium, have tended to focus on this new generation, exploring social issues affecting the black community and representations of youth who, in Hall's words, 'look as if they *own* the territory' (1987: 44). It is too often assumed that black British theatre has moved away from the first-generation's preoccupation with themes of migration and entered into an exploration of third-generation youth by second-generation playwrights. However, this approach discounts the prevalence of migration themes in work by new arrivals. It also means that when such themes are taken up by second-generation playwrights, these plays

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<sup>22</sup> For a similar discussion on categorizing black British authors along generational lines, see Stein (2004: 5-7).

are sidelined in discussions of their work in favour of their plays which privilege the here and now.

A transnational perspective is also useful in discussing movement that is not restricted to immigration. International travel is an equally important element to consider in terms of transnational processes. A number of black British practitioners have travelled extensively where they have been influenced by exposure to work in other countries or through producing work internationally (for example, Lennie James and Kwame Kwei-Armah). In the opposite direction a number of foreign nationals have spent a substantial time working in the British theatre: Rufus Collins (USA), Pat Maddy (Sierra Leone), Edgar White (Caribbean / USA) have all played instrumental roles in black British theatre. Many of these practitioners were, in turn, shaped and influenced by their experiences in Britain, and returned to their homelands where they implemented newly acquired approaches and understandings (for example, Soyinka). Acknowledging this cosmopolitanism that characterizes the black artistic community provides insight into the various outer-national traditions and approaches that have shaped it. Finally, non-British activists who have travelled to the UK have also had an important impact politically as well as artistically (for example, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X).

### **Transnationalism and Cultural Identity**

Existing critiques of black British theatre have drawn attention to how the intermixture of homeland / hostland cultures finds theatrical representation. Semiotic analysis rooted in postcolonial theory and / or diaspora frameworks highlights how African and / or Caribbean cultural practices are re-inscribed within Britain, resulting in hybrid forms. Typically, such approaches argue that this syncretism undermines essentialist notions of British culture and Britishness. Nevertheless, discussions that trace the transformation of cultures carried over to Britain, and how they are incorporated into black theatre, still merit expansion. For example, African British plays have received little attention in terms of their use of cultural practices rooted in specific ethnic / national traditions. The fact that cultural practices from Africa or the Caribbean are already deeply syncretic should also be remembered so that assumptions aren't

made about these cultures as 'authentic' or discrete with an inherent ability to undermine hegemonies.

The representation of blacks in plays reveals a certain amount about black British social spaces which are transnationally informed. The portrayal of characters in a realist mode who brand themselves in various ways (through language, clothes, outlook), and their ability to code-switch between identities, draws attention to their sense of multiple belonging and in-between placement. By occupying these transnational social spaces, characters undermine notions of a singular national identity. Acknowledging the occupation of transnational social spaces also reframes perspectives that perpetually describe black Britishness in terms of oppression. If black Britons are only described in terms of the nation, then the discourse becomes limited to racism and marginalization. However, identification with other spaces channels discussion towards connection, solidarity and community.

The importance of locating black British theatre's influences and the different traditions from which it draws, is highlighted using a transnational optic. The question of influence and tradition remains largely underexplored in relation to black British drama. A transnational perspective problematizes assumptions that practitioners 'from a particular place by default situate their writing in an aesthetic tradition that derives foremost from their own or their parents' or their grandparents' birthplaces' (Stein, 2004: 16). Furthermore, it should not be assumed that influences and tradition are necessarily inherited from previous generations. The issue at stake, as McLeod points out in his discussion of black British literature, is that if we only regard black *British* art within the space of the nation, then there is the danger of 'falsifying the mechanics of black British creativity and tradition'; if analyses become 'spatially constricted', this will impact negatively upon the way an artist's work is 'mapped, remembered and read' (2006: 98).

Where playwrights set work outside the nation (for example Roy Williams' early work is set in the Caribbean), their plays are often sidelined in discussions that favour work located in Britain and which is specifically targeted towards British issues – especially racism. Similarly, the outer-national influences in plays (for

example, those found in plays by Kwame Kwei-Armah) are usually glossed over. Osborne states:

Much of the neglectful reception of new black writing appears to stem from the lack of knowledge of the cultural networks and writing worlds in which these playwrights circulate and from where they draw their inspiration. Their specificity and individuality is too easily generalized into transience and mediocrity as though the black presence in Britain will somehow go away or eventually become assimilated into a monolithic cultural greyness (2006a: 98).

A more thorough understanding of the diverse influences and traditions which shape black British theatre is necessary for a deeper understanding of the work. Such perspectives help shift discussions of black British theatre beyond being framed simply in terms of resistance, and towards a discussion of inter-culturalism that exists among blacks in the diaspora and with Africa.

### **Transnationalism and Politics**

The resistance model, however, remains central to a discussion of black British theatre. However, a transnational approach extends the resistance paradigm hitherto focused on the politics of culture towards a discussion of the politics of race. Because transnational relationships are formed over time as well as distance, a transnational perspective forces an acknowledgement of the historical links that have been forged politically among blacks in the diaspora and in Africa. Strategies of resistance therefore become contextualized in global anti-slavery, anti-colonial and anti-racism movements and discourses, around which a politics of solidarity has emerged. This raises the question: to what degree is black British theatre influenced by, and how does it articulate, a politics of brother / sisterhood based on race, gender and class?<sup>23</sup>

The focus on the history of black politics also forces a historicizing of specific terms commonly used in black British theatre theory. Terms such as diaspora

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<sup>23</sup> Feminist approaches provide a useful precedent here. For a discussion of transnational feminist politics and black British women's theatre, see Elaine Aston (2003: 125-148).

and creolization have been adopted into postcolonial theory to describe hybrid processes that undermine essentialism and highlight differentiated subject-positions and identities. However, the origins and evolution of such terms are often ignored. Both diaspora and creolization find their roots in conservative notions of essentialism and nationalism. The tension between the contemporary and historical meanings reveals an interesting ambiguity that can illuminate works which often combine both anti- and essentialist perspectives (cf. Goyal, 2010: 12).

Likewise, a transnational perspective draws attention to definitions of blackness. In some instances a capital B or a lower case b is used, which alters the implications of the word B / black. As William Wright puts it, the lower case spelling refers to colour or race (while understanding a shared experience of racism) whereas the uppercase spelling implies ethnic commonality (1997: 49). However, an analysis of black theatre must acknowledge the influence of both perspectives. As Michelle Wright argues about identity:

Seeking to determine Black subjectivity in the African diaspora means constantly negotiating between two extremes. On one end stands ... the hypercollective, essentialist identity, which provides the comfort of absolutist assertions in exchange for the total annihilation of the self. On the other end stands the hyperindividual identity, most commonly found in poststructuralist critiques of racism and colonialism, which grants a wholly individualized (and somewhat fragmented) self in exchange for the annihilation of 'Blackness' as a collective term. Any truly accurate definition of an African diasporic identity, then, must somehow simultaneously incorporate the diversity of Black identities in the diaspora yet also link all those identities to show that they indeed constitute a diaspora rather than an unconnected aggregate of different peoples linked only in name (2004: 2).

Likewise, a transnational perspective draws upon the tensions between the collective and the individual. Drawing attention to the heterogeneous makeup of Britain's black population undermines the 'hypercollective', while simultaneously arguing that through transnational ties, collectivity has, to some extent, been

achieved and sustained. It argues that seeing black Britons as part of the African diaspora united by a common history, culture or politics is fictitious: 'there is no one historical moment or cultural trope to which one can link all of the African diasporic communities now living in the West' (Wright 2004: 3). Yet it acknowledges that belief in this still nourishes linkages, identification and artistic expression.

Although a transnational optic reaches beyond the nation in its explanations of black British theatre production, the national space remains important as a site which shapes practice. As King (2004) argues, a profound social and cultural internationalization of Britain has occurred which is reflected in its literature. Yet this process has happened within a specific and highly contested terrain. Osborne (2010) and Scafe (2007), for instance, have highlighted the way in which institutional racism in the British theatre continues to shape black theatre's production, performance and reception. A transnational perspective also provides a way of engaging with the relational space that exists between black British theatre and other global black cultures / politics / communities, while at the same time rooting black theatre within the specificities of the British socio-political and cultural landscape.

However, the space of the nation need not only be constructed in negative terms, as a site where marginalization and racism have flourished. Britain's functional liberal democracy has rendered it a transnational hub which has brought people together from diverse countries. Historically, this concentration of people from disparate nations has provided a space where black solidarity and resistance could be imagined and implemented. This occurred during the anti-slavery movement in the nineteenth century, in the first half of the twentieth century with the anti-colonial and Pan-African movements, in the post-war period when new nationalities were being debated, the anti-Apartheid movement and in anti-African dictatorship campaigns. Ultimately, Britain has for a long time provided both the opportunity and space for diverse cultures and people to interact, forge alliances and oppose discrimination and oppression.

## Thesis Structure

The black British population is both recent and diverse, a fact reflected in the theatre, and to which a transnational approach is suited. The pressing questions that emerge in the gaps of existing research are, therefore, primarily genealogical. A transnational critical framework allows us to take into account the historical processes that have impacted upon black British theatre's formation and articulation that have not necessarily originated within the nation space.

In much the same way that perceiving local events as occurring in isolation becomes increasingly untenable in a globalized world, a transnational optic facilitates the consideration of questions that demand a broader scope than a simply national one allows: how have non British events, people, ideas and cultures influenced black British theatre? What conditions have facilitated both the circulation of, and identification with, these outer national occurrences and / or people, ideas and cultures? Where do they come from? Why? And how are these influences theatrically reconfigured in the context of the local / national? Is such circulation best described as socio-cultural phenomena or is there a political dimension?

In order to situate black British theatre within the relational spaces of the black diaspora and continental Africa, the following chapters are divided into three geo-cultural spaces: the USA, the Caribbean and Africa. In doing so, this thesis aims to locate continuities and departures between black British theatre and other black traditions that help us to understand the collective term 'black British theatre' in a more meaningful way, beyond the confines of black / white dualisms that national paradigms have hitherto prioritized.

# Chapter 1: The USA

Barbados may have been where my mother came from and where many of my family remain. The country's flag may well have been on my door and I may even have called it 'home', but Barbados never surrounded me in the way that America did [...] Barbados just physically couldn't reach me in Stevenage unless my mother went out of her way to put it there. The United States did not have that problem.

Gary Younge (1999: 18).



## Introduction

Of those scholarly analyses that draw attention to black British theatre's international influences, the role of black America as a site of significant impact is sidestepped in favour of the more immediate and obvious relational spaces of the Caribbean and (occasionally) Africa. Despite Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic's* (1993) frequent bibliographic presence in black British theatre analyses, the UK / US point of the triangular political and cultural relationship that he identifies remains underexplored.

Chambers' (2011) history is the only work to document in detail the black American presence on the British stage. Chambers charts a long and significant relationship, drawing attention to, among others, the achievements of key African American actors such as Ira Aldridge (nineteenth century) and Paul Robeson (interwar period); Broadway transfers such as the American Negro Theatre's staging of Philip Yordan's *Anna Lucasta* (1944, USA; published 1945) in 1947 at His Majesty's and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959, USA; published 1959) in 1959 at the Adelphi; and productions of plays by the 1960s black radical playwrights Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Ed Bullins, and Ntozake Shange in the 1970s. Chambers' meticulous detailing of mainstream and fringe black plays produced in Britain up until the early twenty-first century also provides an important record of the significant number of African American plays performed in Britain.<sup>24</sup> However, although the significance of American Black Power for blacks in Britain during the 1970s is routinely commented on in historical overviews of black British theatre (see Chambers (2011), McMillan and SuAndi (2002), Osborne (2006a), Peacock (1999)), its impact and legacy has not been fully developed. Likewise, a number of analyses of black British dramatists only mention in passing the (often self-confessed) influence of African American playwrights such as Ntozake Shange (on Jackie Kay, Trish Cooke, Valerie Mason John, Mojisola Adebayo and debbie tucker green) and

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<sup>24</sup> For other brief discussions of the African American presence in British theatre before the Second World War, see Osborne (2006b: 65-71). For a discussion of transnational black politics in Britain during the 1930s, exemplified through Paul Robeson's activism and theatre / film work, see Dawson (2009). For detailed biographies of Paul Robeson, see Duberman (1989) and Boyle and Buni (2001). For an account of Ira Aldridge's life and career, see Marshall and Stock (1958). For a collection of essays on Aldridge, see Lindfors (2011, 2007). For a dramatization of events surrounding Aldridge in the title role of *Othello* at Covent Garden in 1833, see Lolita Chakrabarti's *Red Velvet* (2012, Tricycle; published 2012) with Adrian Lester as Aldridge.

August Wilson (on Kwame Kwei-Armah). A detailed study of influential African American individuals, events and epistemologies that have shaped black British theatre and drama since the 1970s is yet to be carried out. This chapter seeks to address this lacuna.<sup>25</sup>

The chapter begins by providing a context for the discussion of the African American influence on black British theatre by outlining the penetration of American culture, white and black, into the post-war British (theatre) landscape, and the broad reaction to this process of Americanization. The discussion concurrently establishes the parameters of a broad framework for analysing the African Americanization of black British theatre based on a sense of black diasporic identification and the re-articulation of black American culture within a black British context.

The chapter then examines the impact of African American Black Power on black British politics and identity, and demonstrates how Black Power ideology, in conjunction with the model of the African American Black Arts Movement (BAM), influenced the formation of and approaches to black theatre in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The legacy of Black Power on African American theatre and, in turn, black British theatre is then discussed.

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<sup>25</sup> Research into the impact of African America on post-war black politics and culture in Britain remains confined to a handful of academic sources. Rosalind Wild's unpublished PhD thesis *'Black was the colour of our fight.' Black Power in Britain, 1955-1976* (2008) provides the only book-length historical account of the impact of America on early post-war black British politics. In *Special Relations: The Americanization of Britain?* (2011), Howard Malchow devotes chapter seven to the influence of the American Civil Rights Movement and Black Power on black Britain. At a more localized level, Jacqueline Brown examines the influence of black America on black Liverpool in her chapter 'Diaspora and Desire: Gendering 'Black America' in Black Liverpool' (2006). Ashley Dawson's chapter 'Black Power in a Transnational Frame' in his book *Mongrel Nation* (2007) highlights the circulation of American Black Power discourses in Britain and discusses the work of the Caribbean Arts Movement, particularly that of Edward (Kamau) Brathwaite, through Black Power modified for a Caribbean British context. A number of journal articles and book chapters examine the African American influence on black British novelists Caryl Phillips, Jackie Kay and Courttia Newland (who are also playwrights). On Phillips and Kay, see Alan Rice (2004) and Leila Kamali (2009). On Kay, see Samantha Pinto (2010). On Newland, see Kwame Dawes (1999). A special issue of the journal *Atlantic Studies* is devoted to tracing America in a range of black British cultural forms, including literature, film, music and theatre. Editors Dave Gunning and Abigail Ward's article 'Tracing black America in black British culture' (2009) outlines the important role black American culture has had in post-war Britain. Of the issue's eight articles, one discusses theatre. In his analysis of Caryl Phillips' play *Rough Crossings*, John McLeod (2009) reads the two black protagonists' conflicting perspectives as representations of the Malcolm X and Martin Luther King divide that polarized black American politics.

Finally, the chapter examines the way in which black America has provided an iconic and mythic resource for black British theatre practitioners, before moving on to a detailed analysis of work by Kwame Kwei-Armah (Caribbean origin) and Mojisola Adebayo (mixed-race of Nigerian and Danish parentage) in order to illustrate the different ways in which black America resonates in contemporary black British drama.

As a whole, the chapter highlights African America as a nodal point in the nexus of transnational relationships that complicates black British identities / identifications; disturbing parochial notions of the nation as the primary / singular site of cultural formation and of diaspora as an over-simplified hybrid model comprising dual influences of home and host cultures.

### **Americanization**

The political and economic dominance of the USA that began before the First World War but accelerated exponentially after the end of the Second, has resulted in an indelible and ubiquitous American cultural footprint cast across every continent. Starbucks, Microsoft, Hollywood films and TV shows like *The Simpsons* and *Friends* all serve as daily reminders of the USA's omnipresence. Anti-American discourses which view America's role in the twentieth century as neo-imperialist and a threat to indigenous national cultures are common, eliciting rebukes of neo-colonization, cries of Coco-Colonization.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, although the depth of the American presence in Britain is contested, its breadth is irrefutable. A walk down the local High Street, visit to the cinema or watching television at home reveal the many ways in which Britain has embraced the cultures of her closest ally; an influence which has been pervasive across social and ethnic / racial strata.

The post-war period elevated American theatre to the echelons of the highly esteemed. According to Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright in *Changing Stages*:

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<sup>26</sup> See Genevieve Abravanel for a genealogy of the term Americanization, which she dates back to Baudelaire who, in 1861, declared his anti-American sentiment by writing: 'so far will machinery have Americanized us, so far will Progress have atrophied in us all that is spiritual, that no dream of the Utopians, however bloody... will be comparable to the result' (qtd in Abravanel, 2012: 4).

*A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (which was also a television series), it was dramas by writers such as Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, and Broadway musicals such as *West Side Story* and *Carousel*, which injected new life into British theatre during the late 1940s and 1950s, emancipating it as an art form that had become 'drained of vigour, etiolated, bound up by class, public puritanism, hypocrisy, self-censorship and state censorship' (2000: 135). In the 1960s, the American theatre also provided a model for the revolutionary tone of the decade. Companies such as the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre and the Bread and Puppet Theatre 'became an inspiring example to the British of how theatre could give minorities a voice to express themselves – about politics or race or drugs or gender – or, simply, sex' (2000: 190). Celebrated American plays by the likes of Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, David Mamet and Tony Kushner, and their dramatization of the rise and demise of the American Dream, have continued to capture the British audience's imagination.

The assimilation of African American cultural forms into the American mainstream has meant that black America has enjoyed similar reach. African American musical forms in particular have defined the quintessential character of American sound. As a result, blues, jazz, soul, R&B and more recently rap / hip-hop, with its attendant culture of language, dress and behaviour have been globally disseminated.<sup>27</sup> Exceptional African American personalities in diverse fields such as politics, media, entertainment and sport have developed as global icons: Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jackson, Will Smith, Tiger Woods, Barack Obama, to name a few. In 1997 Orlando Patterson observed:

For better or worse, the Afro-American presence in American life and thought is today pervasive. A mere 13 percent of the population, Afro-Americans dominate the nation's popular culture: its music, its dance, its talk, its sports, its youth fashion; and they are a powerful force in its popular and elite literatures [...] So powerful and unavoidable is the Afro-American popular influence that it is now common to find people who,

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<sup>27</sup> For discussions on the influence of African American rap and hip-hop on black, white and Asian British youth subcultures and musical forms, see Hesmondhalgh and Melville (2001), Codrington (2006), Wood (2009) and Bennett (2004). For a discussion on the (related) influence of black American music, vernacular and politics on black British spoken word and dub poetry, see Habekost (1993) and Wright (2000).

while remaining racists in personal relations and attitudes, nonetheless have surrendered their tastes, and much of their viewing and listening time, to Afro-American entertainers, talk-show hosts, and sitcom stars (1997: 18).

The African American presence on the British stage has a long history, and plays by African Americans have come to be held in the same high regard as those by white Americans. Godiwala criticizes Eyre and Wright for their history of British theatre, which does not include reference to the black or Asian British contribution (2006b: 6).<sup>28</sup> It is telling, however, that the authors devote relatively lengthy discussions to the importance of African American music (particularly ragtime and jazz), African American representation by whites (including minstrel shows, the antislavery play *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, dramas about race such as O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and *The Emperor Jones*), and African American penned dramas in the post-war period (including Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and August Wilson's plays) to British theatre. Indeed, since the 1950s, a number of African American musicals and dramas have been staged in London's West End and across white-run subsidized venues.<sup>29</sup> In 2009, an all-black production of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot*

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<sup>28</sup> Eyre and Wright do mention some black and Asian British playwrights in passing, such as Mustapha Matura, Hanif Kureishi and Winsome Pinnock; however, the book contains no section that specifically discusses the black and Asian contribution to the British theatre landscape.

<sup>29</sup> A number of important black American productions have been staged in the UK. Langston Hughes' musical *Simply Heavenly* (1957, USA; published 1963) transferred from Broadway to the Adelphi in 1958. It was also staged in 2003 at the Young Vic, transferring to the Trafalgar Studios in 2004. Hughes' *Black Nativity* (1961, USA; published 1992) was staged at the Criterion in 1962 and revived in 1964 at the Vaudeville. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959, USA; published 1959) transferred from Broadway to the Adelphi in 1959. It was also staged by the Black Theatre Co-operative at the Tricycle in 1985, at the Young Vic in 2001 (revived in 2005), and at the Manchester Exchange in 2010. James Baldwin's *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964, USA; published 1964) played at the Aldwych in 1965. It was also staged by Talawa in 2004 at the New Wolsey. Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* (1954, USA; published 1968) was staged at the Saville in 1965. It was also staged in 1987 by Carib Theatre Company at the Tricycle, before transferring to the Lyric Theatre in the West End. Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976, USA; published 1977) was staged at the Royalty Theatre (now the Peacock Theatre) in 1979. Her *Spell #7* (1978, USA; published 1981/1992) was staged by the Women's Playhouse Trust at the Donmar in 1985, and *The Love Space Demands* (1992, USA; published 1992) was staged by Talawa at the Cochrane in 1992. August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984, USA; published 1985) was staged at the RNT in 1989, and at the Liverpool Playhouse in 2004. His *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986, USA; published 1988) was staged at the Tricycle in 1990, at Manchester's Royal Exchange in 2006 and at the Young Vic in 2010. *Fences* (1985, USA; published 1986) was staged at the Liverpool Playhouse in 1990, before transferring to the Garrick. *The Piano Lesson* (1990, USA; published 1990) and *Two Trains Running* (1990, USA; published 1992) were staged at the Tricycle in 1993 and 1996 respectively. *Jitney* (1982, USA; published 2000) received its British premiere at the RNT in 2001. *King Hedley II* (1999, USA; published 2005),

*Tin Roof* (1955) starring James Earl Jones transferred from Broadway to the West End's Novello Theatre, where it became a smash hit and demonstrated the pulling power of an American classic revamped with African American stars.

In the same way that Americanization is viewed by some as a process that threatens to erode an authentic and indigenous British culture, the adoption of African American culture by black Britons has similarly been attacked. In his essay, 'Journey without Maps' (2000), travel and fiction writer Ferdinand Dennis recounts his journey from his native Jamaica at the age of eight to live in England, and his experiences of rootlessness growing up black in London during the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1970s, American Black Power provided an anchor for his identity. As a student he socialized with members of the British Black Panthers, read books such as Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967), Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1967) and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952/1967) and *Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 1961/1963):

I began to describe myself as Black. I wore a black beret, black leather jacket and black corduroy trousers. My language was littered with phrases and words borrowed from other people's experiences. The African-Americans provided the most extensive vocabulary. It did not matter to me then that I had never known a situation of racial segregation, attended an all-Black school or lived in an all-Black neighbourhood. Somehow, I had journeyed from being a Jamaican child immigrant in Britain to becoming Black, a black Briton, and carried within me all the alienation, anger and unease that such an identity, of necessity, must entail (2000: 43).

However, while acknowledging that his identification with black America was because of 'the lack of precedence' in Britain, it is a position he has since moved away from, perceiving his association with the African American

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*Gem of the Ocean* (2003, USA; published 2006) and *Radio Golf* (2005, USA; published 2007) were staged at the Tricycle in 2002, 2006 and 2008 respectively. The Royal Court premiered Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* (1993, USA; published 1993) in 1993, and Suzan Lori-Parks' *Topdog / Underdog* (2001, USA; published 2001) in 2003. The Almeida staged the British premiere of Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog* (1937, USA; published 1974/2007) in 2007, and Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer Prize winning *Ruined* (2009, USA; published 2009) in 2010.

situation as a result of confusing 'likeness with sameness, similarity with identity' (2000: 44). Although he managed to overcome this aggressive black American indoctrination, he perceives the rest of black Britons to be less successful:

Indeed, in recent years I have often thought just as the world is increasingly dominated by American culture, so the small population of people of African descent in Britain have become the victims of African-American cultural imperialism, mimicking styles and taking on concerns which sit uneasily in the British context, rather than engaging in the more difficult task of searching for a language to define the uniqueness of this situation (2000: 44).

Dennis' autobiographical account draws attention to some key issues. Firstly, although he critiques the black British 'mimicking' of black America, he acknowledges that for blacks growing up in Britain during the 1970s, the paucity of black role models; lack of a visible, mainstream black British culture; no precedent of a critical mass of British-born blacks; and a racist environment meant that youths had to look elsewhere for their cultural reference points. Secondly, he indicates a distinction between those that imitate and those that develop an art / poetics / aesthetic that is somehow more authentic by reflecting 'the uniqueness of this situation'. American influence becomes for him, in the first instance, a logical and necessary evil and, in the second, a form of brainwashing and neo-imperialism.<sup>30</sup>

The African American / black British relationship, characterized by both inspiration and antagonism, has a long precedent with important implications for black theatre in Britain. In the inter-war and immediate post-war period, the success of African American actors such as Paul Robeson not only 'raised the profile of diasporic theatre and helped develop a growing body of diasporic actors' (Chambers, 2011: 98), it also frustrated the attempts of British-based colonial black actors to enter the industry. In 1947, actor Robert Adams

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<sup>30</sup> For a less critical, but no less confirmatory account of the influence of black America in Britain during the 1970s, see Gary Younge's *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey Through the American South* (1999). In this travelogue, Younge describes the affinity he felt with African American culture while travelling through the American South as a result of growing up black in London during the 1970s.

(Guyana) wrote an article for Unity's magazine, *New Theatre*, in which he expressed his disillusionment at the British theatre scene, which, he felt, provided limited and stereotyped roles for non-whites and the prevailing belief that, sidelining African and West Indian actors, 'only the American Negro artist had any talent' (qtd in Chambers, 2011: 106). The actor Orlando Martins (Nigeria) echoed Adams' sentiments in the same magazine a year later, extending his criticism to the dominance of plays about the black American experience in the British theatre: 'We are tired of such plays as *Emperor Jones*, *All God's Chillun*, *Little Foxes*, etc. What we really need is some new material written by British authors' (qtd in Chambers, 2011: 107). Surveying the theatre landscape of the first decade of the new millennium, Goddard raises similar anxieties. According to Goddard, the British theatre and public's preference for African American over black British theatre persists to black British theatre's detriment. She cites the Young Vic's staging of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in 2001 and 2004 and Langston Hughes' *Simply Heavenly* in 2002 and 2004, Talawa's production of James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* at the Tricycle in 2004 and the Tricycle's African American Season in 2005/6 as examples of some theatre's 'fill[ing] their culturally diverse quotas by staging commercially viable African-American plays' (2007b: 37).

Stuart Hall has also drawn attention to the close relationship between African America and black Britain:

[A] distinctive feature of the new Black British identity is the extent to which it has been Americanized. Its ideal images, its stylistic references are very powerfully Black American. Even though the style may have been indigenized, given a British home-grown stamp, all the leads come from Afro-America. The lines of Black transatlantic communication grow ever more complex and intense (1997/2000: 129).

By drawing attention to the black British indigenization of African American culture, Hall perceives Americanization as less of a threat, reflecting the view that Americanization is not a harbinger of an inevitable cultural levelling down,



but a global process, vulnerable to local mediation and adaptation.<sup>31</sup> Hall emphasizes cultural transfer and translation, providing a way of mapping the African American influence in black British theatre while drawing attention to the creation of an autonomous, yet influenced, cultural practice.

Nevertheless, the sway of black America on black British culture should not be underestimated. An approach that is too focused on cultural adaptation can also downplay the depth of the influence and divert attention away from how it operates (Malchow, 2011: 5). Examining African America's influence on black British theatre should be contextualized through both the existence of historical networks of black affiliation, as well as by an uneven structure of dominance: the economic and political might of America propels its culture with ease across the Atlantic. Black British theatre's relationship with black America should be perceived in dual terms of American dominance and a more lateral process of identification based upon the notion of a shared experience of racism. Finally, drawing attention to its reinterpretation highlights the possibility of localized adaptation of globalizing processes while undermining notions of the authentic or the indigenous.

In terms of dating the African American influence upon black British culture, Hall's above statement implies that this process is a recent phenomenon. His observation seems to conflict with Dennis' account of the black British experience during the 1970s which draws attention to the significant impact of American Black Power ideology and style. The British Black Power movement may not have had a mass following; however, it was certainly resonant among a number of black (and white) theatre practitioners. Furthermore, even though Black Power was short-lived in the USA and in the UK, its legacy remains visible in both black American and British theatres. American playwrights who emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s were influenced by the preceding Black Power generation of the 1960s. In turn, they influenced black British writers in the 1990s and 2000s, ensuring the (re)circulation of Black Power ideology and its aesthetic / poetic manifestations.

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<sup>31</sup> For a range of views on Americanization and the role of America in globalization, see Beck, Sznajder and Winter (Eds.) (2003). For a discussion from a cultural studies viewpoint of Americanization as a negotiated process of cultural exchange, see Winter (2003).

The following section traces the African Americanization of black Britain to the late 1960s and early 1970s with the advent of Black Power and concomitant adoption of the term Black British. This is also the period (not coincidentally) that is commonly identified as the start of black British theatre proper with the staging of Matura's *Black Pieces* in 1970.

### **British Black Power**

The start of the Black Power Movement (BPM) in the USA is often attributed to when the then leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Stokely Carmichael (aka Kwame Ture who was born in Trinidad but moved to the USA when he was eleven) used the phrase 'Black Power' in a speech made during the Meredith 'March against Fear' in Mississippi on the 16 June 1966 (P. Joseph, 2006a: 1). It marked a turning point in American race politics. Black Power as a term gave a greater clarity to the shift in discourse away from the non-violent, integrationist aims of the Civil Rights Movement towards a more militant, uncompromising nationalist ideology, which placed at its heart the need for radical revolution – physical, mental and spiritual – in the struggle against racism initiated by Malcolm X. Although the BPM was short-lived (peaking in 1972), its contribution should not be underestimated. A number of scholars have argued that the BPM's cultural and political legacy remains visible in the present and has had a more enduring impact than the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>32</sup>

The BPM also had a significant transnational impact. Black Power organizations emerged in the Caribbean, South Africa and the UK.<sup>33</sup> The BPM's international appropriation was facilitated by its ideological extension of Pan-Africanism,

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<sup>32</sup> See Carmichael and Hamilton's manifesto, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967). For a range of critical perspectives on the history of Black Power and its influential legacy on African American politics and identity, see Peniel Joseph (Ed.) (2006b) and Jeffrey Ogbar (2004).

<sup>33</sup> For perspectives on the influence of Black Power in other contexts, see Lux (1972) and Meeks (2009), who discuss Black Power in the Caribbean. An interesting difference in the Caribbean context was that Black Power developed as a political movement against other blacks perceived to be upholding the former colonial system. See Gerhart (1978) for a discussion of Black Power in South Africa, where Black Power was adopted as a political ideology in a black majority versus white minority context. For a discussion of the global impact of Black Power and black revolutionary politics, see West, Martin and Wilkins (Eds.) (2009).

which, in the early twentieth century, flourished among black radicals in the USA, the UK, Caribbean and Africa.<sup>34</sup>

In Britain, the bond with black American politics intensified in the 1950s as the experiences of blacks came to reflect more closely those faced by African Americans than those in the newly independent colonies. Initially, the success of the USA's Civil Rights Movement, with its emphasis on inter-racial co-operation and non-violent protest seemed the most logical model for the UK, where the non-white population was much smaller. In the UK, the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) was formed as a result of Martin Luther King's visit to London in 1964. According to Kalbir Shukra, '[t]he significance of CARD lies in its being the first substantial post-war attempt of black and white activists to intervene in national British politics on the 'race' question' (1998: 19). In its mixture of support from black and white activists, as Shukra highlights, CARD 'was comparable to 1940s' organisations in the USA' (19).

As the 1960s progressed, echoing the changes in the USA, the UK's black population, especially among the youth, embraced the more radical politics of Black Power which emerged in the wake of Malcolm X's assassination in 1965. Malcolm X's message of black nationalism and brief visit to the UK in 1965 also inspired its own British imitation in the form of Trinidadian born Michael X (formerly Michael de Freitas), who co-founded the Racial Action Adjustment Society (RAAS) with Guyanese Roy Sawh and Indian Abdul Patel in 1965. The

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<sup>34</sup> Trinidadian Sylvester Williams established the first Pan-African Congress in London in 1900. From the onset it was a transnational political movement. The 1900 conference was attended by thirty delegates which included people from Africa, the Caribbean, Britain and the USA. Later, Jamaican Marcus Garvey's Universal Improvement Negro Association (UNIA), which was formed in 1914 in New York, would become the largest global black political organization that has ever existed. It was in London during the 1930s with the decline of Garveyism that a new Pan-African movement established itself. A driving force behind the movement was C. L. R. James. James, spurred into action by Italy's invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), founded the International African Friends of Ethiopia (IAFE) with George Padmore (Trinidad), Amy Ashwood Garvey (Jamaica), Ras Makonnen (Guyana), Sam Manning (Trinidad), I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson (Sierra Leone) and Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya). The group formed a core elite of black individuals who were living in Britain at the time. Others included Lapido Solanke (Nigeria), Eric Williams (Trinidad), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Paul Robeson (USA), Harold Moody (Jamaica) and Una Marson (Jamaica). These cosmopolitans, by virtue of the fact that many of them travelled between Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and the USA became the driving force behind early twentieth century black radicalism. The creation of Pan-African organizations in Britain during the inter-war period saw the consolidation of international networks in the fight against colonialism and racism. This continued in the immediate post-war period, led by people such as Ashwood Garvey, James, and Claudia Jones who 'provided an intellectual bridge between the struggles against imperialism and colonialism of the recent past and the struggles for racial equality of the present' (Wild, 2008: 5).

South Asian presence is significant as it highlights an important difference between Black Power / nationalist politics in the USA and in Britain, with the latter reflecting 'a far more cross-cultural character at the grass roots than did its American counterpart' (A. Dawson, 2007: 53).

However, it was in 1967 that Black Power formally arrived in Britain, when Stokely Carmichael spoke at the Dialectics of Liberation conference in London. Carmichael's articulation of Black Power ideology would become a strong model for defining Black Power in Britain.<sup>35</sup> In 1967, Nigerian poet and playwright Obi Egbuna, who moved to the UK after studying in the USA where he had also been involved with the SNCC, founded the Universal Coloured People's Association (UCPA), which became Britain's first Black Power organization.<sup>36</sup>

While black American political activity fuelled a growing black British dissatisfaction, it also fed British right-wing anti-black immigrant discourse. Powell's 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech uses the race riots which erupted in the US in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination, as a portent for British social harmony if black immigration is allowed to continue:

That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect. Indeed, it has all but come. In

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<sup>35</sup> Stokely Carmichael's speech at the Dialectics of Liberation conference in 1967 resonated particularly with Britain's black former colonial residents because of Carmichael's internationalist and African diasporic message. According to Dawson, 'Stokely Carmichael offered his audience a transnational perspective that transformed them from an isolated and outnumbered national minority to an integral part of a militant global majority' (2007: 50). For a transcript of the speech, see Carmichael (1968). For a discussion of the formation of Black Power in Britain, paying particular attention to the contributions of C. L. R. James and Obi Egbuna, see Bunce and Field (2011). Egbuna's personal account of British Black Power is captured in his book *Destroy this Temple: The Voice of Black Power in Britain* (1971).

<sup>36</sup> Egbuna's play *Wind versus Polygamy* (1966, Senegal; unpublished 1966), an adaptation of his novel of the same name (1964), is a comedy about a polygamous African chief. The play explores the theme of modern versus traditional African values. It was performed at the first World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal by the British-based black theatre troupe the Pan African Players. (It was also broadcast on BBC radio in 1966). Egbuna's play *The Agony*, about the six months he spent in Brixton prison in 1968 charged with conspiring to incite murder, was performed by Unity Theatre in 1970 (Chambers, 1989: 394-5).

numerical terms, it will be of American proportions long before the end of the century (Powell, 2010: 50).

Black Power, which rejected the principle that race equality should be negotiated, and instead demanded that it was a right, not a privilege, resonated with the blacks in Britain who were persistently defined as immigrant others.

As Gunning and Ward argue, black British identification with the USA, confirming Enoch Powell's worst fears, led to the American situation being appropriated as:

[...] a model for the racial minority to see itself as part of the nation: not straddled across the dichotomy of colonizer and colonized... but firmly within the dialectic of 'double consciousness' [...] Echoing an American idea, then, allows black Britons to place themselves not on the (post)colonial periphery, but at the centre of the metropolitan nation. In looking to America, a more central role within Britishness is claimed (Gunning & Ward, 2009: 151).

The discourse of Black Power brought with it a fundamental shift in the self-perception of blacks in Britain. Despite its small number of committed London-centric activists who were mainly of Caribbean origin and its short-lived occupancy in the British political landscape, it allowed those of Asian, African and Caribbean heritage, and the very different ethnicities and experiences those broad identities entailed, to see themselves within Britain as a community, as politically 'Black' (Wild, 2008: 131). A Black identity did not efface ethnic particularity; however, it provided the African American idea(l) of an 'imagined community', whose homogeneity in the British case was not ethnic like the African Americans, but was equally based upon the shared experience of historical and contemporary racism, and political solidarity in the fight against oppression.

Wild highlights that, in the British context, it was the BPM's ideas pertaining to 'identity, community control, anti-colonialism and internationalism' that made it so attractive, but that ultimately it was in the sphere of identity (culture, self-

definition, history and pride) that brought about 'the most significant and enduring achievements' (2008: 5). These spheres of Black Power identity that Wild identifies would become the central points of reference for the new black British theatre of the 1970s.

Before the 1970s, on the whole, the African and Caribbean dramatists and theatre practitioners living in England were more concerned with depicting the homeland than the experience in the hostland. Plays about the black experience in Britain were few, often represented by white dramatists (such as Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958, Theatre Royal Stratford East; published 1959)) or white groups, in particular the Unity Theatre. Attempts at black theatre companies were short lived and struggled to operate professionally. Examples include: the Negro Theatre Company (1948), initiated by Edric Connor; the West Indian drama Group (1956-9); the Ira Aldridge Players (1961), both initiated by white directors from Unity, Joan Clarke and Herbert Marshall respectively; Lloyd Reckord's New Day Theatre Company (1960); Clifton Jones' The New Negro Theatre Company (1960) and Edric and Pear Connor's Negro Theatre Workshop (1961-1968).<sup>37</sup>

A continuous tradition of black playwrights engaging directly with the black experience *in* Britain began with the birth of the alternative theatre or fringe in the 1960s. During this period, the theatre, 'inspired by the revolutionary fervour of the student, civil rights and anti-war movements', sought to explore important socio-political issues and to challenge the status quo of the mainstream (Kershaw, 2004a: 357). The political and cultural inspiration, which fuelled artistic experimentation, resulted in 'a flourishing international traffic in culture' predominantly through the 'Atlantic axis' (Kershaw, 2004a: 357). Mustapha Matura, the most well-known of the first-generation playwrights describes the changes which were occurring in the USA and filtering across the Atlantic as political and artistic fertilizer which would nurture the voice of the new generation of black artists in Britain:

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<sup>37</sup> For details of the activities of these early companies, see Chambers (2011: 111-116 and 125-133). For a history of Unity theatre and its productions, see Chambers (1989).

Then 1968 arrived. The social and economic changes amongst young people began to create other forms of expression: the fringe, the underground – the alternative culture was born. It was the time too of the Vietnam war; flower power; revolutionary politicians cohabiting with peace and love devotees; rallies at the Roundhouse in London, political as well as artistic in content. It was also a time of serious personal and psychological changes for me, my friends and other colonized people around the world; for as well as flower power in 1968 there was also Black Power. Information and knowledge about my life and history was arriving at breakneck speed, the effects of which were so dramatic and inspiring I felt an urge, a need to speak, to tell it like it is, to pass it on, to confirm. The alternative culture had also given birth to alternative theatre, which attracted me by its accessibility and immediacy (Matura, 1992: ix).<sup>38</sup>

There became a need to explore not just the politics of the homeland, but to represent what life was really like for blacks in Britain and, to quote a slogan popular among African American artists as Matura does above, ‘to tell it like it is’. LeRoi Jones (who changed his name to Amiri Baraka in 1968), one of the most prominent voices of America’s Black Arts Movement (BAM), wrote:

[...] as long as the Negro writer contents himself with the imitation of the useless ugly inelegance of the stunted middle-class mind [...] and refuses to look around him and ‘tell it like it is’ - preferring the false prestige of the black bourgeoisie or the deceitful ‘acceptance’ of *buy and sell* America [...] he will be a failure, and what is worse, not even a significant failure. Just another dead American (1966/2009: 134-5).

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<sup>38</sup> 1968 was a particularly significant year in the USA which saw large scale protests against the Vietnam War, race riots, and the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. 1968 also witnessed violent student protests in France and Mexico, and the threat of an Olympic Games boycott by a number of African nations if South Africa was allowed to compete. At the same games, African American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos gave a Black Power salute when they were awarded their medals. In England, 1968 saw violent anti-Vietnam War protests in London, Enoch Powell delivered his ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, James Earl Ray, the man who shot Martin Luther King, Jr., was apprehended in London, and the Race Relations Act was passed. It was also a significant year in British theatre which saw the abolition of censorship.

Jones' sentiments find theatrical representation in his play *Dutchman* (1964, USA; published 1964), which received its British premiere in 1967 at the Hampstead Theatre,<sup>39</sup> by which time the BAM (c. 1965 – 1975) was well underway in America.<sup>40</sup> The BAM, which became the theatrical incarnation of Black Power politics, provided an important model for black British theatre's initial voices.

### **The Black Arts Movement (BAM)**

To understand the artistic influence of American Black Power on black theatre in Britain, it is necessary to examine the way in which Black Power in the USA found artistic representation through the work of the BAM. The movement was widespread, although Harlem was its epicentre, and comprised a number of poets, playwrights, intellectuals and artists of which Jones / Baraka, Ed Bullins, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Askia Touré and Marvin X are its most distinguished contributors.<sup>41</sup> The BAM defined itself as 'the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept' (Neal, 1968: 29). For its adherents, inspired by the message of black political and cultural nationalism expounded by activists like Malcolm X and the anti-colonial writings of Franz Fanon, the imperative to create a theatre about, by, for and near blacks advocated by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1926 became its driving force.<sup>42</sup> Despite being short-lived, their attempts to express and define a 'Black' aesthetic has had lasting implications.

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<sup>39</sup> *Dutchman* was presented in double bill with *Neighbours* (published 1968) by James Saunders (white British). *Neighbours* echoed *Dutchman* in its exploration of race issues through an antagonistic relationship between a white woman and a black man. *Dutchman* was later staged by the black British theatre company Temba in 1974.

<sup>40</sup> The BAM is seen to begin in 1965 (only to decline in the mid-1970s) when Jones / Baraka founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School (BARTS) in Harlem to be run by and for African Americans.

<sup>41</sup> For overviews of the history and scope of the BAM, see Smethurst (2005) and Collins and Crawford (Eds.) (2006). For historical discussions of the BAM and its specific impact on African American theatre, see Sanders (1988), Benston (2000) and Elam and Krasner (2001).

<sup>42</sup> Du Bois set out his terms for what a 'Negro theatre' should constitute in his article 'Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre' in *The Crisis* in July 1926: 'The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: 1. *About us*. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. *By us*. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. *For us*. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. *Near Us*. The theatre must be in a Negro neighbourhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people' (qtd in M. Williams, 1985: 109).



Despite the differences in approaches and styles of the BAM members, Leslie Sanders notes that the movement's adherents all agreed on several key issues: to create work first and foremost for a black audience; to employ African American and African cultural forms rooted in the urban experience; and that work, whether directly political ('theatre of revolution') or concerned with depicting the lives and experiences of black Americans ('theatre of experience') would meld aesthetics with ethics (1988: 122).

The BAM added a dimension to Du Bois' key aspects for the creation of a black theatre by seeking to create plays *of blacks*. Intrinsic to this notion was the need to evolve a Black aesthetic. In order to access 'a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology' (Neal, 1968: 29) which would provide 'a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic' (Neal, 1968: 29). In the same way that Black Power rejected the assimilatory and conciliatory approach of the Civil Rights Movement, the BAM initiated a radical re-assessment of the black subject's positioning within white society through their arts practice. Their work rejected what they perceived as the measured and Eurocentric tone of writers such as Lorraine Hansberry and instead sought to embrace blackness by confronting the 'truth' about race in America presented through the lens of a black cultural idiom and value system.

In their quest to create a Black aesthetic, the members of the BAM aligned their plays' messages with Black Power ideology, aiming them at ordinary people living on the 'front line'. The settings of 'revolutionary' and 'experience' plays were distinctly urban, supplanting the romantic depictions of the working class (perceived as having 'white' aspirations) or the folk in the south (perceived as pandering to a white stereotype that stretched back to minstrelsy) by the experience of inner-city living. The plays, written in 'African American Vernacular', not only depicted how 'real' urban blacks spoke, they also used language as a weapon, as a way of, to quote another slogan, 'telling it how it is'. Thus, the term 'nigger' was frequently used as a way of reclaiming a word owned by whites to debase blacks and racist terms to describe whites peppered the plays with the intent to show whites what it was like to be the recipient of racial slurs. Intrinsic to the BAM's notion of the Black aesthetic was the social role art should play in helping the black community on its path to self-

determination and self-consciousness. In accordance, they rejected what they perceived to be a Western model of 'art for arts sake', embracing instead a theatre with a clear social function aimed first and foremost at black people:

The Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one. That the contradictions between ethics and aesthetics in western society is symptomatic of a dying culture (Neal, 1968: 31).

This belief channelled a didacticism in their work: the more militant dramas often taught a lesson and advocated the need to overhaul the self and community if self-determination and black consciousness were to be achieved. This was not only reflected in drama but also in the operation of black theatre institutions. A major achievement of the BAM was the establishment of a number of black arts venues across the country which had a strong community focus and became hubs for performances of plays, dance, poetry and debates.

### **Black Power and Black British Theatre**

In 1968 the white British director Roland Rees, recently returned from living in the States, began to stage works in London by the radical playwrights of America's BAM. Between 1968 and 1970, Rees directed five British premieres of Ed Bullins' plays at American expatriate Ed Berman's Ambiance Theatre in Queensway. (Bullins spent the summer of 1968 in London).<sup>43</sup> In these plays, Rees perceived a 'political acumen' that he found 'totally lacking' in British playwriting (qtd in Coveney, 1973a); however, it was something he was keen to nurture (Rees, 1992: 101). When Berman decided to stage a 'Black and White Power Season' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), Rees convinced him that the season should have a black British presence to accompany the African-American perspective. In 1970, Mustapha Matura made his debut with a series of short vignettes entitled *Black Pieces* (published 1972) staged alongside the world premiere of Bullins' *It Bees Dat Way* (published 1972) as well as *Clara's*

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<sup>43</sup> In 1968 Rees staged Bullins' *The Electronic Nigger* (1968, USA; published 1969), *A Minor Scene* (1966, USA; published 1973) and *It Has No Choice* (1966, USA; published 1973). In 1969 he staged *The Gentleman Caller* (1969 USA; published 1970/1971) and *How Do you Do* (1965, USA; published 1967).

*Ole Man* (first produced 1965; published 1969) and Jones' *The Baptism* (first produced 1964; published 1967).

*Black Pieces* comprised three short works: *Dialogue*, *Indian* and *Party*.<sup>44</sup> *Dialogue* features three men watching television and is constructed around the lesson that white consumer culture erodes and impinges on the development of black consciousness and self-determination. *Indian* portrays a group of men whose lust after a white girl gets in the way of finding food. *Party*, the longest of the pieces, satirizes white bohemian fetishization of black men and stresses the need for blacks to overcome this white liberal milieu which limits their political possibilities. The short vignettes were remarkable for depicting the black experience in London and for being written in dialect. According to Peacock, *Black Pieces* significance lay in the fact that 'for the first time, Matura reproduced the authentic voice of the working-class, black West Indians who were attempting to settle in Britain' (1999: 174). Matura's plays are not only remarkable for depicting the black experience in Britain, they are also strikingly similar in theme, style and tone to the BAM plays that Rees had imported.

*Black Pieces*' representation of issues and themes about black self-consciousness, latent racism of white liberals and white women as threats to black self-determination, ally the plays with the style and content of Baraka and Bullins' work which Rees had premiered in London. Like Baraka and Bullins' plays, *Black Pieces* were didactic in tone, naturalist with a touch of absurdity in style and were written in a black (London) vernacular.<sup>45</sup>

The plays reflected Matura's own politicization. Matura, of Indo-Caribbean heritage, was born Noel Mathura in Trinidad in 1939 and immigrated to Britain in the early 1960s. In England, the experience of racism and the political mood of the times led him to identify with the Black Power movement. He self-

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<sup>44</sup> The publication of these plays under the title *As Time Goes By; and, Black Pieces* (1972) includes the unproduced *My Enemy* as part of *Black Pieces*. The piece is about an interview between Mustapha Black, the self-styled Prime Minister of the Black Nation of Britain and a journalist whose daughter is having a relationship with Black. The piece exposes how easily racism erupts when the relationship between blacks and whites becomes personal.

<sup>45</sup> In an interview Matura recalls socializing with American activists and artists in Britain during the late 1960s and 1970s. He cites the important contribution of Baraka and Bullins to the political and cultural shifts that were occurring in Britain at the time and which had an impact on his writing (McMillan, 2000: 257-259).

identified as part of Britain's Black community and, in-line with the trend in the USA of blacks changing their 'slave names' to names that reflected their African heritage, he changed his name from the European 'Noel' to Mustapha. (Mathura became Matura by accident. It was a misspelling in the *Black Pieces* programme which Matura felt had a better sound to it (Rees, 1992: 103).

Like the BAM, who rejected earlier plays such *A Raisin in the Sun* for pandering to white Western values and dramatic traditions, the Caribbean playwrights in Britain during the 1970s also rejected earlier theatrical depictions of life in the Caribbean such as Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (1958, Royal Court; published 1958) for their romanticism in favour of urban and 'front-line' portrayals of black life in England. As Matura states of John: 'In the heat of the cultural and political explosion of the 1960s, we all thought he was an 'Uncle Tom'' (qtd in McMillan, 2000: 259).

Matura's next play and first full-length work *As Time Goes By* (1971, Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh and the Royal Court; published 1972/1992) continued to echo the aims and style of the writers of the BAM. Although it incorporated themes of diaspora and the generation gap between first-generation immigrants and their British-born children, the play was, in the main, a satire of a black / Indo-Caribbean spiritual guru named Ram who, through his pandering to his white hippie clients, is exposed as an Uncle Tom and living an inauthentic existence:

*As Time Goes By* is about a black man living in this country and how he's escaping from the realities of being a black man and not looking at the world, this country, in any political context. A lot of it is about his escapism and how he's pretending and not being himself, not being black, not being his own true identity (Matura qtd in Coveney, 1973b: 29).

Matura's use of language in *As Time Goes By* is the principal way of communicating the play's theme of authenticity. Ram's linguistic imitation of his white clients' repetitive and vapid speech underlines his denial of his roots and identity. (The theme is echoed in the subplot of a Trinidadian father concerned about his son's adoption of a cockney accent and skinhead culture).

Representing the specific West Indian in London linguistic idiom was, following the BAM, a political act which asserted a Black 'auditory' aesthetic, reflective of the black urban 'truth'. On writing in West Indian / London patois, Matura states:

This was, you know, a conscious political act on my part [...] There was a very, very strong motto or rap going on at the time – 'Tell it like it is!' And that is what I thought I was doing (qtd in Rees, 1992: 107).

On the whole, Matura's work lacked the 'savage intensity' of the BAM playwrights (Coveney, 1973b: 28); his work by contextual necessity was tempered. The openly hostile tone of the BAM plays were untenable within the British context where a discreet black theatre and / or audience did not exist. As Rees' 'patronage' indicates, black theatre in Britain depended on white financial, artistic and audience support. The fact that, as a white man, Rees was given permission to stage Bullins' work was remarkable, a point that Rees acknowledges (Rees, 1992: 108).

Of all his plays, Matura's *Black Slaves, White Chains* (1975, Royal Court; published 2012) echoes the BAM most. It is a symbolic meditation on the history of black oppression as well as a parable of resistance. The play depicts three black men chained together who are watched over by a guard who they think is asleep but who is actually dead. In their attempts to escape, they experience sexual temptation from a white woman, a white priest offering salvation and a hailstorm of western epistemology symbolized by books being thrown onto the stage. The play ends with the arrival of a judge who offers the men work in exchange for housing and food but no money. The offer is accepted by two of the men and rejected by the third who refuses to be co-opted. Although the play ends with the third man alone, he defiantly eats the dead guard.

Matura's plays, which initiated similar conversations occurring in America to the British theatre landscape, also provided a model for future playwrights to articulate themes of black consciousness and activism in a British context. It was Alfred Fagon's involvement as an actor in Matura's *Black Pieces* and *As Time Goes By* that inspired him to also become a playwright (Rees, 1992: 109).

Fagon's first play, *11 Josephine House* (1972, the Almost Free Theatre; published 1999), is set in Bristol and focuses on the experience of West Indian immigrants adjusting to life in England. However, his subsequent plays, *No Soldiers in St Pauls* (1974, Metro Club, London; unpublished 1974), *Death of a Black Man* (1975, Hampstead Theatre; published 1999), the one-act *Four Hundred Pounds* (1982, national tour and Royal Court; unpublished 1982), and *Lonely Cowboy* (1985, Tricycle; published 1987/1999), focus on younger generations of blacks in Britain and engage directly with Black Power politics and life on the 'front line'.<sup>46</sup>

A number of black British plays exhibit the BAM's – and Black Power's – influence, evidenced in their thematic and stylistic approach. This is particularly apparent in plays written in the 1970s and 1980s, during which time increased social tensions in the UK ensured that the imperatives of community- and self-empowerment remained pertinent. 'Revolutionary'-style plays which convey a message of solidarity against the white Establishment include Linton Kwesi Johnson's performed poem *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1973, Keskids; published 1974/1983) and Michael McMillan's *On Duty* (1983, Carlton Centre, London; published 1986) and *Brother to Brother* (1996, the Green Room, Manchester; published 2000). These plays are also less linear and echo the symbolism and revolutionary tone of plays by the BAM's members. A number of contemporary dramatists also weave 'education' with 'entertainment' in their works, such as Sol. B. Rivers and Kwame Kwei-Armah.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *No Soldiers in St Pauls* is set in Bristol and focuses on a group of friends in their twenties. In this play, Fagon begins to explore the hold Black Power politics has taken among some black youth who feel trapped within an oppressive and racist system that offers little prospects. *Death of a Black Man* is set in Chelsea and revolves around two 'hustlers', Shokie and Stumpie. However, their plans to make their fortunes takes a dark turn with the arrival of Jackie, Shokie's ex girlfriend and mother of his child. Jackie is middle-class, has a white Jewish partner, and becomes the target of their venom. They keep Jackie hostage and plan to pimp her out to rich white men. The play ends with Jackie slitting her wrists. *Death of a Black Man* is an ambivalent exploration of Black Power. On one level, Fagon satirizes Shokie and Stumpie's beliefs. Their Black Power / nationalist politics is undermined by their greed, their 'ganja' smoking and the way in which they treat women. However, Fagon contextualizes their anger and the play's tragedy in the racism they encounter living in a country where it is impossible to 'convince white people that you are an Englishman' (1999: 129). *Four Hundred Pounds*, set in the 1970s in Finsbury Park, is about two Jamaican friends who earn money gambling in pool games. During a game, one of the friends sees the £400 wager as symbolic of the four hundred years since the Atlantic slave trade began and refuses to sink the black ball with the white. The play provides a critique of black people living a life in England dictated by the need for material gain which compromises black spiritual and emotional enlightenment.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of Sol. B. Rivers's plays as 'edutainment', see Tellis (2006).

The exploration of Black Power politics carried into plays by the second-generation playwrights who emerged in the 1980s. Numerous plays feature (and critique) Black Power characters and stage a conflict between 'conscious' characters versus 'uncle Toms', such as Jimi Rand's *Say Hallelujah* (1977, Keskidee; published 1988) and Caryl Phillips' *Strange Fruit* (1980, Crucible Theatre; published 1981). Individuals battling against a white Western construction of identity are portrayed in dramas such as McMillan's *The School Leaver* (1978, Royal Court; published 1979), Michael Ellis' *Chameleon* (1985, Oval House Theatre; published 1987), Kwei-Armah's *A Bitter Herb* (2001, Bristol Old Vic; published 2001), Courttia Newland's *B is for Black* (2003, Oval House; published 2008) and Roy Williams' *Sucker Punch* (2010, Royal Court; published 2010). Plays by women, such as Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro* (1986, Soho Poly; published 1987), Winsome Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues* (1991, Royal Court; published 1995) and Zindika's *Leonora's Dance* (1993, Cockpit Theatre; published 1993), reveal the painful internalization of white conceptions of beauty and feature protagonists who must discover, to echo a Black Power slogan, that 'Black is Beautiful'.

### **Black Theatre Companies**

In the USA, the short-lived period of the BAM saw the creation of an unprecedented number of theatre companies in response to the understanding that 'a theatre politicized on behalf of black liberation would have to be controlled and funded by blacks' (Watts, 2001: 217). In Britain, the 1970s also witnessed a mushrooming of black arts organizations and theatre companies which continued into the 1980s. Attempts at organizing black theatre companies had been made before; however, Black Power, and the raised awareness in cultural nationalism, brought with it new imperatives for artists to have a space in which to develop their art and to communicate with, and build, a black audience. Ogbar defines black nationalism as a 'group consciousness among black people and the belief that they, independent of whites, can achieve liberation by the creation and maintenance of black institutions to serve the best interests of black people' (2004: 3). Black Power's imperatives of self-determination and collective opposition fuelled the creation of a number of black British organizations, for which black nationalism provided an ideological

foundation. As Chambers states, in spite of the achievements of individual playwrights in raising the profile of black theatre, during the 1970s 'the struggle for collective existence remained the bedrock' (2011: 140).

Initially, black theatre companies were multiracial in their approach and / or organization. The Dark and Light, established in 1969 by the Jamaican Frank Cousins, set its sights on becoming 'the first professional Multi-Racial Theatre company in Great Britain' (qtd in Chambers, 2011: 140). Dark and Light was significant as the first black-led theatre company to secure its own premises. The company balanced a repertoire of plays by black and white writers from the USA, Africa, and the Caribbean, which ranged from the more radical and experimental to family friendly pantomimes and well-made plays. African American productions included Baraka's *The Slave* (1964, USA; published 1964) in 1972, and Lonne Elder III's *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* (1969, USA; published 1969) in 1974. Indeed, Michael Coveney's summation of Dark and Light was that it failed to define itself strongly enough; in attempting to pander to black and white audiences, it ultimately alienated its target 'Brixton' audience:

They get money from the Arts Council to tour the country, but they attract little public interest in Brixton itself and probably the main reason for this is that the 'blackness' of their work is often sublimated in a vague attempt at generally acceptable standards of production. White production, that is. Thus a reasonably able presentation of Le Roi Jones's *The Slave* was given on a double bill with a pleasantly agreeable comedy about a coloured lodger in London; a potentially powerful performance by Thomas Baptiste in the title role of O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* was lost in a fussy, slow-moving Anglo-Saxon production; and occasional sorties into indigenous, Jamaican writing are blighted with ill-defined performances and jolly nigger jiggling (Coveney, 1973b: 28).

As the 1970s progressed, black theatre would become increasingly separatist in reaction to the lack of representation in, and access to, the white-run mainstream and, as Coveney's words suggest, the pressure to conform to 'blackness' from both blacks and whites. In 1975, Cousins left Dark and Light, and was replaced by Norman Beaton (Guyana), Jamal Ali (Guyana), and Rufus



Collins (USA). The company was also renamed Black Theatre of Brixton. The new title was significant. The term 'Black' was indicative of the, by then, widespread adoption of the American term as a marker of identity among non-whites in political solidarity against racial oppression, a fact reflected in the company's multi-ethnic leadership. The incorporation of 'Brixton' into the name highlighted the company's community-oriented approach aimed at the grass-roots level, or what Black Power activists called 'the front-line' (Chambers, 2011: 143).

By the mid-1970s, black cultural nationalism drove artistic debates and explorations. The 1970s saw the emergence of a number of companies and community / arts centres, such as The Radical Alliance of Poets and Players (RAPP), founded by Guyanese Jamal Ali; Temba, founded by South African Alton Kumalo in 1972; the Keskidee Centre, founded by Guyanese Oscar Abrams in 1970; and the Drum Arts Centre, founded by Guyanese Cy Grant and Zimbabwean John Mapondera in 1974. Keskidee provided a space for poetry readings, theatre, music, art, and political meetings and rapidly became an important location on the black British cultural and political map. In 1972, Keskidee became home to the Caribbean Arts Movement (CAM) in its final year.

CAM, formed in London in 1966 by Barbadian (Edward) Kamau Brathwaite, Trinidadian John La Rose, and Jamaican Andrew Salkey, also reflected a growing Black Power influence. Structured around regular meetings and symposia, CAM drew together writers, playwrights, and poets. In particular, it was the debate they fostered around aesthetics / poetics that was important and which was inspired by developments across the Atlantic (Malchow, 2011: 183).<sup>48</sup> The direction the CAM was taking echoes the earlier work of tracing survivals in African American culture and harnessing them to artistic ends. It was black America that provided the launch pad for Brathwaite's conceptualization of a poetic approach, later termed 'nation language', that drew upon Caribbean cultural practices rooted in African traditions. For example, Brathwaite based his vision on an African American cultural paradigm

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<sup>48</sup> For a detailed study of CAM, see Walmsley (1992). For a discussion which highlights the influence of American Black Power on CAM, see Ashley Dawson (2007: 49-72).

in his essay 'Jazz and the West Indian Novel' (1967). His approach, deeply informing the activities of CAM, came to influence black British / Caribbean arts practices in important ways. The ideas behind nation language resonated Black Power, yet re-articulated the same vision of cultural nationalism within a familiar framework for the Caribbean diaspora in Britain. It, both then and later, provided Caribbean artists living in Britain with an aesthetic and ideological model which integrated a strong sense of cultural identity and nationalism channelled through the African link.

The late 1970s and 1980s saw more theatre companies / groups emerge of varying degrees of organization and focus, such as Staunch Poets and Players, formed by Don Kinch in 1975; the Black Theatre Co-operative (BTC), formed by Matura and white Charlie Hanson in 1978, and re-named Nitro in 1999; Carib Theatre, formed by Anton Phillips and Yvonne Brewster in 1981; Theatre of Black Women, formed by Bernadine Evaristo, Patricia Hilaire, and Paulette Randall in 1982; Umoja, formed by Gloria Hamilton in 1983; Imani-Faith, founded by Jacqueline Rudet in 1983; the Black Theatre Forum, a collective of seventeen Black companies, including Asian groups, that delivered six annual festivals / 'Black Theatre Seasons' in London between 1983-1990;<sup>49</sup> Double Edge, formed by Derrick Blackwood and Clarence Smith in 1984; Black Mime Theatre, formed in 1984 by Sarah Cahn and David Boxer; Talawa, formed by Yvonne Brewster with Inigo Espejel, Mona Hammond, and Carmen Munroe in 1986; and a host of other groups including Sas Theatre Company, Afro-Sax, L'Ouverture, Roots Theatre, and Unlock the Chains.

Chambers highlights how in the 1970s, '[d]istinctions were porous between the professional and the non-professional, between pure and applied art, and between art forms themselves' (2011: 156). Although many of the aesthetic explorations reflected an arts practice informed by their practitioners (and audience's) heritage (i.e. African or Caribbean), the discourse was profoundly shaped by Black Power and the BAM, particularly in terms of the focus on community, developing a black audience and a black aesthetic / ethics. Chiming with the mood of solidarity, this porosity was also reflected in inter-ethnic alliances between blacks and Asians, intra-rationally between African and

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<sup>49</sup> For details about the Forum's organization and activities, see Terracciano (2006).

Caribbean-origin practitioners, and also internationally. The frequent programming of African American plays attests to the importance attributed to the African American experience, and its capacity to illuminate the black British situation.

African American theatre practitioners who periodically settled in Britain brought ideas and trends from the USA to the UK and played an important role in shaping black British theatre. Rufus Collins moved from New York to London in the 1970s where he worked as a director for Dark and Light and the Keskidee Centre. He brought with him his experience of working for the experimental Living Theatre as well as a Black Power political awareness fostered in Harlem during the 1960s. Collins directed a number of British premieres of African American plays, including Steve Carter's *Eden* (1976, USA; published 1976) in 1978 at the Keskidee Centre, and his *Nevis Mountain Dew* (1978, USA; published 1979/2012) in 1983 at the Arts Theatre. The latter was the Black Theatre Co-operative's contribution to the Black Theatre Forum's first Black Theatre Season. Collins also directed Edgar White's *The Black Woman / Les Femmes Noires* (1974, USA; published 1985) and *Lament for Rastafari* (1975, USA; published 1983), both in 1977 at the Keskidee, and the world premiere of *Masada* (1978, Keskidee and transfer to Royal Court Upstairs; unpublished 1976). Like Collins, White relocated from the USA to London where he spent a number of years during the 1980s.<sup>50</sup> White's plays, which are set in, and sometimes between, the Caribbean, the USA and the UK, explore issues of cultural heritage, migration and exile, refracted through his strong Afrocentric beliefs.

### **Afrocentrism and The African Diaspora**

The view of African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans as an African diaspora who share a common origin and cultural similarity with continental Africa emerged as

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<sup>50</sup> White was born in Montserrat in 1947, but grew up in New York City from the age of eight. White moved to London in 1981 where a number of his plays were set and premiered. For a discussion of White's work and details of his productions staged in the UK, see Stone (1994: 161-167) and Chambers (2011: 147-8, 176 and 187). African American theatre practitioners currently living in Britain include playwright and cultural critic Bonnie Greer, actor / playwright / director Ray Shell and playwright Harold Finley. Through his theatre company Collective Artistes, African American (via Nigeria) Chuck Mike has brought an African American Afrocentric presence to British theatre.

an important ideological accompaniment to black political and cultural discourses that sought to highlight essential differences between blacks and whites in reaction to white racism. The perception of Africa as the ancestral homeland to blacks in the diaspora and, therefore, a source informing cultural production and a political rhetoric of solidarity has a long precedent among African diasporic activists and artists.<sup>51</sup> Afrocentric ideology emerges in political movements such as Pan-Africanism in the early twentieth century and cultural movements such as the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and, most forcefully, in the Francophone Négritude literary movement of the 1930s. In the 1960s, Black Power reinvigorated these notions.

A principal aim of the BAM was to harness African American urban cultures to their aesthetic and dramaturgy. This was accompanied by a desire to establish continuity with Africa by utilizing indigenous cultural forms or 'survivals' which were seen to have their roots in African practices. The 1970s in particular saw a drive to create a theatre that would bring to the Euro-American dramatic form 'African' practices such as ritual, circularity (as opposed to linearity), folk forms rooted in orature (music and storytelling), as well as values of community and the importance of collective history. For a number of playwrights, such as Paul Carter Harrison and Ntozake Shange, Africa and its pre-Western oral traditions and rituals provided an important cultural seam which could be mined in an attempt to further differentiate a black approach.<sup>52</sup> Benston notes a shift in African American theatre in the 1970s from '*mimesis*' ('representation of an action') to '*methexis*' (communal and participatory), or from 'drama' to 'ritual':

The evolutionary path directed by Black playwrights' ever-changing perspectives has led from an emphasis on naturalism and pedagogy to an equally passionate desire for ritual celebration of a common ethos.

The primary aim of the Black theatre event has thus altered radically in

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<sup>51</sup> Afrocentrism has broad interpretations. Adeleke defines it as a racially essentialist ideology that uses Africa in order 'to advance a monolithic and homogeneous history, culture, and identity for all blacks, regardless of geographical location' (2009: 10-11). Howe highlights its less extreme interpretations which place 'an emphasis on shared African origins among all 'black' people, taking a pride in those origins and an interest in African history and culture – or those aspects of New World cultures seen as representing African 'survivals' – and a belief that Eurocentric bias has blocked or distorted knowledge of Africans and their cultures' (1998: 1).

<sup>52</sup> See Paul Carter Harrison's *The Drama Of Nommo* (1972) in which he sets out a framework for a black theatre aesthetic and practice based upon African retentions in African American culture.

the past fifteen years from 'educating the people' to embracing the audience in collective affirmation of certain values, styles, and goals (1980: 77).

The emergence of a strong Afrocentric approach in African American theatre in the 1970s was accompanied by an equally strong presence in popular culture. In the 1970s, the Afro hairstyle became a fashionable symbol of African solidarity and defiance to white concepts of beauty. In fashion, African designs were appropriated such as kente cloth, dashikis, and cowrie-shell jewellery (Van Dyk, 2010: 16). Some individuals such as Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) and Ntozake Shange (formerly Paulette Williams) rejected their family 'slave names' and adopted names which proclaimed their African ancestry. The embrace of Afrocentrism in the 1970s is exemplified in Alex Hayley's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976). The book was adapted into a series for television (broadcast in the UK in 1977) and had a massive international impact.<sup>53</sup>

The premise of the story, essentially a parable of how the spirit and culture of Africa is preserved by an African American family, was, according to Hayley, based upon fact. Through his mother's line, Hayley traced his family tree back to Africa. The link to Africa, alleged Hayley, was confirmed by a griot (traditional storyteller / historian / mystic) he visited while researching in the Gambia. The griot was able to name Kunta Kinte as Hayley's ancestor and provide details which corroborated his research. The veracity of Hayley's claim to be able to trace an unbroken line of descent to a specific village and family in Africa has been contested. Furthermore, Hayley was accused of plagiarising Harold Courlander's novel *The African* (1967). Nevertheless, *Roots*' popularity brought Afrocentrism into the mainstream. According to the editors of the journal *Public Culture*, 'Afrocentricity could not have existed without (Alex Haley's) *Roots*. After *Roots*, we can say that the academic version of Afrocentrism is preaching to the already converted' (qtd in Howe, 1998: 108). *Roots* also introduced the term and role of the 'griot' into the mainstream. The figure of the griot appears in

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<sup>53</sup> *Roots* is about the capture of Kunta Kinte by slave traders from his village in what is now the Gambia. The story charts his journey across the Middle Passage, life as a slave in Virginia and the lives of his descendants who retained the story of how Kinte was once a free man before he was a slave.

(or is identified in academic readings of) a number of dramas, often occupying the position of mystic and signifier of a performance's ritual element and link to Africa.

*Roots* was a mainstream example of tracing 'survivals' within African American culture. As Howe shows, the debate about African survivals, particularly in the USA, is contentious. Although, he states, that in the USA instances of African practices are harder to discern than in some parts of the Caribbean or South America (1998: 101-2), to deny them is tantamount to 'a denial of the Afro-American past and a possible Pan-Africanist present' (Thornton qtd in Howe, 1998: 102).<sup>54</sup> A number of African American dramas draw attention to survivals, thematically and aesthetically, in order to underline Africa as the original homeland. However, the African elements represented are often of a generalized kind, non-specific and all-encompassing, distinguishing Africa a symbol rather than a lived reality. As Howe states:

Since it is often difficult, if not impossible, especially in the United States, to identify Afro-American cultural traits as deriving from *particular* African peoples, it has become politically important for some intellectuals to emphasize that distinctions between those peoples were essentially insignificant, so that descent from a generalized 'Africa' becomes more meaningful (1998: 103).

What emerges, therefore, is a specifically non-specific black diasporic culture hinged around the Middle Passage. It is a culture rooted in the experience of slavery and the complex intermixture of African and European cultures. A process which some, such as Brathwaite, call creolization, within a space that Gilroy calls the Black Atlantic. Although it is a shared experience, America contributed much to its myth.

A number of black British playwrights draw attention to survivals in order to situate their dramas, particularly those that treat the theme of slavery, within a continuum of African belonging. In particular, African American Edgar Nkosi

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<sup>54</sup> Adeleke provides a more robust critique of Afrocentrism, arguing that assertions of cultural continuity and ethnic equation between diasporic Africans and continental Africans 'are socially and therapeutically utilitarian but historically misleading and inaccurate' (2009: 9-10).

White brought a thematic and aesthetic exploration of the African diaspora to the British stage in the late 1970s and 1980s. His plays find unity in their exploration of the theme of the painful experience of the black diaspora (Stone, 1994: 163) and their underlying Afrocentric ideology. In his plays set in Britain, his African Caribbean protagonists are often depicted as struggling (emotionally, economically and spiritually) in the hostland. Works such as *Trinity* (comprising three short plays: *Man and Soul*, *The Case of Dr. Kola* and *That Generation*) (1982, Riverside Studios; published 1983), *The Nine Night* (1983, Bush; published 1984), *Ritual by Water* (1983; published 1984), *Redemption Song* (1984, Riverside Studios; published 1985), *The Boot Dance* (1984, Tricycle; published), and *The Moon Dance Night* (1987, Arts Theatre; unpublished 1987) depict the Caribbean immigrant experience, generational conflict within the family and the return to the homeland.<sup>55</sup> White's work pre-empted second-generation playwrights who treat similar themes such as Caryl Phillips, Winsome Pinnock, Kwame Kwei-Armah and Roy Williams. Like Phillips and Kwei-Armah in particular, White's exploration is set against and contextualized through a larger historical and geo-cultural frame. In particular, the fragmented and dream-like *Lament for Rastafari* charts the epic journey of the African diaspora from slavery in Jamaica to life in the twentieth century Caribbean, England and the USA. The black diasporan's experience of fragmentation, he suggests, can only be mended through a return (literal and metaphorical) home. In *Man and Soul*, White explores African and Caribbean antagonisms. After being arrested at the Notting Hill Carnival, a Nigerian student, Ikuru, finds himself in a prison cell with a working-class West Indian, Faigan. Initially, Ikuru is condescending of Faigan for being working-class and from the Caribbean. However, by the end the pair form a bond as Faigan manages to convince him that in Britain they are both 'wogs' (5). Through their friendship, White underlines the need for unity among blacks in Britain which, he intones, can only be achieved by confronting the painful history of the Middle Passage that cleft African Caribbeans from Africa. Faigan's final words of the play reiterate White's message: 'in between us four hundred years of shock. Four hundred years it took us to see each other' (36).

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<sup>55</sup> *Trinity*, *The Nine Night*, *Ritual by Water*, and *Redemption Song* were produced by the Black Theatre Co-operative. *The Boot Dance* was produced by Temba and *The Moon Dance Night* was directed by Yvonne Brewster as part of the Black Theatre Forum's 1987 Season.

White's Afrocentrism is heavily inflected by Rastafarianism, an Afrocentric religious and political movement which developed in Jamaica in the 1930s but has since become a movement with a global presence. According to the Rastafari, because of slavery and colonialism, blacks are living in exile in the diaspora (Babylon) and one day they will return to Africa (Zion / Ethiopia). Ideologically, Rastafari, as it emerged in the 1930s, is indebted to, among other influences, the circulation of ideas contained within Pan-African discourse from the start of the twentieth century, as well as earlier African American Baptist missionaries (Chevannes, 1994),

In Britain, the Rastafarian brand of Afrocentrism had an impact among some of the black (mainly male youth of Caribbean origin) second-generation population in the late 1970s and 1980s. Cashmore argues that it was Black Power groups and ideas which facilitated the adoption and adaptation of Rastafarianism in Britain (Cashmore, 1979). Although Shukra asserts that 'Rastafarianism in Britain was no more than a cultural movement' (Shukra, 1998: 37), its cultural accoutrements specifically expressed through hair (dreadlocks), clothes (red, green and yellow colours) and music (particularly reggae) often encoded a political message of resistance to racism and black consciousness and (sometimes) an Afrocentric identity that saw Britain as Babylon / enemy territory (Hebdige, 1975/1993). In some ways, it was a British version of Black Power articulated through a Caribbean cultural form, itself genealogically intertwined with black America.

### **Black Women's Theatre**

In terms of playwrights, aside from Una Marson's (with Horace Vaz) *At What A Price* (1932, Jamaica; unpublished), staged in London in 1933 at the YWCA for one night followed by a three-day run at the Scala Theatre in 1934, the voice of black women on the British stage came from the USA.<sup>56</sup> Lorraine Hansberry's *A*

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<sup>56</sup> *At What A Price* was produced by the League of Coloured Peoples (LCP). The play is about a woman living in the Jamaican countryside who moves to Kingston where she has an affair with her white boss and falls pregnant. Marson's play *London Calling* (1937, Jamaica), a comedy about an African prince moving in British high society, has never been performed in Britain (Chambers, 2011: 99-101). For a biography of Marson, see Jarrett-Macauley (1998). An important contribution to the development of Caribbean and black British theatre; however, was Marson's role working on the BBC radio's *Caribbean Voices* (initially *Calling the West Indies*),



*Raisin in the Sun* remains the only play by a black woman to be staged in the West End. Echoing the male-dominated American BAM, the black voice in British theatre was monopolized by men until the 1980s.

Nevertheless, before the 1980s, two key black American woman playwrights, Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange, made important contributions to black theatre in Britain. During the 1960s, Adrienne Kennedy's plays provided an important counterpoint to the imported black radical male voices of Baraka and Bullins, which nevertheless brought an equally searing exploration of the psychological impact of racism and gender issues to the stage. Kennedy's plays are marked by their symbolism and fragmented, surreal dream-like qualities, which reject realism in favour of a representation of her characters' internal schisms.<sup>57</sup> Kennedy spent time in England between 1966 and 1969, where her plays *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964, USA; published 1968/1988) and *A Lesson in Dead Language* (1964, USA; published 1968/1988) were produced at the Royal Court in 1968. In that same year, the Royal Court commissioned *Sun* (1971/1988), a tribute to Malcolm X which Kennedy wrote in a 'choreopoem' style which would later become the hallmark of poet / playwright Ntozake Shange (Kolin, 2005: 149).<sup>58</sup> In 1968, Kennedy also co-wrote the one act play *The Lennon Play: In His Own Write* (1968) with John Lennon and Victor Spinetti, which was performed at the National Theatre (then at the Old Vic) and is probably the first example of a play by a black woman to be performed at the National.<sup>59</sup> In 1970 her play *A Rat's Mass* (1966; published 1968/1988) was staged at The Royal Court by the New York theatre / company, La Mama.

Despite Kennedy's relative visibility, her surreal and heavily symbolic style made little impact on the black British theatre scene of the 1970s, which was

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which was broadcast from 1945 to 1958. For a discussion of the transnational implications of the program, see Ball (2004: 101-109).

<sup>57</sup> For discussions of Kennedy's life and work, see Byrant-Jackson and Overbeck (Eds.) (1992) and Kolin (2005).

<sup>58</sup> Writing about *Sun*, Kolin observes: '*Sun* remains one of Kennedy's most poetic, experimental dramas [...] The play can be classified as a choreopoem, a poem written to be staged with an emphasis on music, drama, lighting, spectacle, and the fluidity of performance. *Sun* looks forward to the choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1974) by Ntozake Shange, a playwright who has readily acknowledged her debt to Kenney' (2005: 149).

<sup>59</sup> The next time a play by a black woman would be performed at the RNT was in 1995 with a revival of Winsome Pinnock's *Leave Taking* (1989) at the Cottesloe. (*Leave Taking* premiered in 1988 at the Liverpool Playhouse).

dominated by men who tended towards a (social) realist mode. However, as Osborne notes, in their exploration of the self within an imagined and symbolic narrative, Mason-John's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998, Lyric Hammersmith; published 2008) and Mojisola Adebayo's *Moj of the Antarctic* (2006, Lyric Hammersmith; published 2008), 'exploit dramatically what Rosemary K. Curb observes of Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of the [sic] Negro*: 'what seems to be an autobiographical pseudo-factual monologue'' (qtd in Osborne, 2009: 7). In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Kennedy's exploration of her protagonist Sarah's mixed-heritage, which has manifested in psychosis, and the dramatization of her inner quest for an identity through an African and European past also emerges as the dominant theme in both Mason-John's and Adebayo's plays. In particular, Sarah's schizophrenia, dramatized by the four characters which form her divided self, with the Duchess of Hapsburg and Queen Victoria representing the white aspects of herself, finds parallel in *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Like Sarah in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, the protagonist in *Brown Girl in the Ring* is tormented by her internalized self-hatred. The play takes the form of a monologue delivered by a woman claiming to be the Queen at a press conference and is inspired by the presence of black genes in European royal families. (Specifically, Sophia Charlotte of African and German descent who married Britain's King George III and the story of Queen Marie Theresa, the wife of Louis XIV of France who bore a mixed-race child from her black servant). The way in which the presence of blackness in European royalty has been hidden becomes an allegory for her own life, raised in a culture which has suppressed her racial difference. The set, which is made up of scattered jigsaw pieces, signifies not only the genetic mixture of her theme but also the multiple parts which make up her identity and feed into the themes of un-belonging.<sup>60</sup> However, Kennedy is not mentioned as an influence by these writers. In the interview with Osborne, Adebayo and Mason-John strongly identify Ntozake Shange as a key influence. Although Kennedy seems to have faded into

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<sup>60</sup> See also Bonnie Greer's *Munda Negra* (unproduced; published 1995). The play also deals with a woman's (Anna's) internalization of white notions of beauty and explores her struggle to find self-acceptance. The play melds realism with surreal externalizations of Anna's mind. Appearances by the Pope and the Virgin Mary, and the scene in which she meets her younger self represented as a white child and symbolic of her childhood desire to be white, recall *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. For a discussion of *Munda Negra* and Greer's *Dancing on Black Water* (1994, Warehouse Theatre, Croydon; unpublished 1994), see Goddard (2007a).

obscurity, her pioneering style re-emerges through Shange's influence on black women writers in the UK.

In 1979, Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is not enuf* (1976, USA; published 1977) premiered in London.<sup>61</sup> Although the play has not been staged often in Britain, it nevertheless has had an important impact. A number of key black British women playwrights found inspiration in Shange's style which appealed in its use of aesthetic and formal elements which were seen as deriving more from a feminine impulse and themes which provided an important critique of the black male authorial voice and drew attention to intra-racial oppression. Along with Adebayo and Mason-John, Jackie Kay acknowledges the influence of Shange on her play *Chiaroscuro* who admits to being 'impressed with the way she [Shange] made poetry work as theatre' (Kay, 1987: 83). Griffin also finds similarity between *for coloured girls* and later black British women's writing. Referring to Trish Cooke's *Running Dream* (1993, Theatre Royal Stratford East; published 1993), she remarks:

'Running Dream' references *for colored girls* in a number of ways, including in its focus on women, poetic form, use of patois and a chorus, representation of heterosexuality as exploitative of women, and in its exploration of the need for the colored girl or black woman for self-affirmation (Griffin, 2003: 68).

More recently, Shange has been cited as an influence on Debbie Tucker Green, making Shange possibly the most cited influence by black British women playwrights.

Shange's play also came at a time just before a number of black British women's theatre companies were established. Hatch highlights three reasons behind *for colored girls'* landmark status in the USA: it came at a time when African American women writers were not well represented; it expressed for the first time the inner thoughts and experiences of black women on stage; it

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<sup>61</sup> *For coloured girls* was later staged by Siren Theatre (renamed Daughters of Oshun) and performed at the BAC in 1990 and the Albany Empire in 1991, directed by Paulette Randall.

coincided with the rise of white feminism (Hatch, 2003: 426). The play's impact on black British women's theatre can be attributed to the same conditions in the British theatre. In the UK, the 1980s saw the emergence of a number of black British theatre companies led by women, including Theatre of Black Women in 1982, Imani-Faith in 1983, Umoja in 1983, and Talawa in 1986. In 1990, Black Mime Theatre Company, formed in 1984 by Sarah Cahn and David Boxer, expanded by adding the Women's Troupe under the leadership of Denise Wong. In 1993 the men and women's troupes joined as a single ensemble with Wong as Artistic Director. Of these companies, however, only Talawa remains. In fact, Talawa's first produced play by a woman was in 1992, six years after the company's formation, with a production of *The Love Space Demands* (1992, USA; published 1992) by Ntozake Shange.

Since black women's writing began to emerge more forcefully in the 1980s and 1990s, African American dramas by women have formed a consistent part of the main black theatre companies' repertoires. To date, a third of the plays by women produced by Black Theatre Co-operative / Nitro and Talawa have been by American women. Theatres such as the Royal Court, the Tricycle and the Young Vic have also produced a number of important plays by African American women.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Black Theatre Co-operative / Nitro has produced the following plays by American women: *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1985 at the Tricycle, directed by Yvonne Brewster; white American Ruth Dunlap Bartlett's (aka Helena Stevens) *The Cocoa Party* (1975, Unity Theatre; unpublished 1987) in 1987 at the Drill Hall with an all-black cast; and British-based Bonnie Greer's *Dancing on Black Water* in 1994 directed by Joan-Ann Maynard. Talawa has produced the following plays by African American women: Shange's *The Love Space Demands* at the Cochrane; Endesha Ida Mae Holland's *From The Mississippi Delta* (1987, USA; published 1992/2005) in 1993 at the Cochrane and Contact Theatre, Manchester - the play received its British premiere at the Young Vic in 1989, directed by Annie Castledine; and Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West* (first produced 1992; published 1995/1999) in 1997 at the Drill Hall. Other notable plays by African American women staged in the British theatre include *Spunk* (1990, USA; published 1991), based on three short stories by the Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston and adapted by George C Wolfe, staged in 1991 at the Royal Court; Alice Childress' *Trouble in Mind* (1955, USA; published 1971) and her *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969; published 1972/2012) staged in 1992 and 2000 at the Tricycle - the latter was staged in double bill with Winsome Pinnock's *Water* (unpublished 2000), written as a response to Childress' play; Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* in 1993 at the Royal Court; Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog / Underdog* in 2003 at the Royal Court; Lynn Nottage's *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004, USA; published 2006) in 2006 at the Tricycle and her *Ruined* in 2010 at the Almeida; and Katori Hall's *The Mountaintop* (published 2011), which received its world premiere at the tiny London venue Theatre 503 in 2009 before transferring to the Trafalgar Studios where it went on to win the Olivier Award for Best New Play.

Aside from playwrights, African American women writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, in particular, have had a global presence, not least because Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Colour Purple* (1982) and Nobel Laureate Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) were both made into Hollywood blockbusters, in 1985 and 1998 respectively. The influence of black American women has not gone undetected among practitioners. Coming into prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s, Winsome Pinnock attributes the interest in her work to the global interest that was occurring around African American women writers at the time:

There was a lot of interest in my work when I first started because it was at a time when the black woman writer was sexy. There were a lot of black, American women novelists and they had become very successful and fashionable. And there was an upsurge in women's writing anyway ... So I guess all of that enabled me to do quite a lot of work (qtd in Griffin, 2003: 241).

There is also an intellectual debt owed to African American women writers and theorists such as bell hooks who have influenced critical discourses of black British women's theatre. Likewise, Shange's theatre provides a model against which the feminist potential of black British women's theatre is often measured. However, the implications of the interaction with the African American tradition remain underexplored. For instance, Goddard draws attention to the thematic and aesthetic similarity between Kay's *Chiaroscuro* and *for colored girls*, which both examine 'black women coming into sexual awareness and maturity' (2007b: 123). However, in defining the choreopoem Goddard, quoting Neal Lester, describes it as:

'a theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance, and music [...] to arouse an emotional response in an audience (Lester, 1995, p. 3)', which is located within a black ritual theatrical style that 'emerges from an African tradition of storytelling, rhythm, physical movement, and emotional catharsis' (3)' (2007: 123).

Goddard removes part of the quote which reads 'those elements that outline a distinctly African American heritage' (Lester qtd in Hatch, 2003: 426). Goddard therefore removes the choreopoem from its African American origins and locates it primarily within African traditions. In so doing, however, we lose the important ways in which these imaginary 'ideas' and fantasies about Africa, which emerged in the USA during the 1960s Black Power movement, are mediated through African America. Kay's use of the choreopoem does not connect her to African traditions and thus some sort of generic 'black ritual theatrical style', but rather connects her to imagined African traditions, filtered through an African American ideological prism. Kay's work, therefore, and other black British women writers who employ similar techniques, are much more closely connected with African American traditions than they are with Africa.

### **African American Myths, Icons, and Style**

The culture, icons and myths of Black America have provided potent inspiration for black British dramatists. The adoption and adaptation of African American culture in the British context draws attention to the global dissemination of Americana and its hegemony and the black British experience of racism that has fostered identification with other black cultures and histories. For a number of black British dramatists, black America is a resource from which to draw upon and an articulation of political and cultural solidarity.

In particular, African American popular culture remains unrivalled in its visibility. African American accoutrements from fashion to slang have travelled across the Atlantic. Reflecting on his childhood in Stevenage, Gary Younge states:

[...] America's dominance was especially strong among black Britons because our numbers were so few and our own reference points so well hidden. From the turntable to the fashion store, black America became our influence almost by default. When I was about eight, we got a rabbit which we called not Thumper or Flopsy but Mohammed after Muhammad Ali (Younge, 1999: 18).

The lack of black role models for black Britons, especially in the 1970s, combined with widespread assumptions that blacks born in Britain were not really 'British', opened the door to African American identification, which coincided with the ascendancy of black American popular culture.

In the late 1960s and 1970s the BAM playwrights sought to tap into urban cultural codes as a means of depicting the 'front line' and in a move away from what they perceived as hackneyed representations of black rural life. This had important repercussions as the ghetto and its cultural and linguistic accoutrements came to be seen as authentic markers of blackness. The ghetto experience found representation in alternative popular culture through the blaxploitation films that emerged in the USA in the 1970s. The blaxploitation films, often employing a funk / soul soundtrack consolidated (glorified) images (and stereotypes) of African American gangs culture, violence and 'street' ethics versus racist whites (particularly the police) as the epitome of 'cool'. Debates as to whether the genre undermined or reinforced stereotypes accompanied the genre. However, its cult status and legacy has been celebrated in African American hip-hop as well as by white American directors such as Quentin Tarantino. The urban portrayal of black life in the films of Spike Lee in the 1990s also owes a debt to the genre.<sup>63</sup>

Alfred Fagon's *Lonely Cowboy*, set in Brixton, is populated by British-born black youth whose 'Afro' or 'Rasta' hairstyles and 'army fatigues' hints at the black 'street' fashion in the 1980s influenced by African American and Rasta styles. The play is about a young couple opening a new café in Brixton who are determined to disassociate themselves from the 'front line', characterized by youth who interpret resistant politics as a justification for a life of crime and drugs. As Flight, the 28 year-old co-owner of the Lonely Cowboy café makes clear, there will be no 'back to Africa politics' in his café (154). The image of Brixton as a lawless place akin to the 'wild west' evoked by the play's title suggests a critique of the Americanization of black British youth. The melodramatic ending, which sees the mass death of the characters seems to borrow from, and critique, the blaxploitation genre.

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<sup>63</sup> The blaxploitation genre is often attributed to Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971). For an overview of the Blaxploitation film genre, its history and legacy, see Novotny Lawrence (2008).

British-born Tunde Ikoli (mixed Nigerian and white British parentage) was particularly influenced by African American urban culture. Ikoli's depiction of London's underworld in several of his plays reveals his debt to blaxploitation films and his adaptation of the genre to a London setting. Before writing his first play, Ikoli wrote, directed and starred in his film, *Tunde's Film* (1973) at the age of seventeen. The film focuses on the lives of a group of black youth in London's East End and depicts their struggle to find work, their friction with the police and an attempted robbery. One reviewer described it as an 'an East End version of *Superfly*, with shades of *Shaft* and *The Godfather*' (PHS, 1973). Ikoli's interest in the urban underground inspired by American blaxploitation and mafia films carried over into his playwriting. His debut play, *Short Sleeves in the Summer* (1977, Royal Court Upstairs as part of the young writers program; unpublished 1977) depicted a young black man named Trevor, working as a cutter in Whitechapel, and his feelings of entrapment when his girlfriend falls pregnant (Billington, 1977). The protagonist resembles Ikoli who worked as a cutter in a factory before becoming a writer. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Ikoli acknowledges he was inspired to change his career by Claude Brown's biography, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965). (Christmas, 1973). The controversially gritty book tells the story of Brown as a young black man in Harlem who succeeds in escaping his limited life by studying to be a lawyer. Ikoli's second play, *On the Out* (1978, Bush; unpublished), is set in Whitechapel, and revolves around a newly released convict Zoltan who must decide whether to take part in a crime after his release or to change the direction of his life.<sup>64</sup>

The 'ghetto' presence of African America has been further solidified in popular youth culture since the rise of hip-hop. Hip-hop's linguistic and cultural codes (dress, behaviour) have all had a visible impact on British youth culture, black and white. As a result of hip-hop's uptake into mainstream popular culture, its

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<sup>64</sup> For an interview with Ikoli, see Rees (1992: 117-134). *On the Out* was the first of six plays Ikoli was to do with Rees' company, Foco Novo. The other five were *Sink or Swim* (1982, Tricycle and UK tour; unpublished 1982); *Sleeping Policemen* (1983, Royal Court; published 1984), co-written with Howard Brenton; *Week In, Week Out* (1985, London tour of community venues; unpublished 1985); *The Lower Depths* (1986, Tricycle; published 1987); and *Banged Up* (1986, Young Vic; unpublished), a double bill comprising *Soul Night* and *Please and Thank You*.



function as a form created in resistance to white racism is today often ambiguous. Hip-hop culture has also solidified the glamorization of the ghetto. The focus on the ghetto and street life can also be seen in many current black British plays, which depict black youth in urban settings with a focus on themes of crime and violence. Roy Williams' *Fallout* (2003, Royal Court; published 2003/2008) depicts a black gang on a London council estate, who murder a young boy of African origin and steal his trainers and mobile phone. The African American influence is obvious in the way the gang dress (African American-inspired hip-hop hoodies and trainers), speak (a combination of London Estuary, Jamaican patois and African American slang, for example they refer to police as '5-0s' after the American television show *Hawaii 5-0*, and frequently use the word 'nigger') and in their cultural references (they discuss whether Tyson or Lennox was the better boxer). Derbyshire argues:

Through their banter the group reaffirms its subcultural identity, reifying blackness and maleness to the point of prejudice and misogyny. Their refusal to adopt the codes and mores of white England is underscored by their subject (Mike Tyson) and their means of expression, which draws on American street slang and Jamaican patois (Derbyshire, 2007: 425).

The disaffected gang's identification with America, not Britain, as the epitome of 'cool', highlights anti-nationalism as part of their anti-Establishment identities. Through the gang's actions – murdering a boy for his shoes and mobile phone - Williams' play critiques the darker side of American driven capitalism, which has manifested a culture of greed with violent consequences.

Homage to African American singers and music appears in a number of guises. It features in a play's soundtrack, such as Felix Cross and Paulette Randall's *Up Against the Wall* (1999, Tricycle; unpublished 1999) for Nitro, a tribute to the funk, soul and disco music of the 1970s blaxploitation films, featuring songs such as Curtiss Mayfield's 'Superfly' – the title track from the blaxploitation film of the same name. African American music references also appear in plays' titles which borrow from songs, such as Caryl Phillips' *Strange Fruit* (1980, the Crucible Theatre; published 1981), named after the song made famous by Billie Holiday; and Kwei-Armah's *Let There Be Love* (2008, Tricycle; published 2009),

after the Nat King Cole version. Femi Elufowoju Jr. uses Sammy Davis Jr.'s biography in his play *Sammy* (2002, Theatre Royal Stratford East; unpublished 2002) as a means to draw attention to the challenges facing blacks in the performing arts. For Debbie Tucker Green, the influence of African American music occurs at the level of writing: she attributes singer / songwriters Lauryn Hill and Jill Scott as influences on her poetic style.

The influence of black American icons on youths also emerges, especially in accounts from the 1970s. Younge's identification with Ali is shared with Mojisola Adebayo's experience of growing up in the 1970s, dramatized in her play, *Muhammad Ali and Me* (2007, Oval House Theatre; published 2011). Black British identification with African American boxers also emerges in Roy Williams' *Sucker Punch* (2010, Royal Court; published 2010).

In *Sucker Punch*, Williams taps into the long tradition of aligning boxing with race relations. Set against the race riots and 'sus' laws of the 1980s, Williams pastiches the myths which surround both black British and American boxing. The play charts the rise of black British boxer Leon, whose trademark, the 'Leon Shuffle', combines a Michael Jackson inspired moonwalk and a 'Sugar Ray spin' (31) in homage to 1970s and 1980s African American boxing world champion Ray Leonard. When Leon fights and defeats Tommy, the white British champion, Williams draws on the now mythic 1908 fight between African American Jack Johnson and white Canadian Tommy Burns, which led to Burns' defeat and the search in the USA for a white champion to take the American title from Johnson. The fight, first dramatized in Howard Sackler's *The Great White Hope* (1967, USA; published 1968), has come to symbolize black achievement over white supremacy and provides a fertile launch pad for Williams' exploration of British racism and black solidarity. In the 1980s context of the Brixton race riots, Tommy represents the British public's 'white hope' and Leon's victory resonates the demand for equality and the end to racism.

Williams, however, extends the idea of boxing as representative of black resistance to white oppression to explore less traditionally associated themes of intra-racial solidarity. The second half of the play pits Leon against his old school friend, Troy, who moved to the USA. Troy, now a naturalized American,

has embraced Black Power ideology and scorns Leon for having a white manager and being in love with a white woman. The fight between Troy and Leon dramatises the polarization between black nationalism and black integration that the figures of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. have come to stand for respectively. When Troy accuses Leon of being an Uncle Tom, Leon's identity crisis echoes the antagonism between Frank Bruno and Lennox Lewis before the 'Battle of Britain' in 1993. Bruno questioned Lewis' 'Britishness', as Lewis had grown up in Canada but retained dual nationality, and Lewis responded by calling Bruno an Uncle Tom. Leon's predicament, echoing Bruno's, reveals the pressures on black public figures to subsume their blackness to their Britishness in the interests of their careers, while at the same time appeasing their black fans who expect them to represent their race (Carrington, 2000). In doing so, Williams highlights the dilemmas of 'double consciousness' to be as relevant to the black British situation as it is to the African American one. By staging battles of Britishness and blackness, and through allusion to historic boxing fights and boxing icons, Williams plumbs the continuum of racial struggle, how it has been played out within the boxing ring in the USA and Britain, and ultimately draws attention to how these spaces are discursively entwined.<sup>65</sup>

The division between separatist and integrationist camps that Malcolm X and Martin Luther King have come to represent can be traced in a number of plays that focus on themes of intra-racial hostility and / or which stage debates around black identity. McLeod identifies Phillips' exploration and critique of African American political discourses as a dominant theme in his work (McLeod, 2009: 191). In his analysis of Caryl Phillips' *Rough Crossings* (2007, Birmingham Rep; published 2007), about black Loyalists who fought on the British side during the American War of independence and their 'repatriation' to Sierra Leone, adapted from Simon Schama's history with the same title, McLeod argues that the play's two black protagonists, David George and Thomas Peters, are represented as 'hagiographical' characters that reflect the

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<sup>65</sup> Plays staged in Britain that have dramatized the lives of black boxers, using boxing as a metaphor to explore race relations and / or black political struggle, include Harry Bloom, Todd Matshikiza and Pat Williams' South African township jazz musical *King Kong* (1959, South Africa; published 1961), about the rise to fame and demise of Ezekiel Dlamini, staged in London at the Princess Theatre in 1961; and Howard Sackler's *The Great White Hope*, which received its British premiere in 1987 at the Tricycle Theatre.

political choices of King and X (2009: 191). Indeed, the same ideological conflict defines the relationship between the brothers in Phillips' *Strange Fruit* and surfaces in a number of character relationships in black British dramas, such as Kwei-Armah's *Statement of Regret* and Newland's *B is for Black*. The continued importance placed on African American political figures as role models is highlighted by David Levi Addai's play for young people *I have a Dream* (2011, Polka Theatre; published 2013), about Martin Luther King, Jr. and Kwei-Armah's *Seize the Day* (2009, Tricycle; published 2009) which, inspired by Obama's election victory, imagines a black mayor of London.

A number of black British dramatists have sought to highlight the black British / American connection through their plays, which can be described as recuperations of forgotten history. Works such as these not only bring to light the stories of an individual's contribution to the black experience in Britain but retrace the routes of connection that link black people in Britain politically and culturally with African America. Mojisola Adebayo's *Desert Boy* (2010, the Albany, Deptford; published 2011) like Phillips' *Rough Crossings*, draws attention to the history of slaves in America who fought on the side of the British during the American Revolutionary War. Not only did these men win their freedom, they also became British citizens, becoming, in a way, the 'first' black Britons. Adebayo's *Moj of the Antarctic* (2006, Lyric Hammersmith; published 2008) is inspired by the true story of American slaves Ellen and William Craft, who escaped from the South to Boston by Ellen dressing up as a white man and pretending her darker husband William was her slave. From Boston, the Crafts travelled to England where they spent nineteen years and raised five children before returning to the USA in 1868. Michael McMillan's *Master Juba* (2006, Luton Library Theatre; unpublished 2006) chronicles the life of William Henry Lane, a member of the American blackface minstrel troupe called the Ethiopian Serenaders. The troupe toured to England in 1848, where Lane found fame in London when he danced for Queen Victoria. (Despite being black, he was still required to perform in blackface). Lane became a sensation in the UK and is credited with creating tap dance by fusing Irish folk and African American forms. The play highlights the important contribution made by African American performers to British culture, especially in music and dance. The play also draws attention to the trans-Atlantic circulation of racial stereotypes, which

emphasized black people as musical buffoons and objects of patronizing fascination.<sup>66</sup>

Plays about the post-war contribution of African American individuals living in Britain include Winsome Pinnock's *A Rock in Water* (1989, Royal Court; published 1989). The play traces the life of Trinidadian-born, American-raised Claudia Jones, a Civil Rights activist, journalist and member of the American Communist Party who was eventually deported to Britain in 1955 where she founded and edited *The West Indian Gazette* in 1958 and was involved in establishing the Notting Hill Carnival in 1959. Jones' skills and political acumen fostered in the US were applied to the particular needs of the UK's Afro-Caribbean community. Pinnock's play dramatizes the important political connections between blacks in America and the UK in the post-war period.

In a number of plays, particularly those more oriented towards performance art, the names of famous black icons from around the world are listed as a means of emphasizing the genealogy of global black achievement and solidarity. However, the names of African Americans are the most prominent, underlining the degree to which African America has captured the black British imagination. Names invoked in plays such as Sol B River's *Moor Masterpieces* (1994, West Yorkshire Playhouse; published 1997), SuAndi's *This is all I've got to Say* (1993, ICA; unpublished) and Valerie Mason-John's *Brown Girl in the Ring* include, among others, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Ira Aldridge, Paul Robeson, James Baldwin, Booker T Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.

The remainder of the chapter traces black America in the works of two black British playwrights, Kwame Kwei-Armah and Mojisola Adebayo.

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<sup>66</sup> For a discussion on the transatlantic circulation of blackface minstrelsy, see Nowatzki (2010). For an overview of minstrelsy in the British theatre and a list of key sources on the subject, see Chambers (2011: 52-56 and 214).

## Kwame Kwei-Armah (b. 1967)

### Introduction

Kwei-Armah (OBE) is an actor, writer and director and has worked extensively in theatre, television and radio. His debut play, *A Bitter Herb* (published 2001), was written in 1999 and produced at the Bristol Old Vic in 2001. Meanwhile, in 1999, *Big Nose* (published 2001), based on Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* and co-written with Chris Monks, opened at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry. That same year his soul musical, *Hold On* (then entitled *Blues Brother, Soul Sister*) (published 2001), premiered at the Bristol Old Vic before touring nationally. In 2003, *Elmina's Kitchen* (published 2003/2009) premiered at the National Theatre's Cottesloe theatre, before transferring to the Garrick Theatre in 2005 where it became the first drama by a black British-born writer to be staged in the West End.<sup>67</sup> Kwei-Armah followed *Elmina's* with two new plays, both of which also premiered at the Cottesloe: *Fix Up* (published 2004/2009) in 2004 and *Statement of Regret* (published 2007/2009) in 2007. Together the three plays comprise what Kwei-Armah refers to as his 'trilogy'. Since *Statement* he has written two other plays, *Let There Be Love* (published 2009) and *Seize the Day* (published 2009), both of which premiered at London's Tricycle theatre in 2008 and 2009 respectively and were directed by Kwei-Armah. His plays are all set in contemporary London, demonstrating his commitment to representing the contemporary metropolitan black British experience.<sup>68</sup> *Elmina's* was also performed in Baltimore and Chicago, marking it as one of a handful of plays written by black Britons to have crossed the Atlantic.<sup>69</sup> In 2011, Kwei-Armah

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<sup>67</sup> In 2005, the ska musical *The Big Life* (2004, Theatre Royal Stratford East; published 2005), by Paul Sirret with music by Paul Joseph and directed by Clint Dyer, transferred to the Apollo Theatre. The play, inspired by Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost*, is set in 1950s London and explores the Caribbean immigrant experience.

<sup>68</sup> The only exception is *Big Nose* which is a Caribbean take on Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The play is set between the Caribbean and the UK during the late 1950s. The plot follows Rostand's original version fairly closely in plot and structure. In *Big Nose*, however, Rostand's verse is replaced by calypso songs and seventeenth century Paris for an Eastern Caribbean island in 1958. Instead of Cyrano and Christian leaving Roxane to fight against the Spanish, the newly and respectively named Clovis and Hubert leave Rosemary for London where they go to seek their fortunes. Stylistically, the play comes across as a pantomime-esque satire which lampoons British colonialism, racism and the view that immigrating to the mother country would lead to a better life.

<sup>69</sup> Other plays by black British-born playwrights that have been staged in the USA include Winsome Pinnock's *Mules* (1996, Royal Court; published 1996), at the Magic Theatre, San

relocated to the USA where he became Artistic Director of Center Stage in Baltimore.<sup>70</sup>

### **African America as a cultural and symbolic resource**

Kwei-Armah's relocation to the USA follows a long infatuation with African American politics and culture. Two African American writers played a decisive role in Kwei-Armah's life: Alex Haley, whose books, *Roots* (1976) and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, co-authored with Malcolm X (1965), re-configured Kwei-Armah's identity and honed his political consciousness; and August Wilson, who inspired him to become a playwright and whose style has highly influenced Kwei-Armah's dramaturgy.<sup>71</sup>

The television series of *Roots* had a profound impact on the young Kwei-Armah (then Ian Roberts): 'It was on when I was 11 and I changed my path. It inspired me to start connecting myself with Africa and to find my true identity' (N. West, 2008). Kwei-Armah identified strongly with the African American sense of rootlessness. Born in Britain to Grenadian parents, Kwei-Armah felt disconnected from his parents' culture and struggled to find his place in Britain. Looking back at his youth, Kwei-Armah expresses a profound sense of dislocation:

When I was young I never had a home. I used to call myself at sixteen famously a 'universal alien'. When I walked out on the streets in London, they'd say 'Go back home, you black bastard.' When I went to the West Indies they'd say, 'You're English.' When I go to Africa, they say 'Go home. Look at you, Bob Marley.' I'd never had a home until I discovered that I was an African and that actually I was a diasporic African (qtd in Davis, 2006b: 247).

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Francisco in 1998; Debbie Tucker Green's *Born Bad* (2003, Hampstead Theatre; published 2003), at the off-Broadway Soho Rep in New York in 2011; and Roy Williams' *Sucker Punch* at the Studio Theatre, Washington D.C. in 2012.

<sup>70</sup> For newspaper articles about the black British brain drain to the USA, particularly among actors, see 'Why do we black actors have to go to the US to be taken seriously?' (Harewood, 2008), 'Why black British actors are heading for the US' (Thorpe, 2012), and 'Morgan Freeman: Why black actors quit Britain' (T. Walker, 2012).

<sup>71</sup> For newspaper articles demonstrating the influence of Wilson and Hayley on Kwei-Armah, see 'He made me the writer I am today' (Kwei-Armah, 2006) and 'The world of Kwame Kwei-Armah' (N. West, 2008).

In his mid-twenties, the then Ian Roberts went to Ghana where he traced his family genealogy and changed his name to Kwame Kwei-Armah on his return. His identification with Afrocentric ideology was the direct result of his experiences of racism and marginalization growing up in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s. Defining himself as a 'diasporic African' gave Kwei-Armah a sense of belonging to a black Atlantic community. Kwei-Armah sees himself occupying an interstitial position between three cultures which define his identity:

I call myself tri-cultural: I'm African, Caribbean and British. And each one of those has an equal part to play and I can be one or all at the same time depending on what it is (qtd in Davis, 2006b: 240).

Kwei-Armah's sense of self and political consciousness as a 'diasporic African' is not refracted through the Caribbean, but rather black America. It was through *Roots* that Kwei-Armah literally 'discovered' Africa and decided to change his name. Similarly, his Pan-African, Afrocentric politics stems in the main from African American cultural nationalist thinkers. On his political influences that have shaped his work, he states:

My work comes from a cultural perspective that is supported by my Pan-Africanist politics [... ] My politics is a diasporic, black politics influenced by the philosophies of Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X and the writings of James Baldwin and Amiri Baraka. It is non-apologetic politics (qtd in Osborne, 2007a: 253).

Apart from Garvey, the above mixture of activists and writers are all African American – and even Garvey spent a substantial time in the USA. Therefore, it is in black America that we see the dominant influences that have shaped his identity, politics and art.

In a number of plays, African America provides a starting point for Kwei-Armah's engagement with the black situation in Britain: The title of his play *Let There Be Love* is taken from Nat King Cole's version of the song and uses its message of harmony and compassion in a plea against prejudice and



intolerance of minorities in Britain; *Seize the Day* revolves around a candidate in the running to become London's first black mayor and was inspired by the election of Barack Obama in 2008; *Fix Up* was inspired by a book of African American slave narratives he received as a gift from his agent for the opening night of *Elmina's*; and in *Statement of Regret*, Kwei-Armah bases the play's central theme on African American social scientist Dr Joy De Gruy Leary's theory of 'post-traumatic slave syndrome' in her book of the same title (2005). In her book, Leary argues that the trauma of slavery continues to impact upon the psychological development of black Americans. The Caribbean experience of racial segregation under colonialism and the hostile and racist treatment of blacks in Britain in the post-war period have had, in Kwei-Armah's opinion, a similarly damaging effect on blacks in Britain:

My parents' generation, who came here from the Caribbean in the 50s, had what was literally a legal colour bar in the Caribbean before they came here and brought that with them. Even though a lot of people say it's not the same in this country as in America, technically with colonialism, we are running in direct parallel (Kwei-Armah, 2007).

August Wilson, in particular, has been an inspiration. In 1990, Kwei-Armah attended his first August Wilson play. It was *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986, USA; published 1988) at London's Tricycle Theatre where Kwei-Armah admits he became a devotee of Wilson: 'I really got turned on to August in a big, bad way. I was smitten by its spirituality, by its haunting refrain to Africa, its exploration of the pain of the diaspora' (qtd in Edwardes, 2006). In August Wilson, whose plays give theatrical expression to Afrocentric and black cultural nationalist politics, Kwei-Armah would find a powerful role model.

### **Tracing August Wilson in *Elmina's Kitchen*, *Fix Up* and *Statement of Regret***

Kwei-Armah's inspiration for his triptych of plays, *Elmina's Kitchen*, *Fix Up* and *Statement of Regret*, was a production of Wilson's *King Hedley II* (1999, USA;

published 2005) which he saw while in Washington, D.C. in 2001.<sup>72</sup> In an interview in *The New York Times* about *Elmina's* Kwei-Armah recounts:

I was so touched by the magnitude of this man [August Wilson] and his commitment to talk of and chronicle the African-American experience through the art form [...] I went back to my hotel room that night and said, 'O.K., I now know what I want to do; I want to chronicle the black British experience' (qtd in Wolf, 2005).

Kwei-Armah's triptych takes its lead from Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle. For the Cycle, Wilson wrote ten plays, each set in Pittsburgh and each play representative of a decade in the twentieth century. Similarly, Kwei-Armah sets all three of his plays in London and although the plays occur within the first decade of the 2000s they are divided according to class: *Elmina's Kitchen* – the underclass, *Fix Up* – the working class and *Statement of Regret* – the middle class.

In *Elmina's Kitchen*, the action takes place in a fast-food diner called Elmina's Kitchen in Hackney's notorious 'murder mile'.<sup>73</sup> The play examines the failed attempts of restaurant owner Deli to keep his son Ashley from entering into a life of gangs and crime. Brother Kiyi's black-consciousness bookshop provides the setting for *Fix Up*. In the play, Kiyi's struggle to keep his shop afloat is undermined by his lodger Kwesi, who plans to takeover the premises and turn it into a black hair products shop. The conflict yields a debate centred around whether black self-determination is best won through intellectual or economic means. When Kiyi's mixed-race daughter arrives, looking for the father who gave her up for adoption and for an explanation as to the whereabouts of her mother, a concurrent theme emerges around identity and the importance of historical knowledge and truth if individual and collective freedom is to be achieved. *Statement of Regret* is set in a black political think-tank. The play explores the role of black politics in contemporary British society and the differing generational and ethnic approaches taken by the think-tank's black

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<sup>72</sup> In 2002 the play premiered in Britain at The Tricycle.

<sup>73</sup> The Upper and Lower Clapton Roads in Hackney earned the nickname at the start of the 2000s. For example, see the article in *The Independent*, 'Eight men shot dead in two years. Welcome to Britain's Murder Mile' (Mendick & Johnson, 2002).

British, West Indian and African employees. At the play's core lies an examination of the continued legacy of slavery and its impact upon the black psyche.

Themes of inter-generational conflict and the struggle against racial oppression and for racial identity are as central to Kwei-Armah's work as they are to Wilson's. The echoes of August Wilson's thematic concerns and style in Kwei-Armah's work are frequently commented upon. Writing in *London Theatre News* Matt Wolf commented:

For all that the suited black British characters exist an ocean apart – and an economic class or two above – the black milieu unforgettably chronicled in the US by the late August Wilson, *Statement of Regret* seems in *numerous* ways to want to answer many of Wilson's ongoing concerns, adapting them for a UK audience. The result makes for an intriguing theatrical case of call-and-response, whereby one feels very directly the cultural and thematic baton being passed from one important dramatist to another (Wolf, n.d.).

A number of thematic and situational similarities exist between Kwei-Armah's triptych and Wilson's ten-play cycle. In *Elmina's*, Deli, an ex-boxer and convict, is determined to reform his and his son's life. The relationship is reminiscent of Wilson's *Fences* (1985, USA; published 1986). In *Fences*, Troy, the play's protagonist, like Deli, is an ex-convict, an ex-sportsman whose dreams never came true and who struggles in his job to provide enough money for his family. However, the relationship between father and son in *Fences* is reversed in *Elmina's*. In *Fences*, Troy's jealousy prevents his son going to college on a football scholarship. In *Elmina's*, Deli is desperate to remove his son from a world of gangs and violence and his motives are entirely altruistic. Nevertheless, the father-son relationship is destroyed in both plays. Both plays feature climactic scenes in which father and son fight, fracturing the family and marking a turning point in the dramas. Cory abandons the family home after his fight with Troy and Ashley decides to turn against Deli in his desperation to become gang leader Digger's right-hand man, a decision that costs him his life. The similarity lies in both plays' exploration of the themes of failed ambitions,

the inability of the father to prevent history repeating itself and of death. In *Fences*, Troy challenges Death, determined to outmanoeuvre him. In *Elmina's*, Death has been allowed to enter into the backstreets of Hackney and now stalks the family and permeates the piece with his presence. Although *Fences* ends with hope when Troy's death brings about the possibility of the family to unite and heal, *Elmina's* tragic ending, which sees Ashley shot by Digger in front of Deli, highlights how the gang world has perverted the natural order of things whereby a father must attend the funeral of his son.

When Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen* was produced by Center Stage in Baltimore and directed by Marion McClinton, a leading August Wilson director,<sup>74</sup> the reviewer for *The Washington Post* could not help draw a comparison between Kwei-Armah and Wilson:

'Elmina's Kitchen' clearly owes a debt to, among other dramatists, Wilson; the play's setting - a funky diner in a marginal black neighbourhood is practically interchangeable with that of Wilson's 'Two Trains Running' (Marks, 2005).

However, while the setting may be familiar, the themes of *Two Trains Running* (1990, USA; published 1992) more closely resemble the issues explored in *Fix Up*. The setting of *Two Trains Running* in the declining neighbourhood of the Hill District in the 1960s, which was once a politically and culturally vibrant black area, resembles Kiyi's struggling black-consciousness bookshop. In both plays, the setting (Memphis' restaurant in *Two Trains* and Kiyi's bookshop in *Fix Up*) provides the locus for the exploration of a generational and gendered debate on approaches to black political activism and the route to self-determination. In *Two Trains*, Memphis represents the older generation of African Americans who adhered to the non-violent integrationist philosophy of the Civil Rights Movement, while the younger politically-active Sterling adopts the more hard-line approach of Black Power. Memphis scorns Sterling's involvement in a Black rally and disagrees with Sterling's confrontational approach, preferring to

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<sup>74</sup> McClinton became Wilson's director when Lloyd Richards retired. McClinton has directed most of Wilson's work, including the premiere of *King Hedley II* in 2001 (the same production which inspired Kwei-Armah to write *Elmina's*). In 2001, he directed the British premiere of *Jitney* at the RNT.

navigate life without provocation. On the other hand, Risa, a woman who works in the restaurant, and her relationship with Sterling highlights the hypocrisy of blacks who critique white oppression yet continue to oppress black women. Her disinterest in Sterling's rally reveals the way in which Black Power excluded women. In *Fix Up*, there is a similar generational conflict between Kiyi and Kwesi. Whereas both men are political, Kiyi's approach is based upon emancipation through knowledge, while Kwesi views economic power as the only means by which to achieve self-determination. Their divergent positions draw attention to the malleability of Black Power ideology:

Black Power, an idea conceptually diffuse enough to be claimed by Black capitalists as well as Black communists, revolved around the notion of economic independence and cultural self-determination (Ongiri, 2010: 2).

Like Risa, the mixed-race Alice highlights the male-centricity of black intellectual and political leaders and her exclusion from black discourse as a mixed race woman. The inter-generational political debate is continued in *Statement*. Within the middle-class, political-intellectual environment of the think tank, the younger generation led by Idrissa comes into conflict with the older Kweku. Idrissa challenges Kweku to replace the think-tank's old politics of blaming whites with a more internalized approach which examines the black community's inner and self-perpetuated failings.

In much the same way that a triptych describes three individual yet correlated pieces of art intended to be appreciated together, *Elmina's*, *Fix Up* and *Statement* are linked by a common thematic thread: despite differences in age, gender, birthplace, sexuality and ethnicity, Kwei-Armah asserts that commonality may be found in a legacy of oppression which began with slavery and continues to manifest itself in the present. The most striking echo between Kwei-Armah's triptych and Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle is the treatment of the impact of the past on the lives of the characters.<sup>75</sup> The interplay between past and present is a hallmark of Wilson's work and defining element of his dramaturgy. In plays such as *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986, USA;

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<sup>75</sup> See Kasule (2006) and Goddard (2011b) who both highlight this key aspect of Kwei-Armah's dramaturgy.

published 1988), *The Piano Lesson* (1990, USA; published 1990) and *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson (2003, USA; published 2006) inserts moments which pull apart the unities of time and place and force the characters into a space in which they must confront not only their specific pasts but the collective past of African Americans. It is only by going through this terrifying process that the deep lacerations of past injustices, still festering in the present, can begin to heal.<sup>76</sup> Wilson encases his explorations of the relationship between the past and present within a dramaturgy which melds realism with ritual, and which allows for the collapsing of the time and space of the present with that of the past. This unique style is achieved through a combination of music, African American folk traditions and mythology and ritual re-enactment. In *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, Harry Elam writes:

Wilson (w)rights history by invoking rites that connect the spiritual, the cultural, the social, and the political, not simply to correct the past but to interpret it in ways that powerfully impact the present. In a space and time outside of time, within the liminal dimensions of theater, Wilson (w)rights history (2004: 4).

In the same way, Kwei-Armah's plays attempt to access a larger cosmos. Although the settings of a café (*Elmina's*), a book shop (*Fix Up*) and a small, floundering think tank (*Statement*) are parochial, Kwei-Armah inserts devices which link the ordinary people of his plays with the larger historical events of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. The plays' themes in common (inter-generational conflict, the struggle against racial oppression, and the search for identity) are placed within a broader continuum of black experience. In *Elmina's*, contemporary Hackney is firmly planted on the foundation of slavery. Elmina's Kitchen, named after Deli's mother, is a reference to the Elmina Castle, which was used as a slave trading post in Ghana. The reference to the Atlantic slave trade suggests, as Wilson does, that the origins of intra-racial violence lie in the violent historical treatment of blacks by whites. Although the references to slavery point to an underlying cause of the intra-racial violence in the play, Kwei-Armah is also at pains to highlight that it is through knowledge of the

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<sup>76</sup> For comprehensive collections of analyses of Wilson's works, see Alan Nadel (Ed.) (1994) and (2010).

history of black suffering and a connection with one's cultural and spiritual roots in Africa that blacks in the diaspora can find healing. The play's prologue situates the play in an historical and ritualized time / space from the onset:

The stage is in darkness. A single spotlight slowly reveals a costumed man, standing absolutely still with a gurkel (a one-string African guitar famed for possessing the power to draw out spirits) in his hands [...] The music starts. It is a slow lament-sounding concoction of American blues and traditional African music. The man then covers the length and breadth of the stage flicking handfuls of powder on to the playing area (5).

Traditionally, the gurkel is an instrument associated with exorcising malevolent spirits and the sprinkling of powder implies that the space is being consecrated and that a healing is about to take place. Although there is no interaction between the African figure and the characters in the play, his appearance (a similar female figure appears at the start of act two) signifies the presence of the ancestral past in the present and suggests that the play is a ritual re-enactment which will bring about collective healing. Such a figure is redolent of Aunt Ester, a recurring character in some of Wilson's plays, who represents the past and often draws attention to how the characters' in Wilson's plays have lost touch with their history.

In *Fix Up*, the melding of past and present is more fully realized and embodied. The set, comprised of towering bookshelves, encases the performance space. The towers of books draw attention to the substantial contribution of black intellectuals and artists, reinforcing the idea that the play's setting within a black consciousness bookshop is a space which harbours the thoughts, dreams and creativity of the past contained within the tomes. The most vivid depiction of the melding of past and present occurs when Alice, alone in the shop, begins to read from a volume of slave narratives that Brother Kiyi has recently purchased. These slave narratives provide the catalyst for Alice's self-discovery. Alone in the shop, Alice begins to read aloud about a mixed race slave from Grenada named Mary Gould. Gould recounts the difficulties facing the mixed-race 'yella' (133) children who occupied a social positioning between the black slaves and

the plantation owner's white children. Betrayed by her colouring, a visual reminder of the plantation owner's infidelity, Mary Gould was routinely whipped and then sold on by the owner's wife. The extract plunges Alice into the dark truth of her mixed-race ancestors. As she reads, she takes on the voice and persona of Mary Gould. The transformation is accompanied by a shift in the lighting state to a spotlight upon Alice and a physical transformation as Alice's voice changes and takes on a Grenadian accent. Possessed by the 'spirit' of Mary Gould, Alice is forced to confront an aspect of her history that had otherwise been unavailable to her growing up with white foster parents in Somerset. The event further provides Alice with an understanding of her feeling of dislocation in the present. She is now able to begin the process of coming to terms with growing up without a father and her isolation from her black heritage.

Kwei-Armah's debt to Wilson also has a political dimension located in Kwei-Armah's cultivation of a Black aesthetic. Accordingly, his plays draw on a plethora of black British cultural and linguistic forms so as to represent the complex cultural heritage of the black community in Britain. Kwei-Armah acknowledges Wilson as an inspiration for this approach:

What he was doing with the African-American community, with his own community in Pittsburgh, inspired me to create what I perceive as the theatre of my front room. Validating your language, giving equal cultural status to the syntax, to the rhythm in which your own people speak: this is cultural equality (qtd in Edwardes, 2006).

Kwei-Armah does this deftly through his use of West Indian and Black London vernacular, calypso and his representation of multiple generations with different cultural backgrounds. Kwei-Armah's self-described aesthetic 'theatre of my front room' reveals a front room as a transnational hub through which diverse cultures move, meet and form anew. Through Kwei-Armah's plays' depiction of multiple generations and ethnicities we are presented with the genealogical diversity of the black community, which encompasses different histories, cultures and geographies. Kwei-Armah's very specific stage directions, indicating the characters' accents, reveal his acute awareness of language as a primary marker of such complex identities. In *Elmina's Kitchen*, 'Digger's accent



swings from his native Grenadian to hard-core Jamaican to authentic black London' (6), Anastasia, who is black British, is able to use 'authentic, full-attitude Jamaican at the drop of a hat' (17) and Clifton, who is from Trinidad, 'uses his eastern Caribbean accent to full effect when storytelling' (34). Identity is further complicated in *Fix Up* through the character of Alice, who is mixed-race but was brought up in an all white environment, and whose physical appearance is in conflict with social assumptions. At one point, she remarks: 'Cos I'm brown, everybody expects me to somehow know everything black. And I'm like, 'Hey, how am I suppose to know what ... raaasclaat means, I'm from Somerset' (128). And in *Statement of Regret*, Kwei-Armah explores intra-racial identity contrasting Junior's speech with that of his Caribbean father and African mother. The inclusion of multiple generations fulfils Kwei-Armah's aim to chronicle the black British experience by grounding it within its historical context, which takes into account the remembered history of colonization, the Caribbean migration of the Windrush generation and the contemporary phenomenon of large-scale African migration to the UK.

However, like Wilson, Kwei-Armah's approach to aesthetics is one that combines an educational aspect, demonstrative of his commitment to using theatre as means to raise the self-awareness of his (black) audience. When asked by Osborne if he agreed with Linton Kwesi Johnson that 'no black writer working in England today can afford 'art for art's sake'', Kwei-Armah responds: 'Correct, and I believe in that. Let's not mince words here, my work is political work' (Osborne, 2007a: 253). In his emulation of Wilson, Kwei-Armah's politics reflect the legacy of the BAM. In Wilson's seminal speech, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, delivered at the Theater Communications Group at Princeton University on 26 June 1996, Wilson states how he came to be formed as a 'race man', holding the perspective that race 'is the largest, most identifiable, and most important part of our personality' that his racial identity and his art were inseparable (1998: 494). He acknowledges that the Black Power Movement of the 1960s was 'the kiln in which [he] was fired' and highlights his debt to the playwrights of the BAM:

It was this high ground of self-definition that the black playwrights of the 1960s marked out for themselves. Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Philip Hayes

Dean, Richard Wesley, Lonnie Elder III, Sonia Sanchez, Barbara Ann Teer and Amiri Baraka were among those playwrights who were particularly vocal and whose talent confirmed their presence in the society and altered the American Theater, its meaning, its craft, and its history. The brilliant explosion of black arts and letters of the 1960s remains, for me, the hallmark and the signpost that points the way to our contemporary work on the same ground (1998: 496).

Wilson's strong impact on Kwei-Armah's playwriting places Kwei-Armah as an inheritor of this same tradition. As a result, Black Power cultural politics distinctly informs the aesthetic in his triptych. Kwei-Armah's plays are written with a black audience foremost in mind. The absence of white characters in all three plays signals Kwei-Armah's reluctance to enter into a discussion of racism or protest art which centres white people as the principal subject by attacking them:

I'm not interested in talking about race. What I'm interested in is presenting stories from my cultural lens that are about my humanity [...] What I'm saying is, we must not define ourselves purely in relation to racism (qtd in Newland, Norfolk, & Kwei-Armah, 2003).

As the African-American theatre scholar Larry Neal, quoting Knight, made clear,

[...] implicit in the act of protest is the belief that a change will be forthcoming once the masters are aware of the protestor's 'grievance' (the very word connotes begging, supplications to the gods). Only when that belief has faded and protestings end, will Black art begin (qtd in Neal, 1968: 30).

Kwei-Armah's aesthetic aligns ideological didacticism with black cultural forms in order to provide a vehicle for black consciousness and self-determination. Like Anastasia's collection of self-help books she passes on to Deli, the principle of self-help informs the message of Kwei-Armah's plays, which explain the plays' multiple references to black intellectual, political and cultural icons. In August Wilson's plays, characters with shamanistic powers such as Bynum and

Aunt Ester provide the bridge between individuals and the healing, liberating space of the collective memory. In *Fix Up*, the space of the bookshop offers such a resource for the play's characters. In the dramatis personae Kwei-Armah lists three 'non-present characters': Marcus Garvey, James Baldwin, and Claude McKay. Their presence throughout the play is given voice. For instance, at the start of the play, Kiyi is playing a tape of one of Garvey's speeches; Kiyi cites Baldwin in his conversations; and Carl reads McKay's poem, *If We Must Die*. Through references and quotations, the intellectual, political, and cultural life of these seminal black icons imbues the piece with their legacy and provides intellectual and spiritual nourishment to the characters and audience. Norma comments that Kiyi has taught her to love herself: '...you love Black. And all of my life I have been taught to fear it, hate it. That ain't right!' (119). Kwei-Armah's authorial voice is clearly of the opinion that black improvement lies in knowing one's racial history. For those that embrace it, such as Deli, there is hope; for those that do not, there is darkness, plainly demonstrated with Ashley's death at the end of *Elmina's*. The need to know yourself, your roots, your history, your people rings throughout the three works. For Kwei-Armah, pride in one's history is as important as coming to terms with the painful experience of the collective past. His plays provide a wealth of examples of extraordinary black achievement. As he states in an interview:

Art is there *solely* to reflect ourselves. And it is only in that reflection that we are able to be self-critical and able to improve and remove some of the subconscious inferiority that has been placed in us since slavery (qtd in Davis, 2006b: 243).

Running in parallel with Kwei-Armah's depiction of characters struggling in life is a strong seam of positivity to bolster and nourish the audience and characters if they choose to see it.

Kwei-Armah's 'borrowing' from Wilson also opens his work to interpretation through an Afrocentric lens. Kwei-Armah creates characters grounded in African mythology as a means to root his plays in an African cosmology. (Although it is possible that Kwei-Armah sourced these archetypes from West African culture directly, as he never references African writers, it is plausible, as seen with his

other depictions of Africa such as the gurlkel player, that he has accessed such knowledge from African America). Paul Carter Harrison argues in his essay, 'August Wilson's Blues Poetics' (1991), that characters in Wilson's work such as Troy in *Fences*, and Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* are examples of the Yoruba figure of the trickster, Esu. Harrison argues that Wilson's appropriation of an African deity reflects 'a culturally specific African American cosmological world view forged from ancestral memory' that in turn 'informs the aesthetics of his work' (qtd in Shannon, 2003: 175). Similarly, Kwei-Armah's characters can also be seen to reflect this cosmology. In *Elmina's*, Anastasia is juxtaposed to the male-dominated world of the play. She arrives unexpectedly carrying a home-made macaroni pie and looking for a job. Her superior cooking secures her the job and she quickly becomes a major force of change in the play. She convinces Deli to clean up the image his restaurant is projecting by getting rid of patrons like Digger, whose presence Anastasia describes as giving off 'the stench of death' (45). She also helps Deli to give the restaurant a fresh image and new name, and exposes him to self-help books. Her positivity strengthens Deli's resolve to extricate Ashley from mixing with gangs. As a character, she is almost too good to be true. There is something artificial about her, leaving the impression that she is more archetype than a three-dimensional representation. The stage directions describe her entrance in the following way:

Anastasia scans the shop quickly then pauses for a second. Then, as if she is somehow rooted to the spot, looks around again but this time slower, more deliberate, as if trying to see something that is not visible, something that is hiding (17).

It is the macaroni pie, a traditional southern American 'soul food', that further hints at her more supernatural purpose. The power of food is not underestimated, as Digger comments before Deli takes a bite: 'Mind she obea you, boy!' (18). Yet from his first taste of the food, Deli's life begins to change for the better and Anastasia secures a place in his life. As Harrison writes, 'Black Theatre is not merely the social inscription of victimization arrested in the lens of social realism' (2002: 5). Its critical engagement, he argues, requires an understanding of African diasporic cultural traditions:

It is not uncommon to discover in the ritual forms of Black Theatre characters that are more representative archetypes than individuated, full-dimensional characters located in the conventions of realism. Characters configured as archetypes serve a universe that allows both the living and the dead to drive the actions of a dramatic event (2002: 5).

The stage directions describe Anastasia in such a way that supports this idea: 'we can see that she has the kind of body that most men of colour fantasize about. Big hips and butt, slim waist and full, full breasts' (17). The description that stresses her African physicality renders Anastasia as representative of an African 'Earth Mother Goddess' archetype. Anastasia has come to save Deli and his family. Yet for all the positive change she brings, her influence is destroyed by the jealous Clifton, who sees her as a threat to his ambitions for his son's attention and financial assistance. Clifton seduces her and then blackmails her to leave Deli for good. Here, Kwei-Armah critiques a male-dominated culture that has lost respect for its women and any spiritual connection to their goddesses. Osborne criticizes this particular stage direction as one among other examples of 'sexual denigration' of women within the play (Osborne, 2006a: 92). Kwei-Armah's intentions, however, seen through a non-Western value system, are in fact the reverse. Yet, as Osborne's critique reveals, the stage direction exposes the heterosexist and patriarchal values of a traditional African world-view and of the Black Power movement. The play, therefore, reflects a conservative world-view by dint of it being rooted in 1960s Black radical politics. An American reviewer noted that the play dealt with themes that may be new to a British audience, but to an American one, it trod upon familiar territory pioneered by the likes of Langston Hughes and August Wilson (Marks, 2005).

Another archetypal figure emerges in *Statement* through the character of Soby. When Kwaku is desperate for money to keep the business afloat, it is Soby who offers to help him on the condition that he reject his African name and take on his West Indian birth name, Derek, and that he stands up against the Africans and asserts West Indian superiority. This separatist approach within the multicultural office ends up destroying the organization and Kwaku loses

everything. Only at the end of the play do we discover that Soby is the ghost of Kwaku's father. The character of Soby can be seen as fulfilling the role of the 'trickster'. Descended from West African mythology, namely the Yoruba god Esu, the trickster takes numerous forms (animal / spirit / human) and emerges in cultural traditions in Africa and the New World. As Euba highlights, however, although the trickster figure is commonly seen as a hero and his dissembling powers an example of black survival against white oppression, he is more complicated than that. Euba argues that Esu's manifestation in the New World embodies the 'fateful / fatal satiric complex'. In other words, he is not always a hero but instead his presence has the objective of 'affecting human awareness' (Euba, 2002: 167). Soby leads Kwaku down the wrong path to near destruction. He tempts him with rhetoric of division which tests Kwaku's capability as a leader of the organization. Through his interaction with Soby, Kwaku's pride and associated inability to make clear judgments is revealed as damaging to his family and to the community. As Euba concludes:

Esu-Legba, in his fateful / fatal oppositional constitution, suggests a more complex and functional purpose than mere dissembling, one that has the potential to deflate human excesses and stupid rives, such as arrogance, megalomania, and pompousness, thereby forcing self-awareness and, ultimately, self mastery (2002: 178).

Kwei-Armah provides two possible endings for the piece. In the first (the ending staged at the RNT), Kwaku is left alone and confused and unsure of what he has done. However, the alternate ending (used in his radio adaptation) provides redemption. Lola his wife comes back to him and they are reconciled:

LOLA: ...The battle had changed, Kwaku. Maybe it's time we rest.

Maybe it's time we let the young ones make their mistakes.

KWAKU: Maybe. Take me home, Lola (255).

In the first ending, Kwaku remains deceived and his life is in shreds. In the second ending, Soby brings about an eventual self-awareness. The inclusion of such trickster and archetypal characters is in line with Kwei-Armah's approach, which seeks to root his drama beyond the purely social and place it within a

larger mythological cosmos of the African diaspora. However, Kwei-Armah's route to these African cultural practices is mediated through African America. This explains the almost romantic and non-specific employment of African forms.

Kwei-Armah's incorporation of the African American experience and culture into his dramas also has a musical dimension. The blues features prominently in *Elmina's* and in *Fix Up*. In the prologue to *Elmina's Kitchen*, the African griot is accompanied by music described as 'a slow lament-sounding concoction of American blues and traditional African music' (5). The mixture of American blues and African music traces in sound the movement of slaves from Africa to the USA. As the scene is meant to contextualize the action of the rest of the play, set in Hackney, the *mélange* of musical styles seems oddly placed. The music of the blues is used a second time at the opening of the second act during the funeral of Deli's brother, when the cast sing *You Gotta Move*. Kwei-Armah also uses the blues in *Fix Up*. At the end of the play, Kiyi's cuts off his dreadlocks and sings the blues slave chant *Adam in the Garden*. Tellingly, Kwei-Armah signifies slavery and its impact on contemporary black Britishness in such a way that does not yield identification with the African Caribbean experience but rather locates it in an African American context.

The blues permeates beyond providing a soundtrack to the plays to influence their tone. Kwei-Armah's plays tend to end on a melancholic note. *Elmina's* ends with Deli covering the body of his dead son, in *Fix Up* Kiyi is forced to leave his shop and has been exposed as a father who abandoned his daughter, and in *Statement* the positive work of the think-tank hangs in the balance after Kwaku's nervous breakdown. Nevertheless, juxtaposed with these endings the plays balance moments of light heartedness, songs and comic relief. The result is a bittersweet tone that epitomizes the blues. Although this tradition has nothing to do with Africa or the Caribbean, it seems Kwei-Armah uses the blues not to signify cultural specificity, but rather as a means to evoke an atmosphere of shared history. In this way, its use can be seen as a 'call and response' with not only a musical form, but with African American dramatists such as Baldwin, Baraka, and Wilson renowned for infusing their work with the spirit of the blues.

## **Conclusion**

Beneath the surface of these very specific black British plays, the influence of black America can be traced. August Wilson has been an important factor in the shaping of Kwei-Armah's plays, especially with regards to his plots and characterization. However, partly through Wilson and partly through a strong identification with African American black radical cultural politics which emerged in the 1960s, Kwei-Armah's plays reveal an indebtedness to an African American ideology that does not distinguish between art and politics. It is an approach which seeks to collapse aesthetic and ethical distinctions and one which places the black subject at its centre.



## **Mojisola Adebayo (b. 1971)**

### **Introduction**

Adebayo is a playwright, performer / deviser, director, and facilitator. Her first full-length play *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey* (2008) premiered at the Lyric Hammersmith in 2006 and was followed by a reworked production in 2007 at the Oval House Theatre.<sup>77</sup> *Moj of the Antarctic*, set in the nineteenth century, depicts the epic journey of Moj, a mixed-race house slave on a plantation in southern USA, who escapes from slavery by dressing up as a white man and flees to Boston and then to England. Once in London she finds work on a whaling ship and journeys to the Antarctic.

The play was inspired by the true story of Ellen and William Craft, who, in 1848, escaped from slavery by the light-skinned, mixed-race Ellen dressing up as a white man and pretended that her darker husband was her servant. The couple fled from Georgia to Boston before journeying to England in 1851, where they lived before returning to the USA in 1868.

While in England, they published *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860/1969), which documented their experience. Adebayo followed *Moj of the Antarctic* with *Muhammad Ali and Me* (2011) in 2008 at the Oval House Theatre. *Muhammad Ali and Me* is set in London during the 1970s and depicts the imaginary friendship between a mixed-race girl named Mojitola and Muhammad Ali. The play follows Mojitola's experience's growing up in foster care and at school where she encounters racism and sexual abuse. Ali's 'visitations' and example provide Mojitola with guidance and support, giving her the strength to stand up for herself, channelling her politicization as black British.

In 2010, her first commission, *Desert Boy* (2011) was staged at The Albany and produced by Nitro. Her most recent work, *I Stand Corrected* premiered in South Africa before being staged in England at the Oval House Theatre in 2012. The

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<sup>77</sup> In 2008 *Moj of the Antarctic*, funded by the British Council, toured to Botswana, Malawi, Mauritius and South Africa.

piece, co-created with South African Mamele Nyamza, explores the issue of corrective rape in South Africa through physical theatre / dance. *The following discussion will focus on *Moj of the Antarctic* and *Muhammad Ali and Me*. A short discussion of *Desert Boy*, which is partly set in the USA, is included in the conclusion.*<sup>78</sup>

### **Middle Passages and Talking Books: Intertextuality and American Icons in *Moj of the Antarctic* and *Muhammad Ali and Me***

*It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others [...] One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body [...] The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face*

(Du Bois, 1903/2008: 11-12).

Adebayo is British-born and raised, of mixed-race heritage (her mother is white Danish and her father black Nigerian), and an out lesbian. Although mixed-race, Adebayo identifies herself as Black British. Adebayo's experience growing up in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s, characterized by often outspoken as well as institutional racism and an increasing black British politicization, explains her identification with being black over mixed race. She acknowledges that having a white mother has led to being treated differently by both black and white people; however, she insists upon her 'black' identity:

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<sup>78</sup> Other works by Adebayo include *Matt Henson, North Star* (2009, rehearsed reading at the Lyric Hammersmith; published 2011), about African American Mathew Henson who was a member of the first expedition to the North Pole in 1909; and *48 Minutes for Palestine* (2011), an experimental piece in collaboration with Ashtar Theatre.

My mother is white Danish, but my experience of living in Britain is as a black woman [...] as a mixed-heritage person I have been and will be treated differently. I have been privy to racist comments on the basis that my mother is white, and the door has been opened to me more, as though somehow I'm not really black, that my mum has given me a passport out. I know I may be treated differently, but in terms of how I feel, I feel black (qtd in Goddard, 2008: 148).

A formative experience for Adebayo was the time she spent in white foster care as a child. Adebayo describes her experience in care as providing a black child such as herself with the 'tools' to navigate a 'white institution' an experience which equips one with the knowledge of 'how to be white' (qtd in Osborne, 2009: 14). This notion of having 'insider information' (14) into whiteness, coupled with a sense of being alienated from one's blackness, of having 'to learn how to be black' (14) has profoundly shaped Adebayo's thematic concerns and approach to performance.

In line with other black / mixed-race British playwrights raised in care or by white adoptive parents, such as Jackie Kay, Lemn Sissay, and Valerie Mason-John, Adebayo's work registers the pain of being raised in an all-white environment (*Moj of the Antarctic*) as well as the search for, and reclamation of, a denied black identity (*Muhammad Ali and Me*).<sup>79</sup>

Both *Moj of the Antarctic* and *Muhammad Ali and Me* contain elements of autobiography. In both plays, the protagonist's (Moj in *Moj of the Antarctic* and Mojitola in *Muhammad Ali and Me*) are mixed-race lesbians and share a similar first name with the author. In its depiction of a black / mixed-race woman's escape from slavery by dressing up as a white man and journey to the Antarctic – '[i]nto the heart of whiteness' (178) - *Moj of the Antarctic* can be read as a metaphorical reflection of Adebayo's experience growing up in white foster care and its psychological implications: 'The autobiographical stuff for me' she

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<sup>79</sup> See Lemn Sissay's *Something Dark* (2008) and Valerie Mason-John's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (2008).

states, 'was about my own history of being a black kid brought up by white people' (qtd in Osborne, 2009: 14).<sup>80</sup>

*Muhammad Ali and Me*, 'inspired by real life experiences' (70), confronts Adebayo's experience in care more directly. Set in the 1970s, the play traces the experiences of Mojitola growing up in a foster home and charts the development of her Black consciousness through her imaginary relationship with Muhammad Ali. In this sense, the play, in contrast to *Moj of the Antarctic*, presents a journey into blackness. What is remarkable is that, in both cases, Adebayo explores the self through two African American figures.

*Moj of the Antarctic* is a one-woman show in which Adebayo plays multiple characters. *Muhammad Ali and Me* comprises a cast of three (a second actor and a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter) with Adebayo playing both roles of Mojitola and Muhammad Ali. Adebayo's works are characterized by their epic quality: unities of place and time yield to stories which cover extended periods and are set in multiple locations.

The combination of her poetic style of writing, physical theatre performance technique (nurtured as a performer with the Black Mime Theatre troupe under Artistic Director Denise Wong), and use of multi-media create highly textured pieces with multiple resonances, which are, nevertheless, grounded in a more or less linear, yet symbolic, realism. Within the narrative, her works also incorporate Brechtian 'alienation' techniques which draw attention to her productions' performed elements through use of projection / montage, anachronism and audience-actor participation / interruption. Acknowledging Adebayo's blending of fact with fiction and poetic writing and performance style, Goddard describes Adebayo's work as 'auto-bio-mythography' (Goddard, 2008: 147).

As a whole, Adebayo's work reveals an ambivalence in relation to race. On the

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<sup>80</sup> *Moj of the Antarctic* echoes Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* (1998), which is also based on a true story about an African American woman who passed as a man (musician Billy Tipton). In *Trumpet*, Kay invents the character Joss Moody, based on Tipton, and transposes the story to Scotland.

one hand, her work challenges the fixity of binary categorizations by drawing attention to the construction of race through her representation of characters with mercurial identities and by switching between characters of different races / ethnicities in performance. On the other hand, Adebayo's identity is rooted in a black diasporic ideology that does not challenge blackness, but rather insists on it as a primary source of influence, which manifests in her approach to playwriting and performance.

Bracketing Adebayo's work within a tradition of mixed-race British women writers who celebrate their dual cultural and racial heritage should, therefore, be treated with caution. While, at points, Adebayo's work registers a mixed-race awareness, its expression of racial and cultural 'in-betweenness' reflects rather a *black* woman's negotiation of Du Boisian 'double consciousness' (1903/2008) or a Fanonian exfoliation of the white mask from black skin (1952/1967), as opposed to a mixed-race women's one. Within this, her work does challenge black heterosexual hegemonies; however, despite giving voice to a number of marginalized positionalities, particularly mixed-race / black lesbians, this, as she makes clear, is not her focus:

I think my work is most definitely feminist [...] It's within lesbian history, but something in me says, I don't know if the feminists need me, I don't know if the lesbians need me. Maybe they do? I don't know. But I for sure know I need blackness. I need the African diaspora. I need Africa, I need and want, crave, will fight for, my place within my family – I mean my immediate family, the Adebayo family, as well as the wider family (qtd in Osborne, 2009: 19-20).

Echoing Kwei-Armah, Adebayo's identification with the diaspora as a 'home' space emerges from a sense of unbelonging in her natal land, which has fostered transnational alliances beyond the borders of the nation. As Adebayo confirms:

The experience of being black in Britain is a microcosm of homelessness, of being displaced, estranged, a foreigner in your own country (qtd in Osborne, 2009: 14).

Viewing the African diaspora as a space / community from which to draw inspiration and support finds theatrical representation in Adebayo's plays, in which blackness and black diasporic history retain central positions.

Like Kwei-Armah, Adebayo's sense and representation of African diasporic history, politics, and aesthetics has been importantly shaped by African America. These strong empathetic links with African America attest to how black British notions of the African diaspora are deeply informed by an African American cultural imaginary. The notion of cultural imaginary, as articulated by Graham Dawson, refers to 'those vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time, and articulate its psychic and social dimensions' (1994: 48).

### ***Moj of the Antarctic***

In *Moj of the Antarctic*, Adebayo pastiches the eighteenth century African American slave narrative. The main thrust of the plot for the first half of the play is taken from the Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. However, Adebayo also interweaves quotations from, among others, Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845/1999), Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859/1983) (the first female African American novelist) and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861/2001).

Adebayo does not attempt to present an historical 'docu-drama'. Instead, Adebayo uses the Craft's (and others) experience as a basic framework to construct a fantasy 'herstory'. Adebayo excises the figure of William Craft and gives the protagonist, re-named Moj, a female lover named May. When Moj's master (and father) discovers that May has taught Moj to read and write, May is whipped to death. The incident precipitates Moj's flight to Boston and then to England by dressing up as a white man. In London, Moj, still disguised but now as a black man, finds work on a whaling ship, which sets sail for the Southern Ocean. During the voyage she is involved in hunting a whale, performs a black-face minstrel show for the crew, and becomes the first black woman to set foot

in Antarctica. Although the latter half of the play moves away from the slave narrative, its basic arc as a journey to emancipation (or, in this case, consciousness) remains intact.

While the first half of the play is fairly realistic in its portrayal of events, the second half moves increasingly towards the symbolic. In this half, Moj is plunged into a world of whiteness. The text incorporates quotations from mainly white Euro-American canonical writers whose words recall the way in which their works have shaped discourses of race and how they engaged with themes of slavery and colonization. For instance, quotations from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* draw attention to colonization, Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* highlights how Western capitalist expansion was indebted to slavery, and Darwin's theory of evolution recalls its appropriation by Social Darwinists and the science of eugenics. In particular, Melville's *Moby-Dick* is used as a key source text by Adebayo, not least because the second part of the play is set on a whaling ship in the Antarctic. Adebayo quotes extensively from *Moby-Dick*, drawing attention to the novel's representation of whiteness:

Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own, as in marbles, japonicas, pearls; and though various nations have in some way recognised a certain royal pre-eminence in this hue...and though this pre-eminence...applies to the human race itself, giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe; and though, besides all this, whiteness has been even made significant of gladness...there lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood...Witness the white bear of the poles, and the white shark of the tropics; what but their smooth, flaky whiteness makes them the transcendent horrors they are? (167-8).

Moj's voyage to the Antarctic (represented by projected images of Adebayo's research trip to the region) becomes an externalization of her struggle to emancipate herself from the bondage of 'mental' and 'discursive' enslavement:

to extricate herself from the role of the 'Other' imposed upon non-whites since the 'Enlightenment' or what Moj refers to as the 'Enwhitenment' (151).

In *Moj of the Antarctic*, Adebayo simultaneously draws attention to the conditions of slavery and treatment of blacks, as well as their representation in literature and on stage (through her performance of a blackface minstrel show). As a result, reference to books and literary allusions within the play carry significant weight. In the first scene in which we are introduced to Moj (the play begins with a prologue) she is cleaning her master's / father's library. Longing to read books by black authors, she contents herself first with the mastery of white texts:

MOJ: One day / When I'm truly free / I'll read books by Negroes! / I'll read [...] Ignatius Sancho! Francis Harper, / Harriet Wilson, Harriet Jacobs, Phillis Wheatley! [...] But in the greenwich meantime / I'll say these books are mine / By rights my 'inheritance' / And with this knowledge I'll make a recompense / A small 'reparation' / For the rape of my mother-nation' (159-60).

The setting of the library and initial image of Moj reading from a book underlines the link between knowledge and power. Adebayo, echoing sentiments expressed in Douglass' slave narrative, draws attention to the importance of literacy as the slave's primary route to individual and collective freedom. Equally, Adebayo highlights literacy as a tool of domination. When the master discovers that Moj has learnt to read and write he whips May to death, sparing Moj only because she is his illegitimate child. It is at this point that Moj, realising that 'the only creatures to walk truly free upon on [sic] the earth were men. White men' (167), decides to disguise herself as a white man and flee to Boston.

Adebayo's focus on the importance of reading and books brings to mind Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s notion of 'the trope of the Talking Book'. Gates identifies this as the 'ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition' (Gates, 1988: 131), which he traces back to five eighteenth-century slave narratives. In the earliest narratives, the black slave describes his first encounter with books as objects that could



talk and impart knowledge to whites. Equating literacy with whiteness and whiteness with freedom, mastering the ability to read and write, therefore, brings with it the possibility of discursive freedom; a means by which the black slave can articulate his / her humanity (Gates, 1988: 127-169). Moj's decision to appropriate the knowledge of the white texts '[a]nd with this knowledge ... make a recompense ... [f]or the rape of my mother-nation' echoes this desire to use the 'white' form of the book for black ends. In other words, literacy becomes a way in which to negotiate and resist the master discourse.

This theme is supported stylistically by Adebayo's incorporation into her text of quotations from the mainly nineteenth-century white Euro-American canon. At one point in the play, Moj reflects on her journey to Antarctica as a voyage '[i]nto the heart of whiteness' (178) – a clear reply to Conrad and his exploration of darkness. Adebayo's engagement with these texts is, therefore, a self-conscious attempt to 'write back' to the Euro-American canon, undermining and critiquing its authority and drawing attention to the historical construction of race.

When asked in an interview with Goddard about her engagement with white male writers, Adebayo acknowledged that she intentionally sought to create a dialogue between prominent (mainly) nineteenth-century influential white male figures with the forgotten black male and female voices of the same period, an act she recognizes as counter-discursive or 'writing back' (Ashcroft et al., 1989): 'in a sense, I'm Africanising the European literary voice (qtd in Goddard, 2008: 145). The Talking Book trope, Gates states, coincides with Bakhtin's notion of 'double-voiced discourse' and through it we can read a tradition of 'making the white written text speak with a black voice' (Gates, 1988: 131).

Importantly, however, through the trope of the Talking Book, Adebayo is not only 'writing back' to the white canon, she is also 'writing back' to the African American slave narratives. This, Gates suggests, is an act of 'Signifyin(g)' akin to intertextuality through which one can trace a tradition of writing, whereby African American writers build on and affirm work by their predecessors ('unmotivated signifyin') or adapt and rework tropes to create new meaning ('motivated signifyin'):

It should be clear, even from a cursory familiarity with the texts of the Afro-American tradition, that black writers read and critique the texts of other black writers as an act of rhetorical self-definition. Our literary tradition exists because of these chartable formal relationships, relationships of Signifyin(g) (Gates, 1988: 122).

In *Moj of the Antarctic*, Adebayo places herself within this African American tradition by re-working the trope of the Talking Book. In Adebayo's play, however, it is Moj's lover May who teaches her to read. Moj's education is prompted by a combination of desire for emancipation and her desire for May. In other words, May is the embodiment of the 'Talking Book' and Moj's literacy becomes framed as both intellectual and sexual. By removing William from the history and changing Ellen's sexuality and name to reflect Adebayo's own sexuality and name, Adebayo inserts herself into history by critiquing and revising the heterosexual, male authorial voice of the slave narrative. Anderson highlights such interventions or 'imagined histories' as characteristic of an attempt 'to fill in the gaps in the histories of black women, particularly black lesbians, gay men, and other black 'queers', whose histories have been left out' (qtd in Osborne, 2009: 6). The fictional additions to the 'history', in other words, allow Adebayo ownership of a past which has failed to provide self-representation:

I chose a female lover for her because I'm acknowledging that there are many stories of female lovers in our history that I will never discover because they have never been written down and have never been acknowledged (qtd in Goddard, 2008: 144).

According to Cook and Tatum, Frederick Douglas' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* became 'the allegorical master narrative of later African American texts as varied as *Black boy*, *The Street*, *Invisible Man*, *The Color Purple*, and *Beloved*' which 'reproduce the pattern he devised' by highlighting 'the symbiotic relationship between literacy and liberation in African American literature' (2010: 53). Adebayo follows in the footsteps of African American women writers such as Alice Walker (*The Colour*

*Purple*) and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*) who have equally 'Signified' on the trope of the Talking Book by bringing gender, and in some cases sexuality, to bear on the slave (neo) narrative tradition. In particular, Walker's *The Colour Purple* depicts loving relationships between women, particularly between Celie and Shug Avery and is a writer (along with Morrison) whom Adebayo cites as important influences: ' – and where would I be without Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, all of those great black writers?' (qtd in Osborne, 2009: 9).

Following the formula of slave narratives, *Moj of the Antarctic* is a journey of self-discovery modelled upon the literacy / liberation relationship and the 'queering' of this tradition, which is as much about transgressing the borders of gender and race as it is about genre (or the lesbianization of history). Ellen Craft's act of dressing up as a white man as a survival strategy resonates with Adebayo's personal experience of being raised in white foster care during the 1970s. Craft's 'race-change' provides Adebayo with the starting point to explore a journey into whiteness<sup>81</sup>. In one sense, the play becomes an affirmation of the in-betweenness of being mixed-race and its ability to challenge the static framework of black and white racial discourses. Throughout the play, Adebayo draws parallels between the bondage / confines of slavery with binary categories that thrive upon the 'Other' to maintain their own definition:

I see what Ellen Craft did as a wonderfully queer thing, part of a queer history and legacy. It's nothing to do with her sexuality, but is about her transgressing the boundaries of gender (qtd in Goddard, 2008: 144).

However, in another sense, the message seems less to do with the elimination of binaries and more focused upon Moj finding her blackness within the whiteness as an act of psychological healing. It is in Antarctica that she feels a sense of belonging on discovering the black Antarctic rock that is covered by white snow: 'And under all this white / Antarctica is a broken rock as Black as my great-grandfather' (185).

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<sup>81</sup> Gubar uses the term 'racechange' to connote 'the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality' and as a way in which to understand and challenge 'racial parameters' (1997: 5).

To these texts, however, Adebayo brings a third voice – her own as a black British Londoner – to signify upon the existing texts. Adebayo’s voice adds a contemporary black British anachronistic idiom to the text. Her words combine a specific way of rendering language influenced by the British Rastafarian’s ironic use of English which changes words to mock their meaning, such as ‘Amen’ said ‘A – Men’ (158) stressing religion as created by and for men and ‘Enlightenment’ as ‘Enwhitenment’ (151).

Adebayo’s borrowing and reformulation of the Craft story to create a new myth places her within a tradition of African American writers. This is given an interesting dimension in the theatre. The play, which combines the eighteenth-century white and black quotations with Adebayo’s contemporary idiom, when presented in the present space of the theatre, reminds the audience of the legacy (and invisibility) of these texts. By recalling the past through the prism of the present, attention is drawn to how these discourses have shaped the field of representation: how blackness and whiteness have come to signify as well as the erasure of homosexuals from past narratives. By combining the Craft’s story, quotes from slave narratives and canonical writers, and reworking them within her language and experience, Adebayo writes and performs herself ‘into being’ in an act of myth-making that becomes, as Gates states, ‘an act of rhetorical self-definition’ (1988: 122).

### **Muhammad Ali and Me**

*One of the reasons the civil rights movement went forward was that Black people were able to overcome their fear. And I honestly believe that for many Black Americans, that came from watching Muhammad Ali. He simply refused to be afraid. And being that way, he gave other people courage* (Byrant Gumbel qtd in Zirin, 2005: 63).

*Muhammad Ali and Me* begins with the forty-year-old Mojito telling the audience that ‘Muhammad Ali / And me / Have only one thing / In common. / We were Black, / in the seventies’ (72). The play then proceeds to disprove this initial assertion by weaving together seminal moments in Mojito’s and Ali’s lives.

The impression we are left with by the end of the play is that it is precisely this commonality of being 'Black', during what is portrayed as the racist 'seventies' in both Britain and America, that connects Mojito's and Ali's otherwise very different experiences. After the opening statement, the narrative flashes back to 1970s London, to when Mojito's father decides to return to Nigeria, leaving her in the care of Mummy Angie. (Mojito's white Danish mother is never seen; however, we are made aware that she was physically abused by her husband). Before the character of Ali is introduced, the play establishes Mojito's struggles in foster care where she experiences both racism and sexual abuse. It is after a harrowing scene in which the seven-year-old Mojito is sexually abused by her foster mother's son that Muhammad Ali appears in Mojito's life.

Initially, Ali is invoked by a griot character who appears to Mojito to tell her a bedtime story. Delivered in the style of an epic poem, the griot recounts Ali's (then Cassius Clay) early life growing up in Kentucky under Jim Crow segregation. The speech contextualizes Ali's decision to become a boxer through his upbringing in the racist South; essentially tracing his journey to self-determination along similar lines found in the slave narrative: from 'slave ship to citizenship' (Gilroy 1993: 31).

Ali's biography, told as a bedtime story by the griot, underlines two things. Firstly, that Ali's life, told within the didactic frame of the storytelling event, is a lesson of courage and self-pride for the young Mojito. Secondly, that Ali's example, communicated by the African griot, is accessible to Mojito as he is not just a black American but that his story belongs to the repertoire and shared experience of the black / African diaspora.

After the griot's introduction of Ali's early life story, the narrative interweaves scenes of Mojito's and Ali's lives. As Adebayo deftly switches between playing each character, scenes alternate between depicting seminal points in Ali's life – his rise to fame as a boxer, political radicalization as a member of the Nation of Islam, key fights of his career, and refusal to fight in the Vietnam War – with Mojito's coming of age.

As opposed to depicting two distinct and isolated biographies, Ali is portrayed as Mojito's imaginary friend with whom she interacts. Throughout the play, the performance insistently draws comparisons between Ali and Mojito's struggles. Like Ali, who changed his name from Cassius Clay when he joined the Nation of Islam – an act which many refused to acknowledge – Mojito has been given an English name Susan. When Mojito is fighting a school bully who taunts her about her name, the fight between Ali and Ernie Terrell is simultaneously projected in which Ali repeatedly shouts 'What's my name?' (106).

Mojito's recourse to African American icons and culture is played out against a white-washed 1970s Britain 'full of Teddy Boys, British Bull Dogs, National Front, Skin Heads ... Thatcher Thatcher milk snatcher ... all sorts of monsters' (96). Mojito's identification with Ali draws attention to the lack of black role models otherwise available to her – an experience that is shared and documented by other black Britons growing up in the 1970s. Mojito's isolation from black culture is exacerbated by her father's abandonment. She is left 'to grow up Black, in Britain, alone' (126). Without recourse to her father's African cultural heritage, Mojito's only access to positive and nourishing representations of blackness is mediated through America.

The representation of Ali in the play can also be read as an example of the trope of the Talking Book, albeit in a significantly reconfigured form. The book, as conduit of knowledge, is, by the 1970s, the television. Adebayo draws attention to both the ritual of watching television as a family, and television as a cultural resource for children who imitate television shows. The importance of television also finds aesthetic representation: footage of Ali's fights is projected onto the stage throughout the play. The use of projection adds a third, 'intermedial' space to the theatrical event by juxtaposing the present of the performance with snippets of the captured past in the images / films. The use of multimedia disrupts the linear narrative, allowing movement in time and place. This provides an aesthetic echo to the play's theme of memory and gives form to the transnational circuits of Mojito's identification.

Whereas in *Moj of the Antarctic* Moj approaches literacy and knowledge through a negotiation of whiteness which is then re-articulated for her black self needs, in *Muhammad Ali and Me the Talking Book* / Ali figure provides the map for Mojitola's journey into blackness. In other words, Ali is the route through which she is able to locate a positive sense of self. Ali's presence, advice, and example help Mojitola cope with her experiences of abuse and racial discrimination. Ultimately, he provides her with a template to facilitate her growing self-awareness and her decision to embrace a 'Black' identity. Her 'relationship' with Ali also introduces her to other inspirational African American political activists, namely Malcolm X. Inspired by a speech X gave at Oxford University in which he quoted the beginning of the 'to be or not to be' soliloquy from *Hamlet* as an example of the need to fight tyranny as opposed to simply 'suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', Mojitola presents the same speech and interpretation while at drama school.

The play, however, does not solely focus on Ali's influence in helping Mojitola overcome racism. As well as being the subject of white racism, Mojitola's experience of sexual abuse, rejection by some of her black peers at school and subsequent feeling of unbelonging as neither white nor black, her sexuality as a lesbian, and abandonment by her father are equally important oppressions she faces. For the young Mojitola, Ali's example teaches her vital lessons in both self-assertion and self-consciousness. At the end of the play, when Mojitola meets her father for the first time since he abandoned her, she repeats verbatim the statement Ali made when he declared his conversion to Islam following his victory over Sonny Liston in 1964: 'I know where I'm going and I know the truth, and I don't have to be what you want me to be. I'm free to be what I want' (149).

Ali provides Mojitola with a model through which she is able to locate her own sense of belonging in the world. The Mojitola / Ali relationship represents, in microcosm, a relationship based upon solidarity and identification within the deterritorialized space of the African diaspora. This sense of the African diaspora as the glue that binds their relationship, and introduced from the beginning through the griot, is later extrapolated in a presentation that Mojitola gives at school entitled 'The History of the Shuffle' (111). The title of her speech

is inspired by Ali's trademark moves in the boxing ring, which he christened the 'Ali shuffle' after winning his fight against Cleveland Williams in 1966:

MOJITOLA: Shuffle has always been a feature of dances on the African continent: / Africans shuffled for celebration, / and shuffled in grief. / To maintain traditions, / and shuffled in chains. / Shuffled shackled in pain. / On the slave ships. / On the auction blocks [...] And from the shuffle / came tap / and from tap / came Jazz / and Jazz equals / everything we are / and all we can be. / All our Black possibilities. / Our roots / and our routes / to being free. / So shuffle is a movement / is a memory / is a state of mind. / And when Muhammad Ali did *his* shuffle in the ring / he was doing so much more than boxing or dancing, / he was saying / Me, We (112-3).

Mojitola's history of the shuffle highlights that Ali's dextrous footwork in the boxing ring resonates beyond physical movement. Through Ali's performance of the shuffle, the movement articulates an embodied African diasporic cultural and political tradition. The 'shuffle' communicates central ideas in the play of African cultural continuity and community based upon shared experiences in the diaspora. Through Ali, Mojitola forges a connection between the self and the African diaspora and therefore finds a sense of belonging encapsulated in Ali's poem 'Me. We'.<sup>82</sup>

This diasporic history and cultural tradition based upon 'routes' allows Mojitola to create a sense of identity and belonging by accessing histories, stories, traditions, and cultures beyond the geographic, cultural, and temporal confines which define the national identity from which she experiences exclusion. This mode of belonging is contrasted with a traditional sense of Britishness that draws upon a vocabulary of historical rootedness through which to articulate a national identity. This idea is articulated in the play when the Ali versus Cleveland Williams fight, after which he christened the term 'Ali shuffle', is projected onto the stage during a scene when Mojitola is singing 'When a Knight Won His Spurs' (106) at school assembly. The scene contrasts the ways

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<sup>82</sup> Ali first recited his poem, referred to as the shortest poem in the English language, at a lecture he gave at Harvard University (Sharma, 2009: 191).



in which history and tradition are appropriated. In England, through the singing of the song and its reference to Arthurian legend, culture and history rooted in England's white past is transferred. In contrast, through the history of the shuffle Adebayo highlights an alternate history and moral code, which does not stem from a sense of nationalism but rather transnationalism.

In *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora*, Carrington develops a Gilroy-inspired conceptual space he calls the 'sporting black Atlantic'. Black athletes, he argues, have, through their successes, acquired a political weight which operates on a transnational level and resonates throughout the black diaspora (2010: 201). Ali's outspokenness on issues of American race relations and refusal to fight in the Vietnam War made him a national and global hero and a symbol in the struggle for racial equality. As Eldridge Cleaver argues, despite Ali's political and religious allegiances, his sense of self-pride, self-belief, and refusal to bow to white mainstream America's demands, were the values that consolidated his broad appeal and iconic status in the minds of many African Americans (2003: 303).

*Muhammad Ali and Me* dramatizes the impact that Ali's international career had upon Mojitola's parochial London suburban experience. It draws attention to Mojitola's friendship with Ali as a survival strategy that allows her to shape her own reality, unhampered by the constraints of place. Thus, *Muhammad Ali and Me* gives theatrical form to Carrington's notion where Africa and the USA coalesce within Mojitola's London bedroom. It is in this borderless space that Mojitola is able to imagine and, in turn, to concretely forge her identity.

### **Form and Style**

Adebayo's work engages with the black American literary tradition by drawing upon slave narratives, African American icons, myths, and history to inform her narratives. Through her re-working of the trope of the Talking Book, Adebayo not only appropriates but also re-imagines these traditions to articulate her own sense of self and journey to consciousness as black British and a mixed-race lesbian. This intertextual approach resonates on a formal, dramaturgical level, as well finding expression in her performance style.

Adebayo's melding of fact and fiction and representation of characters torn by psychological and biological schisms recalls Adrienne Kennedy's work. However, Adebayo's plays are also stylistically aligned with Ntozake Shange. Like Shange, Adebayo's works incorporate a poetic text (rooted in a black British vernacular), fluid form, and combine elements of ritual, song, and dance. They are also informed by a Black aesthetic ideology which seeks to challenge and dismantle Euro-American forms by providing a theatrical experience that emphasises ritual, collectivity, and the potential for healing. Commenting on her approach to form, Adebayo states:

I have never really related to the form of Western drama. I enjoy it, it can satisfy me – I love Synge, for example – but there's nothing like that kind of truth in how Shange and others like Suzan-Lori Parks write. Thought is so broken down, interactions are so fragmented, and one moment crosses another in a way that I really believe in (quoted in Osborne, 2009: 9).

It is telling that Adebayo draws a distinction between 'Western drama' and an approach exemplified by Shange and other black American women writers that is presumably 'non-Western'. Adebayo describes her approach as rooted 'within an African diasporic aesthetic', exemplified by her use of audience interaction / call-and-response and her melding of speech with song:

We don't seem to have a dividing line where speech becomes song. I'm not too bothered about drawing lines between lines. If it feels like this line should rhyme or if it feels right to speak to the audience or there should be movement or props transformed, these are all things that we see very much in West African and Southern African theatre forms. They come back again and again in most black theatre that I see (qtd in Osborne, 2009: 11-12).

What Adebayo refers to as an African diasporic aesthetic is in fact rooted, not in a general practice – what she refers to above as 'most black theatre', but in specific African American approaches to cultural production that have emerged

within a specific historical context. Adebayo's claims that 'these are all things that we see very much in West African and Southern African theatre forms' and that 'They come back again and again in most black theatre that I see', are no less prevalent in a diverse range of global theatre practices. Furthermore, the lumping together of West and Southern Africa is tellingly generalized. Indeed, if Adebayo is referring to theatre approaches that incorporate movement and the transformation of props in Southern Africa as representative of an authentic African / black approach, it should be pointed out that plays from South Africa that do this, such as *Woza Albert* (1983), are rooted in a European theatre approach informed by practitioners as diverse as Jacques Lecoq, Peter Brook and Grotowski. All of these so-called African traits exist in all cultures; however, it is the ideology of recuperation, driven by African American discourses and approaches to theatre creation, and placed within a global 'black' value system, that is of interest.

Adebayo's approach to creating theatre is undergirded by the ideology of call-and-response:

Call-and-response is the alternation of voice (call) and refrain (response). It is the verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and hearer in which the speaker's statements are punctuated by responses. While rooted in African music, vernacular traditions, and black religious services, its genealogy can also be traced to slave life (Krasner, 2002: 49-50).

The notion of call-and-response lies at the heart of African American cultural discourses that highlight the links between black American and African cultures. Tracing African survivals in indigenous black American cultural forms and practices highlights continuity with the ancestral homeland, encapsulated by the dialogic act of 'call-and-response'. The belief in, and act of tracing, African survivals moves beyond objective anthropological study to embrace a distinct politicized ideology of recuperation. The project of tracing such survivals gives a displaced people a sense of 'visible' origin as well as justifying a differentiation between blacks and whites along ethno-geographic lines. Studies tracing the retention and transformation of African cultural practices in the USA have

highlighted their existence across a range of cultural artefacts including folk tales and their telling, music and religious worship. The practice of call-and-response is identified across these practices which emphasise audience participation (storytelling), circular movements (religious circle dances), syncopation and improvisation (jazz). The project of a number of African American dramatists has been to harness these African informed folk forms for dramaturgical purposes, in order to articulate an African American theatre practice that is culturally and ideologically distinct from Euro-American theatre forms and the values embedded in its architecture. When black British dramatists, influenced and inspired by African American ones, emulate their work they inherit this ideology and its aesthetic and structural implications.

Both *Moj of the Antarctic* and *Muhammad Ali and Me* incorporate a griot character. In *Moj of the Antarctic* the stage directions for the griot character (named The Ancient) state:

A West-African female griot (storyteller, historian, singer, mystic), enacts a ritual: she sings, circles the space in a shuffle, speaks in tongues and sprinkles libation (151).

The Ancient's actions closely resemble the griot figure in Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen*. Similarly, in *Moj of the Antarctic*, the figure's function as a mediator between the past and the present, the living and the dead, and as the embodiment of the Middle Passage, positions the play within an African historical and cultural continuum. The generalized description of the griot, like the one found in *Elmina's Kitchen*, underlines the routes of its appropriation as a romantic ideal of pre-colonial Africa rooted in 1970s African American Afrocentrism.

The incorporation of the griot character in both *Moj of the Antarctic* and *Muhammad Ali and Me* serves two complimentary purposes: to locate the work in the shared experience of the African diaspora and to frame the European literary text-based dramatic tradition within an African derived tradition of orality. In doing so, the form and performance of the pieces reinforces their themes of

historical recuperation and positions them within an alternate, Afrocentric cultural value system.

The circling of the space, speaking in tongues and sprinkling of libation contextualizes *Moj of the Antarctic* within the framework of a ritual possession. In an interview with Osborne, Adebayo identifies with Alice Walker's notion of 'the role of the writer as a kind of medium' (qtd in Osborne, 2009: 10). Adebayo's incorporation of quotations from eighteenth-century writers into her text is akin to a sort of possession, a call and response with other writers and traditions. In *Mohammad Ali and Me*, the moment in which the griot invokes Ali is not performed as a religious ceremony; yet, the griot's function of communion with others remains consistent except, in this case, it is not with the dead but with the geographically disparate.

The griot also locates both pieces within an oral tradition of storytelling which, in an African and African diasporic context, is seen as a means to maintain bonds in the present with the past and to provide instruction to the community. In *Muhammad Ali and Me*, the griot intervenes directly in Mojibola's life to teach her about Ali who becomes her guiding role model. In *Moj of the Antarctic*, the griot urges the audience to look beyond divisive boundaries. In doing so she establishes the play's exploration of and polemic against binaries:

THE ANCIENT: If the world is a globe / Then there is no above / No below / No North or South / No heaven or hell / No white or... (*She prompt audience to respond*) black / No male or... (*She prompt audience to respond*) female / No God or... (*She prompt audience to respond*) Devil (155).

The audience participation is also seen as a key part of African-based oral tradition and is part of the ideology against binaries. The call-and-response brings speaker / performer and listener / audience together. In *Moj of the Antarctic*, Adebayo integrates a number of moments of audience participation into the piece. At one point, when Moj is fleeing a slave catcher, Adebayo instructs the audience to help her sing the African American spiritual *Sinnerman* (famously sung by Nina Simone):

MOJ: Abolitionists! I need your help, I need your spirit! We gotta confuse the slave catcher. So we'll set up a rhythm. I'll call and you respond. (*Improvises with audience.*)...That's good now let's put a little tone in it...(etc) (173).

This moment of audience participation not only incorporates the call-and-response into Adebayo's performance style, she is engaging with the discourse of call-and-response and drawing attention to the existence of African survivals within African American cultural forms in her performance. This moment of audience participation signifies on the musical genealogy of the song rooted in the black American spiritual tradition, itself rooted in slave chants and Christian religious experiences. Furthermore, coming at a time in the play when Moj is fleeing the slave catcher, the moment also draws attention to how messages of flight and freedom were encoded into songs during slavery and how they continued to be adapted to serve political ends, as Nina Simone's addition of 'Power! Power!' to the end of her version of *Sinnerman* suggests.

Whereas Kwei-Armah's work resonates the blues aesthetic of the BAM's realist theatre of experience, Adebayo's work, like Shange's, which has been described as transferring 'the dissonance and syncopation of jazz rhythm into language creating a poetic, yet spontaneous vernacular' (Taumann, 1999: 57), is more aligned with the form and rhythm of jazz. Her work presents a complex of narrative and performance techniques that echo each other and persistently draw attention to the journey of African American cultural forms. However, incorporated within her work and changed slightly, they attest to a further transformation resulting in, as we saw with Kwei-Armah, a black British mediation of Africa via America.

## **Conclusion**

*Moj of the Antarctic* and *Muhammad Ali and Me* dramatize the mythic influence of black America upon Adebayo. Both plays reveal much about Adebayo's personal experience growing up mixed race and lesbian in 1970s Britain and her experience of being in white foster care as a child. However, this

experience, along with her approach to theatre creation and resultant textual and performance style, are persistently refracted through the prism of black America. The fact that both protagonists in *Moj of the Antarctic* and *Muhammad Ali and Me* are loosely based upon Adebayo's life or experiences means that not only does Adebayo perform herself into being but that through her performance she positions herself as an inheritor of an African American performance and literary tradition.

Adebayo sees her work within an African diasporic tradition. There are elements of Nigeria and influences from the Caribbean / black British culture in her work. However, overwhelmingly one is struck by the dominance of black America not only in the narratives of her pieces but also reflected in their aesthetics and politics. It is something she has not noticed (Pearce, 2012). This unawareness reveals the pervasiveness and resultant normativeness of American culture whereby its myths and icons have become dislodged and even obscured from their geo-cultural roots and entered into the global public domain.

America and the history and aesthetic of the Middle Passage emerge in Adebayo's third full-length play *Desert Boy*. *Desert Boy* significantly departs from Adebayo's previous two pieces. A commission from Nitro, the play explores the criminalization of contemporary black British youth through the historical context of slavery. Adebayo wrote the play (with music by the Artistic director of Nitro, Felix Cross) but did not perform in it or weave in autobiographical elements. *Desert Boy* is an epic story that begins in South London on Deptford Beach with a young black man, Soldier Boy, who has a knife in his stomach. Desert Man, appears on the beach and transports the wounded Soldier Boy back in time to Desert Man's past in Mali. Soldier Boy becomes a witness to Desert Man's life as the play chronicles how he was sold into slavery, transported to the USA, fought as a Loyalist on the side of the British in the American War of Independence, was granted passage to Britain, and how in Britain he was arrested for theft and sentenced to prison in Australia. The play ends with a return to the present. In its engagement with themes of black male youth delinquency and its contextualization in the historical experience of slavery, the play echoes Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen*. Adebayo brings a different perspective to the debate, however,

underlining the historical abandonment of women by black men and failure for them to take responsibility for their actions and the resultant overreliance on a culture of blame that is blind to self criticism. Nevertheless, for both Kwei-Armah and Adebayo, the idea of black bondage in the present (ether as a man, woman, youth, sexuality) is explained thorough slavery. For both writers, the images of slavery rely upon the African American experience as recorded in its literary traditions (prose, poetry, and drama) and political polemic.



## Chapter 2: The Caribbean

In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.

Frantz Fanon (1952/1967: 229)

## The Caribbean in Black British Theatre Praxis and Theory

Since the 1950s, Caribbean immigrants and their descendants working in theatre have been responsible for cultivating a sustained black presence in the British theatre landscape to which they have brought a distinct Caribbean sensibility. Of Britain's black theatre companies, the majority have been initiated and run by artistic directors of Caribbean origin, including: Jamaican Frank Cousins (*Dark and Light*), Guyanese Norman Beaton and Jamal Ali (*Black Theatre of Brixton*), Trinidadian Mustapha Matura, Trinidadian Malcolm Frederick, Joan Ann Maynard, Trinidadian / British Felix Cross (*Black Theatre Co-operative/NITRO*), Jamaican Alby James (*Temba*), Jamaican Yvonne Brewster, British / Jamaican Paulette Randall, Jamaican Pat Cumper, and British / Grenadian Michael Buffong (*Talawa*). As a result, the repertoire of black theatre companies has traditionally included a large number of plays by Caribbean writers. The staging of these plays, which often comprise culturally specific practices and references to Caribbean history, have allowed actors, directors and audiences in Britain to maintain close cultural contact with the Caribbean.

Initially, plays by first-generation writers living in Britain in the immediate post-war period were set in the Caribbean. First-generation playwrights who emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, like Barry Reckord and Mustapha Matura, began to set plays in both the Caribbean and Britain. Matura's Caribbean dramas such as *Play Mas* (1974, Royal Court; published 1982) and *Independence* (1979, Bush Theatre; published 1982) interrogate Trinidad's political shifts following its 1960s independence, revealing Matura's maintained interest in the socio-political state of his homeland. The Caribbean connection is no less evident in first-generation plays set in England by writers such as Michael Abbensetts, Alfred Fagon and Jimi Rand. These works, populated by Caribbean immigrants, persistently examine the implications of being *of* but not *in* the Caribbean, and reveal the emergence of what Malcolm Page identifies as a 'West-Indians-in-Britain culture', distinct from 'a new Anglo-Caribbean culture' (1980: 99).

Plays by second-generation or 'black British' writers who emerged in the 1980s such as Caryl Phillips and Winsome Pinnock have explored what it means to be

born and raised in a different country to one's parents.<sup>83</sup> From their vantage point that straddles their parental homeland and birth land, the struggle to belong in either location emerges as a major theme in their work. In such instances, the Caribbean, personified through the parental generation or represented as a place to which a character travels in search of their roots, is ambivalently portrayed as a location that both hinders and helps identity formation and a sense of belonging.

The portrayal of characters suffering from identity angst has abated in works by second-generation playwrights who emerged in the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s such as Roy Williams, Kwame Kwei-Armah and Debbie Tucker Green. However, all three writers have set at least one play in the Caribbean. The number of second-generation playwrights who, since the 1980s, have engaged with the Caribbean in their work reveals its continued importance to Britain's indigenous black population as a vital cultural and ideological space. The influence of the Caribbean on these playwrights highlights a continued allegiance to their (grand)parents' homelands, as well as the way in which Caribbean culture is appropriated, reformulated, transformed or resisted in the British context. Therefore, the occupancy of multiple identities and sustenance of transnational social and cultural ties persists among the second and subsequent generations as well as the first. As Hall states of the third generation, which is no less true of previous generations:

[...] they come from the Caribbean, know that they are Black, know that they are British. They want to speak from all three identities. They are not prepared to give up any one of them (Hall, 1991: 59).

To discuss black British theatre by Caribbean origin practitioners, a more elastic framework that can bridge the transnational and indigenous positions articulated in black British drama is needed. The tensions that arise from centripetal indigenous versus centrifugal transnational identifications find articulation in the concept of creolization and the model of the creole continuum.

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<sup>83</sup> Although Caryl Phillips was born in St. Kitts, he grew up in Leeds, England from the age of four months.

## Creolization: Genealogy of a Term

At its broadest, creolization refers to a process of cultural inter-mixture which produces new (creole) cultural forms. The term creolization emerged relatively recently; however, as Stewart highlights, the process of mixture, newness and difference it embodies emerged in the sixteenth century with the coining of the word 'Creole' to distinguish people born in the New World from their Old World European or African parents and from the aboriginal Amerindian populations. Later, from the late seventeenth century, the term began to be used to describe the mixed languages spoken by New World inhabitants (2007: 1-2). Today, 'creole' describes the mixed languages spoken in the Caribbean and connotes a Caribbean ethnicity that is often, but not always, defined by miscegenation. Creole peoples, languages and cultures are not confined to the Caribbean; however, the colonial occupation of the various islands by Spain, the Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom, and their use of African slaves and later Chinese and South Asian indentured labourers, has resulted in complex social, cultural and ethnic / racial fusions, making this region, in many ways, the creolization prototype.<sup>84</sup>

One of the most important early contributions to creolization theory is Edward / Kamau Brathwaite. Braithwaite grew up in Barbados but moved to England where he attended Cambridge University (1949-1953) and then lived in Ghana and Jamaica before returning to England in 1965 to pursue a PhD at the University of Sussex.<sup>85</sup> Brathwaite's ideas on creolization were outlined in his

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<sup>84</sup> For seminal works that analyse the process of creolization and formation of Creole societies, see Brathwaite (1971), Nettleford (1978) and Mintz and Price (1992). For overviews of the history of the term creole and analyses of the application of creolization theory, see Buisseret and Reinhardt (Eds.) (2000) and Shepherd and Richards (Eds.) (2002). For an influential theoretical precursor to creolization, see Fernando Ortiz's concept of 'transculturation' in *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1940/1947).

<sup>85</sup> Other Caribbean elites resident in Britain around this time included Wilson Harris (Guyana), Ronald Moody (Jamaica), Aubrey Williams (Guyana), Orlando Patterson (Jamaica), Stuart Hall (Jamaica), Sam Selvon (Trinidad), George Lamming (Trinidad), V. S. Naipaul (Trinidad), Claudia Jones (Trinidad / USA). These privileged cosmopolitans were the conduits through which ideas about and approaches to art and politics circulated throughout the Black Atlantic. In Britain, a similar grouping of (mainly Caribbean) activists, artists, and intellectuals occurred in the 1930s who found commonality in the anti-colonial and Pan-African movements. They included: Peter Abrahams (South Africa), Amy Ashwood Garvey (Jamaica), C. L. R. James (Trinidad), Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), Ras Makonnen (Guyana), Sam Manning (Trinidad), Una Marson (Jamaica), Harold Moody (Jamaica), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), George Padmore (Trinidad), Paul Robeson (USA), Lapido Solanke (Nigeria), Eric Williams (Trinidad). For more on the activities of black inter-war intellectuals and activists in Britain, see Robinson (1992),

doctoral thesis *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (1971), and later developed in *Contradictory Omens* (1974b). In these works, Brathwaite argues that Jamaican (and the wider Caribbean) society emerged as a result of encounters between European settlers and African slaves, a meeting which produced 'a cultural action – material, psychological and spiritual – based upon the stimulus / response of individuals within the society to their environment and – as white / black, culturally discreet groups – to each other' (1971: 296).

Brathwaite's model of a creole society describes the interaction between African and European cultures and the resultant creation of new cultural forms. However, he does not imply the erosion of ethnic distinctions. For Brathwaite, creolization occurs in the Caribbean as the result of the dual actions of *acculturation* and *interculturalization* (Brathwaite, 1974b: 11) The former process refers to the way in which the African slaves and their descendants adopted the dominant European culture (essentially a process of coercion) which gave rise to 'Afro-creole' culture, and the latter to how the African culture of the slaves was integrated by the European culture (a more subtle process of 'osmosis') rendering a 'Euro-creole' (G. Richards, 2007: 225).

In the Francophone Caribbean during the 1980s, the process of creolization in the Caribbean began to be discussed in ways which de-emphasized ethnic distinction, fixity and origins. The Martiniquais Edouard Glissant (1928-2011) argued the idea of *essence* in the Caribbean becomes meaningless and must be replaced by the continually evolving notion of *relation* (Munro & Shilliam, 2011: 173).<sup>86</sup> By avoiding the pursuit of a root or origin, hierarchies of centre and periphery are undermined:

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McLeod (2002) and Dawson (2009). For detailed essays on key Caribbean artists and activists in Britain in the twentieth century, see Schwarz (Ed.) (2003).

<sup>86</sup> Glissant coined the term *Antillanité* or 'Caribbeanness' to describe his definition of Caribbean culture in terms of mixture, multiplicity and movement outlined in his collection of essays *Caribbean Discourse* (1981/1989) and later developed in *Poetics of Relation* (1990/1997). Glissant was influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the rhizome detailed in *A Thousand Plateaus* which describes social and cultural formations as non-linear, heterogeneous and 'anti-genealogical' (1980/2004: 3-28). The rhizome is also a term Gilroy adopts to describe the cultural formation he calls 'the Black Atlantic'.

If we speak of creolized cultures [...] it is not to define a category that will by its very nature be opposed to other categories ('pure cultures') [...] Creolization as an idea is not primarily the glorification of the composite nature of a people: indeed, no people has been spared the cross-cultural process [...] To assert peoples are creolized, that creolization has value, is to deconstruct in this way the category of 'creolized' that is considered as halfway between two 'pure' extremes (Glissant, 1981/1989: 140).

Creolization provides an important theoretical frame for discussing complex cultures and identities and the processes that contribute to their formation in an increasingly postmodern and globalized world. Because creolization takes into account the mixing of cultures from elsewhere within a new environment, it is an important mode of transnational analysis.

As a theoretical term used to discuss cultural intermixture, creolization has travelled beyond the confines of the New World. Creolization discourse, indebted to post-structuralism, has contributed to theorising black Britishness and critiques of Britishness by cultural theorists such as Hall, Gilroy and Mercer. These theorists have persistently drawn attention to how nationalist discourses have constructed Britishness as ethnically and racially homogenous. Their deconstruction of such assumptions has highlighted Britain as a nation that has long been creolized.

Hall and Gilroy's influence has helped to shape the overriding scholarly conclusion that black theatre in Britain has contributed to the re-articulation of what British theatre is and what being British means. Despite the (indirect) intellectual debt to creolization theory, the term is rarely seen in black British theatre criticism. Instead, terms such as hybridity, multiculturalism, and diaspora are favoured in exploring black British theatre's representation of cultural mixture and the experience of negotiating and being in between cultures. Creolization, however, provides an appropriate and comprehensive model for analysing Caribbean origin black British drama.

The experience of migrating to Britain and adapting to and adopting a new culture, and of children who are born and bred in Britain but who may still

identify more with Caribbean cultures or who are exposed to Caribbean culture through their (grand)parents, chimes with the process of cultural intermixture and mutation that creolization describes. Like the employment of the term hybridity in postcolonial theory, creolization is attentive to tracing subaltern strategies of cultural resistance. However, where postcolonialism finds combative approaches to cultural colonization in common among all formerly colonized peoples (hence the application of the non specific term 'hybridity' to describe cultural encounters and intermixture), creolization draws attention to the Caribbean's specific history of slavery and multiple colonial masters, distinguishing it from other former British colonies, for example in Anglophone Africa. Sheller argues that we should resist emptying creolization of its specificity as a term not only associated with the New World, but with the specific experience of slavery (2003: 192-6). Creolization enables us to think of the Caribbean-origin population in Britain not as a simple diaspora marked by the single event of arrival in Britain, but as a double diaspora whose ancestral homeland is in Africa. Thus, creolization expands the way in which diaspora is sometimes understood as a movement from (and between) dual locations of home and hostland. Furthermore, creolization's emphasis on process enables a longitudinal perspective attuned to cultural (dis)continuity, bringing into view the complex historical and contemporary relations between black Britons and the Caribbean as both a geographic and cultural site.

### **Creolization as Artistic Practice**

The 1960s saw the independence of many of the Anglophone islands in the Caribbean. In accompaniment to the political shifts pre- and post-independence, a new cultural identity, both regional and national, needed to be imagined and defined. The often pejorative implications associated with the word creole (specifically Afro-Creole cultures) in the Anglophone Caribbean came to be challenged in the twentieth century by nationalist movements. Such movements began to re-appropriate the association of creole with inferiority and instead celebrate the region's unique ethnic and cultural makeup to signify a positive national identity. Indeed, a number of key contributors to the term's theorization have been Caribbean poets and playwrights who have also applied their theoretical models to their praxis. A number of these individuals spent time

in Britain, such as Brathwaite and Errol Hill, or have had their work produced in the UK, such as Derek Walcott, which has had an important impact on black British theatre. Thus, creolization emerges as an analytic tool / transnational mode of analysis and also as an artistic approach that has shaped black British theatre and influenced dramaturgy.

Paradoxically, creolization has been harnessed as a means to articulate positions which support either cultural retention or the breaking down of discrete cultures. In terms of cultural retention, Brathwaite argues that in order to redress the balance that has historically favoured the Euro-creole and to achieve a collective sense of unity, the suppressed Afro-creole culture needed to be re-instated. Richards, in his reading of Brathwaite's work, states:

Brathwaite sees the 'African-influenced creole form' as the creative and dynamic centre of the creolization process in the Caribbean, for it was this Afro-creole 'little tradition' among the black slave population which provided the possibility for cultural autonomy, and ultimately political independence, in the region. It was the failure of both the white masters and the elite blacks and free coloureds, particularly in the case of the former, to recognize the humanity of the black slaves and to 'make conscious use' of their 'rich folk culture' which helped to perpetuate first slavery and then colonial dependency (2007: 225).

Brathwaite developed his Afrocentric ideas into a poetic approach centred around the use of creole / patois, or what he termed 'nation language'. This approach, which focused upon the African contribution to the language (rhythms, pronunciation, syntax) and orality (storytelling, music as social comment such as Calypso based on African satire), provided a blueprint for a postcolonial Caribbean poetics. Although the term 'nation language' was only coined later in Brathwaite's *History of the Voice* (1984), Brathwaite's ideas and their application emerge earlier during his involvement in the CAM in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The recuperation of Caribbean indigenous practices rooted in African traditions became a key artistic strategy for black British artistic expression. Creolization discourse, therefore, provided a compass around



which its members could orient their artistic expression in both content and form.<sup>87</sup> According to Walmsley:

It [CAM] set the stage for trends now dominant in Caribbean arts, especially in poetry with its stress on orality and performance, its use of 'nation language' and the rhythms of everyday speech. It foreshadowed many of the directions of the so-called 'black arts' in Britain (1992: xviii).

At the same time actor, playwright and academic, Trinidadian Errol Hill (1946-2003), who spent time in Britain during the late 1940s and early 1950s where he studied acting at RADA, was developing a similar blueprint for a Caribbean theatre praxis rooted in indigenous folk forms. Hill viewed Trinidad's Carnival as a model for developing a creolized aesthetic that emphasized a total theatre rooted in indigenous, mainly African origin folk forms that found expression in Carnival such as stick fighting, calypso, steelpan and masquerade.<sup>88</sup> Hill's

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<sup>87</sup> Brathwaite's project in elucidating African survivals in Caribbean folk culture and harnessing them to aesthetic ends echoes previous artistic movements with similar Pan-African and Afrocentric ends such as the African American Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and the Francophone Négritude movement of the 1930s. Indeed, Brathwaite's essays 'Jazz and the West Indian Novel' (1967) and 'The African Presence in Caribbean Literature' (1974a) draw attention to this debt, as does his own admission of the influence of Aimé Césaire (Martinique) who pioneered Négritude with Léopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal).

<sup>88</sup> Carnival, originally introduced to Trinidad by the French colonists as part of the pre-Lent tradition and upheld by the colonial white elite, became a popular festival with the abolition of slavery in 1834 among the non-white masses. Carnival, characterized by steel band, calypso and masquerade, expresses Trinidad's multi ethnic society and cultural heritage through performance. The utilization of masquerade and costumes has meant that it has also historically been associated with providing a platform to critique and subvert dominant power structures. Trinidad's Carnival has informed a number of plays that use the event to thematically explore and aesthetically express the state of the nation (see Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996: 78-105). Plays about Carnival and staged in the UK include Errol Hill's *Man Better Man* (1960, published 1964/1985), staged in the UK in 1965; Matura's *Play Mas* and *Rum an' Coca-Cola* (1976, Royal Court; published 1980); Helen Camp and her Trinidad Tent Theatre's production of *J'Ouvert*, which toured to the UK in 1982; Euston Jarvis and Ronald Amoroso's *The Master of Carnival* (1973; published 1979), staged in the UK by Temba in 1986; Earl Lovelace's theatrical adaptation of his 1979 novel *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1984, Trinidad; published 1989), staged by Talawa in 1990 at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. Trinidad's Carnival underwent another transformation when it was transplanted to the British context in the form of the Notting Hill Carnival. Cohen states that the role of carnival as a 'symbol of emancipation, resistance, protest, and triumph' (1980: 71) was transferred to Britain by Trinidadians living in Britain. However, the festival developed as an expression of a more generalized Caribbean culture as other traditions, especially Jamaican inspired reggae and Rastafarianism, were incorporated: 'In Britain, the artistic traditions of Jamaica are now being brought to bear on these arts [...] to express, as well as to bring about unity across islands of origin' (1980: 79). Carnival in Britain also took on the symbolic force of resistance and protest, as the 1976 event testified which ended in violence between black youth and the police. Dramas about Carnival in Britain that do not incorporate its aesthetics, but use it to explore themes of protest, include Winsome Pinnock's *A Rock in Water* and Edgar White's *Man and Soul* (1982, Riverside Studios; published 1983).

doctoral thesis, written at Yale, entitled *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre* (1972), expressed his views that Caribbean theatre should develop as a total theatre employing a range of indigenous folk forms:

I believe that a powerful means to promote social integration is for drama to turn to our indigenous culture for its inspiration. West Indian drama must consciously slough off the accretions of an imported culture which remain alien to the large majority of West Indian peoples. By indigenous culture I refer to the folk culture developed by the largest sections of our society who, torn from their roots, had no place but the West Indies to turn for a cultural heritage and who therefore built their culture out of the memory of their past and the experience of present physical and economic slavery [...] I feel a pervasive and predominant rhythm in the life of our people – in the drums, in music, in dance and movement, in vocal sounds including speech; but too many theatre productions are devoid of this beat [...] I see as inseparable in folk theatre music, dance, song, speech, mime, choral response; but we have become metropolitan specialists and compartmentalize these integral theatre modes following alien practice (Hill, 1972: 37-9).

Hill's approach is exemplified in his most well known play, *Man Better Man* (1964/1985), first produced in 1960 at the Yale School of Drama, and which toured the UK in 1965, representing Trinidad and Tobago in the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival. The play, about a man who uses witchcraft in order to win a stick-fighting competition, is centred around the art form of martial arts / dance known as Calinda (stick-fighting) associated with the origins of Carnival, and incorporates indigenous cultural practices such as calypso and sorcery / religious practice (obeah).<sup>89</sup>

Brathwaite's theories have been criticized for their underlying essentialism in contradiction to his belief in creolization. Puri highlights the 'tension in Brathwaite's work between the transformational tenets of creolization and the cultural primacy and prioritization he accords Africa' which as a result place 'the

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<sup>89</sup> For a view similar to Hill's on the value of carnival for Caribbean theatre, see writer / director and active CAM member Marina Maxwell, 'Toward a Revolution in the Arts' (1970).

creolizing impulse into question' (2004: 64). The same critique could be levelled at Hill. Thus, although creolization brings with it an awareness of mixedness, it paradoxically becomes a notion of fixity in order to have a national political discourse.

The St Lucian poet and playwright Derek Walcott has explored a poetics and aesthetics equally indebted to creolized folk forms. However, his approach is not rooted in an African past.<sup>90</sup> Neither does it reject the European cultural influence or celebrate the folk as the only means by which the Caribbean self may attain wholeness. Instead, as Thieme shows, since the 1940s Walcott's works have consistently balanced 'an eclectic assortment of elements from inside and outside the region' (1999: 2) producing 'an aesthetic which emphasizes the cultural cross-pollination that he sees as characteristic of the Caribbean region' (1999: 1). Although he has represented the Caribbean as a place of exile, and its inhabitants as suffering from a 'schizophrenic' state, the artist's strength stems from this very fragmentation (see Walcott, 1998 ). When he received his Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, Walcott stated in his speech 'The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory':

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger  
than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole.

The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such

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<sup>90</sup> Plays by Walcott staged in Britain include *Henri Christophe* (1950, St Lucia; published 1950), staged in 1952 at Hans Crescent House, a colonial student centre and hostel in London's Knightsbridge, and directed by Errol Hill with Errol John as Christophe; *The Sea at Dauphin* (1954, St Lucia; published 1954/1970) and *Malcochon, or The Six in the Rain* (1959, St Lucia; published 1965/1970), staged as a double-bill in 1960 at the Royal Court as one of their 'productions without décor' and directed by Lloyd Reckord, who later staged both plays at the Tower Theatre, London under the auspices of his new and short-lived theatre company, New Day; *Pantomime* (1978, Trinidad; published 1980) received its British premiere at the Keskidee in 1979, directed by Henry Muttoo - it was later staged by Temba at the Tricycle in 1985 and at the Lakeside Theatre at the University of Essex's Colchester Campus in 2012, directed by Walcott; *Remembrance* (1977, St Croix, Virgin Islands; published 1980) was first staged in the UK at the Keskidee in 1980 and directed by Anton Phillips - it was later staged in 1987 at the Arts Centre as part of the Black Theatre Forum's Black Theatre Season and directed by Carmen Munroe, and in 1990 Anton Phillips directed the play again at the Tricycle for his company Carib Theatre; *O Babylon!* (1976, Trinidad; published 1978) was staged by Talawa in 1988 at the Riverside Studios; *Beef, No Chicken* (1982, USA; published 1986) was staged at the Shaw Theatre in 1989 as part of the Black Theatre Forum's Black Theatre Season and directed by South African-born John Matshikiza - it was later staged in 1996 by Talawa at the Tricycle; *Viva Detroit* (1990, USA; unpublished 1992) was staged in 1992 at the Tricycle as a Black Theatre Co-operative production and directed by Malcolm Frederick; *The Last Carnival* (1982, Trinidad; published 1986) received its British premiere in 1992 at the Birmingham Rep; *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* (1993), commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company, received its world premiere at The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon in 1992.

a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirloom whose restoration shows its white scars [...] Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent (Walcott, 1992/1996: 506).

The creole condition describes indigeneity but not aboriginality. In other words, it balances a sense of belonging with an awareness of the here *and* elsewhere. This idea is encapsulated by the '(post-)creole continuum' (DeCamp, 1971). Initially coined to describe creole languages, the continuum encompasses the spectrum of the language from the standard form (acrolect) on one extreme, with a more mixed version (mesolect) in the middle and, at the other end, full / deep / 'pure' creole or patois (basilect). In the Anglophone Caribbean, the acrolect is standard 'Caribbean' English. The basilect reflects a range of linguistic influences, including West African words brought over during slavery, and varies in its structural difference from English depending on the area. The continuum highlights that usage is not static, but fluid. Users can employ or understand a range of positions along the continuum ('code-switch') depending on the situation in which the speaker finds him / herself (Wardhaugh, 2010: 53-83).

The creole continuum also highlights how language use is inflected by socio-economic discourse and contexts. The acrolect, with its historical proximity to the language of the (former) colonial master and its contemporary status as an official language, affords it a higher prestige than the basilect, which is associated with the lower / slave classes. This has had implications for artistic practices, whereby European cultural forms have been celebrated and emulated over indigenous folk forms. The Caribbean's social organization along racial lines follows a similar pattern. Whiteness (indicating proximity to Europe) has traditionally been associated with the higher classes. On the other hand, the darker one's skin, the lower one's occupancy on the class system. Blacks have therefore traditionally occupied the lowest position, which associated them more with Africa and the slave class, whereas mixed race people or mulattos

have enjoyed a higher status.<sup>91</sup> An awareness of how expression operates along a continuum – and the socio-political implications of occupying points along it – is part of the Caribbean experience. As Otto highlights, ‘the notion of what it means to be ‘creole’ goes far beyond issues of language. It affects every aspect of Caribbean life’ (Otto, 2007: 97). As a result, sensitivity towards linguistic and cultural mixture and their shifting meanings are a hallmark of Caribbean drama, and one that has equally carried over to black British dramas.

Black British theatre can also be seen to hold a position along a continuum between a British theatre / tradition and approaches more rooted in the Caribbean and Africa. For some, the experience of racism, marginalization and a sense of unbelonging has fostered cultural retentionist approaches. The indigenous Afro cultures of the Caribbean have been preserved and emphasized as a means of asserting and maintaining a distinct cultural heritage and identity. Yet, their articulation within the British context means that, even while these practices are harnessed, they are changed to suit new needs and specific contexts. In other words, they are extended to Britain but, in the process, become adapted, and (re)creolized, ultimately producing new and distinct forms. The specific experience of being black in Britain has precipitated a further evaluation of the self as removed from the Caribbean. This has subsequently had implications upon identity, further enhancing a sense of fragmentation and multiple belonging. In such cases, representations deliberately challenge and undermine notions of authenticity and cultural purity.

### **Creolization and Language**

Caribbean dramatists are acutely sensitive to language, a trend which is

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<sup>91</sup> This summary is an oversimplification as the Anglophone Caribbean is ethnically and linguistically complex and cultural formation is dependent on multiple factors specific to individual territories. The utilization of Asian and Chinese indentured labourers with no connection to Africa, for instance, complicates the notion that creoleness exists between poles of Africa and Europe. However, in terms of the British context this simplification serves a purpose where distinctions between Caribbean islands and hierarchies according to intricate racial and linguistic differences were flattened out. In Britain, all non-white Caribbean immigrants were considered black (such as the Indo-Caribbean Mustapha Matura from Trinidad) and defined simply as West Indian. Furthermore, Caribbean immigrants themselves began to self-identify as West Indian and a more general culture amalgamating aspects of the different islands emerged. Arguably, freed from the restrictions of traditional hierarchies, Caribbean unity could be more easily envisaged and attained in Britain (W. James & Harris, 1993: 239-240).

consistent with a broad approach to undermining colonial authority and achieving cultural ownership over representation in literature, poetry and theatre.<sup>92</sup> Because Caribbean English is made up of a mixture of influences, language is used by playwrights not only to reflect the way in which people in a region, from a particular class and in a particular situation, may speak, but also to draw attention to the historical and social forces which have shaped *how* they speak. Thus, language use in Caribbean theatre operates on multiple levels: as a reflection of the way in which 'real' people speak; to draw attention to the history of slavery and colonization; to indicate the social positioning of speakers; and as a way to re-connect with and affirm folk forms, traditionally viewed as inferior and artistically illegitimate, which challenges colonial / Western cultural imperialism and seeks to express a new, postcolonial cultural identity. As Gilbert and Tompkins state, 'the use of variant Englishes offers one effective means of refusing to uphold the privilege of the imperial language as it has dominated both the theatre and the wider social realm' (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996: 177).

In the post-war period, the use of non-standard English in Caribbean dramas penned in Britain emerged in the 1950s with plays such as Jamaican Barry Reckord's *Flesh to a Tiger* (1958, Royal Court; published 2010)<sup>93</sup> and Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (1958, Royal Court; published 1958) staged later that year. *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, set in 1940s Trinidad, depicts a young man's decision to abandon his personal responsibilities and escape the

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<sup>92</sup> For historical overviews of theatre in the Caribbean, see Banham, Hill and Woodyard (1994), Corsbie (1984), Omotoso (1982) and Stone (1994).

<sup>93</sup> *Flesh to a Tiger* was originally produced under the title *Della* in 1953 in Jamaica and then as *Adella* in 1954 at the Theatre Centre, London. Prior to its staging at the Royal Court, *Flesh to a Tiger* was performed in Southsea and Cardiff. The play, set in Kingston, Jamaica, explores the conflict between folk and modern / colonial European cultures through a woman's choice to enlist the help of a white medical doctor for her sick child instead of seeking help from the local witchdoctor. Reckord's other plays include *You in Your Small Corner* (1960, Cheltenham Everyman; unpublished 1962), staged in 1960 at the Royal Court as one of their 'productions without décor' and later as a full production in 1961 at the New Arts Theatre - In 1962 the play was broadcast on television, produced by Granada and directed by Claude Whatham; *Skyvers* (1963, Royal Court; published 1966/2010) was revived in 1971 at the Royal Court and transferred to the Roundhouse that year - Reckord adapted *Skyvers* into a musical play called *Streetwise* which toured England in 1982/3; *Don't Gas the Blacks* (1969, the Open Space Theatre, London), which was revised as *A Liberated Woman* (1971, Greenwich Theatre; unpublished 1971), and staged at La Mama in New York later that year; *Give the Gaffers Time to Love You* (1973, Royal Court; unpublished n.d.); and *X* (1974, the Royal Court with Joint Stock; unpublished), which was later renamed *Let It All Hang Out Daddy* and staged in Jamaica in 1988.

limitations of life in Port of Spain by immigrating to England in the 1940s.<sup>94</sup> Keir Elam argues that John's use of Trinidadian 'lect' in *Moon* operates beyond the level of realistic depiction of working class characters to draw attention to 'cultural and ideological conflict through the tensions at play within Caribbean heteroglossia' (K. Elam, 1995: 180). This sensitivity to the complexity of language and the exploitation of the creole continuum to indicate broader socio-political issues has been carried over to Britain by Caribbean dramatists writing about the immigrant experience since the 1970s.<sup>95</sup> Matura, Fagon and Abbensetts gave voice to the regional diversity of the Caribbean immigrant population through their plays, which featured characters from across the Caribbean. For example, Matura's *As Time Goes By* (1971, Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh and the Royal Court; published 1972/1992) features Trinidadian characters, Fagon's *11 Josephine House* (1972, the Almost Free Theatre; published 1999) Jamaicans, and Abbensetts' *Sweet Talk* (1973, Royal Court; published 1974/2001) includes characters from Trinidad and Guyana. *As Time Goes By* also stages the ethnic diversity of Trinidad through its representation of Indo and Afro-Caribbean characters. Language usage as a signifier of class and the ability of some to manipulate their speech depending on the situation is also a feature of these early works. In this regard, these playwrights continue the tradition established by earlier Caribbean playwrights writing in the vernacular such as Reckord and John. For instance, in *As Time Goes By*, the Indo-Trinidadian protagonist Ram, a self-appointed spiritual guru and immigrant life coach, changes his language from a thick Creole when speaking to his wife Batee to near Standard English when giving advice to his Afro-Trinidadian visitors in order to assert his 'professional' status. However, what is distinctive

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<sup>94</sup> *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* has been revived in the UK a number of times: in 1986 at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, directed by Errol John; in 1988 at the Almeida, directed by Maya Angelou; in 2003, directed by Paulette Randall as the inaugural production for Eclipse Theatre, a black-led regional touring company established in 2003 as the result of an ACE initiative to address the lack of middle-scale regional black theatre; in 2012 at the RNT directed by Michael Buffong, who became artistic director of Talawa that year.

<sup>95</sup> Before the 1970s, plays by Caribbean writers set in Britain include Barry Reckord's *You in Your Small Corner*, about a Caribbean mother living in Brixton who disapproves of her son's relationship with a working-class white woman; Barry Reckord's *Skyvers*, about the dead-end aspirations of a group of working class school children - controversially, when the play was staged in 1963 and again in 1971, it had an all white cast because apparently the Royal Court could not find any black actors (Rees, 1992: 101); Norman Beaton's musicals *Jack of Spades* (1965, Liverpool Everyman; unpublished), about an inter-racial relationship; *Sit down Banna* (1968, Connaught Theatre, Worthing; unpublished), about the underground activities of a group of Guyanese immigrants (see Chambers (2011: 143) and Nicholson (2012: 69)).

about these works is their staging of the meeting between Caribbean English and British English varieties to articulate the theme of acculturation. The language in these plays persistently draws attention to the cultural shifts occurring in the transition from Caribbean to black British and the ideological positions at stake in this process. For example, in *Sweet Talk*, Abbensetts indicates that Tony and Rita's accents should be slightly different as Tony 'has been over in England longer than his wife has, so he has less of a West Indian accent than she has' (15). The subtle difference in accent reinforces the play's theme of immigrant adaptation and survival within the hostland. By the end of the play, Tony and Rita's marriage has broken down and Rita returns to Trinidad to recover from a miscarriage that threatened her life leaving Tony in England.

Similarly, in *As Time Goes By*, the fractures in Ram and his wife Batee's relationship are located in the tension between cultural adaptation and retention. While Ram shifts his language usage effortlessly depending on with whom he is speaking, Batee speaks throughout the play in a thick Creole. For Batee, who hates living in England, her accent is a marker of her refusal to become Anglicized. Although her thick Creole signifies her lower social status, of all the characters Batee is represented as the only one who is able to honestly articulate her feelings. On the other hand, while Ram perceives his ability to adapt as positive, through his mimicry of his white English clients' simple vocabulary and repetitive rhythms, Matura reveals his adaptation as a survival strategy but one that is ultimately undermined by the hollowness of the language he imitates. Matura's satirical portrait implies that to lose one's language or accent is to compromise the integrity of one's cultural identity. This notion is reinforced in the play through the relationship between Trinidadian immigrant Albert and his son Skin Head who has fully acculturated into his new home by, as his name suggests, adopting a skin-head subcultural identity. Skin Head literally speaks a different language to his father. Portrayed from the vantage point of the first-generation, Skin Head's one-dimensional characterization emphasizes the cultural disconnect between Caribbean immigrant parents and their children:

ALBERT: Well this is why a come ter see yer. (*Thumps son*). Say 'good



evening' ter Mr Ram. (*Thump*).

SKIN HEAD: Watcher.

RAM: Hello.

ALBERT: (*thump*). Watcher. What yer mean by watcher. Say good evening (43).

The second-generation playwrights who emerged in the 1980s also use language to draw attention to the disjuncture between Caribbean-born parents and their British-born / raised children. In Caryl Phillips' *Strange Fruit* (1980, Crucible Theatre; published 1981), language underlines this cultural chasm:

The language in *Strange Fruit* has to be a careful mixture of West Indian English (patois), Standard English, and English working-class regional dialect. In the language one should be able to detect the socio-cultural confusion which undermines any immediate hopes of harmony within the body politic of the family (5).

The contrast between the mother's language and that of her two sons, Errol and Alvin, underlines their separation from her. The multiple influences that inflect Errol and Alvin's speech (patois, Standard English, African American slang) highlights their attempts to anchor their identity to a notion of 'Black' culture in order to assert a perceived authentic identity and to differentiate themselves from white Britishness. However, when Alvin returns from his pilgrimage to his mother's homeland in the Caribbean, Errol is surprised that he has not returned with a stronger accent with which to bolster his black identity:

ERROL: ...I thought? you might have picked up a bit of the ling. You know, add a bit of authenticity to the banter.

ALVIN: Oh that lingo. The English language (62).

Alvin's sarcastic retort is indicative of his personal journey within the play as he slowly comes to untangle himself from imposed markers of authentic blackness.

Phillips' exploration of the second-generation's sense of unbelonging and their attempts to assert an authentic 'black' identity by speaking 'black' echoes

Matura's *Welcome Home Jacko* (1979, the Factory; published 1980/1992). While in *As Time Goes By*, Matura uses language to critique adaptation to British life by adopting its language, in *Welcome Home Jacko*, he reverses his stance and critiques those who are born in Britain and yet root their sense of self in an imagined Caribbean / Africa. *Welcome Home Jacko* depicts a group of young offenders in a community centre who are trapped within a dead-end system. Their entrapment, Matura implies, is exacerbated by their identification with a Rasta belief system. For these youth, Britain is a place of oppression defined as 'Babylon' (enemy territory). In defiance, they identify with the Caribbean and Africa as their 'true' and spiritual homeland. However, Matura exposes their belief-system as rooted in fantasy and based on ignorance. In an exchange between one of the youths (Zippy) and a black middle-class volunteer (Gail), Matura undermines the youth's allegiances:

GAIL: ...where are you from?

ZIPPY: Me from Jamaica.

GAIL: You were born in Jamaica?

ZIPPY: No, we born in London, but me people from Jamaica.

GAIL: But you speak with a Jamaican...

ZIPPY: Cha, me could talk London if me wanted to but me is a Rastafarian so me talk Ja.

GAIL: I see

ZIPPY: Yer all genuine Rasta man him a talk Jamaican or else him not genuine (261-2).

The sense of betraying your blackness by not adopting a Rasta / Caribbean identity is strongly conveyed in this exchange between Gail and Zippy, both black Britons. Gail, however, is middle-class and speaks with an English accent. As a result, one of the other youths, Marcus, tells her 'you a not one a we' (280) and that 'she a Ras clart hypocrite black woman' (289).

Winsome Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues* (1991, Royal Court; published 1995) provides a less scathing but no less critical exploration of the interlinking issues of language and identity. The play examines the protagonist Leela's sense of unbelonging as a second-generation black Briton who feels she does not have

a language through which to express her true self. On discovering her boyfriend is having an affair with a white woman, Leela goes on holiday to Jamaica with her black friend. In Jamaica, Leela is envious of the people's sense of having a home. Leela's sense of dislocation is expressed by her inability to articulate herself:

LEELA: It's because this isn't my first language, you see. Not that I don't have any real first language, but sometimes I imagine that there must have been, at some time...If you don't feel you belong to a language then you're only half alive aren't you, because you haven't the words to bring yourself into existence (195).

Ultimately, however, Leela has to reconcile that British English is the only language she has and that the Caribbean is not her home. Pinnock, like Phillips, critiques the fantasy of authenticity. These plays reflect the gradual erosion of native language and speech patterns in line with acculturation for both the first and second generation. However, language is also shown to be an ideological terrain occupied by various factions centred around issues of authenticity and a sense of (un)belonging.

Representations of youth in plays written in the 1990s and 2000s continue to reveal how some black youth subcultures appropriate language from the Caribbean and the USA in an act of cultural retention in resistance to the white mainstream. Roy Williams' *Fallout* and Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen* which depict black gang culture highlight how subcultural identification has shifted away from Jamaican Rastafarianism of the 1970s and 1980s towards a Jamaican 'yardie' / gansta-inspired patois and African American 'ghetto' slang. In these representations, we see acculturation of a different kind, whereby cultural adoption is not the result of integration into the dominant national culture, but instead occurs transnationally, as black British youth are influenced by and identify with dominant representations of black hyper-masculinity in black American and Caribbean hip hop culture.

The discourse around language that emerges in an overview of black British drama reveals how it is tied to notions of racism and belonging. Early

representations of black youth raised in Britain depict them with English accents. In the 1970s, it seemed that the process of acculturation was well under way. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., an African American scholar writing for the *New Yorker* in 1997, remembers being in London in the early 1970s and his experience of discombobulation when he spoke to a black Briton who did not have a 'black' accent:

I was dumbstruck [...] Though I must have known better, I had, on some level, always assumed that my black compatriots *sounded* black because they *were* black (Gates, 1997/2000: 169).

Black characters in dramas by white playwrights such as Barrie Keefe's *Sus* (1979, Royal Court; published 1979) also spoke in British (usually London) accents.<sup>96</sup> Likewise, in the plays that emerged in the 1980s by second-generation playwrights such as Caryl Phillips, Winsome Pinnock and Zindika, British born black characters spoke in British accents – even while these writers interrogated the implications of language on their characters' identities. However the emergence of Rastafarian inspired language in the 1980s and patois in the 1990s and 2000s shows that, as blacks in Britain faced increasing racial hostility and marginalization, the Caribbean provided a cultural, historical and imaginary space in which they could root and assert their identity and articulate their cultural difference. For Mercer, the transference of Caribbean languages to Britain and its 'creolization' which has led to a black British vernacular fulfils a postcolonial oppositional agenda within the metropolitan centre:

Across a whole range of cultural forms there is a 'syncretic' dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master-codes of the dominant culture and 'creolises' them, disarticulating given signs and re-articulating their symbolic meaning. The subversive force of this hybridizing tendency is most apparent at the level of language itself where creoles, patois, and black English decentre, destabilise and carnivalise the linguistic domination of 'English' – the nation-language of

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<sup>96</sup> In 2010, *Sus* was staged by Eclipse, the touring black theatre company, with a London run at the Young Vic.

the master-discourse – through strategic inflections, re-accentuations and other performative moves in semantic, syntactic, and lexical codes (Mercer, 1988: 57).

However, the view that creolization is inherently oppositional is thrown into question especially when the focus becomes more about retention than intermixture. The seeming dominance of dramatic representations of black youth gang culture, estate life and the language of the 'ghetto' in the 2000s, in particular, has prompted some strong responses. In 2010, journalist and cultural critic Lindsay Johns, frustrated by what he saw as an overriding trend in the representation of the black experience in British theatre, wrote a controversial article 'Black Theatre is Blighted by its Ghetto Mentality' in *The Evening Standard*. The article was written in response to the title of British Nigerian Bola Agbaje's play, *Off the Endz* (2010, Royal Court; published 2010), which had not yet opened and which Johns had not yet seen. Nevertheless, it was the title, particularly the spelling of 'endz' at which he took umbrage. Johns anticipated 'yet another derivative black street play, probably set on a council estate, and probably with lots of patois and pimp-rolling protagonists to boot' (2010). However, Johns' concern is not so much about positive than it is about equal representation – although the distinction between the two is very fine. He recognizes that the pervasive representations of the 'theatre of the ghetto' 'is damaging to white British society's perception of us. For these plays conform to, rather than confound, stereotypes'. However, the thrust of his argument is that such dramas have become the dominant representation of the black British experience. Despite the existence of black plays in the mainstream providing an example of 'multicultural bonhomie', for Johns, they actually present a monocultural experience:

For the ghetto is not black London's only reality. What about my reality? My milieu is comprised of barristers, doctors, media and arts types. We'd like our reality represented too. And I know for a fact that none of us spells 'ends' with a 'z' (2010).

Johns' article raises questions around the assumption of the apparently inherent oppositional nature of creolization. Is the adoption of so much African

American culture evidence of resistance to its hegemony? Is the imported 'patois and pimp rolling' culture of the Caribbean, which legitimates hyper masculinity and violence, a counter culture that 'carnivalises' the master discourse? Some critics, such as Osborne (see 2006a: 89-90), have criticized playwrights who claim that they are simply portraying reality for perpetuating stereotypes. If creolization becomes a 're-established' identity politics based on retention and binary opposition, then it is as inadequate to describe and enclose the black British experience today as the first generation's nostalgia for a national Caribbean identity was in the 1970s.

### **Black British Theatre Aesthetics as Nation Language**

Nation language can be extended to include a broader theatrical vocabulary. A number of Caribbean-origin playwrights extend Caribbean theatrical traditions and / or use Caribbean cultural practices as framing devices or formats to give valour to indigenous forms within inherited European dramatic structures. Such usage reflects the differing ideological stances emphasizing either a position of cultural retention or one that subverts notions of fixity and tradition.

Nevertheless, through the transference of Caribbean practices to a British context, both positions reflect continuity with the Caribbean and draw attention to how such practices transmogrify in the process, despite the ideological differences that emerge in their particular employment of 'nation language'.

The theatre companies, in particular, have contributed to maintaining a Caribbean theatrical presence in Britain. Talawa, established by Yvonne Brewster in 1986, aimed to foster black consciousness and pride by 'using ancient mythologies and the political experience of our forebears to inform, enrich and further enlighten modern black British theatre' (Talawa Theatre Company, 2012). The name 'Talawa' was taken from a Jamaican patois word 'tallawah' which translates as 'strong / tough' and which features in an expression 'she likkle but she tallawah' which means 'watch out, the little woman could be dangerous' (Brewster, 2006: 88). As Victor Ukaegbue points out, the name articulates an attitude of defiance in the face of mainstream marginalization as well as expressing the company's artistic approach as rooted in the Caribbean and other black cultural practices (Ukaegbu, 2006: 125-6).

(Not to mention that the company was established and run by women up until 2012 when Michael Buffong replaced Patricia Cumper as Artistic Director).

Talawa has staged a number of Caribbean plays by dramatists who employ creolized cultural forms as dramatic modes, such as Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone* (1974, Jamaica; published 1985), which explores the legacy of slavery through the religious ceremony of the nine nights, staged in 1986 at the Drill Hall, London; Derek Walcott's Rasta musical, *O Babylon!* (1976, Trinidad; published 1978) in 1988 at the Riverside Studios; Earl Lovelace's musical adaptation of his 1979 novel about Trinidad's Carnival, *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1984, Trinidad; published 1989) in 1990 at Theatre Royal Stratford East; Sylvia Wynter's *Maskerade* (1979, Jamaica; published 1979), about the Jonkonnu celebration in Kingston which the authorities attempted to suppress in 1814, staged in 1995 at the Cochrane; Kwame Dawes' *One Love* (2001, Bristol Old Vic and Lyric Hammersmith; published 2001), a reggae musical about Rastafarianism; and Christopher Rodriguez's *High Heel Parrotfish* (2005, Theatre Royal Stratford East; published 2005), about a group of drag queens in Trinidad attempting to stage an underground cabaret around Carnival.

An important yet often overlooked black British link with a Caribbean theatre form is the Jamaican pantomime. Dating back to the early 1940s, this style of pantomime shares key elements with the English tradition, such as a satirical portrayal of local people and commentary on local events within a fairytale structure. The Jamaican form distinguishes itself with original stories based on indigenous folk tales and characters and its use of Caribbean music and dance forms. In particular, the folkloric trickster Anansi / Anancy is a recurring character in the genre.<sup>97</sup> Stories about Anansi, who usually takes the form of a spider or man, are found throughout the Caribbean and are particularly associated with Jamaica, where he remains the dominant hero in folktales (Tiffin, 2001: 56). The widespread existence of the Anansi figure or 'Nancy' stories in the New World find their origin in the religious beliefs and oral

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<sup>97</sup> The first Jamaican pantomime dates back to 1943 with the Little Theatre Movement's production of Vera Bell's original script, *Soliday and the Wicked Bird. Bluebeard and Brer Anancy* by Louise Bennett and Noel Vaz, produced in 1949, cemented the folkloric trickster Anancy as a recurring character in the genre. For brief discussions of the history of the Jamaican pantomime and its defining characteristics, see Stone (2002: 135) and Hill (1992: 283-4).

traditions of the numerous West African peoples who belong to the Akan ethnolinguistic group, particularly among the Asante (E. Marshall, 2010: 171). Anansi and the storytelling tradition and their links with Africa make both the figure and the act of storytelling important to the project of defining an indigenous Caribbean arts tradition. As a result, Anansi emerges in the postcolonial period as 'a complex metaphor and archetype for Caribbean experience' (Tiffin, 2001: 56). Anansi's trickery is seen to encapsulate survival against oppression and hardship, a fact reiterated by the survival of the Nancy stories which were banned by the colonial educational authorities (Tiffin, 2001: 57). In this light, Anansi has come to symbolize a Caribbean future defined by the ability to adapt in the face of difficulty. However, Anansi's links to Africa also render him a symbol of a connection with an African past and original homeland (Tiffin, 2001: 57).

The first Jamaican-style pantomime to be staged in Britain was *Anansi and Brer Englishman* (published 1974) written by Manley Young and directed by Yvonne Brewster for The Dark and Light theatre company's Christmas show in 1972 (and revived in 1973). From the onset the Jamaican pantomime tradition was altered to suit its new British setting. *Anansi and Brer Englishman* was set in Brixton and told the story of a love affair between Anansi's daughter and a Conservative council official's son. Since 1972, there have been a number of Anansi pantomimes staged in Britain. Talawa, in particular, has staged several such productions.<sup>98</sup> On the one hand, the staging of these pantomimes can be seen as a continuation of a Jamaican tradition – itself a hybrid of an English one. However, by bringing the tradition to the UK and transposing it for a British audience, stories of Anansi's trickery and their aim of moral instruction are adapted to resonate the black experience in Britain. The fact that they are

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<sup>98</sup> Pantomimes featuring Anansi staged in England include Manley Young's *Anansi and the Strawberry Queen* (1974, Dark and Light; unpublished), directed by Norman Beaton; Jimi Rand's *Anansi's Royal Quest* (1983, Arts Theatre; unpublished 1983); Jamaica's Little Theatre Movement Pantomime Company's *Anansi Come Back* (1993, Jamaica; unpublished), which toured to London in 1995 where it played at the Hackney Empire; *Itsy Bitsy Spider: Anansi Steals the Wind* (2002, Queen Elizabeth Theatre, Royal Festival Hall; unpublished 2002), co-written by Christopher Rodriguez, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Jackie Kay and Courttia Newland and produced by Talawa - and restaged in 2003 at the Bloomsbury Theatre, London; Trish Cooke's *Anansi Trades Places* (2007, Shaw Theatre; unpublished 2007), produced by Talawa; Geoff Aymer's *Anansi and the Magic Mirror* (2009, Shaw Theatre; unpublished 2009), produced by Talawa; Lisa Cagnacci's *Anansi: An African Fairy Tale* (2010, Southwark Playhouse; unpublished).



aimed at children – the next generation – makes them more pertinent. Thus, while the history and traditional culture of the Caribbean are remembered and re-enacted, the Jamaican-British pantomime tradition simultaneously provides a means to reflect the present and imagine the future.

Creolization discourse is inextricably entwined with a self-conscious desire to forge a positive identity through knowledge of and re-connection with the past. The cultures that were formed, suppressed and marginalized became a way to assert a positive identity. The reclamation of history, often erased or forbidden access, is of underlying concern:

A grounding in history is seen as an essential precondition for the realization of both individual and collective freedom [...] The recovery of historical knowledge is felt to be particularly important for blacks because the nature of their oppression is such that they have been denied any historical being. Their banishment from historicity is presented as originating in the slave experience approximating what Orlando Patterson has called the state of 'social death' in which slaves exist (Gilroy, 1987: 207).

This emerges particularly in plays that treat slavery. However, there is also an important dual approach that balances historical recuperation with the desire to make sense of the present through the past. As a result, slavery's devastating social and cultural consequences are persistently mapped onto contemporary issues facing blacks in Britain, locating the black British experience within an historical continuum of oppression stretching back to slavery. In such instances, cultural retention takes on an objective of political resistance and social activism within the context of the present.

### **Creolization and Slavery**

For Caribbean playwrights, the history of slavery has been a vital way in which to interrogate Caribbeanness, particularly its damaging affect on the psyche, exemplified in Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone* and Edgar White's *Lament*

for *Rastafari*. Playwrights such as Kwei-Armah have also explored the extension of slavery's traumatic legacy upon the black British psyche.

Playwrights have equally turned their attention to exploring the Caribbean as a revolutionary space. The San Domingo Revolution (1791-1804), which led to the creation of Haiti, the first independent Caribbean state and the first black-led republic, has become iconic in the Caribbean (and wider African diasporic) struggle for self-determination. According to Hill, the Haitian Revolution is an event that has 'engendered more plays by black authors than any other single event in the history of the race' (1986: 414). One of the earliest dramatizations of the San Domingo Revolution was also one of the earliest plays by a black writer to be staged in Britain. In 1936, C. L. R. James' *Toussaint L'Ouverture* (published 2013) received its world premiere at the Westminster Theatre London.<sup>99</sup> Although James was in the process of writing a book about San Domingo, he felt compelled to write a play when Italy invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia), the only country in Africa not to have been colonized and which had long been seen as a spiritual home by Pan-Africanists. James' drama marks the first time that the Caribbean history of slavery was used in a play by a black writer living in Britain, using allegory to confront contemporary British politics. In 1986, James' play, re-written and re-named *The Black Jacobins* (1967, Nigeria; published 1976), was staged by Talawa at the Riverside Studios, London. The play, directed by Yvonne Brewster, was the company's inaugural production and was commissioned by the GLC's Race Equality Unit as part of the Black Experience Arts Programme.

The racial tensions in Britain at the time, with the race riots of 1981 and 1985 a recent memory, motivated Brewster to provide an inspirational historical role model for black Britons. The 1986 production provides a bridge to 1936 and draws attention to the time in between the two points, highlighting the global and local changes that have occurred for black people - not least the achievement of independence in Africa and the Caribbean. A play by a theatre company established by black women, directed by a black woman, starring many black actors who were born in Britain or who came from abroad and

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<sup>99</sup> *Toussaint L'Ouverture* was written from research James had been compiling for his book on the same subject *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938) which he had been working on since arriving in Britain from Trinidad in 1932.

trained at British drama schools, the existence of a black press that reviewed the show, and the play's high black attendance figures demonstrate the remarkable gains for black theatre since the 1930s. A comparison of the reviews, which in 1936 display a patronizing and often blatantly racist tone, were all but gone in the critical reception in 1986. In 1936, *The Daily Mail* deemed the play 'propaganda' (Disher, 1936) and in the *Sunday Times*, instead of revolutionary heroes, the slaves were described as a 'grotesque army of negro warriors' (Anon, 1936a). The acting ability of the black cast members was, at best, patronizing. The *Observer* (I. Brown, 1936) described the performances as having 'its own natural humour and charm', and the *Daily Mail* noted, aside from Robeson's sometimes 'thrilling' performance, 'how the many less gifted players of colour in the cast were enjoying themselves' (Disher, 1936). Despite receiving positive reviews, Robeson's acting is nevertheless attributed to his blackness. *The Times* stated: 'his method is unusual and its merit hard to define. By the rules that apply to others it is clumsy, but his appearance and voice entitle him to rules of his own, justifying the directness of his attack upon his audience' (Anon, 1936b). By 1986 the language of the reviews had completely changed: 'this is the sort of show...that lends dignity and credibility to the British black theatre movement' (Coveney, 1986). Despite these considerable achievements, institutional and popular racism was still pervasive. Indeed, Talawa's funding by The Race Equality Unit of £80 000 in an attempt to nurture black culture in Britain may have been unimaginable in 1936; but it also reminds one of the racial hostility that had developed since.

The San Domingo revolution inspired a more direct comparison with the 1985 Broadwater Farm race riot in Amani Naphthali's *Ragamuffin* (1989, Albany Empire; published 2002). In 1995, Black Theatre Cooperative brought to the stage the story of Toussaint L'Ouverture's South American counterpart in Shango Baku and Franco Aninha's *Zumbi* (Theatre Royal Stratford East; unpublished 1995), a musical historical drama about an uprising led by slave Francisco Zumbi in Brazil in the seventeenth century. The play incorporated music, song, poetry and dance and, structured around vignettes, made direct comparison with the plight of contemporary blacks in Britain by splicing the seventeenth century narrative with examples of police racism in contemporary England. The production elicited strong reactions among the public and in the

press. David Lister, writing in *The Independent*, described the play as 'highly emotive' and that it 'urges blacks to use violence against whites, especially the police' (1995: 9). In a statement, Black Theatre Co-operative responded saying that 'the stories it portrays are based on real-life experiences from the black community' and that 'it is an affirmation of black culture' (qtd in Lister, 1995: 9).<sup>100</sup>

### **Creolization and Identity / Ethnicity**

Creolization provides a model that allows us to examine the ethnic transformation from Caribbean to black British. Although this emerges strongly in plays by the second-generation, the process of transformation and difference that creolization, or becoming creole, implies, is also articulated by first-generation dramatists. In other words, black British culture did not begin with those born in Britain. Its seeds were sown as soon as the first-generation arrived, as soon as Britain became their home, unwelcoming or otherwise.

The post-war mass migration from the Caribbean to Britain reverses the pre-modern Old to New World journey and reconfigures it, rendering it a voyage from the familiar 'Old World' Caribbean to an unfamiliar 'New World' Britain. The fact that the 'first' of these post-war migrants arrived on a ship – the Windrush – neatly loops the metaphor. The experience of these first-generation Caribbean immigrants in Britain recalls and, through its reversal, obliquely subverts that of the colonists in the New World. The culture of the world they were coming to was, of course, not unknown. Caribbean immigrants, regardless of class and profession, came to England with an array of assumptions about the motherland gleaned through their colonial education. The anticipated journey to England, perceived as a culturally familiar place learnt about from afar, and experience of rejection once in the motherland, is a recurring motif in first-generation narratives. Nevertheless, the underlying motivation that drew Old

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<sup>100</sup> Other plays that examine slavery include Margaret Busby's *An African Cargo* (2007, Greenwich Theatre; unpublished), produced by Nitro; and Caryl Phillips' *Rough Crossings* (2007, Birmingham Rep; published 2007). For an interesting interpretation of slavery presented from an African perspective, see Biyi Bandele's *Oroonoko* (1999, The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon; published 1999), based on Aphra Behn's novella of the same name (1688/2003). For a timeline and details of theatre productions about slavery in Britain since 1807, see the website *Trading Faces: Recollecting Slavery* (Terracciano, 2008).

World Europeans to the New World is paralleled in the Caribbean immigrants' desire to escape the drudgery, poverty, and claustrophobia of the Caribbean and dream of building a successful new life in England.

The 'American dream', the most famous articulation of New World hopes, is also a recurring theme in plays (by first and second-generation playwrights) that are set in the Caribbean in the 1950s. Although the Caribbean newcomers to Britain may have felt they knew something about England and Britishness (an identity with which many would have felt they could understand and indeed legally claim as citizens of the Empire), the experience of living in an unfamiliar environment was a revelation. Like the pioneers of the New World, the first generation's initial exposure to Britain is told through and evaluated against the topography. The British environment not only reflects the social and political temperature of life in England, it is seen as a force that shapes experience. For example, in Matura's *As Time Goes By*, this is voiced through the character of Batee. For Batee, Britain is a hostile 'new' world which is always 'cold an' dark' (14) and 'a trap' (63). Batee's advice to the recently arrived Thelma is to go home as quickly as possible:

BATEE: I don't like it. I dying ter go back home, it too cold, de people don't like me, dey tink we is dirt an' de treat we like dirt, dey lazy an' dey say we lazy, dey dirty an' dey say we dirty, dey bad an' dey say we bad, how yer could like a place like dat?

THELMA: Well I heard a lot of stories but I only just came so I can't say.

BATEE: Well take my word for it. Dat de way it is an' don't stay a minute longer dan yer have ter stay, is a evil kinda ting dat does rub off on yer if yer stay too long. You look like a nice girl, you go back home an' tell anybody who tinkin a coming here dat. Tell dem do' bother it en worth it (62).

Batee's words attribute the land with a transformative power where, just by being in Britain, its malevolence 'does rub off on yer' and her reference to the English as lazy, dirty and bad reverses the way in which New World colonists stereotyped and 'othered' indigenous inhabitants. Through Batee, Matura parodies the stereotype of blacks as lazy by drawing attention to the fact that

people from the Caribbean were encouraged to immigrate to Britain to fill menial work vacancies the English felt were beneath them. Batee's aversion to white English women and insistence that she 'want no white girls coming into my house' (42) also echoes the fear colonists felt of the power of the natives to corrupt their men and women. Refusing to integrate, each night she retreats into her dreams of return: 'a pray dat when a open me eyes in de morning a go see de sun shining, home' (63). Survival in this 'brave new world' depends on the ability to adapt. As Batee's husband Ram states: 'I was lucky, I could adapt but it's different with her, she can't change, so I just leave her' (29).

Early plays depicting the Caribbean immigrant experience in Britain chart the fundamental shifts that accompanied their re-location. Through their portrayal of relationships between husband and wife, parent(s) and children, the plays reveal the tensions that arose from occupying a position between the Caribbean and Britain. A similar breakdown in marriage between a husband who can adapt and a wife who cannot is portrayed in Michael Abbensetts' *Sweet Talk*. The play charts the challenges faced by a married couple, Tony and Rita, attempting to make a life for themselves in London. The small bedsit in which the entire play is set draws attention to the challenges faced by Caribbean immigrants susceptible to landlord racism and exploitation which forced many to live in cramped, squalid conditions. Although they both struggle in England, Tony remains optimistic. He is determined to become British despite the obstacles: 'How many years you reckon we got to live in this country before they stop callin' us immigrants?' (71). Rita, however, who begins the play 'very tired' (15), becomes more and more weak as the piece progresses. When she miscarries she decides to leave London and return to Trinidad to recuperate. The unborn child, conceived in the cold, cramped room, and her subsequent miscarriage which threatens her life, symbolizes the stillbirth of the British dream.

Barbadian Jimi Rand's *Sherry and Wine* (1976, New End Theatre, London; unpublished)<sup>101</sup> is a satire about a family in conflict over acculturation. The mother, the motor behind the family's aspirations of upward mobility, has had

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<sup>101</sup> No script for *Sherry and Wine* has been found. A summary of the production has been gleaned from reviews and reports held in the Arts Council file for Temba Theatre Company in the V & A Theatre Collection Archive (ACGB/34/158; file 1 of 19).

considerable success: the family have moved from Brixton to Finchley, the house is decorated with 'G-plan' furniture, and their daughter, Pearl, is at university where she has met a black middle-class boyfriend. The conversion of her husband who refuses to conform to a British middle-class way of life remains her only uncompleted project. When Pearl brings her boyfriend to meet her family, the introductory dinner precipitates a conflict over cultural values. While the mother is delighted, the father will not change out of his overalls for dinner, rejects a dinner of roast beef and chooses to drink beer over sherry or wine. Each character, as the reviews point out, represents a type in the debate around the Anglicization of Caribbeans in Britain as it affects both the first and second-generation. Naseem Khan, writing for the *Evening Standard*, states: 'The generation gap gapes wide. For the youngsters the West Indies don't exist – the [*sic*] are black English – nor do the old modes of Victorian respect' (1976). For the father, as De Jongh's review of the production makes clear, as he witnesses the cultural shift in his family away from the propriety of traditional Caribbean values, he finds himself 'in a state of passionate alienation' (1976).<sup>102</sup>

The disjuncture that arises between parents born in one country and their children in another, a process which, according to Caryl Phillips, bears 'strange fruit', recalls the original meaning of the word creole. In the sixteenth century, the earliest theories of creolization (although the term itself was not used) focused on the dispositional difference that occurred among children of Old World parents born in the New World. For Spanish scholars in early modern times this change was perceived 'as profoundly disturbing, as evidence of a cultural 'degeneration' (R. Bauer & Mazzotti, 2009: 1). Those born in the hot climates of the New World were seen as morally inferior, lazy and less sophisticated than their parents who, by dint of their birth, could claim the

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<sup>102</sup> De Jongh's summation of the play was that, while providing light entertainment, 'an important or imposing black play would deal with mugging, the socially deprived, unemployed and hopeless in Brixton and Lambeth. These are the people who should be the subjects of plays by the Temba Theatre company; but meanwhile they are working hard in Hampstead' (1976). His attitude to a play that is one of very few which explores the theme of middle-class black families is indicative of a theatre environment that has institutionally shaped the subject matter of black theatre according to what the white, liberal (male) critic / audience member feels is appropriate black subject matter. On the other hand, Jonathan Hammond praised the play for its portrayal of characters 'not self-consciously as 'coloured immigrants,' 'problems' or as projections of a liberal white's fantasies but as thinking human beings with opinions, hang-ups and prejudices' (qtd in Page, 1980: 96).

cultural pedigree of the Old World. Tellingly, one of the definitions of the verb form 'to creolize' in *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb 'to spend the day in a delectable state of apathy' (qtd in R. Bauer & Mazzotti, 2009: 5). Thus, as Antonello Gerb states:

The distinction was not ethnic, economic, or social, but geographical. It was based on a negative *jus soli*, which took precedence over the *jus sanguinis*' (qtd in Stewart, 2007: 1).

In *As Time Goes By*, for Albert, a Trinidadian who works for London Underground, the move to Britain has also resulted in a rupture in his family life represented by his relationship with his son Skin Head who has fully acculturated into the British teenage way of life. As his name suggests, Skin Head is a caricature whose adherence to British skinhead youth culture represented by his style of dress, attitude and speech contrasts sharply with his parents' values and culture. Alfred has brought his son to Ram in the hopes that Ram will be able to cure Skin Head of his cultural malaise. Constantly berated by his father for having lost the values, culture and language of Trinidad (and compounded for his having not chosen a respectable model of British culture to identify with), Skin Head is represented as an inferior character, a version of a modern-day Creole.

Examining the theme of inter-generational culture clash provides a barometer for the creolization process within the microcosm of a family unit. Those born in Britain, like the Old World Creoles, are marked by their difference by being *of* but not *in* the Caribbean and thus not able to fully claim it as home. The difference between Caribbean parents and British-born children provides the central conflict in Phillips' *Strange Fruit*. However, unlike *As Time Goes By*, *Strange Fruit* presents the dilemmas of the second-generation in a much more three-dimensional manner. The play portrays a Caribbean immigrant mother and her two British-born sons. Through the mother's eldest son, Alvin, Phillips interrogates the disjuncture between the first-generation, who have a memory of the homeland, and the second, who are born and raised in Britain. The theme of disconnection between parent and children dominates the play and the weather is a key way through which this difference is explored.



Alvin visits Jamaica in the hope that he will gain insight into his identity as an African Caribbean. However, Alvin's visit to his mother's home leads to his bitter disillusionment. For Alvin, the first-generation's nostalgic remembering of the Caribbean is undermined by the harsh political and economic reality of the region he witnesses during his visit:

ALVIN: Well, what is it, man, that West Indians here always mention when they talk about home?....The weather. The weather, Errol, and picking fucking mangos off a tree. They've been here too long. You know what it's really like, man, and the same will be true in Africa. It's full of all the diseases of decolonisation, which they don't realise has eaten away at their islands in the sun. Inflation, unemployment, political violence – remember them? Fucking weather! (69).

For Alvin, his mother's nostalgia has been a poisonous lie. Her selective memory of the homeland has created a simplistic binary of good Caribbean / bad Britain that she has passed onto her children. It is this distorted memory, refracted through nostalgia's rose-coloured spectacles which has compounded their sense of (un)belonging by painting a picture of a utopia, of a place where they should be instead. As a result, both sons, like their mother, have become trapped in the past:

ALVIN: You know, for the last nineteen years I've wondered about that island, mother, about the people on it, what they're doing, who they are, and why I'm not back there with them, sitting in the sun and living the simple life of existence...and then it kept dawning on me that I shouldn't really be wondering at all. You should be telling me. You know, filling in the blanks 'cos the most important part of knowing where you're going to is knowing where you've come from, right? (77).

Alvin's experience in the Caribbean shatters his imaginary sense of a homeland and highlights not, as he thought it would, his belonging, but his unbelonging:

ALVIN: I can't live here, I can't live there. What am I supposed to do?  
What are we supposed to do? Live on a raft in the middle of the Atlantic  
at a point equidistant between Africa, the Caribbean? and Britain? (99).

Alvin's dilemma anticipates Gilroy's argument in the *Black Atlantic*. In the end, Alvin rejects those who seek an identity based on roots or some notion of purity and begins to see himself, and his place in the world, in terms of process rather than fixity. His words get to the heart of the matter when he declares: '[t]he only people who can help me are either too busy playing white or too busy playing black, understand!' (88).

Plays which stage black Britons visiting the Caribbean draw attention to the way in which they have evolved in different directions from their (grand)parents and throw into relief questions of home and belonging. In Winsome Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues*, Leela and Claudette escape to Jamaica for a holiday after Leela discovers her boyfriend is having an affair with a white woman. For Claudette, who strongly believes in black separatism, going to Jamaica is a return home. She differentiates between herself and the white Americans who she refers to as 'tourists' (204). However, her mission to 'rest, eat, drink, soak up as much sun as I can stand and fuck everything that moves' (204) aligns her behaviour with the white American tourists on the island. Her ideals of 'Black' sisterhood are undermined by her affair with local married man Mikie – seeing her conquest of him only in terms of being a victory over the white American tourists and making them jealous. Mikie's wife, Sugar, sums up the black British visitors to Jamaica:

SUGAR: ...I don't understand you people at all. Mikie right. He say you all sick, say unno come out here because you broken people...You come here looking for...Yu tell me what you looking for. Unno tourist think you belong here. But you come out and you don't know where to put yourself: one minute you talking sisterhood, the next minute you treating us like dirt. You just the same as all the other tourists them' (223).

Through Claudette, Pinnock raises the thorny issue of the economic gulf that separates those in the Caribbean from the Caribbean diaspora in Britain.

Leela, on the other hand, is searching for a sense of wholeness. Her inability to articulate herself is symptomatic of her sense of racial, sexual and cultural oppression:

LEELA: 'Broken, yes. Invisible people. We look all right on the outside, but take our clothes off and you'll find nothing underneath, just thin air. That's what happens to people who have no language – they disappear. Only your feelings tell you that you exist, so you cling on to them even if they're not nice. And they're not nice. I'm angry, Sugar. I can't stop hating. I hate the world that tries to stifle me. I'm angry with myself for not being strong enough to hit out at it. I want revenge. I want to lash out...' (223).

When she and Claudette cut off a white woman's hair while she is sleeping, it is an act of revenge against white oppression, but it is a hollow victory. The act does not bring Leela closer to her sense of self, but rather brings to light how damaged she has become. Her talking in tongues is a cathartic experience in which she finds a voice and releases some of the pain and hate she has harboured for so long. Only then can she begin to heal herself. However, Sugar is blamed for the incident and loses her job. The play exposes, in real terms, the damaging repercussions of Leela's attempt to find redemption in Jamaica. In a self-centred way, she comes to a deeper understanding of herself; yet, the consequences of her actions are left unresolved when Sugar is fired. Ultimately, the play undermines simplistic notions of racial solidarity which are blind to factors such as class and place in structuring oppression.

### **Creolization and Miscegenation**

Although initially the term creole did not convey a racial dimension, it was not long before it signified people of mixed-race parentage. The *Oxford Dictionaries Online* defines Creole as 'a person of mixed European and black descent, especially in the Caribbean' (Creole, n.d.). For Hall, inter-racial relationships were the ultimate taboo in Britain in the post-war period and the dominant fear that underwrote racism:

Black migration is constructed as the *problem*. But I had forgotten how

persistently in these early days there was constructed, at the centre of the problem - the problem of the problem, so to speak - the core issue: *miscegenation*. It is as if in the middle of the vast number of ways of representing the Black presence, in words, in images, one topic, virtually unspoken, lay at the centre of the discourse, driving those who contemplated it crazy, like a shadow across the collective unconscious. In the mirror of the imagery - screaming to be spoken: the trauma of black and white people, together, making love, finding their sexuality with each other and having children as the living proof that, against God and Nature, *It Worked* (Hall, 1984/2000: 92)

In terms of British statistics, Elaine Bauer shows that the black Caribbean-origin population has 'a higher rate of inter-ethnic group partnership than people from other ethnic groups' (2010: 14). 48 per cent of Caribbean men and 34 per cent of Caribbean women are in an inter-ethnic partnership and 49 per cent of children with a black Caribbean parent have a white parent (14). Also, the mixed-race group (which includes other mixes) is the fastest growing sector of the population. So, creolization applied here does not only refer to racial miscegenation but indeed to the creolization of the British demographic.

Plays by black men, which represent black male / white female partnerships, frequently represent the negative aspects of the relationship. In some cases black men who date white women are perceived as Uncle Toms, using white women as a way to escape their blackness (see Abbensett's *Sweet Talk* and Fagon's *Death of a Black Man*). In other plays, the white woman is portrayed as using the black man in an act of exotic fetishization (see Caryl Phillips' *The Shelter* (1983, Lyric Hammersmith; published 1984)). In such cases, she becomes a temptress and a representation of caution to the audience (see LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman* and Matura's *Party / Black Pieces*). Or, the relationship is depicted as violent where the black man takes out his insecurities and feeling of oppression on his white partner (see Phillips' *Strange Fruit*). Plays by black women reverse the male-centric insecurity of black women dating white men by representing black male characters who cheat on black women with white women (see Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues*). Plays about mixed families often portray them as dysfunctional, with issues of race lying at the heart of the

turbulence (see Ikoli's *Scrape off the Black* (1980, Riverside Studios; published 1995) and Linda Brogan's *What's in the Cat* (2005, Contact, Manchester and Royal Court; published 2005)). Kwei-Armah insinuates that inter-racial relationships have a negative effect:

when we look at most of the Premier League footballers who are black, the overwhelming majority of them have white partners. The signal that it sends to my daughter is, 'When you're successful, you date outside your community, yet when you're not successful you date in.' You're only good for the bad end of it. What psychological effect is that having? (Kwei-Armah qtd in '21st-century Britons', 2009).

His words reflect a long-standing issue of miscegenation ingrained in Caribbean society. The class structure of Caribbean societies are deeply inflected by colour gradation, where, in most cases, proximity to whiteness is indicative of wealth and status (Goulbourne, 1991: 173).

Bauer's (2010) study, which also uses creolization as a framework, paints a different portrait: of contemporary mixed relationships and their children that are positive and healthy, issues largely yet to be explored in black British drama. According to Bauer, studies from the 1950s and 1960s on mixed-race identity concluded that mixed-race children suffered from identity problems, which stemmed from not being accepted by the black or white community. Since the 1970s, however, she states that studies have showed that mixed-race children experienced a positive identification with both parents. Previous assumptions of mixed-race children occupying 'ambiguous social positions' were based on, and she cites Anne Wilson (1987) here, 'a mixture of impressionistic observation, popular myth and theoretical analysis of race and racism in Britain' (qtd in E. Bauer, 2010: 28).

In one sense, as Bauer's study shows, mixed-race children destabilize the discourse of fixity and purity. However, dramas by mixed-race playwrights or those who represent mixed-race characters seem to conform to the earlier held view. Representations of mixedness reveal characters with an acute sense of unbelonging, alienated by blacks and whites.

In Zindika's *Leonora's Dance* (1993, Cockpit Theatre; published 1993), the crisis of identity experienced by the protagonist, Leonora manifests itself in mental disorder. Leonora is a mixed race woman who grew up in the Caribbean where she was raised by her black mother (a field worker) who had an affair with the white land owner (Leonora's father). Leonora leaves the Caribbean to go to England to pursue a career as a ballet dancer. Her failure to succeed in the notoriously white dominated ballet world coupled with the rejection she experiences in England because of her race results in psychosis. Her fragile mental state is represented in the play by a spirit character named Medusa who taunts her, taking pleasure from her failures and isolation in England. Leonora's mental illness is a symptom of the push / pull of the intransigent binaries (Caribbean / England, black mother / white father) between which she finds herself positioned. Torn between the Caribbean and the UK, Leonora struggles against her mother's wishes to take her back to the Caribbean: 'But, can't you see mama, this is where I belong. This is my father's land. Where else should I belong? It's my birthright' (137).

Leonora's rejection of the Caribbean, and England's rejection of her, and the psychosis her in-betweenness engenders, is reminiscent of possibly the most well known representation of the Creole in English literature, Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Leonora, echoing Bertha Mason's captivity at Rochester's Thornfield Hall, is trapped in her house in England unable to leave because of agoraphobia. Following Jean Rhys' prequel to Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which attempts to restore Bertha's humanity by providing possible answers to her madness, Zindika contextualizes Leonora's psychosis through her creoleness / in-betweenness. Leonora is marked, like Bertha, by her being of the Caribbean and England but also by her mixed-raceness (In Bronte's novel Bertha's race is indeterminate, but in Rhys' novel she, renamed Antoinette Cosway, is a European creole). As Thieme sums up, Bertha Mason's 'predicament' in Rhys' novel is due to her being 'caught between Afro-Caribbean and English worlds, she is abused by the former as a 'white cockroach' and by the latter as a 'white nigger' (2001: 77). Zindika's play therefore continues the tradition of aligning creoleness with

psychosis (Bronte) and explaining it as a result of in-betweenness, un-belonging and racist discourse rooted in notions of purity (Rhys).

Following Bronte, however, Zindika seems to embrace familiar nineteenth century literary representations of the Caribbean as a place which corrupts the mind and as the antithesis of rationality. The belief that the New World environment had a corrupting effect on the mind stemmed from classical antiquity where according to humoral theory 'a person's physiological and psychological constitution was determined by the qualities of the natural environment and astrological constellation' (R. Bauer & Mazzotti, 2009: 1). Leonora's mother's attempts to return her daughter to the Caribbean are met with hostility; however, the play ends with the implication that Leonora will return to the Caribbean, a place, befitting of her mental state.

Although Bronte's representation of Bertha Mason is based on stereotypes of the irrational New World 'other' versus civilized Europe, the scientific exploration of the psychological effect of migration continues in the present. In the UK there is a higher risk of psychotic disorders among immigrants, especially among African-Caribbean and black African groups (Bhugra & Gupta, 2011: 66-7). Contributing factors include 'social exclusion, urban upbringing and discrimination' (Singh & Kunar, 2010: 67). This idea is expressed in Abbensetts' *Sweet Talk*. Tony highlights the psychological impact of un-belonging through his description of a black woman he sees on his way to work at the tube station who is well-dressed and beautiful:

TONY: Only she always screams and screeches at everybody...English people pretend they can't see her...her distress. (*Pause*). Lord only knows how long she's been in this country. (*Pause. Tapping his forehead*). In here. She's gone in here...People talk about how we can't get proper jobs in this country, decent accommodation. But what nobody as yet really knows about is the price we're payin' up here (40).

Plays which link blacks in Britain suffering mental illness to the experience of migration and / or racism include Bonnie Greer's *Munda Negra*; Oladipo Agboluaje's *The Hounding of David Oluwale* (2009, West Yorkshire Playhouse;

published 2009), about the true story of the life and eventual death of Nigerian immigrant David Oluwale in Leeds in 1969; Linda Brogan and Polly Teale's *Speechless* (2010, Lyric Hammersmith; published 2010), based on the novel *The Silent Twins* (1986) by Marjorie Wallace, about the true story of June and Jennifer Gibbons who were committed to Broadmoor psychiatric hospital in 1982 for fourteen years following an arson attack.

The remainder of the chapter provides a detailed discussion of the works of Roy Williams (Caribbean origin) and Bola Agbaje (African origin).



## Roy Williams (b. 1968)

### Introduction

Since Williams' (OBE) debut with *The No Boys Cricket Club* in 1996, he has maintained a prolific presence in British theatre. Williams' early plays explored the theme of migration from the Caribbean from the perspective of the first-generation. Since 2001, however, his focus has largely shifted to depicting the second and third-generation experience in Britain.<sup>103</sup> Initially these plays explored the politics of identity within a domestic setting. However, while retaining a focus on the domestic, Williams' later and most successful plays (in terms of their critical reception and staging in mainstream venues) have been set against the backdrop of larger socio-political events: the Macpherson Report and the murder of Damilola Taylor in *Fallout* (2003, Royal Court; published 2003/2008); The Iraq war in *Days of Significance* (2007, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon; published 2007/2008); the race riots of the 1980s in *Sucker Punch* (2010, Royal Court; published 2010).<sup>104</sup> As Hall notes, representation plays a 'constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role' and thus has 'a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life' (Hall, 1988: 27). By tapping into events that circulate within the national consciousness, and by combining an ear acutely trained in (black) British youth vernacular with a social realist style, Williams allows his characters to move beyond the immediate confines of their social settings and become conduits for the larger debates that surround contemporary Britain.

Williams' work does not slot easily into a particular generation of British playwrights. Suzanne Scafe criticizes Aleks Sierz's omission of Williams' work in his book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (Sierz, 2001), arguing that Williams' style aligns 'almost perfectly' with Sierz's template (Scafe, 2007: 72). However, although explicit language and challenging subject matter are

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<sup>103</sup> Exceptions include the 1958 Notting Hill race riots in *Absolute Beginners* (2007, Lyric Hammersmith; published 2008), immigration in *Angel House* (2008, New Wolsey; unpublished 2008), and he is currently adapting Sam Selvon's *Lonely Londoners* for Talawa

<sup>104</sup> Other works include the exploration of gang culture and gun crime in *Little Sweet Thing* (2005, New Wolsey; published 2005) and the penitentiary system in *Category B* (2009, Tricycle; published 2009).

features of Williams' plays, on the whole they avoid graphic representations of sex and violence. As Kritzer shows, writers such as Williams, of a minority race or culture, not only replied to the 1990s 'in-yer-face' generation of writers but by bringing their race, ethnicity, and class to bear, 'revis[ed] its terms' (Kritzer, 2008: 78). However, unlike many black British writers, Williams' style does not draw upon the cultural traditions of Africa and the Caribbean. Instead Williams' plays are rooted within a British social realist style and urban geography. Williams cites Nigel Williams' *Class Enemy* (1978) and Barrie Keeffe's *Barbarians* (1977), which he was introduced to at school, as important influences. The plays' social-realist depiction of British working-class youth set in an urban environment, exploration of themes of inter-racial friendship and masculinity and written in a youth vernacular would profoundly shape Williams' later work. Despite this apparent rejection of his diasporic roots, Williams' theatre neatly charts a diasporic trajectory as his focus shifted from the Jamaican 'homeland' of his parents in his early plays (*The No Boys Cricket Club*, *Starstruck*, and *The Gift*) and settled in the 'hostland' of the United Kingdom where all of his plays of the 2000s have been set.

### **Travelling Across Borders: Migration Narratives**

Williams has described his early plays, *The No Boys Cricket Club*, *Starstruck*, and *The Gift*, as belonging to a Jamaican trilogy (R. Williams, 2004a: xi). *The No Boys Cricket Club* is set in both London and Kingston Town and *Starstruck* and *The Gift* are set entirely in Jamaica. The plays' central exploration of the theme of migration echo the works of first-generation black playwrights in Britain as well as plays by antecedent second-generation writers such as Winsome Pinnock, who Williams credits as an inspiration. *The No Boys Cricket Club* and its themes of inter-generational culture clash, the nostalgic sense of in-betweenness that characterizes the immigrant condition, and the dialogic relationship between past and present are reminiscent of Caryl Phillips' *Where There is Darkness* (1982, Lyric Hammersmith; published 1982). Similarly, the (broken) dreams of a better life in England in *Starstruck* echo Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* and Pinnock's *A Hero's Welcome* in theme and yard theatre format. *The Gift* (2000, Birmingham Rep; published 2000/2004) explores the relationship between two sisters, one of whom was taken with her parents to

England while the other remained in Jamaica, bringing to mind Trish Cooke's earlier treatment of the theme of the impact of Caribbean-British migration upon families in her play *Running Dream*.

*The No Boys Cricket Club* is set between London in 1996 and Kingston Town in 1958. The play centres around Jamaican immigrant Abi, whose existence in London is characterized by struggle: she lives in a council house, her husband passed away, and her two wayward children, Michael, twenty-six, and Danni, nineteen, still live at home and expect her to support them. Communication in the household has broken down: Abi and her children don't speak the same language, both literally (Abi's Jamaican accent and expressions contrast with her children's British English) and figuratively (the children do not share Abi's Jamaican values). The crisis in their relationship highlights the pressures that arise from the cultural divide between first-generation immigrants and their British born children. When Abi's school friend Masie comes to visit, the two women reminisce about growing up in Jamaica where they were both star players in an all-girls cricket team. Williams employs a magical device which allows the women to time-travel back to Jamaica and revisit key moments in their childhood. The scenes in the play move between the women's present in London and the cricket pitch of their youth in Kingston Town in 1958. Crucially, the women are able to interact with their younger selves; thus, Abi and Masie's journey back in time is not only an opportunity to voyeuristically re-inspect their pasts, it allows them to actively intervene in history. However, while Masie attempts in vain to change past events in a bid to better her present life, Abi's experience facilitates a greater understanding of her self. It is not the older Abi who provides her younger self with a list of retrospective do's and don'ts, but the younger Abi who reminds her of the ambitious girl she used to be. Abi's engagement with her past becomes a revitalising experience, equipping her with the wherewithal to face up to the challenges in her present.

In *The No Boys Cricket Club*, Williams introduces a twist to the staging of diasporic memory. The Caribbean is not depicted as a nostalgic homeland which holds Abi back. Neither is her return characterized by disillusionment and a rejection of both the Caribbean and Britain, leaving her with an ultimate sense of un-belonging (like Alvin in *Strange Fruit*). Instead, Abi's interface with her

past provides her with the tools to reconstruct her identity in the present. This interaction reveals the homeland as a site of potential power, a memoried archive from which to draw on in a bid to reinvigorate and reassert the self in the present:

ABI: Masie was right. I feel, reunited wid my soul. (*Laughs.*) 'Hello soul, hello Abi. Long time no hear girl! Long time' (55).

When Abi 'returns' to London she is able to assert herself over her children and takes the first steps towards regaining control of her new life. As Osborne highlights, '[t]he Caribbean location (paradoxically) is symbolic of the Old World while Britain is the New' (Osborne, 2011: 489).

Through the play's staging, which fluidly moves between British and Caribbean locales, *The No Boys Cricket Club* provides a representation of the homeland within the hostland and demonstrates the important role that the homeland / past plays in configuring the diasporic experience in the present. By collapsing time and space in such a way, the play gives form to the workings of memory:

Memory is the act of looking at the past through the perception of the present. Because perception is constantly shifting in response to the self's ever changing environment, memory becomes both interpretive as well as recollective; whereby, through an examination of our past we (re)make sense of our selves (Freeman, 1993: 6).

In *The No Boys Cricket Club*, Williams shows that the Caribbean homeland can, and should, be incorporated by the immigrant in a manner that is positive. The two locations can become one if they are imaginatively allowed to co-exist and not irrevocably separated in a then / now, there / here binary. Masie's attempt to change the past is naïve. Rather, Williams suggests, living with the past, making it usable in the present, is the way forward.

Williams' engagement with Jamaica suggests a coming to terms with his own present and his own voice. Williams' employment of a more magical realist style in his Jamaican trilogy, in contrast to the gritty realism of his later plays set in

the UK, further supports the notion of the Caribbean as a locale that exists first and foremost in his imagination. The Caribbean is used as a space through which to process where he, as a member of the second generation, is 'at', and less about where his parents were 'coming from':

I didn't quite know what kind of a writer I wanted to be so I chose to write about my mum's past rather than about my own life. I don't think I was ready to write about me, or my generation, black British living in today's society. I thought, you've got to look back before you can go forwards. And I felt I wanted to understand my mother's generation, how it was for her (Williams qtd in Sierz, 2006b: 115).

Williams' perspective contrasts with Matura's. Matura began by writing about the black experience in Britain, but increasingly turned towards the Caribbean as the setting for his work:

it's more important where we're coming from. I think we've got to get that clear as a basis, and then we can go anywhere! There's no mental or creative challenge for us here [...] The challenge lies in the Caribbean (Matura qtd in Peacock, 2006a: 189).

However, Williams' Jamaican trilogy should not be relegated to an immature back-catalogue and only invoked to narrativize his coming of age as a black *British* writer. Williams' subsequent plays, like his Jamaican trilogy, reveal an acute awareness of borders which delineate and deny. The limits of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and nation are repeatedly scrutinized and tested throughout his work. What consistently emerges is a socially conscious message for the need to blur these boundaries and complicate their parameters.

### **The Borders of Race**

Williams' later plays draw attention to the massive shifts that have resulted in Britain's increasingly multicultural and multiracial demographic. Peacock, defining multiculturalism as an ideal which 'refers to immigrants and the indigenous population preserving their cultures and interacting peacefully within

one nation' (2006b: 531), concludes in his analysis of Williams' plays that they contribute towards this ideal by highlighting 'the cultural, social and political forces' that underlie 'inter- and intra-racial relations' (2006b: 540). Derbyshire, on the other hand, interprets multiculturalism as a socio-political policy rather than an ideal. He argues that Williams' plays provide a critique of such policy 'that may disguise rather than address structurally perpetuated inequalities among racial groups' (2007: 417). However, Williams' definition of multicultural is somewhat different to the ones expounded above, as demonstrated by the way many of Williams' characters speak, dress, act, and imitate each other. Williams' representations suggest that for him, multiculturalism is less to do with discrete cultures struggling to co-exist in plural congruity and refers rather to what Gilroy identifies as 'the complex pluralism of Britain's inner-urban streets' which result in 'kaleidoscopic formations of 'trans-racial' cultural syncretism' (1988/2000: 310). As Williams states: 'Life in a multicultural society is one big grey area – and I want to see shades of grey when I go to the theatre' (2004b). Williams sees the conventional multicultural understanding of Britishness as unrealistically bounded and neat, and that in fact Britishness is hybrid and amorphous. In this way he centres black British as being essentially British and vice versa. This is not to say that his plays are a celebration of 'optimism'.<sup>105</sup> On the contrary, the prevailing tragedy in Williams' dramas arise when these 'grey areas' of cultural miscegenation are contested by whites and blacks alike in the name of ethnic, racial, and class purity. It is at the juncture, and subsequent negotiation, of the terrain inhabited by black Britons and the 'indigenous' white population that Williams draws his rich material.

In *Lift Off* (1999, Royal Court; published 1999/2002) and *Clubland* (2001, Royal Court; published 2001/2004) Williams problematizes essentialist perspectives by presenting and then undermining stereotypes. *Lift Off* explores the friendship between Mal, Rich (who are both black) and Tone (white).<sup>106</sup> Mal, who is violent

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<sup>105</sup> See Suzanne Scafe for a critique of the 'tendency towards optimism in critical readings of Black British culture' (2007: 71). She finds Williams' work to be characterised by 'models of 'social antagonism', exclusion and unbelonging', and are, she argues, a useful way in which to 'interrogate this wave of optimism' prevalent in the work of contemporary critics and theorists (72).

<sup>106</sup> *Lift Off* was written between *Starstruck* and *The Gift* and is Williams' first play to focus exclusively on contemporary Britain. In line with Williams' plays of this period, there is a strong element of magical realism. The protagonist Mal, for example, is haunted by the ghost / memory of his school friend Rich who committed suicide. The play also moves between the characters'

and sexually promiscuous, subscribes fully to the black male stereotype. *Clubland* deals with similar themes of inter-racial friendships and masculinity. Ade (black of African origin), who was bullied at school for being an immigrant from Africa by Ben (white) and Kenny (black of West Indian origin), is now a physically fit adult. Like Mal in *Lift Off*, Ade capitalizes on white women's fascination with the stereotype of black male sexual prowess. Due to the ease with which they seduce white women, both Ade and Mal becomes the object of the white male characters' admiration.

Both Tone in *Lift Off* and Ben in *Clubland* attempt to emulate the black masculinity which Mal and Ade embody. Tone, who sees blackness and its accompanying signifiers of strength and sexual prowess as a means by which to gain respect, apes Mal's way of speaking and dressing. Tone speaks in patois, and when he beats Mal in an arm-wrestle declares: 'I'm blacker than yu Mal!' (171). By demonstrating how culture can be imitated and adopted, Williams undermines essentialist notions of ethnicity. Tone's behaviour recalls Bhabha's concept of mimicry, whereby the colonized subject assimilates the culture of the colonizer. Creating an imperfect replica, Bhabha argues, provides the possibility of subversion, whereby 'mimicry is at once resemblance and menace' (1994: 86). In Williams' plays, where the whites imitate blacks, Bhabha's concept is ironically reversed. In these scenarios, it is homogenous notions of blackness which are scrutinized and challenged. *Lift Off* and *Clubland* present characters in an identity dance where whites wants to be black, blacks wants to be white, and blacks wants to be 'Black'.

Williams also highlights the physical and psychic destructiveness of stereotypes. Neither Rich in *Lift Off* nor Kenny in *Clubland* subscribe to the ideal of blackness held by their friends. They are both sensitive and shy. As a result they are perceived as weak, likened to homosexuals, and seen as worse than white people. In *Clubland*, Ade scorns Kenny for attempting to date a white woman: 'Yu gotta tink, brudda. Fuck 'em yeah, by all means, but don't breed wid dem' (85). In *Lift Off*, when Rich refuses to join a gang and engage in school fights, Mal deems him unworthy of being black: 'He ain't black. Fuck

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school-days and the present. However, the play is set entirely in the UK and does not deal with the theme of migration in any way. *Lift Off* stylistically and thematically provides a bridge between Williams' Jamaican trilogy and his later work.

knows wat he is' (235). Rich's refusal to prove that he's 'hard' (192) stems from his fear of becoming abusive like his father. As a result of the pressure to fit in, Rich eventually commits suicide.

Mal's internalization of black stereotypes is brought into question when he learns he is dying of cancer and needs a bone-marrow transplant; however, it has to be from a black person and there are not enough black donors. His situation leads to a complex state whereby he at once assumes and rejects black male stereotypes: he sleeps with Tone's sister, makes her pregnant, and wants no part in being the father. When Tone, furious, calls him a 'nigger' (232), he retorts:

MAL: Yes! Thas wat I am, and niggers don't care Tone, it's not in us. I mean we'd rather stuff our faces wid fried chicken, go out and teif, fuck whoever we like, than give blood to one of our own who badly needs it – who could die if he don't get it...We do wat everyone thinks, wat everyone expects, so give 'em wat they want, go for the pussy' (232).

The play ends with Tone and Mal re-evaluating but, nevertheless, continuing their friendship. Similarly in *Clubland*, Kenny stands up for what he wants against the pressures from Ben and Ade. He determines to follow his heart in spite of the colour of a woman: 'I don't have to think, I don't have to do nuttin, or prove myself, fuck wat colour yu are, fuck how yu think yu look, juss feel it, let yerself feel it' (124). At the end of *Clubland*, Ben comes to accept Kenny's choices and supports him. In both *Lift Off* and *Clubland* there is the possibility of redemption for the black and white characters, who manage to salvage their friendships and overcome the pull of cultural separatism to create new relationships.

In *Fallout*, Williams presents us with racism's alienating effects on British society. The play explores the intersecting worlds of gang-culture and the police using two actual events as a starting point: first, the murder and subsequent botched investigation of Damilola Taylor in 2000;<sup>107</sup> second, Williams examines

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<sup>107</sup> For an analysis of the problematic investigation and trial of the case, see *The Damilola Taylor Murder Investigation: The Report of the Oversight Panel* (Sentamu, Blakely, & Nove,



the police as an institution in the wake of the 1999 Macpherson Report, published after the Stephen Lawrence murder, which concluded that the police were 'institutionally racist'.<sup>108</sup> In particular, the media frenzy surrounding the murder of Damilola rekindled a public fear of violent youth crime. Because of the murder in which a black Nigerian boy was killed by other black youths, 'black-on-black' violence became the new 'buzz' word and an 'underclass' of dangerous black youths was identified as the new malaise afflicting urban Britain.<sup>109</sup>

The play opens with the murder of Kwame, a boy of African origin, at the hands of gang leader Dwayne and his cronies, Perry, Clinton and Emile, who delivers the fatal kicks to Kwame's head. Because the audience is aware of the murderer's identity from the onset, the play is more a revelation of characters than a whodunit murder mystery. The play follows the police investigation led by Matt (white) and Joe (black). Despite their suspicion regarding the killers' identities, the police are unable to provide any incriminating evidence. In his desperation to arrest someone, Joe feeds Ronnie, a key witness, information. When the police Inspector discovers that Joe has led a witness during questioning, the investigation falls through.<sup>110</sup>

Through his representation of the gang of youths Williams introduces us to a subculture that has severed itself from white British society. They speak using a combination of African-American and Jamaican-inspired patois and view Joe as a black man who has sold himself in slavery to the white Establishment. The

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2002). Since *Fallout* was written, the Taylor trial was re-opened and two brothers, Danny and Ricky Preddie, were convicted of manslaughter in 2006.

<sup>108</sup> In 1993, a black British eighteen year-old, Stephen Lawrence was murdered. Despite five suspects being arrested, nobody was convicted of the crime. The crime was seen as racially motivated, and the inability of the police to find the criminals and their handling of the case was also linked to racial prejudice. In 1999 the Macpherson Report was published which criticized the Metropolitan Police of institutional racism. Ten years after the report was published, a new report found that although improvements had been made within the Metropolitan Police, '[b]lack communities [...] are disproportionately represented in stop and search statistics and on the National DNA Database' a gap which has increased since 1999. The report goes on to highlight that 'being subject to higher levels of stop and search and inclusion on the DNA Database perpetuates black people's over-representation in the criminal justice system', and 'that any gains made by the use of stop and search may be offset by its potentially negative impact on community relations' (The Home Affairs Committee, 2009: 7).

<sup>109</sup> For some responses to the murder, see 'How Violent is Britain?' (BBC News, 2000).

<sup>110</sup> Williams' plot follows the Damilola case fairly closely. In his play, Ronnie is based on the key witness in the Damilola case, given the pseudonym 'Bromley', whose questionable evidence and motivation to testify led to the trial's dissolution.

absence of parental and community role models, failure of the educational system and the overriding poverty in the estate apprehends their future prospects. The character of Joe, who grew up on the estate but has since left, is also displaced. He is unable to reconcile the transformed non-racist Metropolitan Police with the same institution that he knew growing up in the 1980s. Joe's disorientation manifests in aggression towards the gang, who he feels are being treated with post-Macpherson kid gloves, and in provoking Matt with racial slurs in the hope that Matt will eventually let down his liberal guard and conform to Joe's stereotype of a racist policeman.

Although *Fallout* was a critical success, there were murmurs in the press regarding the negative issues surrounding representation of black people in the theatre (see Koenig, 2003). This response to *Fallout* reflects a wider debate about black representation. While black theatre in the first decade of this millennium has enjoyed unprecedented prominence in the number of plays produced and the high profile venues in which they have been presented,<sup>111</sup> this prominence has been accompanied by a proliferation of images of black hyper-masculinity, urban poor and themes of violence and male sexuality. Such representation, it has been argued, plays into the hands of dominant discourses, which stereotype black youths as violent, predatory and dysfunctional and ignore the diversity of the black experience.<sup>112</sup> Williams, however, refuses to yield to what Mercer has defined as 'the burden of representation' (1994: 233-58), claiming that '[p]ositive role models, of whatever race, make dull characters, because they don't really exist' (2009), that he is not writing about 'all' but only 'some black people,' and that he 'can't be a spokesman for a whole culture' (Williams qtd in Sierz, 2009). In *Fallout* Williams presents us with complicated characters who occupy a position between victim and perpetrator and whose oppression is at once constructed by deeper social structures and perpetuated or transgressed by their own actions. In his representation of the gang he plays to and then undermines stereotypes in

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<sup>111</sup> For a list of productions by black British playwrights staged in major London venues in 2003 and 2004, see Osborne (2006a: 82-3).

<sup>112</sup> Pat Cumper, the former artistic director of black British theatre company Talawa, wrote in the *Guardian's* online blog that she refused to 'put another dead young black man on stage' again for precisely these reasons (2009). The responses to Cumper's blog posting provide further interesting opinions from the general public on the matter.

order to contextualize and then challenge dominant assumptions regarding black gang culture. Furthermore, in revealing the gang members as both victims and perpetrators, Williams highlights their agency which unsettles the debate around racism which perpetuates the placement of 'the white "us" of British society' at its centre (Barry & Boles, 2006: 299).

The group of youths under scrutiny is depicted under the stereotype that one might expect: Shanice and Ronnie were expelled from school for stealing; they hang out at the soulless fast-food cafe where Shanice works; the boys make a living from stealing; Emile and Dwayne pull knives and guns on each other in order to establish their gang hierarchy; and women become prizes in contests of machismo. As Derbyshire argues, the play draws our attention to structural inequalities, which have resulted in the youths' alienation from mainstream society (2007: 424). However, Derbyshire also suggests, based on his reading of Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson's (Eds.) *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (1975/1993), that the gang's violent subculture is predicated on resistance to deeply ingrained social racism. Despite contextualizing their delinquency, Williams' primary aim is not absolution by finger pointing at society's innate racism – although these are clearly factors that have shaped the youth's behaviour. Rather, through the black-on-black murder and the reaction of the gang in its aftermath, he highlights their agency. In doing so Williams provocatively challenges notions of black youth as victims.

The murder of Kwame confounds the notion that black gang culture can be entirely explained as a product of cultural resistance to white oppression. In his critique of subculture theory as developed in the 1970s and 1980s by the CCCS, Rupa Huq argues that because subculture was examined only in terms of its existence as a response to oppression, theorists tended to overlook the negative aspects of their case studies (2006: 16). Furthermore, Huq notes, if subculture arises solely from resistance then it presupposes the inevitability of violence, 'rendering it excused as much as explained' (2006: 16). In *Fallout*, Williams' portrayal of the youths and, for most of them, their apparently unfazed attitude towards the murder they've committed presents a challenge to a liberal audience well versed in the social causes that lie at the foundations of dysfunction. Had Williams' aim been merely to reveal the gang as a product of

society's failings he may have followed David Wilson's argument in *Inventing Black-on-Black Violence* that if we are to 'supplant the meaning system of 'black-on-black violence'' then the portrayal of violence needs to be not one of 'agency-infused kids rambunctiously roaming inner cities' but instead a depiction of 'hurt, hopeless, and searching youth in societally created settings' (2005: 159). Instead, Williams balances the youth's victimization by demonstrating them equally as perpetrators, as agents in their own undoing and, crucially, in their tentative steps towards reformation at the end.

This sense of agency is carried through in the play's performance. Without an interval and with scenes that transition seamlessly into one other, the pace is relentless as the audience witnesses acts of un-premeditated violence and anger spontaneously erupt, allowing little time for reflection before the scene changes. Reviews comment on Ian Rickson's direction as achieving a 'bruising, confrontational production' (Spencer, 2003) with a 'visceral impact' (Billington, 2003). Countering this tone of seething aggression is the humour that Williams brings to the dialogue, especially through the clown-like banter between Perry and Clinton. The last line of the play is said in jest as Shanice tells Dwayne that they can date but: 'Yu ain't grindin me' (117). The experience of high-octane acting overshadows the more subtle message of social causality, complicating whether responsibility lies either within society or the individual.

The characters of Shanice and Dwayne also make important decisions that lead them to transformation at the end. Shanice's remorse guides her to confess to Emile that Kwame never tried to 'sex' her (102) and that it was in fact she who made a pass at him, which he rejected. Her confession, beyond revealing that the murder was in part the result of adolescent jealousy, is seen as a brave act in a world where a bruised ego is enough motivation to kill. And it is Dwayne's feelings for Shanice that prevents him from shooting Emile:

DWAYNE: Yu really think I woulda shot Emile?

SHANICE: Yeah.

DWAYNE: Believe. Yu know wat stopped me?

SHANICE: Wat?

DWAYNE: Yu, Shanice (116).

The play ends with Shanice and Dwayne having a re-match of a football game they played as children seven years before. This re-creation of their childhood symbolizes a fresh start through a return to innocence. It is unlikely that their lot will change dramatically, nevertheless it underlines their desire to start anew and marks a moment of self-intervention. The social oppression experienced by the gang, the killing of Kwame and the accent on the characters' own decision-making all combine to present a gang of youths that are at once oppressors and products of their own oppression, disallowing any comfortable categorization of good / bad and victim / perpetrator.<sup>113</sup>

Through the character of Joe, Williams further blurs the line between hero and villain confronting intra-racism from a different angle. Williams presents us with a highly complex character, battered from all sides by what he perceives to be a racist society which negatively pigeonholes black people, yet now appears to be masking its fundamental prejudices with political correctness. The result is a deeply conflicted character. Joe despises the gang and is desperate to make an arrest and avenge Kwame with whom he identifies strongly as a high achiever and someone who was bullied for wanting to make a better life for himself. When the investigation falls through Joe takes justice into his own hands. He seeks out Emile and beats him up:

JOE: Niggers, Emile, can't play the game. You can't play the game, Kwame played the game, Kwame had a life. He was a decent kid. But you, you! (*Slaps him repeatedly*) You want a life, bwoi, get yer own. Why you have to tek his? You know what, it's fuckers like you, like that pisshead, is why I had to leave. Now it's fuckers like you that bring me

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<sup>113</sup> The set design added another layer to Williams' method of undermining stereotypical representations. The set, designed by Uitz, was placed in the middle of the stalls and surrounded by wire with the audience looking down on the performance space from their vantage point in the circle. The design drew attention to the way in which black youth have come to embody the displaced fears of white society. The tension created between the content and performance of the piece with the audience's positioning created an uncomfortable situation whereby the audience were made to feel complicit in the youth's objectification. This sense of discomfort is characteristic of Williams' style that uses stereotypes to create a deliberate tension between mainstream assumptions and a radical re-positioning of the black (and white) subject. For an alternative perspective, see Osborne (2006a: 89).

back to where I started. You had to drag me down, innit? You had to drag Kwame down (112).

Joe's character challenges notions of assumed black solidarity that are blind to internal divisions, and presents us with a more complicated view of intra-racial relations. For the upwardly mobile Joe who has escaped from the estate, his hostile attitude towards the gang demonstrates the negative impact of society's racial homogenising which differentiates along racial as opposed to behavioural lines:

MATT: They're your people, why do you hate them?

JOE: Listen, yeah, those boys are not my people (96).

Joe's anger expresses his struggle to be perceived as black and as an equal member of society. His use of the word 'nigger' is not evidence of his internalized racism. He applies the pejorative term to the gang to differentiate himself from them which exposes a frustration borne from living in a society in which all black people are perceived as the same. As Joe points out to Matt: 'if you're walking down the street at night, you see a bunch of black lads walking towards you ...you know you're gonna cross that road, as fast as your legs can tek you' (51). The notion that black strangers are pre-judged by whites as threatening finds its roots in Matt's assumption that Joe should feel empathy because the gang are his 'people'. As Hall points out: 'After all, it is one of the predicates of racism that 'you can't tell the difference because they all look the same'' (1988: 28).

Joe's sense of displacement manifests in a nostalgia for the 1980s where racial boundaries were clearly demarcated:

JOE: Give me back the old school of police. Give them boys something to really cry about.

MATT: Not another word.

JOE: At least they'd know where they stand. That's all they want.

MATT: Is that what you want, Joe? (97).

His projection of his own sense of displacement onto the gang results in Joe taking on the role of the 1980s police and replicating their treatment of young black offenders when he physically attacks Emile. When Shanice intervenes, he tells her:

JOE: I'm letting him know where he stands.

SHANICE: Yu think dis is gonna change him?

JOE: Bwoi drowning girl.

SHANICE: Wat else yu expect him to be? (113).

Joe's action provides a startling inversion of the premise of the bad, white policeman.

At the end of the scene Shanice retorts to Joe: 'why should we be like yu?' (113), underlining the fact that Williams does not provide role models and eschews notions of 'positive representation' in favour of 'realistic' depictions of characters which exhibit both positive and negative traits. In *Fallout* through his representation of black characters Williams presents and simultaneously undermines black and white stereotypes through complex characterizations, which fly in the face of representational expectation and complicate critical generalizations echoing, Hall's declaration of 'the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' (1988: 28).

### **The Borders of Britishness**

In *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* Williams continues his exploration of what it means to cross the racially demarcated lines of identity. The play is set in the King George pub in south-west London where the pub's football team assemble to watch the 2000 England v Germany World Cup Qualifier. The lads are a stereotypical group of young, white, working-class football fans: they are big drinkers, violent, foul-mouthed, misogynist, patriotic, xenophobic, homophobic and racist. Complicating the stereotype of the English lad is Barry who, with St George's flags painted on his face, acts and behaves exactly like his fellow white, racist teammates, but is the only black member of the football team. In

contrast, his brother Mark has come to extricate Barry and take him home to visit their sick father.

The screening of the live match in the pub and the reactions it evokes in the lads initiates a debate around national belonging and Britishness. Representing the far right is Alan, a member of a political group resembling the British National Party, and his protégé Lawrie. Lawrie wants to ‘make a bomb or summin, go down Brixton and blow every one of them up’ (222), while Alan sources the arguments of Enoch Powell to demonstrate that ‘the blacks, the non-whites, have absolutely nothing in common with the Anglo-Saxon Celtic culture’ and that ‘if they want to practice their black culture and heritage, then they should be allowed to do it in their own part of their world’ (188). Even the seemingly nonpartisans like policeman Lee, who struggles with professional impartiality since being knifed by a black man, betrays a seam of racism. So too does the pub owner Gina who, on discovering that her son Glen’s mobile phone and jacket have been stolen by the black teenager Bad T, refers to him as ‘That fuckin little black kid’ (183).

In *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*, Williams interrogates the racial parameters of national belonging and identity in contemporary Britain: ‘I very much wanted to write a bigger play, not just simply about race, but about British Nationalism: what does it mean to be British in the twenty-first century, who’s more British now, the blacks or the whites? (R. Williams, 2004a: x). The dualist nature of competition, mirrored in the England versus Germany game, pervades the play’s exploration of national belonging, which pits black against white in a tussle for the British title. Unlike Williams’ previous plays such as *The Gift* and *Clubland* which portrayed the fraught nature of cultural slippages, *Sing Yer Heart Out* functions along much starker lines. The dualisms in the play reveal how a sense of ‘Britishness’ operates through binaries of inclusion / exclusion and proffers a scathing critique of multicultural rhetoric that maintains cultures can live in harmony without taking into account the oppressive nature of the dominant ideology. Williams’ play seems to support Gilroy’s argument expounded in *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1987), in which Gilroy demonstrates how discourses of national belonging in the post-war era were redefined in reaction to non-white immigrants. As a result, distinctions between



race and ethnicity were collapsed. Culture became 'almost biologized by its proximity to 'race'' (61) which effectively rendered Blackness and Britishness as 'mutually exclusive' (55). This division is spatially represented in the play. The play's use of space not only underscores the themes of the work, but is also a key determinant of its action. Within the spaces, Williams replicates the complexities of 'nation'. In the play's pub setting, he establishes a territorial microcosm, complete with borders and ethnic affiliations and provides a glimpse into the operations of the 'imagined community' at work. In doing so he exposes the way in which racial differences still patrol the borders of national belonging in the new millennium.<sup>114</sup> The space of the play is divided between the interior of the pub and the outside estate, creating a literal and symbolic border. The King George pub, decorated in St George's flags, is the microcosmic representation of an historic England. It is in the traditional English pub that the disgruntled Alan and Lawrie seek refuge in old-fashioned values against the government's liberal policies which they believe work to marginalize the white working class and, as they see themselves, bedrock of the nation:

LAWRIE: There's nuttin that makes me wanna say I'm proud to be English.

ALAN: No one wants to speak up for you. It's not fashionable.

LAWRIE: Right.

ALAN: But they want to speak up for the blacks, queers, Pakis, that's fashionable (198).

The pub is both a home to three generations – Jimmy, Gina and Glen – and 'a home from home' (160) for the lads. It is within the bosom of this (surrogate) family that a culture based on racial difference is nurtured and transmitted:

Families are therefore not only the nation in microcosm, its key components, but act as the means to turn social processes into natural, instinctive ones (Gilroy, 1987: 43).

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<sup>114</sup> In the 2004 production at the RNT, the Cottesloe space was transformed into a replica traditional English pub with the audience positioned at tables placed around the central area of performance. Through their proximity, the audience become implicated not just as witnesses, but as punters / regulars themselves in this culturally familiar space.

When Glen's mobile phone and jacket are taken by Bad T, Glen's grandfather Jimmy offers to teach Glen to fight so he 'can go back, sort 'em out' (183) and Becks advises Glen to defend himself by creating an all-white gang in retaliation: 'get yerself some white boys, Glen, stick together, show sum pride' (212). The cycle of racism, perpetuated through the institution of the family / pub finds its apex when Glen stabs Mark and Glen succumbs to and echoes the racism that has been ricocheting around the pub all day with his final words: 'He's a black bastard, they all are' (234).

The space of the estate outside, inhabited by the black youths Duane and Bad T, represents the space of the alien / other and is seen as a threat to the core English values of the King George. Glen's association with Duane and Bad T is framed in terms of cultural corruption. As Gina notes, it is because 'he's been hanging round with them black kids from the estate' (135) that he now listens to rap music. Glen sucks his teeth, snubs the classic British rock bands (The Kinks, Pink Floyd) recommended by Jimmy, and speaks using patois inspired slang:

JIMMY: I can't even understand half the things they're [the rap musicians] saying.

GLEN: Ca you ain't wid it guy.

GINA: English, Glen, we speak English in here (135).

Like the white characters in *Lift Off* and *Clubland*, Glen is desperate to become part of the black gang run by Bad T and his sidekick Duane. The influence of black street culture on Glen draws our attention to cultural shifts exemplified in British youth who are increasingly drawing upon a plurality of local and global influences in defining new and hybrid identities. However, such 'mixing' is viewed by Glen's family as a bastardization of his Englishness and affirms Errol Lawrence's observation that 'the 'alien' cultures of the blacks are seen as either the cause or else the most visible symptom of the destruction of the 'British way of life'' (1982: 47). It is in fact Glen's 'mixing' with the wrong crowd that drives the action of the play. When Bad T takes Glen's mobile and jacket it not only precipitates the mob of angry protesters outside the pub, it also leads to Glen, thwarted in his plans to kill Bad T, murdering Mark. The crowd of black

protestors that develops outside the pub is a stark illustration of the way in which the preservation of Britishness is defined along territorial and cultural lines. The 'army of black kids out there' (226) is not only a threat to the site of the pub, but when they are referred to as 'a whole bleedin tribe' (227) and 'those monkeys out there' (230), the colonial imagery distils the 'battle' into a defence of white supremacy against the black 'savages'.

Through the characters of Mark and Barry, Williams explores the implications of such ethnic protectionism upon black Britons through the reactions of cultural retention and acculturation respectively. Mark's objective in the play is to extricate Barry from the pub and its white laddish culture and take him home to visit his sick father and 'his own people' (209). The desire to re-unite Barry with his roots reveals Mark's own retreat into cultural separatism as a result of his direct experiences of marginalization resulting in a profound sense of unbelonging:

MARK: They don't want us here, Barry.

BARRY: We were born here.

MARK: They don't care (210).

Despite the word 'nation' coming from the Latin 'nasci' meaning 'to be born', Mark's experiences reveal that birthright far from guarantees entry into cultural citizenship. Mark's experience of racial abuse in the army where his CO 'was a racist wanker' (214) has pushed him into a position of reactionary racism. As a result he has terminated his friendship with Lee who, although not exempt from displays of prejudice, struggles throughout the play to quash racist sentiment. Mark's heightened sensitivity to racism has to some extent coloured his judgement. He accuses Gina of breaking up with him because he was black to which she retorts: 'I finished wid you cos you were boring [...] If you woke up tomorrow as white as I am, you'll still be boring' (208). On the other hand Barry, desperate to be accepted by the dominant culture, is singing his heart out in support of England and ignores the casual racism of his friends.

In the same way that Glen is judged by his family, Barry's crossing of the imaginary border that separates white and black is seen as a betrayal of his

roots by Mark. Where Britishness is defined by whiteness, the body becomes the site on which national belonging is first and foremost signified. Barry's allegiance is inscribed onto his skin in the form of a British Bulldog tattoo. The painted St George's flags on his cheeks are seen by Mark as a mask of his 'true'/black identity. He tells him to 'wipe that shit off your face' (167). For Mark, Englishness is a contamination and something to be sloughed off: 'You think I'm here by choice? I feel ill juss bein here. I can't wait to go home so I can have a wash' (167). Yet despite Barry's attempts to fit in, he is also ultimately rejected by his white football friends who, because of his blackness, perceive his cultural allegiance as being outside the pub and by extension the nation. Phil questions why Barry is not outside helping his brother Mark who is trying to placate the growing unrest:

PHIL: ... Barry, shouldn't you be out there?

BARRY: ENGLAND!

PHIL: Baz!

BARRY: Wat?

PHIL: He's your brother, you should be backing him up.

BARRY: I'm watchin the game,

BECKS: You ain't gonna miss anything.

BARRY: So why are you still here then?

JASON: Cos we follow England.

BARRY: Wat you tryin to say, Jase?

JASON: Nuttin.

BARRY: I'm not white enuff for England? (194).

Williams does, however, point to the possibility of a more balanced model. Barry unsettles the play's stark dualities and it is his resolve that ultimately convinces Mark to make a stand for his belonging. Likewise it is Mark's sensitivity to racism which eventually leads Barry to stand up for himself against the covert racist comments of his friends. Mark and Barry, confronted with Alan's racist polemic, find a middle ground on which they assert their belonging. Mark tells Alan 'You won't win' (220) and he and Barry begin to chant 'We shall not, we shall not be moved!' (220). It is after this assertive outburst that Mark decides to stay and buy a round of drinks and begins to make amends with Lee.

The screening of the football match throughout the play provides a third symbolic space of the nation. The 'live' screening forges a bridge to the outside world, connecting the local space with the members of its wider 'imagined community'. The televised match provides access to a reservoir of longstanding tradition and culture which have been expressly designed as instruments of nationalist propaganda, reliant upon the re-imagining of imperial Britain's former glory. For example, before the match begins 'God Save the Queen' is played. Significantly, the 2000 England v Germany match was the last to be played at the old Wembley Stadium, home to English national football, and not only a symbol of national pride but the site where England won the World Cup against Germany in 1966. Its history is steeped in British imperialism; originally named the Empire Stadium, Wembley was built for the British Empire Exhibition of 1924-5 which was opened by King George V (hence the name of the pub) and showcased the power and might of the colonial empire. For the spectators, the game provides a forum in which they are encouraged to 'perform' their nationalism: the lads shout encouragement at the screen, they sing along to the national anthem, jeer when the German team enter and during the *Deutschlandlied* they sing 'Stand up, if you won the war!' (166). The broadcast literally 'wires' the lads into the football game in what Hobsbawm identifies as 'an expression of national struggle' (Hobsbawm, 1990/1992: 143).

In the play's climax the borders between the localized spaces, pub / estate / Wembley, collapse. When England loses, the lads' support is displaced onto the growing tension between blacks and whites in the pub. Lawrie laments 'this whole country's lost its spine', 'we ruled the world' (229) and determined to salvage England's dignity, he challenges Barry to fight saying, 'Well, come on then, black boy, show us how English you are' (230). Football's fundamental dualism resonates with the black versus white debate as the borders blur between the England versus Germany match and the pub versus the estate riot. The inside / outside space is traversed when two bricks are thrown through the pub window and open war is declared. For Lawrie, like a football match, there can only be one winner: 'Lass one standing at the final whistle, wins England' (231). The chaos results in Mark's murder and Barry disowning

England symbolized by wiping the painted flags from his cheeks. It appears that Alan's Powellist prophecy of 'rivers of blood' (235) has come to pass.

*Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* is Williams' most pessimistic play. Despite commonality in class, environment and experiences, the play stresses that such local identity is subservient to the larger question of national belonging.

Although Lee, Gina, Glen (initially) and eventually Barry and Mark attempt to navigate the complexity of fitting between rigid cultural and racial essentialist models, their actions and voices are all but drowned out by the din of Alan and Lawrie's 'England for whites' (186) polemic, the riot outside and the stark imagery and spatial delineations which underscore Britishness as defined by cultural / racial separatism. Barry's reaction to his brother's death: 'I'll kill all of yer. Come on, come on! Who wants me, come on! Yer fuckin white cunts, all of yer! (235) renders Lee's advice to Barry and final words of the play: 'Don't lose yerself' (235) an inaudible bleat. Drawing similar conclusions to Gilroy, the play demonstrates that as long as Britishness is defined along such constructs that conflate race and ethnicity, there never will be any black in the Union Jack.

## **Conclusion**

Williams' is a complex theatre that blurs binaries of victim / perpetrator, society / individual and ethnicity / race. Beneath the turbulence of his dramas Williams hints at a social ideal defined by creolization / inter-mixture rather than pluralism. He persistently draws our attention to the ruptures that result from the perversion of life's fundamental complexities to fit distinct and homogenous categorizations. In navigating these social ruptures, Williams inevitably exposes himself to criticism. As Osborne states of *Fallout*, Williams treads 'a fine line between perpetuating negative typing of black people and staging aspects of black British working class experience to spark debate' (2006a: 93). The urge to incite debate has been consistent throughout Williams' work since 2000 and is fostered by a belief that only through open dialogue can society arbitrate deep-seated prejudices and inequalities. According to Williams:

Many pieces of drama (stage or screen) that address racial issues lose their bottle and drown themselves with wishy-washy liberal platitudes (2004a: x).

Similarly, since 2000 Williams' work has increasingly engaged with political issues in which the nation at large is implicated. By not resorting to easy solutions and by highlighting causes and possible areas of redress for the issues he explores, Williams' work is at once reflective of a dysfunctional society as it is hopeful of the possibility of its redemption.

## **Bola Agbaje (b. 1981)**

### **Introduction**

Bola Agbaje was born in England to Nigerian parents. She grew up on the North Peckham Estate in London, the same estate where Damilola Taylor was murdered. Agbaje lived for a brief period between the ages of six and eight in Nigeria but otherwise has spent the rest of her life in the UK. As a playwright, Agbaje has had considerable success at a young age. Her debut *Gone Too Far* (2007) premiered at the Royal Court for the Young Writers Festival and was revived in the main theatre in 2008 for which it won an Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement. The following year, her *Detaining Justice* (2009) opened at the Tricycle, and a year later *Off the Endz* (2010) premiered at the Royal Court. Agbaje's most recent play *Belong* (2012), about a Nigerian British MP who returns to Nigeria to pursue his political career, was a co-production with the African British theatre company Tiata Fahodzi and the Royal Court where it was staged.<sup>115</sup>

Agbaje's experiences growing up on an estate in London as a black woman of African heritage have clearly influenced her thematic choices and writing style. As a second-generation Nigerian Briton, Agbaje's work demonstrates a sustained connection with her African heritage. Most of her plays feature African-origin protagonists and explore issues of particular import to Africans living in Britain. Her representation of African characters, in particular West Africans, reveals her intimate knowledge of African culture despite having grown up in the UK. As a Londoner, however, Agbaje is equally comfortable representing a more generalized urban working-class black British experience. For example, the characters in her play *Off the Endz*, about black Britons in their mid-twenties living on a council estate and struggling to raise their standard of living, are not ethnically located. Similarly, her plays represent a range of characters including white, mixed-race and black Britons of Caribbean

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<sup>115</sup> Agbaje has had one other play published. *Playing the Game* (2010), a short play about the political wrangling of a young woman aiming to be president of a student's association, was staged at the Tricycle in 2010 as part of their Women, Power and Politics Season. Unpublished plays include *House of Corrections* (2012, Riverside Studios), about a family preparing for their son to begin a thirteen-year prison sentence. She has also written for radio and a number of short films.



heritage. The breadth of Agbaje's representations reveals her familiarity with the cultural complexity of urban London life and her own occupancy of multiple subject positions as a black British Nigerian woman playwright.

Similarly to Roy Williams, Agbaje's plays probe the theme of inter-ethnic contact and interrogate the complex issues that emerge around notions of culture, identity and belonging. However, whereas Williams' most acclaimed dramas have explored black / white British relations, Agbaje's most critically acclaimed plays *Gone Too Far* and *Detaining Justice* hinge upon the intra-racial encounter between blacks in Britain of Caribbean and of African origin.<sup>116</sup> It is at the interstice of the African and Caribbean British experience that many of the tensions in Agbaje's dramas are located. This thematic preoccupation is echoed in Agbaje's style. Her social-realist approach and focus on urban youth in *Gone Too Far* and *Off the Endz* places her within a contemporary black British tradition established by the success of Caribbean-origin writers such as Roy Williams and Kwame Kwei-Armah to which she brings a distinct African British voice.

### ***Gone Too Far***

*Gone Too Far* is set on a south London estate and follows two brothers who are sent by their mother to buy milk. Essentially the play is a moral tale about the pressures facing teenagers to conform. Ikudayisi, the eldest brother, grew up in Nigeria and is proud to be a Nigerian, whereas Yemi, the younger sibling, was raised in the UK and spurns his heritage in favour of an adopted black Caribbean British identity. What begins as a benign errand turns into a journey of self-discovery as the brothers come into contact with a range of characters

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<sup>116</sup> Roy Williams treats the theme of African and Caribbean relations most directly in his play *Joe Guy*, although similar issues emerge in *Clubland* and *Fallout*. Other plays which explore relationships between African and African Caribbean origin characters include Edgar White's *Man and Soul* (1982, Arts Theatre; published 1983); Caymanian Frank McField's *No Place to be Nice* (1984, Albany Empire; unpublished 1984), directed by Alby James for Black Theatre Co-operative; Maria Oshodi's *The "S" Bend* (1984, Royal Court as part of their Young Writers Festival; published 1986); Paul Boakye's *Boy with Beer* (1992, Man in the Moon Theatre, London; published 1995), directed by Steven Luckie; Courttia Newland's *B is for Black* (2003, Oval House; published 2008); David Addai's *House of Agnes* (2008, Oval House; published 2008), and his *Oxford Street* (2008, Royal Court; published 2008); and Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Statement of Regret*. *Boy with Beer* is particularly significant as it adds the theme of homosexuality to its exploration of intra-racial relationships.

on the estate including a Bangladeshi shopkeeper, two white cockney policemen, an old white woman and the local black gang. Through the brothers' interactions with the play's other characters and each other, Agbaje explores the various social forces which compel individuals to adopt various personas. As the play progresses, Yemi begins to re-evaluate his feelings towards his Nigerian heritage. But, it is the brothers' interaction with the local black gang which drives the play to its climax. When Ikudayisi is accidentally stabbed in the arm trying to separate Yemi from a fight with gang-member Razer, the moment marks the turning point in Yemi's transition from an angry youth to a proud black Briton of Nigerian heritage.

In *Gone Too Far*, Agbaje demonstrates a malleable identity and ability to code-switch as an important survival strategy employed by minorities to gain social acceptance. This tactic, the play suggests, is not restricted to youths facing peer pressure. For instance, the boys' mother replaces her strong Nigerian accent with 'a very English voice' (4) when she is speaking on the telephone. The mother's adoption of an English persona when interacting with the outside world via the faceless medium of the telephone demonstrates her belief that she is more likely to be treated with respect if she masks her African origins. Likewise, the Bangladeshi shopkeeper makes every effort to proclaim his English nationalism by 'wearing an England shirt and a headscarf' (7) and decorating his shop with England flags. When Yemi insinuates he may be a terrorist, the shopkeeper turns off his Islamic music and replaces it with the England World Cup anthem. Both examples, although comedic, reveal the increasing pressure some immigrants may feel in a post - 9 / 11 and 7 / 7 Britain to 'perform' their integration into English society.

The gang, on the other hand, have constructed identities based in opposition to mainstream expectations. Their dress, language and value-system, which prizes violence and extreme masculinity, is heavily based on Caribbean 'yardie' and African American 'gansta' culture. In their study of inner-city black British young men, Louise Archer and Hiromi Yamashita observed that:

dominant and attractive / popular ('hegemonic') discourses of masculinity were drawn from black Caribbean sources, mixed with US black 'rap'

elements and grounded within a local London context. These identities were 'personified' in the myth of the 'rude boy' or 'bad boy' (2003: 122).

Agbaje provides some insight into the gang's antisocial behaviour by highlighting some of the structural inequalities which face black British youth. The bleak estate setting is an obvious indicator of the way in which class is an important factor in shaping identity and fostering a sense of disenfranchisement among the youth. But, it is the scene in which Yemi and Ikudayisi come into contact with two white policemen that exposes the perpetuation of institutional racism and supports the notion that black youth are often pushed into a position of social opposition as a result of systemic discrimination. When the police find Yemi and Ikudayisi play-fighting, they assume that because of Yemi's black British accent he is of Jamaican origin and that he is antagonizing the African Ikudayisi. While they are sympathetic to Ikudayisi, Yemi is automatically pigeonholed as a cannabis-smoking criminal.

The scene highlights the entrenched antagonistic relationship between police and black youth as well as the police's specifically targeted racism towards Caribbean-origin youth. However, during the confrontation with the police, the tone of the scene suggests that black youth are equally culpable of perpetuating negative police / black British youth relations. Indeed, Yemi's behaviour lives up to the police's stereotype. In contrast to Ikudayisi's more measured approach, Yemi's response is deliberately provocative and inflames the situation. He accuses the police of racism and calls one of them a 'BATTY MAN!' (62). Yemi's aggressive reaction may have its reasons rooted in historical structural inequalities; however, Agbaje's play suggests, it has become a self-destructive cycle. As Ikudayisi cautions Yemi, 'you have to learn to choose your battle' (74) and that 'once you stop thinking dat the whole world has declared war on you, you will see how great your life is' (74). Despite providing a basic socio-economic contextualization of the problems faced by black youth in Britain, Agbaje's overall message in the play places the onus on the individual to ultimately make positive lifestyle choices.

Agbaje problematizes British racism in the scene with the police by showing them to be kind towards Ikudayisi because he is African and, therefore, they

(correctly) assume he is not a trouble-causer. Because Yemi is of African heritage too, a fact the police are unaware of, Agbaje does not indicate an essential difference between Africans and Caribbeans but rather a cultural one. Agbaje seems to be raising a fairly politically incorrect notion that the police's racism is not targeted at all black people but at a specific sector of black youth who have adopted a Jamaican identity, a notion she supports throughout the play. The character Armani, a female member of the gang, is a case in point. Despite being raised by her single white mother, Armani has modelled her identity after her black Jamaican father:

BLAZER: I've seen your mum – she's *white*.

ARMANI: So my dad is black.

BLAZER: And?

ARMANI: And he is Jamaican. So dat makes me Jamaican (32).

Armani's relationship with her friend Paris who introduced her to Jamaican culture such as rice and peas, taught her how to style her hair and how to dance Jamaican-style highlights the extent to which Armani has constructed her identity around her black heritage despite her absent father.

Armani's wholesale adoption of a Jamaican identity has also bred a hatred for Africans. When she learns that Yemi is of Nigerian not Caribbean heritage, she 'compliments' him by saying that he does not 'look' African as he 'don't have big lips and big nose' (18). But when Yemi insults her, she resorts to calling him racist names such as 'babatunde' (21) and 'Kunta Kinte' (32) and urges her boyfriend Razer to beat Yemi up 'because these Africans are forgetting their place' (67). Armani justifies her racism against Africans with the comment that 'back in da days they sold us off as slaves' (36). This explanation seems to be a commonly held reason behind Caribbean prejudices against Africans.<sup>117</sup> The

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<sup>117</sup> Archer and Yamashita note: 'In a recent Channel 4 programme examining relations within the black British diaspora, Darcus Howe related such cleavages between African and Caribbean groups in Britain to historical patterns of immigration and the slave trade, which were instrumental in the formation of modern class differences between some African and Caribbean nations [...] we would suggest that these interpretations draw attention to how diasporic identities have social and geographic 'histories' that continue to influence modern manifestations and constructions beyond the immediate time / space boundaries. Thus, class, migration, and ethnicity are integrally connected concepts' (2003: 122).

inconsistency of her argument – hating Africans rather than white people for their role in the slave trade – is, however, lost on her. Although the rest of the gang don't share her hostility; nevertheless, Armani's anti-African stance is revealed as an integral aspect of her constructed, and therefore lends authenticity to, her Jamaican identity.

Yemi's desire to fit in with the gang has also manifested a dislike for Africans. His internalized negativity is expressed by his disdain of his brother and his view of Africa and Nigerian culture as primitive. Instead, he has constructed a Caribbean / black British-styled identity. His assimilation is so successful that the gang only discover he has Nigerian roots when they meet Ikudayisi. Archer and Yamashita highlight the pressure on young black Africans to conform to the dominant Caribbean British culture among the subjects interviewed in their study:

Distinctions were drawn between 'authentic' / 'cool' Caribbean masculinities and Other / ridiculed African masculinities. Boys of African heritage were more likely to identify their ethnicity as 'black' (as opposed to 'Caribbean' boys) and used popular Caribbean styles of talk and dress. However, they were often ridiculed by Caribbean boys (2003: 122).

Agbaje draws attention to her own experience growing up in London where she had to navigate her blackness in relation to the dominant Caribbean-origin community. On her website she describes her first day in secondary school:

I went around the classroom asking everyone where they were from and when I was asked I told my class mates I was half Jamaican and half African. Thinking back I don't know why I did it, I mean I know why at the time, I was ashamed of being African [sic] most African [sic] where I grew up were ashamed. It was cooler to be West Indian (Agbaje, 2010).

Agbaje seems to indicate that Yemi's dilemma is the result of a confused identity and lack of self-pride which result in him making the wrong choices in life. Yemi is on the brink of losing himself to the wrong crowd by assimilating an

adopted reactionary culture which has been built upon foundations of hate and suffering. The remedy to this malaise, Agbaje indicates, is to reconnect himself with his Nigerian roots:

IKUDAYISI: [...] One minute you feel you don't fit in here because people are racist but then you don't want to be a Nigerian. You want to be left alone, but you complain you have no friends. Do you know who you are, Yemi?

YEMI: Yes, I'm a free person.

[...]

IKUDAYISI: How can you be free when you deny your own heritage? You don't like your name, you are ashamed of your language. If you are so free you won't care what people think about Nigeria and you will just be what you are (46).

However, through the character Blazer, Agbaje veers the play away from promoting a 'good African' / 'bad Caribbean' dialectic. Through Blazer, the gang-leader, Agbaje highlights the dangers of being reactionary. Blazer is also of Nigerian heritage but, unlike Yemi, he advocates a sense of pride in his African origins: he speaks Yoruba and believes '[u]s Nigerians need to stick together' (55). However, his belief in the fundamental difference between Africans and West Indians belies his own racism:

BLAZER: That's what makes us different.

YEMI: What does?

BLAZER: Respect.

YEMI: From who?

BLAZER: Da West Indians (50).

Blazer has given up his Nigerian name; yet, he considers what he is doing as a strategic way to take control of the estate by infiltration: 'Gone are da days when mans take the piss out of this African! Cos I run this estate now...the roles have reversed now' (53). Blazer's position as gang leader may point to a reversal of power; yet, it is a pyrrhic victory: his appropriation of an outward Caribbean British identity and belief that Africans and West Indians are

fundamentally different hints at the problematic issue of reverse racism which perpetuates a cycle of violence and hate. Although Blazer claims the maxim 'Money, power, respect is what you need in life' (51) to be an African 'truth' learned from his Nigerian mother, Blazer's notion of respect is more ideologically in-line with the 'gangsta' interpretation of the word which has nothing in common with its meaning within a traditional African context.

Agbaje reveals the warped values of black British youth through Ikudayisi who is good-natured, polite, respectful of his elders, speaks English and Yoruba and has a firm understanding of when to pick one's battles based on growing up in Nigeria. Agbaje contrasts the African value system of respect, exemplified by Ikudayisi, with the way in which 'respect' has become hijacked and twisted by black youth culture to mean something taken (by violence and intimidation) not given. The play hints that the reason for this is a hostile reaction to authority as a result of individual and institutional racism. But Agbaje moves beyond this traditional perspective to highlight the cyclical self-defeating nature of such an aggressive defence mechanism. This is highlighted by the fact that it is merely a pair of trainers that is the catalyst for the knife fight between Yemi and Razer and underlined by the irony of mistaken identity – Yemi believes Razer took Ikudayisi's trainers, but actually it was a different gang member.<sup>118</sup> In reaction, Yemi, embracing what he believes to be his true identity, distils the fight between himself and Razer into an African versus Caribbean conflict declaring, 'I'm doing this for me. I'm gonna make people know who I am' (74) and that 'These jams think they are better dan us Africans. Dat we ain't shit. That's why they robbed you [...] They treat Africans like they are beneath them. I AIN'T BENEATH NO ONE' (78-9).

Agbaje gets to the moral heart of the play during the knife-fight between Yemi and Razer when Ikudayisi pleads:

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<sup>118</sup> Intra-racial violence over trainers also emerges in Roy Williams' *Fallout* when the African Kwame is murdered by the black British gang for his trainers. Violent crimes over shoes have an American precedent and recall the case of David Martin who murdered his friend Michael Eugene Thomas for his pair of Air Jordans in 1989. More recently, in England, Seydou Diarrassouba, a young black man of African origin, was stabbed in Foot Locker on London's Oxford Street on 26 December 2011.

IKUDAYISI: We are all BLACK! WE ARE ALL BLACK AND YOU ARE ACTING LIKE WE ARE ALL DIVIDED! [...] Why are we always fighting each other? Why can't we just get along? [...] Yemi, you tell me you are free, be free to make the right choice. Don't go down the wrong road. It's your choice, make the right choice. GIVE ME THE KNIFE (79).

Despite this call for solidarity and to let go of deep-seated intra-racial prejudices, the play ultimately presents a conservative view. It implies that black Britain's youth problems stem from a sense of identity disconnect. The solution provided to Yemi is to acknowledge and embrace his Nigerian heritage. However, as Yemi's bad attitude stems from his adoption of Caribbean traits, the play indicates that it is Caribbean culture which is responsible for the negative aspects of black British youths. It also raises questions around authenticity. Agbaje insinuates that one's moral path becomes compromised if one is not true to their roots. By the end of the play, Yemi's transformation has begun and he has started learning Yoruba. In the final scene, Yemi is getting ready for a party. He 'picks up a basketball cap but then decides on the traditional [Nigerian] hat. As he starts to put on his shoes he changes his mind and goes for his trainers' (82). The play ends with him singing: 'Green, white, green on my chest, I'm proud to be a Nigerian!' (82). His traditional hat combined with trainers reveals him as a hybrid but, importantly, one that has been redeemed only through his reclamation of his roots.

### ***Detaining Justice***

During the televised election debate in 2010, David Cameron used an anecdote about a black man he had met named Neal Forde in order to support his argument for greater immigration control. Cameron stated:

I was in Plymouth recently and a 40-year-old black man actually made the point to me. He said, 'I came here when I was six, I served in the Royal Navy for 30 years, I'm incredibly proud of my country, but I'm so



ashamed that we have had this out of control system with people abusing it so badly' (Cameron qtd in Burkeman, 2010).<sup>119</sup>

Cameron carefully used a black man as an example in order to couch his anti-immigration stance as non-racist and to make the point that if even the immigrants are unhappy with immigration then there must be a serious problem. At the same time Cameron's words made an implicit distinction between those immigrants prepared to move to the UK and contribute to society and those that come to take advantage of it. Agbaje's 2009 play *Detaining Justice* anticipates the complex issues of black immigration and belonging in multicultural Britain that Cameron's anecdote raises. In the play, Agbaje examines the themes of immigration and asylum from a predominantly black perspective. In doing so Agbaje holds up for scrutiny notions of multiculturalism and black solidarity in twenty-first century Britain.

The plot centres around a Zimbabwean brother and sister, Grace and Justice, who have sought asylum in Britain. Grace has been granted leave to remain; however, her brother Justice's application has been refused and he is being held in a detention centre. Justice's case is being defended by Cole, a black British lawyer, and Chi Chi, his black British assistant, who both work for the not-for-profit Immigration Advisory Centre. Representing the Home Office seeking to repatriate Justice are Alfred, a black British case-worker, and Ben, a white British enforcement officer. Agbaje explores the broader immigrant experience through three cameo characters who are all illegal immigrants working as cleaners at a train station: Pra, a Ghanaian man who is also the pastor of a church; Abeni, a Nigerian woman and Jovan, a white Eastern European man.

*Detaining Justice* raises questions regarding the reception of immigrants in today's multicultural Britain. Immigration discourses since 11 September 2001 have begun to shift from multiculturalism towards a greater emphasis on integration into the nation. The emphasis placed on foreigners to accept the homeland's values and way of life has become increasingly strong in discourses

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<sup>119</sup> The statement caused much derision in the press as Cameron's statement insinuated that the man, Neal Forde, was ten years old when he served in the Royal Navy. Forde was in fact fifty-one and served in the royal Navy as a marine engineer for six years.

around immigration and national unity. Thus, the debate over multiculturalism (different cultures existing together equally) versus integration (where the values of an overarching national culture and interests are emphasized) has become increasingly visible.

To some extent, these views are held by the pragmatic Cole. His assistant Chi Chi, on the other hand, criticizes the fact that while politicians may speak of the need for immigrants to integrate, the reality is that they receive such a hostile reception that they are unable to even if they wanted to. Chi Chi argues that immigrants who have been granted leave to remain face such discrimination finding a job or in the work place that she does not 'know of *any* asylum seekers or immigrants who feels they can call this place their home' (210). In her opinion, the problem faced by immigrants is not, as Cole suggests, their difficulty to adapt, but the failure of the host society to accept them:

CHI CHI: *But it's not about adapting!* It's about acceptance and as much as this country goes on that they are accepting and how welcoming it is...it is not. If you ask me, the dodgy politicians chat absolute bollocks about Britishness and multi-whatever-you-want-to-call-it. It really gets to me sometimes. People here have this hatred towards asylum seekers, immigrants, and for what? Honestly, I'm telling them to go home to their countries cos I care. This country is bloody racist (211).

However, despite Chi Chi's good intentions, she is revealed to be somewhat naïve and blinded by her Afrocentric politics. She frequently collapses the terms African and immigrant, revealing her commitment to helping immigrants is restricted to black immigrants. Despite not knowing how to pronounce the word 'colonization', she makes nonsensical statements such as: 'Africa was a beautiful nation before the invader went there to mess it up' (215). Her politics are revealed as separatist and rooted in reactionary racism when she is called a 'black cow' and retaliates by calling the person a 'white cunt' (211). When Cole comes to work for the Immigration Advisory Centre, she assumes that, by virtue of him being black, he will be more committed to helping fellow blacks. Cole, however, refuses the positive representation Chi Chi forces upon him. He does not want to be a black activist and hero. Instead his much more pragmatic

approach centres around trying to be the best he can be. His decision to leave the Immigration Advisory Centre raises a question mark over Chi Chi's assumed notions of 'Black' solidarity.

Alfred, the black Home Office case worker, is the foil to Chi Chi. As opposed to trying to secure immigrants' leave to remain in the UK, Alfred's *raison d'être* is to keep them out. Alfred has internalized the rhetoric that there are too many immigrants and that they are a burden on the state:

ALFRED: Watch when your daughter grows up and she needs to look for a job. She is not going to stand a chance because all these damn immigrants would have come here and taken over. If it was up to you, these bloody lawyers and left-wing do-gooders, I bet you'd grant every asylum seeker not just leave to enter but free medical care and housing. Then when your daughter has no job, no house and has to queue for ten hours in the hospital you will only have yourself to blame with our soft approach and equal rights bullshit (220).

Ironically, Alfred reacts to new black immigrants in much the same manner as his grandparents would have been treated.<sup>120</sup> When Grace pleads with him to have pity on her brother, Alfred fails to sympathise, stating, 'I am not an immigrant' (240). Grace's appeal to him on the level of black solidarity fails to resonate:

GRACE: How can you condemn your own? You turn your back on people who need help. We are not animals. They use you to choose the fate of your own and you do not see the problem with that.

ALFRED: I am British.

GRACE: Are you not black? You see you own people suffering and you do nothing to help.

[...]

GRACE: It is only the luck of the draw that you are here. Your family were once foreigners in this land.

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<sup>120</sup> This theme is examined from a different angle in Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Let There Be Love*, about an older Caribbean character who reacts negatively towards the wave of Polish immigrants coming to the UK.

ALFRED: Unlike you and *your* people, my family did not smuggle themselves in a truck to get here. They walked proudly through the borders. They were British citizens from birth. They had the right to enter, work and settle here. They were invited to this country.

GRACE: And what were they invited here to do? Was it not to work in jobs that the immigrants you hate so much do right now?! The invitation was not limited to *your* people. My father was invited to this country to work in 'your' hospitals. But instead of being a follower and going in search of a better world, he had hope our country will get better. He did not want to be a slave in another man's land. He was loyal to his own land' (242).

The exchange highlights the hegemonic nature of nationalism and national identity. The notion that immigration law both restricted non-white entry into Britain as well as contributed to racist discourses has been thoroughly argued:

As part of anti-immigration discourse, the concept of cultural difference between blacks and whites became a primary way to draw distinctions between those populations who were seen as either upholding or threatening the 'English way of life' (Codrington, 2006: 301).

Alfred's words, however, reveal that although the white-only conception of Britishness has been re-defined in the post-war era, contemporary anti-immigration discourse still depends on replicating notions of racial and cultural difference albeit in much more subtle terms. Alfred's words conjure a 'good black' / 'bad black' immigrant scenario. His narrative of legitimacy depicts the Windrush generation with dignity, as people who were not only citizens but who were 'invited' to Britain. African refugees such as Grace (whose asylum claim has been accepted giving her right to remain) are portrayed as criminals and unwanted parasites. This imagery, in conjunction with the divisive '*your* people', contains unmistakable vestiges of imperial discourse which constructed the colonial 'other' as savages and which Alfred has internalized. Agbaje's play insinuates that notions of Britishness have not fundamentally changed – the principles of exclusion based on racial and ethnic differences still exist.

Grace's revelation that her father once worked in Britain in a fairly high-status capacity in comparison to Alfred's more working-class ancestors subtly reveals class politics as a foundational reason behind African / Caribbean hostility. Secondly, Grace insinuates that black belonging in Britain is a matter of historical chance. In the 1950s, both Grace's father and Alfred's parents would have been considered British citizens. Ultimately, the only difference between the two of them is that Grace's father decided to return to Zimbabwe and, between then and now, Britain changed its citizenship and immigration laws. Grace insinuates that not only is Alfred a traitor to his race by not helping her, but that his family were sell-outs and self-serving by leaving the newly independent Caribbean in search of a more secure financial future in Britain. The implication is that her refugee status and politically-motivated departure from Zimbabwe were for more honourable reasons than economic security. Finally, Grace tells Alfred, 'You look down on me like I am so different to you. We are all immigrants in this land! You should not be so blind to the truth' (242). Her point raises the question whether or not blacks can be perceived as indigenous, and echoes a line from Abbensetts' *Sweet Talk*, performed in 1973, when Tony says to his wife Rita, 'How many years you reckon we got to live in this country before they stop callin' us immigrants?' (71).

*Detaining Justice* provides an interesting contrast to earlier Caribbean dramas which explored white racism faced by immigrants in Britain. Racism remains an issue for these new immigrants, as it did in the post-war era. Agbaje indicates through the character of Ben, Alfred's white co-worker at the Home Office, that multiculturalism provides a politically correct veil which masks a persistent fetishization of the 'other'. Initially, Ben appears to have adapted perfectly to life in multicultural Britain: he speaks using black British slang, his favourite food is curried goat and rice, he is married to an Indian woman. However, for Ben multiculturalism is a self-serving ideology that furnishes him with a new vocabulary, access to exotic foods and women, and an excuse to support his adultery. He claims that, 'Monogamy in an English invention' (217). Ben takes advantage of Grace by using his position of power to seduce her into thinking that sleeping with him will help her brother's case. Ben's treatment of Grace highlights the powerlessness of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. Whereas Caribbean immigrants came to the 'mother country' as citizens with

rights, new arrivals from Africa come from the former colonies as non-citizens. Agbaje's play highlights the vulnerability of this sector: Justice's powerlessness at the hands of the guards at the detention centre is harrowingly portrayed when they force him to eat dog food; Pra and Abeni are too scared to stand up against ill-treatment by their employees and the public in case someone makes a complaint against them and they lose their job, reminding us of the Chinese cockle pickers who died in Morecambe Bay in 2004.

The play provides an interesting comparison and contrast with plays by Caribbean immigrants writing in the 1970s, revealing a number of continuities and changes between the black immigrant experiences of the Windrush generation and the more contemporary black African migration to Britain. Like the Caribbean plays of the 1960s and 1970s, *Detaining Justice* portrays immigrants occupying low-paying and marginal positions in society. The train station where Pra, Abeni and Jovan work emphasizes their transitory existence and echoes Matura's *As Time Goes By* in which the characters occupy similar jobs working for the London underground and buses. Similarly, the characters in *Detaining Justice* occupy an in-between position of ambivalent un-belonging: happy in neither home nor host land. Like the Windrush generation, the immigrant characters in the play have come to Britain in search of a better life and, in the case of Grace and Justice, are fleeing persecution. The reality of life in Britain as an immigrant in the twenty-first century is portrayed as equally difficult to the post-war immigrant experience. Menial jobs continue to be the only work available despite the characters occupying positions of status within their communities, such as Pra who is a pastor. The play reveals how immigrants are perceived in the host society to be taking jobs from the indigenous despite the fact they work in positions that Britons feel are below them. As Abeni states: 'They think they know what this country needs. But what they don't know is that they need us' (205).

Yet, in the twenty-first century, the terms have changed. The meeting between the settled and indigenous black community and new black African arrivals complicates notions of blackness, Britishness, and black solidarity. By bringing together histories of black migration, the play highlights the multiple reasons and routes behind black British belonging.

## ***Off the Endz***

In *Off the Endz*, Agbaje tackles the theme of upward mobility and inflated black masculinity. The play is about a couple transitioning from working to middle-class. Twenty-something businessman Kojo and nurse Sharon are expecting a baby and preparing to move off the estate and into a better area with good schools for their unborn son. However, when their old friend David is released from prison he threatens to destroy their fragile future plans. To earn money quickly and easily, David begins to sell drugs. When Kojo loses his job because of the recession and is faced with spiralling debt he is easily co-opted into David's illegal enterprise. However, David's drug peddling encroaches on the local gang's territory run by gun-wielding ten-year-olds. In an attempt to kill David, Kojo is accidentally shot by one of the youths. The play ends with Kojo and Sharon ending their friendship with David and the couple preparing to rebuild their lives.

Agbaje prefaces her play with a quote from Anne Frank: 'Parents can only give good advice or put them on the right paths, but the final forming of a person's character lies in their own hands' (2010: n.p.). In essence, the play is a morality tale with a lesson that anti-Establishment behaviour rooted in blaming society is self-defeating. Self-improvement, Agbaje intones, is ultimately up to the individual and choices s/he makes. The sentiment, conveyed in Frank's quote, is echoed in the final scene when Kojo tells David: 'You're your own worst enemy. You are trapped in a mindset. In a way of thinking that is not helping you. You're the only one holding you back' (75). The moral tone is consistent with *Gone Too Far* and highlights Agbaje's personal connection with the issue of black male wasted potential. In fact, *Gone Too Far* was dedicated to her brother Ladi who spent a year in prison for attempted robbery. Agbaje's description of her brother's actions and belief in his redemption resonates with both male characters in *Off the Endz*.

He didn't work, he didn't go to college. He had that mentality of quick money, easy money is the way out, instead of working hard [...] He has

made some really bad choices. But he's paid for his crime now, and he's got the opportunity to change his life (Agbaje qtd in Costa, 2008).

David and Kojo are two sides of the same coin and represent the either / or scenario of a fundamental life-choice. When Kojo takes the bullet meant for David but survives, it symbolises his resurrection, and an opportunity to start life anew. Agbaje's plays often convey a strong moral lesson indicative of her strong Christian beliefs. She dedicates her plays to God and brings a moral conservativeness to her dramas which can be attributed to her traditional African upbringing.

Agbaje also brings a woman's perspective to a subject in which, because of her brother, she has a vested interest. The note of hope at the end distinguishes *Off the Endz* from plays by black male playwrights that deal with similar issues. Roy Williams and Kwame Kwei-Armah both examine the pressures facing young black men to conform to a world-view which emphasizes hyper-masculinity, 'respect' and anti-Establishment sub-cultural belonging. However, their plays, in particular Williams' *Fallout* and Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen*, end in tragedy and depict a cycle of damaged young men who grow up without fathers or whose fathers are bad role models. In *Off the Endz* however, Kojo survives and his son will grow up with a father.

Agbaje highlights the culture of machismo as the Achilles heel of the urban black male experience where kudos is gained by asserting oneself against the Establishment as well as against women. For example, David critiques Kojo's and Sharon's middle-class aspirations as evidence that they are 'slaves to the system' (76) and accuses Kojo of pandering to and being emasculated by Sharon. The tone in *Off the Endz*, in contrast to Williams' and Kwei-Armah's plays, is not one of anger directed at the failures of the father-figure; rather, it expresses a hope that the men in the play will grow up and make the right decisions. As Billington points out, Agbaje 'resolves the dilemma by pinning her faith, somewhat unfashionably, in the solid virtues of work and family' (2010). As well as bringing a woman's perspective to a theme typically dealt with by male writers, the play is also testament to the multiple identities Agbaje



negotiates and is able to represent as a female black British and second-generation Nigerian British playwright.

Agbaje chooses not to specify the ethnic heritage of any of the characters in *Off the Endz*, beyond them being black British. Despite this important assertion of their indigeneity – whether they are of African or Caribbean descent is of no relevance to the plot – her choice is revealing. Firstly, by not distinguishing their background in the dramatis personae or through the text, but by giving the characters Caribbean-influenced speech, Agbaje reveals the way in which black Caribbean has become normalized as black British. Similarly, the themes of working-class struggle and representation of heightened masculinity are also more associated with the black Caribbean British experience. The point, therefore, is not whether the characters are of African or Caribbean origin but rather that among black Britons, particularly in the working-class, what eventually surfaces is a Caribbean-influenced identity as it has greater status than an African one.

The play's social-realist style with liberal use of patois-inspired black British 'street' vernacular and exploration of black masculinity, crime and violent youth set on a council estate echo a glut of contemporary black British gritty urban dramas. In *Off the Endz*, Agbaje emulates a generic model, pioneered by Caribbean British playwrights and endorsed by mainstream theatres, in particular the Royal Court, that has proven highly successful in the last decade. Agbaje's play, which mirrors this trend in terms of subject-matter and setting, may be located within a black Caribbean British tradition. As a result, the play represents events, people, and issues in a way that has come to be expected from mainstream black British drama. Further, it demonstrates black British as implying a Caribbean background and reiterates the theatrical representation of black Britishness characterized by patois, struggle and youth crime.

Arguably, *Off the Endz* does try to straddle the working-class / middle-class divide by exploring characters attempting to escape the limited possibilities of the 'endz'. Her strong moral tone and hopeful ending provide an alternative to such plays as *Fallout* and *Elmina's Kitchen* which have been criticized for offering no 'way of changing this reality' and being 'more a cry of anger and

despair than a call for change' (Sierz, 2004: 83). Ironically, however, it was the transparent morality of Agbaje's redemptive play which attracted the most criticism. Across the board critics tempered their praise of the play by suggesting it was somewhat 'schematic' (Spencer, 2010), 'sometimes overly direct' (Billington, 2010) and, in the worst-case the reviewer for black cultural website 'Catch a Vibe' found the play 'had more in common with a TIE production on the dangers of drug dealing and mixing with the wrong crowd than an engaging piece of drama' (K. Williams, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

Agbaje's ability to depict black British culture in its ethnic complexity is what distinguishes her voice. Her representation of African and Caribbean British characters of different generations and the exploration of issues which emerge between Britain's African and Caribbean black population is a counter to the way in which black Caribbean playwrights depict both African characters as well as how they thematize the conflict and communion between Africans and Caribbeans in Britain. As a woman, Agbaje also brings a fresh perspective to the body of plays which depict the black male urban experience.

On one level, Agbaje's plays force a re-examination of the term 'black' beyond its automatic association with a dominant Caribbean identity. Her plays testify to the diversity of the black experience in Britain and the multiple and complex positions black Briton's occupy. However, her plays, in their style and setting, also testify to the dominance of Caribbean British culture. Her plays both describe its hold on the black British urban experience while at the same time exemplify its aesthetic influence on black British playwriting itself.

# **Black British Theatre: A Transnational Perspective**

Volume 2 of 2

Submitted by Michael Christopher Pearce, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Drama, January 2013.

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(Signature) .....

## Chapter 3: Africa

My voice has been created by two societies: Nigeria and Britain. For me that is an inescapable fact whatever politics of writing I might claim. As people of the Diaspora we inhabit diverse worlds: home communities back home, home communities within the host nation and relationships with other Diaspora communities. We respond to the politics of the society we are in. As individuals we engage with these societies differently. I'm interested in the place of Africans and Africans in the Diaspora in the world [...] What I find is that Africa has stamped its mark all over the world in many different guises. If I can lend my voice to telling these stories, then I've not done too badly as a writer.

Oladipo Agboluaje (qtd in 2008).

The following discussion is limited to theatre by Anglophone black Africans of sub-Saharan origin who have lived (both temporarily or permanently), or who were born in Britain since the post-war period. The chapter provides a brief discussion of African British theatre in the post-war period up until the end of the 1980s in order to provide a historical context for the emergence of a sustained and more visible African British theatre scene since the 1990s. The chapter then examines in closer detail the contribution of African origin practitioners, particularly playwrights, to black British theatre since the 1990s. The concept of diaspora is used as a framework for the discussion which explores how African British playwrights engage with Africa as well as with the wider African diaspora. The chapter ends with analyses of work by Nigerian British performance poet and playwright, Inua Ellams, and black British (of Caribbean origin) playwright Debbie Tucker Green.

### **The African Diaspora**

The black African population in Britain can be subdivided into specific diaspora communities according to their respective countries of origin (Nigerian diaspora, Zimbabwean diaspora etc). In such cases, diaspora is used in a narrow sense to describe the specific bonds of affiliation – material and psychic – that immigrants and their descendants have with their homelands, and the ways in which they negotiate their experience of the hostland.

As Griffin (2003) has highlighted in her discussion of second-generation black and Asian British women writers, diaspora is a helpful trope to discuss how the cultural and geographic in-betweenness experienced by immigrants and their children finds theatrical representation. African British dramas since the 1990s echo earlier plays by Caribbean-origin writers who treated similar themes of living between home and host land and employed approaches that melded the two cultures.

The same creolizing / hybrid effects highlighted in the previous chapter emerge in contemporary African British plays which also register the creation of new cultural forms. However, there are a number of circumstances which have shaped the African British experience in different ways from the earlier

migration of African-Caribbeans in the 1950s and Africans prior to 1990s. African-Caribbean immigration followed a linear pattern. In contrast, waves of arrivals from different African countries, and sometimes the same country, have occurred at different times. In terms of African British theatre, this has given rise to a situation whereby practitioners of different generations emerge at the same time. An interesting aspect of the legacy of temporary black African students / workers in Britain who returned to their homelands, is that the children they had while living in England have, as British citizens, been able to return to Britain. Examples include British Nigerian playwright Oladipo Agboluaje, British Nigerian playwright and director Femi Elufowoju Jr., and British Tanzanian / Zimbabwean Lucian Msamati, who were all born in England but grew up in Africa and returned to England as adults. Since the 1990s, the coming of age of a 1.5-generation whose engagement with themes of being African and British have brought refreshing perspectives to the Britishness debate.

The time at which migration occurs also impacts on the nature of the immigrant experience. Given the relative newness of a substantial African presence in Britain comprising a large African-born and young second-generation population, African Britons retain close ties to the homeland.<sup>121</sup> Changes in transport and communication technologies have facilitated greater movement and connections between people in the home and host countries, rendering migration in the 1990s less decisive than it was in the 1950s. Contemporary African British dramas reveal less of an insistence upon British belonging, or the pain of un-belonging, than do plays by Caribbean-origin dramatists writing in the latter half of the twentieth century. Instead, the idiosyncratic pleasures of occupying dual or multiple 'diasporic' belongings are increasingly articulated.

However, although the concept of diaspora draws attention to the way in which national boundaries are increasingly becoming eroded and is used as a trope to describe the subject's occupancy of multiple identities, diasporas are also paradoxically understood in terms of distinct communities. As Brubaker

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<sup>121</sup> By the time of the 2001 Census, the black Caribbean population included second- and third-generation descendants of the original migrants. 58 per cent of the black Caribbean population (totalling approx. 566,000 people) had been born in the UK and 86 per cent of the population identified as British. Of the black African population (totalling approx. 485,000 people), however, only 34 per cent were born in the UK and only 53 per cent identified themselves as British (Connolly & White, 2006: 4).

highlights, this notion of 'boundary-erosion' is at odds with diaspora as a concept which insists upon 'boundary maintenance' (2005: 6). Thus, '[d]iaspora can be seen as an *alternative* to the essentialization of belonging; but it can also represent a non-territorial *form* of essentialized belonging' (12). This latter point finds articulation in the notion of the African diaspora.

The term 'African Diaspora' and the beginning of its widespread usage is dated back to 1965 when George Shepperson presented his paper *The African Abroad or the African Diaspora* at the International Congress of African Historians at University College, Dar es Salam in Tanzania (Butler, 2010: 24; Manning, 2009: 2-3). Shepperson, basing his definition of the African diaspora on the classical model of the Jewish dispersion following the Babylonian Exile in 586 BC, defined traumatic dispersal (forced removal in the case of slavery and the flight from persecution under colonialism) and the sense of a shared original homeland as key characteristics of the African diaspora's formation (1968: 152). Although the term entered African / Black (African diaspora and Black diaspora are often used interchangeably) discourses in the mid-twentieth century, the concept it conveys, as Shepperson acknowledges, has a long history that can be traced back to late nineteenth and early twentieth century Pan-African and African nationalist political ideology (166-7).<sup>122</sup> Indeed, Shepperson's conceptualization of the African diaspora came at a time of intense political struggle for blacks in Africa, Europe and the Americas and is clearly rooted in imperatives of transnational black solidarity.

The long established bonds between continental Africans and blacks in the diaspora have fostered complex relationships and diasporic communities based on a sense of shared culture, history and politics (Butler, 2010). As this thesis has argued, since the post-war, black British theatre has reflected the black experience of marginalization and racism in Britain and the resultant black British identification with other black diasporic cultures and political discourses. The idea of Africa as the ancestral homeland and its hold on the imaginary has also emerged in this discussion of black British theatre. However, it has been argued that its representation is mediated by black American influences.

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<sup>122</sup> For discussions of the term diaspora and its application in an African context, see Kilson and Rotberg (Eds.) (1976), Harris (Ed.) (1982), and Edwards (2004).

Traditionally, slavery has occupied a preeminent place in African diasporic discourses.<sup>123</sup> However, discussing black British cultural production in terms of a shared history of slavery and imperialism and an experience of racism in the homeland becomes increasingly problematic in the light of new African arrivals since the 1990s.

Black British political unity in the face of white racism and the search for, and implementation of, African-origin cultural practices as a counter to European ones have informed the way black British theatre has positioned itself and how it has been understood against the wider backdrop of what Butler refers to as 'race logic' that connects 'Africa and its descendants' (2010: 23). The new African arrivals and their children complicate these assumptions. One of the issues that emerges in conceptualizing the African diaspora is that its 'members' do not all share a common reason for dispersal, and the origin and time of dispersal and place of settlement vary enormously. The difference between a diaspora formed by slavery (the black Caribbean population), colonization (immediate post-war African and Caribbean immigrants) and economic and political instability under majority black governments (African immigrants since the 1960s) and the meeting of these different diasporas who nevertheless find themselves housed under the same rubric raises interesting tensions.

The contemporary migration of Africans to Britain cannot be attributed to colonialism or discussed simplistically in relation to the colonial experience. Many contemporary African immigrants come to Britain with an experience not of racial but of class-based and ethnic oppression, and with no memory of the colonial experience. Britain is also a more tolerant society. As a result, imperatives for black solidarity have waned. If anything, the differences between those from Africa and the Caribbean have become increasingly highlighted, as the increase in the number of plays which explore intra-racial conflict attest.

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<sup>123</sup> For a critique of how the conceptualization of the African diaspora has been dominated by African American Atlantic discourses with specific reference to Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, see Zeleza (2005). For a discussion of the complexities of what constitutes the African diaspora and the implications this has upon the field of African diaspora studies, see Zeleza (2008).



New African arrivals since the 1990s, and their children who reached adulthood in the early 2000s, confront the established black population in Britain. This sector has its own history of race and class-based oppression that dates back to the 1950s and 1960s, and which has resulted in the formation of specific modes of social and cultural expression. Although many Africans come from former British colonies, they have not, on the whole, arrived as citizens like the African Caribbean immigrants of the 1950s. For these later African arrivals, Britain is not viewed as the 'motherland' and, regardless of the hostile reception many African Caribbean immigrants received, African immigrants have not had the same automatic rights citizenship entails. Furthermore, African migration since the 1990s has brought a generation of Africans to Britain who come from a postcolonial, third-world experience. It is one that is decidedly different from the black British experience of being an ethnic minority, but equally different from having grown up with the economic and political benefits of first-world Britain.

Using diaspora as a framework to discuss black British theatre, therefore, raises questions of how African British blacks position themselves in relation to Caribbean British blacks and black Britishness in general, how this finds theatrical representation and to what degree an aesthetics and politics of solidarity emerges. The idea of the African or Black diaspora as a collective experience prompts the inevitable question – whose Blackness or Africanness? In other words, while blackness has been used to challenge assumptions at the heart of Britishness and British theatre, how do these new arrivals challenge assumptions at the heart of black Britishness and black British theatre? How can this theatre articulate a collective yet differentiated experience or, as Richards puts it, a central issue of diaspora: 'how to build affective bonds within the context of historical differences' (2010: 201).

### **African British Theatre Pioneers: 1950s – 1980s**

Migration trends from Africa to Britain have shaped black British theatre in specific ways. The relative smallness in size of a black African population between the 1950s and 1990s has impacted on the demand for African theatre. Interest in African theatre has also been impacted on by the international profile

of certain African countries. In line with the trend for students to return to their homelands, key African practitioners (especially playwrights) based in Britain have also re-located to their respective homelands.

Prior to the 1990s there have been a number of African theatre practitioners living temporarily in Britain. Nigerian Wole Soyinka came to the UK to study at Leeds University in 1954, and worked as a play reader for the Royal Court after completing his degree. Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* (published 1963) premiered as part of the University of London Drama Festival in 1958. In 1959, *The Invention* (published 2005), about apartheid in South Africa, was produced as part of the Royal Court's 'Sunday nights without décor' initiatives for new writers.<sup>124</sup> Soyinka returned to Nigeria in anticipation of independence in 1960. Yulissa (Pat) Amadu Maddy, a Sierra Leonean director and writer, trained at Rose Bruford from 1962 to 1964. In the early 1970s, Maddy was in charge of drama at the Keskidee Centre in London and directed plays for Frank Cousins' Dark and Light Theatre, bringing to the repertoire 'a distinct African bent' (Chambers, 2011: 142). Maddy has led a rootless life, living in exile from his native Sierra Leone. He has spent periods in Africa, Europe and the USA.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> A vociferous critic of the Nigerian government during the civil war, Soyinka was imprisoned in 1967-9. Soyinka lived again in the UK during a period of self-imposed exile between 1973 and 1974, where he was a Fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge, during which time he wrote *Death and the King's Horsemen* (1976, Nigeria; published 1975). Productions of Soyinka's plays in the UK include the world premiere of *The Road* (1965, Theatre Royal Stratford East; published 1965); *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1960, Nigeria; published 1963) in 1965/6 in Cambridge and Hampstead; *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959, Nigeria; published 1963) in 1966 at the Royal Court, directed by Athol Fugard; *The Strong Breed* (1964, Nigeria; published 1963) in 1968 at the Mercury Theatre, directed by Lionel Ngakane; the world premiere of *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973, RNT; published 1973); *Before the Blackout* (1965, Nigeria; published 1965) in 1981 in Leeds; the world premiere of *The Beatification of Area boy: A Lagosian Kaleidoscope* (1995, West Yorkshire Playhouse; published 1995); and *Death and the King's Horseman*, which received its UK premiere in Manchester in 1990 and was staged again at the National Theatre in 2009.

<sup>125</sup> Maddy's nomadic life makes a chronology of his work difficult. African plays directed by Maddy in Britain include his own play *Gbana-Bendu* (published 1971) and Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*, both in 1973 for Frank Cousins' Dark and Light company (Chambers, 2011: 142); *A Play* (1967, Uganda; published 1968), by Ugandan Robert Serumaga, at the Keskidee Centre in 1977; and Ethiopian Alem Mezgebe's *Pulse* (published 1981) in 1979 at the Edinburgh Festival, which won a Fringe First. Maddy has also set up his theatre company, Gbakanda Afrikan Tiata (which he had originally established in Sierra Leone in the 1960s) twice in the UK: first in London in the 1970s, and then in Chapelton, Leeds, in the 1980s. People involved with Gbakanda Afrikan Tiata in the 1970s include Nigerian-born actor Taiwo Ajai-Lycett, who starred in Yemi Ajibade's *Parcel Post* at the Royal Court in 1976, and Gambian-born actor and activist Louis Mahoney, who went on to form the Black Theatre Workshop (BTW) in 1976 with journalist Mike Phillips. BTW's first show was a double bill with Bode Sowande's *Bar Beach Prelude* (1976, Collegiate / Bloomsbury Theatre; unpublished) and Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Transistor Radio* (1964, Nigeria; published 1989) (Chambers, 2011: 232). In the 1980s, Maddy's

A number of South African theatre practitioners lived in Britain in exile from the apartheid regime (1948-1991). South African playwrights living in the UK during this period include Alfred Hutchinson, whose play *The Rain Killers* was published in 1964; Lewis Nkosi, whose *Rhythm of Violence* (1961, USA; published 1964) premiered in the UK in 1973, and *Malcolm* (unpublished) received its world premiere in 1970 at the ICA; Arthur (John) Maimane, whose play *The Prosecution* (unpublished) was staged in 1972 at the Bush Theatre (as a double bill with Nkosi's *Virgin Malcolm Look Not So Pale* (unpublished) – a revised version of *Malcolm*); and John Matshikiza (son of Todd Matshikiza who composed the music for *King Kong*), whose plays staged in the UK include *Prophets in the Black Sky* (1985, Drill Hall, London; published 1985), *In the Paddington Style* (1987, Soho Poly; unpublished 1987), and *The King's Hunch* (1992, ICA London; unpublished). Plays by these South Africans tended to reflect the exilic status of their authors: they were often homeward-looking in theme and tended not to engage with the black experience in Britain.

African theatre practitioners in the UK who have engaged more directly with being black in Britain include Nigerian Yemi Ajibade and South African Alton Kumalo. Ajibade arrived in the UK in the 1960s and has since worked extensively in British theatre as an actor, director and playwright. Ajibade was a founding member of the short-lived Pan African Players, for which he directed *Wind versus Polygamy* (1966, World Festival of Negro Arts Dakar, Senegal; unpublished 1966), an adaptation of the 1964 novel of the same name by Black Power activist Obi Egbuna. The production was broadcast on BBC TV in 1968, 1970, and 1971 (Chambers, 2011: 230). Ajibade's plays staged in Britain include *Parcel Post* (1976, Royal Court; published 2001), about a bride who travels from Nigeria to London to meet her future husband for the first time; *Fingers Only* (1982, The Factory; published 2001), about a gang of pickpockets in Lagos during World War II - originally titled *Lagos, Yes Lagos*, and first broadcast on radio in 1971 by the BBC African Service; *Waiting for Hannibal* (1986, Drill Hall; unpublished 1986), about Carthage's attempts to repel the Romans in 204 B.C.; and *A Long Way From Home* (1991, Tricycle; unpublished

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company provided the Sierra Leonean Patrice Naiambana with his first opportunity to work in theatre in the UK.

1991). *A Long Way From Home* is set in 1958 in a Nigerian nightclub in Soho. The play, about an African 'Mafioso' who provides false papers to illegal West African immigrants, provides a portrait of the issues faced by African immigrants at the time. It depicts Africans living on the periphery of society, inter-immigrant relationships, particularly between West Africans and West Indians, and the ways in which these new arrivals navigate their newly adopted homeland. Staged in 1991 by a first-generation African immigrant who has been living in Britain since the 1960s, the play provides a bridge between the experience of post-war first-generation African Britons and the later first-generation who emerged in the 1990s.

Alton Kumalo came to the UK in 1961 as a member of the cast of the South African musical *King Kong*. He studied at Rose Bruford and then joined the RSC for a period as an actor. In 1972, Kumalo co-founded Temba Theatre Company with Trinidadian Oscar James. James, however, went on to pursue a career as an actor and Kumalo ran the company as its artistic director. Temba, which means 'hope' in Zulu, was a small-scale touring company and, in 1974, became the first black theatre company in the UK to secure an annual subsidy from the Arts Council.<sup>126</sup>

Temba produced a number of plays by Kumalo, such as the company's inaugural production *Temba* (1972, Young Vic; unpublished), and plays by fellow South Africans, such as Lewis Nkosi and Athol Fugard. However, the company was never dedicated to representing only the African experience. Under Kumalo, Temba produced plays about the Caribbean British experience, such as Jimi Rand's *Sherry and Wine* and Mustapha Matura's *Black Slaves, White Chains*; plays by white British writers, such as Richard Drain's *Caliban*

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<sup>126</sup> During the 1960s, attempts were made at African theatre companies, such as the multiracial Ijinle Theatre Company (Ijinle is a Yoruba word meaning 'deep'). Founded by Athol Fugard and a group of African London-based actors, Ijinle received funding from the Arts Council and, along with the Negro Theatre Workshop, was the only other company producing black plays in Britain to receive funding support from the Arts Council (Chambers, 2011: 228-9). However, Ijinle was short-lived and disbanded when Fugard returned to South Africa. In 1966 the company presented Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* together with Fugard's *Blood Knot* (1961, South Africa; published 1963) at the Hampstead Theatre Club and Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* at the Royal Court. In 1967, for the Leicester University Commonwealth Arts Festival, Ijinle presented Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's *The Raft* (1964, Nigeria; published 1964) and Lindsay Barrett's ('Eseoghene') *Jump Kookoo Makka* (Chambers, 2011: 122-3).

*Lives* and Barrie Keeffe's *Black Lear*, and works by African Americans, such as LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman* and Edgar White's *The Boot Dance*.

British-born Alby James (of Jamaican parentage) replaced Kumalo as artistic director in 1984. Under James, the company presented two South African plays: a revival of Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema, and Barney Simon's *Woza Albert!* (1981, South Africa; published 1983) in 1986; and Mfundu Vundla's *A Visitor to the Veldt* (1987, USA; unpublished) in 1988. However, on the whole, the repertoire focused on new plays by British-born black writers of Caribbean descent and classics which used integrated casting, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, set in nineteenth-century Cuba with black Montagues and white Capulets, and Ibsen's *Ghosts*. The company folded in 1992 after losing its Arts Council funding.

Accompanying the second-generation playwrights of Caribbean-origin who emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s, were a number of mixed-race playwrights who were part African origin such as Tunde Ikoli, Jackie Kay and Maria Oshodi. Both Ikoli and Kay were estranged from their African parent. Ikoli, born in London to a Cornish mother and a Nigerian father in 1955, lived in care from the age of three to thirteen. Kay, born in 1961 to a white Scottish mother and Nigerian father, was raised by white Scottish adoptive parents. In their own ways, both writers draw inspiration from the black American experience in their examination of black / mixed-race Britishness; Kay, through the influence of Ntozake Shange of her themes and form, and Ikoli through his exploration of the black urban experience. The only play Ikoli has written which deals with his African roots directly is *Lower Depths: An East End Story* (1986, Tricycle, unpublished 1986). The play, an adaptation of Maxim Gorky's *Lower Depths* (1902), is set in 1950s East London in a rooming house run by a Nigerian man and his West Indian wife.

The most direct confrontation with African themes by a second-generation playwright in the 1980s emerges in London-born mixed-race (Nigerian father) Maria Oshodi's *The S Bend* (1986, Royal Court as part of a young writer's festival; published 1986). *The S Bend* explores cultural differences between Africans and Caribbeans in Britain. The protagonist, Fola, is discouraged by her

mother from associating with African Caribbeans who she sees as under-achievers and bad influences. Although Fola's friend Claudette is of Caribbean origin, Fola acknowledges key cultural differences. She describes the differences between Africans and Caribbeans in one scene:

FOLA: A high educational value in the African, and I guess a high material value in the West Indian, coupled with a lack of cultural identity (33).

Fola also holds the opinion that there is a power dynamic involved in friendships between Africans and African Caribbeans. In her opinion, in order for such relationships to work, one culture must submit to the other:

FOLA: [...] one of the two has to make a sacrifice – sell out – and too often, in most cases, it's the African half [...] because African kids feel they are in the minority amongst blacks. Also there is a fear of being ridiculed by the majority of the black West Indian kids in this country (34).

In the end, determined to hold onto her African cultural identity and values, Fola decides to return to Nigeria in order to gain a stronger sense of self-understanding, and to avoid 'the pressure of conflicting cultures' (59) and 'a life torn by my submission to superficial cultural groups' (60). Oshodi's play is an important early representation of the African British experience and pre-empted the theme of intra-racial conflict that emerges more strongly in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>127</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, the African Caribbean voice and the urban black British experience dominated black British theatre. This is reflected in the programming of the main black theatre companies as much as it is in the subject matter of black British plays. Companies, such as Black Theatre Co-

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<sup>127</sup> Oshodi's later plays that depict the black experience in Britain do not focus on ethnicity. *From Choices to Chocolate* (1986, Riverside Studios; unpublished) examines urban youth; *Blood, Sweat and Fears* (1988, Battersea Arts Centre; published 1989), about sickle cell anaemia, examines the intersection of race and disease; and *Here Comes a Candle* (1989, Oval House; unpublished), about a well-off black businesswoman and her black northern nanny, explores class. Oshodi, who was born with glaucoma, gradually lost her sight. Her later works have focused on blindness, such as *Hound* (1992, Oval House; published 2002), about the relationship between blind people and their guide dogs.

operative / Nitro (1978) and Talawa (1985), sought to provide a repertoire which celebrated diverse black experiences; however, their productions reflected the heritage of the mainly Caribbean British management.<sup>128</sup> The 1980s witnessed, therefore, a shift towards the consolidation of the Caribbean voice in black British theatre to which African theatre became more of an appendix than a vital part.

In Femi Euba's article about African theatre in London, written while an actor in the UK during the 1960s, he highlights the issues faced when mounting African plays in the UK.<sup>129</sup> The article not only notes the competition between African and Caribbean actors for the small number of black parts on offer, but also the lack of professionally trained African actors which led to the need to cast African plays using both African and Caribbean performers. The result, Euba highlights, is work in which meaning becomes compromised. Commenting on the casting of Soyinka's *The Road* (1965, Theatre Royal Stratford East; published 1965) Euba writes:

[...] with a tentative and mixed company of West Indian and African actors, the powerful play lacked the authentic feeling. The varying style of speech and cultural mannerisms sometimes made nonsense of meaning and dialogue. But then, one can only go so far in arguing for authenticity, especially with an audience which for the most part does not know what is authentic and what is not (Euba, 1969: 63).

For Euba, the combination of trained actors and high-quality material was a necessity if African theatre was to gain the respect of the British public. Equally important was the creation of African theatre companies to allow the African actor in England an appropriate space in which 'to express his art within an

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<sup>128</sup> To date, Nitro / BTC has only produced three plays by Africans: Margaret Busby's *An African Cargo* in 2007 at the Greenwich Theatre, and Yemi Ajibade's *Waiting for Hannibal* and *Fingers Only*. Likewise, Talawa has produced only three African plays: Ola Rotimi's *The God's are not to Blame* in 1989, Soyinka's *The Road* in 1992, and Biyi Bandele's *Resurrections in the Season of the Longest Drought* in 1994. As a government subsidised company whose mission it is to represent black British culture, this gaping hole in Talawa's repertoire is problematic.

<sup>129</sup> Euba was born in Nigeria and is an actor, director, playwright, and academic. In Nigeria, he worked with Soyinka before moving to the UK to study acting at Rose Bruford. In London, he worked as a professional actor with, among others, Fugard's Ijinle company. Euba has worked at universities in Nigeria and the USA. His plays have been performed in Nigeria, the USA, and on BBC radio. For information on his life, works, and approach, see Osagie (1998).

African idiom' (1969: 62). This required people with a knowledge of African culture to make the theatre, but also an audience for whom such cultural elisions would be untenable. Although such irregularities may have been imperceptible to a general British audience and, therefore, not have interfered with the affect of the production, today such practices (which still persist) become increasingly untenable in a cosmopolitan and globalized society.<sup>130</sup> Compare and contrast Euba, writing in 1965, with Femi Elufowoju Jr., the artistic director of the African British theatre company Tiata Fahodzi, speaking in 2005 about his staging of Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame* at the Arcola:

You get African audiences coming along to check for authenticity. I must adhere to the African theatre tradition and to the writer's intentions [...] All my knowledge of African theatre tradition has gone into this play. It is not missing a beat (Elufowoju Jr. qtd in Cripps, 2005).

Since the 1990s, two important shifts have occurred, as Elufowoju Jr.'s words quoted above show: The emergence of a critical mass of African and British-born practitioners, such as Elufowoju Jr., who have a command of specific African cultural practices; and the presence of an audience fully aware of 'what is authentic and what is not' (Euba, 1969: 62).

### **African British Theatre since the 1990s**

Since the 1990s, the African voice in British theatre has emerged more strongly in line with a community large enough to sustain it. There has also been an increase in the capacity of African artists in Britain which has led to a surge in theatre making by Africans. It was around the 1990s that there emerged educators, playwrights, choreographers, musicians, directors and actors (as well as practitioners who combined these skills) which no doubt played a part in allowing African theatre to gain a stronger foothold in the UK.

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<sup>130</sup> 'Authentic' is a troublesome word as it is tied to notions of essentialism. The term 'accuracy', however, has less 'fixed' connotations and allows the possibility of heterogeneity while demanding a considered and precise representation. The need for accuracy, especially if working in a 'realistic' mode, is important if a culture is to be respected. The lack of accuracy in productions that depend on a realistic approach also raises the issue of homogenization, or that all black people are the same.



Given that Nigerians form the largest population in the UK, followed by Ghanaians, Somalis, Zimbabweans, Ugandans, Sierra Leoneans, and Kenyans, it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of African theatre practitioners in Britain are Nigerian or of Nigerian origin. Neither is it surprising, with over three-quarters of the African population residing in the London area, that most African theatre activity is located there. However, numerical representation does not explain dramatic output alone: where an individual is migrating from and why are important determining factors. The African immigrant population includes economic migrants (both semi and skilled workers), refugees / asylum seekers and students, not to mention a regionally and ethnically diverse demographic (Bosveld & Connolly, 2006: 35). In particular, political instability has driven migration since the 1990s. Nigerian dictatorship in the 1990s, Sierra Leone's brutal Civil War (1991-2002) and Zimbabwe's Mugabe regime since 2000 have all captured news headlines. With such events in the public's consciousness, plays dealing with these issues are more readily staged by British theatres.<sup>131</sup>

The economic prosperity, political stability and time of transition to independence of various African countries have also shaped African British theatre in important ways. Nigeria may have an established tradition of theatre, but it also has a relatively strong educational infrastructure which has nurtured a number of practitioners now living in Britain. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, stability and prosperity after independence in 1980 up until the mid-1990s has meant that a number of economic migrants working in Britain as theatre practitioners have had solid educations and exposure to theatre making. The existence of an established literary / theatre tradition (by Western standards) and educational

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<sup>131</sup> The negative aspects of Africa – corruption, dictatorship, war, famine, disease – dominate representations of Africa on the mainstream British stage. Examples in the 2000s include Out of Joint's production of American J. T Rogers' *The Overwhelming* (2006, National Theatre; published 2006), about the Rwandan genocide; Dominic Cook's staging of Shakespeare's *Pericles* for the RSC (2006, the Swan, Stratford-upon-Avon), also set in an un-named war-torn African country; David Farr's staging of Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (2008, Lyric Hammersmith), set in an un-named African state; Matt Charman's *The Observer* (2009, National Theatre; published 2009), about Western observers in a fictional West African country during elections; Moira Buffini's *Welcome to Thebes* (2010, National Theatre; published 2010), which explores a post-war African state's relationship with the West; and Out of Joint's production of Stella Feehily's *Bang Bang Bang* (2011, Octagon, Bolton and tour; published 2011), about NGO workers in the DRC.

infrastructure in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe may account for the fact that while theatre practitioners from these countries are represented, there is very little, if any, contribution from Kenya, Sierra Leone, Somalia, or Uganda.

The African British theatre scene comprises a fairly small community which has given rise to much cross-over between artists. Ghanaian George Dzikunu formed Adzido Pan-African Dance Ensemble in 1984. The company received regular funding from ACE from 1991-2004. Nigerian Rufus Orisayomi, who moved to the UK in 1988, established Ritual Theatre Arts (RTA) in London to promote African arts in education. Orisayomi's most memorable play, *Akogun* (1997, Hackney Empire; unpublished 1997), was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. *Akogun* was set in fifteenth-century Yorubaland and translated into pidgin English, incorporating dance, music and Yoruba proverbs. Orisayomi's contribution to African theatre in Britain was celebrated after his death in a tribute concert *A Celebration of an African Theatre Pioneer* held at the Arcola Theatre in London on 23 May 2010 and directed by Femi Elufowoju Jr., founder of the African British theatre company Tiata Fahodzi.

The Nigerian choreographer, Peter Badejo OBE, who moved to the UK in the late 1980s (and was a cast member of *Akogun*), established his own African dance company called Badejo Arts. As a choreographer and movement consultant, Badejo has worked on a wide range of projects, including Talawa's staging of *The God's Are Not To Blame* in 1989; *Tickets and Ties* in 1997, *Bonded* in 1999 and *Makinde* in 2000 for Tiata Fahodzi; and *Death and the King's Horsemen*, staged at the National Theatre in 2009.

In music, British-born of Nigerian parents Juwon Ogungbe has composed for a number of African British productions. Ogungbe, who was educated in Britain and Nigeria, has a sound understanding of traditional Nigerian music as well as Western, especially Classical music. His knowledge of African and Western genres has proved a vital skill for the African British theatrical community. Ogungbe has composed music to accompany plays by, among others, Nigerian British Biyi Bandele-Thomas (*Marching for Fausa*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Yerma*, *Oroonoko*); Nigerian / British / American theatre company Collective Artistes

(*Sense of Belonging*, *Trojan Women – Women of Owu*, *The Lion and the Jewel*, *The African Company Presents Richard III*); Mojisola Adebayo (*Moj of the Antarctic*, *Muhammad Ali and Me*) and independent musical theatre productions such as Fraser Grace's *Who killed Mr Drum* (2005, Riverside Studios; published 2005).

Attempts to create a specifically African British theatre company emerged in the early 1990s. Patrice Naiambana (Sierra Leone), Jude Akuwudike (Nigeria) and Femi Elufowoju Jr. (British-born and raised in Nigeria), three actors in the cast of Bandele's *Marching for Fausa* (1993, Royal Court; published 1993), established a short-lived collective named Fraudsters Inc. Their first (and only) production *It's Good to Talk* (unpublished) was commissioned by Philip Hedley as part of the Theatre Royal Stratford East's black and Asian revue initiative.<sup>132</sup> The production explored life in Britain from an African perspective through anecdotal vignettes blending music, rap and physical theatre. As Ogungbe noted, it was an early attempt to create in the UK 'a form of accessible African-based popular theatre' (Ogungbe, n.d).

This company of new first-generation Africans in Britain aimed:

'to explore the various stereotypical images of Africans as perceived by others in the UK today' and 'to debunk these myths for our own people and for the wider public' (Elufowoju Jr.). To this, Naiambana added that the collaboration sought to 'monitor [...] the identity of an African theatre in migration (Ogungbe, n.d).

The comments raise three important issues: the persistent feeling by Africans of the need to redress issues of negative representation, the need to bring to the stage the specific voice of the African British experience, and an awareness of the diasporic skills they were bringing to British theatre and its implications for African and British theatre. Of the trio, Elufowoju Jr. would explore these issues more fully through the creation of African British theatre company Tiata Fahodzi.

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<sup>132</sup> The black and Asian revues at the Theatre Royal Stratford East were introduced by the then artistic director Philip Hedley in the early 1990s. The Posse and The Bibi Crew were two of the most successful black comedy groups to emerge from this initiative.

## Tiata Fahodzi

Elufowoju Jr., who was born in the UK but educated in Nigeria, returned to England to study acting at Rose Bruford. After completing his studies he formed the theatre company Tiata Fahodzi in 1997.

Tiata Fahodzi (meaning 'theatre of the emancipated' in a mixture of Nigerian Yoruba and Ghanaian Twi) was founded in 1997 and receives regular funding from ACE as a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO). Under Elufowoju Jr. (1997-2010) the company presented, on average, one full production a year accompanied by *Tiata Delights* (established in 2004), an annual festival of staged readings showcasing new writing.<sup>133</sup> Elufowoju Jr.'s experience of growing up in the UK and Nigeria fostered a keen diasporic sensibility which he has brought to bear on the company. The repertoire has, on the whole, balanced plays either set entirely in Nigeria or which depict the West African British experience. In terms of style, the company seeks to find a theatrical idiom through which to 'explore the workings of our African theatre tradition and find its compatibility with the British stage' (Elufowoju Jr. qtd in Cripps, 2005).

The company's inaugural production *Tickets and Ties* (1997, Theatre Royal Stratford East; unpublished 1997) was a continuation of *It's Good to Talk* which Elufowoju Jr. had developed as a member of Fraudsters Inc. *Tickets and Ties* was directed by Elufowoju Jr. and co-written by himself and Sesan Ogunledun. The play featured a cast of West African and British actors. Following the premise of *It's Good to Talk*, *Tickets and Ties* presented the highs and lows of the West African experience in London through a series of vignettes and characters from all walks of life. The company's second production *Booked!* (1998, Oval House; unpublished) continued this mode of enquiry into the West

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<sup>133</sup> *Tiata Delights* has nurtured upcoming playwrights who have gone on to have their work produced, including Levi David Addai's *Oxford Street* (Royal Court), Lucian Msamati's *Zuva Crumbling* (Lyric Hammersmith), Lizzy Dijeh's *High Life* (Oval House), and Michael Bhim's *Pure Gold* (Soho Theatre). The festival has showcased work from a range of African (origin) writers from countries, including Mauritius, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, and Ethiopia.

African immigrant experience; however, it was more experimental in its stylistic approach. The piece, devised by Elufowoju Jr. and the company, fused realism with more stylized performance traditions of mime and storytelling and explored attempts by African immigrants to assimilate into the British way of life. *Booked!* was followed by *Bonded* (1999, Oval House and national tour; unpublished 1999) written by Sesan Ogunledun and directed by Elufowoju Jr. The production, set between Nigeria and the UK over a period from the 1980s to late 1990s, is a surreal piece involving two best friends, one of which is abducted and taken to England. Although these productions appealed to a West African immigrant audience, the company thus far, receiving very little press attention, had failed to really register on the British theatre scene.

From 2000, Tiata Fahodzi began to broaden its scope in terms of the scale of its productions, its audience appeal, and thematic exploration. Moving away from the more narrow immigrant-centric dramas, the company produced plays with a broader appeal, such as *Makinde* (2000 Oval House Theatre and national tour; unpublished 2000), inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and written by Elufowoju Jr.; Adewale Ajadi's *Abyssinia* (2001 and national tour; unpublished 2001), about the true story of Prince Alemayehu of Ethiopia and his relationship with Queen Victoria as a child; and a restaging of Nigerian Ola Rotimi's adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, *The God's Are Not To Blame* (produced 1968, Nigeria; published 1971) in 2005 at the Arcola.

*Makinde*, examined the theme of diasporic allegiance to the homeland. A Nigerian prince living in London (the *Macbeth* character) must return home after the death of his father whose reign has been characterized by corruption and heavy-handedness. On arrival, he is received as a Messiah figure and potential saviour from the country's woes. There are strong echoes of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, especially through the theme of a son taking on the responsibility of his father in order to restore order to the land. The production, which melded Shakespeare with traditional Nigerian dance and music and through its exploration of the supernatural, was much more in line with a Nigerian theatrical tradition pioneered by Soyinka as well as the British expectations of African theatre.

Elufowoju Jr.'s choice to stage Rotimi's *The God's Are Not To Blame* in 2005 sees a continuation of presenting a large-scale African production but with a more tried and tested script. The play also had special significance for Elufowoju Jr. who saw a revival of the original 1968 production in 1975 while a boy in Nigeria:

I was blown away [...] With its dramatic emphasis on the supernatural. Here was a large cast of about 50 people, all evoking the gods in front of me [...] It was my baptism into African theatre tradition (qtd in Cripps, 2005).

The production was an ambitious project, with Elufowoju Jr. determined to stage the play with ethnographic accuracy. In order to do so, he returned to Nigeria where he located a number of the cast members from the 1975 production to help him with musical and movement elements of the production in order to stay true to the African traditions of the drama (Cripps, 2005). After *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, the company turned back to smaller scale social realist dramas, but this time, in line with British theatre traditions, with a focus on high quality texts. The company produced Oladipo Agboluaje's *The Estate* (2006, New Wolsey, Ipswich and Soho Theatre; published 2006), a social satire about a Nigerian family in contemporary Lagos and inspired by Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. *The Estate* was followed by Roy Williams' *Joe Guy* (2007, New Wolsey and Soho Theatre; published 2007). The play, about a footballer of Ghanaian heritage and his desire to fit in with the Caribbean black community, explored African / Caribbean tensions. Oladipo Agboluaje's prequel to *The Estate*, *Iyà-Ilé (The First Wife)* (2009, Soho Theatre; published 2009) followed and garnered the playwright an Olivier Award nomination.

Elufowoju Jr.'s final play as artistic director was also the company's first play by a white playwright. It was a revival of Joe Penhall's award-winning *Blue / Orange* (2000, National Theatre; published 2000), which explored the relationship between a black male mental patient and his psychiatrists in London. Elufowoju Jr.'s production used an all-woman cast and added gender to the play's exploration of the intersection of race / ethnicity and mental

health.<sup>134</sup> It was staged in 2010 at the Arcola Theatre. Elufowoju Jr. stepped down as Artistic Director in 2010 and was succeeded by actor / playwright Lucian Msamati. Msamati, like Elufowoju Jr. has had a diasporic upbringing. He was born in the UK to Tanzanian parents but grew up in Zimbabwe. Msamati's début production for Tiata Fahodzi was Bola Agbaje's *Belong* (2012, Royal Court; published 2012), about a Nigerian politician in Britain who decides to move back to Nigeria in order to make a difference to Nigerian politics. It remains to be seen whether Msamati will bring a more diverse voice to the company which has, as a result of the ethnicity of its founder, tended to favour the West African / Nigerian British experience.

### **Collective Artistes**

Collective Artistes, created by African American Chuck Mike, began in Nigeria. Mike immigrated to Nigeria in 1976 where he has worked as a lecturer and in professional theatre. Mike is also an associate professor of theatre at the University of Richmond, Virginia, USA. He established Collective Artistes UK in 2002. In 2008/9 the company received regular funding from ACE.

Mike's work is located within the geo-cultural nexus of the USA, Africa and the UK. Growing up in the USA, he was deeply influenced by the Civil Rights and black consciousness movements. His involvement in African American theatre led to an interest in African theatre traditions. He travelled to Nigeria to study at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) where he met and worked with Wole Soyinka who is a patron of Collective Artistes UK. He describes his theatre as being 'primarily informed by training in Wole Soyinka's guerrilla theatre strategies' (Mike qtd in Amkpa, 2002: 210), particularly in terms of creating a theatre which responds to the political present moment.

Although Collective Artistes UK only formed in 2002, the company had already been involved in a collaboration between Nigeria and Britain through Bandele's adaptation of Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) (1997, West Yorkshire Playhouse and Royal Court; unpublished 1997). The play, a co-

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<sup>134</sup> The company has only produced three plays which do not deal with the African or African British experience: Elufowoju Jr.'s *Sammy* (2002), about the life of Sammy Davis Jr.; Jamaican-origin Angie Smith's *Steppin Out* (2003) and *It Takes a whole Village* (2004).

production between the West Yorkshire Playhouse, the National Theatre Studio and Collective Artistes, Nigeria, was commissioned by the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) and toured to the USA and Nigeria in 1998.

The company's repertoire to date, however, reflects the Nigerian / USA nexus more than the British influence. Apart from being performed in the UK with UK actors, all of their productions have been written by African or African American writers and set in those respective locations. To date, their productions include Bandele's adaptation of Lorca's *Yerma* (2001, Edinburgh Festival; unpublished), set in northern Nigeria; *Sense of Belonging (The Tale of Ikpiko)* (2002, Arcola; unpublished 2002), about female genital mutilation in Nigeria and devised by Chuck Mike and the company; Femi Osofisan's adaptation of Euripides' *Trojan Women* called *Women of Owu* (2003, Nigeria; published 2006) in 2004 at Chipping Norton Theatre and Oval House; Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959, Nigeria; published 1963) at the Oxford Playhouse and Barbican Pit in 2005; and African American Carlyle Brown's *The African Company Presents Richard III* (1993; published 1994/2004), based on the African Company's all-black production of Shakespeare's play in 1821 in New York City, staged in 2009 at the Greenwich Theatre. The company is working on its first African British project, *Zhe*. The play is a devised piece which explores African British issues of diaspora, transgender and sexuality.

### **First-Generation African British Playwrights Since 1990**

Despite the common denominator of being born in Africa, categorizing these writers is problematic. Their respective nationalities, ethnicities, ages and experiences all shape their plays in different ways. Nevertheless, they may be broadly grouped together by their shared experience as first-generation immigrants.

The most high-profile, first-generation African playwright to emerge in Britain in the 1990s is Nigerian poet, novelist and playwright Biyi Bandele-Thomas (often referred to as just Biyi Bandele) (b. 1967). Other African practitioners working in fringe theatre include Sierra Leonean Patrice Naiambana and Zimbabweans Denton Chikura and Tonderai Munyevu (who together are part of the theatre company Two Gents with German director Arne Pohlmeier).



This study has found no first-generation African women playwrights except publisher, broadcaster and critic Margaret Busby who only came to playwriting later in life.<sup>135</sup> Busby was born in Ghana (to a Ghanaian mother and Barbadian father) and educated in Britain where she now lives. She is most well known as the first black female publisher who co-founded the Allison and Busby publishing house in 1967 in London. Although Busby has been living in England since long before the 1990s, it was in 1999 that she made her initial foray into playwriting. For radio she adapted numerous books, including Soyinka's childhood memoirs *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981) in 1995 and a dramatization of C. L. R. James' *Minty Alley* (1936) in 1998 both for BBC Radio 4.

Like first-generation Caribbean playwrights such as Reckord, Matura and Abbensetts, and African playwrights living in Britain before the 1990s, these newer African arrivals exhibit an acute diasporic consciousness: writing from their position within Britain, their work reveals a continued political and cultural connection to their respective homelands. Although not asylum seekers / refugees, their migration to Britain is in part driven by flight from oppressive regimes and / or economic collapse in their respective homelands. The state of their respective nations registers thematically in their work, which tends to prioritize the homeland over life in Britain. Nevertheless, their plays provide an important documentation of the history, culture and identity of diasporic

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<sup>135</sup> Continental-based African women playwrights of profile are also uncommon and the production of their plays in Britain even more so. In 1991 the Gate Theatre staged the British premiere of Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1968; published 1970) as part of its Women in World Theatre season. *Anowa* was also broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 1995. An article by Anne Karpf criticized the fact that Aidoo had not been brought to the British public's attention earlier. According to Karpf, 'If you're not a Nobel Laureate – a Soyinka – then the best you can hope for is to be cordoned off in some "African Writers" series, confirming you as simultaneously worthy and exotic, but most emphatically Not One of Us' (Karpf, 1995). Aidoo's other well-known work *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964, Ghana; published 1965) received its British premiere in 2007. The play was produced by the British-based transnational theatre company Border Crossing (est. 1995) with the National Theatre of Ghana, and toured nationally performing in London at the Africa Centre. Ghanaian playwright and author Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* (published 1975), featuring the folk hero Anancy, was produced at the Drum Theatre in 2006 as part of collaborative project between youth in Plymouth and Sekondi-Takoradi in Ghana. The production was performed in both the UK and Ghana, and followed a similar transnational project in 2005 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For a discussion of a range of key African woman playwrights and their work, see Kathy Perkins' *African Women Playwrights* (2009).

communities in Britain and act as a barometer for the changing socio-political contexts of both home and host lands.

## Themes

Plays by Biyi Bandele engage with his experience of growing up in post-independent Nigeria, marked by civil war, military dictatorship, corruption and the growing divide between the rich and poor as a legacy of the oil boom. His British début, *Rain; Marching for Fausa*, which is set in a fictional African country, explores issues of government corruption, state brutality and censorship, and elicits direct comparisons with Nigeria (see Taylor, 1993). Subsequent plays set in Nigeria continue Bandele's satirical exposé of Nigerian society, centring around explorations of moral / spiritual and economic corruption, such as *Resurrections in the Season of the Longest Drought* (1994, Cochrane, published 1994); *Two Horsemen* (1994, The Gate; published 1994); *Death Catches the Hunter* (1995, the Battersea Arts Centre, published 1995); *Me and the Boys* (1995, Finborough; published 1995); and *Thieves Like Us* (1998, Southwark Playhouse; unpublished). Bandele has also written three adaptations: *Things Fall Apart, Oronoko* (1999, The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon; published 1999), based on Aphra Behn's novella of the same name (1688/2003); and Lorca's *Yerma*. Plays set in England include *Happy Birthday, Mister Deka D* (1999, the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh; published 2001) for Told by an Idiot; and *Brixton Stories* (2001, Tricycle Theatre; published 2001), a part adaptation of his novel *The Street* (1999), which explores themes of death and exile set against the backdrop of multicultural Brixton, for the RSC.

Sierra Leonean Patrice Naiambana's *The Man Who Committed Thought* (1999, Edinburgh Festival; unpublished) is set in a fictional African country which echoes Sierra Leone's situation. The one-man play, written and performed by Naiambana, revolves around four characters whose lives intersect: a megalomaniac African leader; a peasant seeking compensation for the loss of his cow at the hands of the leader; a Westernized lawyer who struggles to overcome his colonized mind, and from who the peasant seeks justice; and a rebel who violently topples the government of the corrupt leader. *The Man Who Committed Thought* has toured nationally and internationally.

Both Bandele and Naiambana engage with the political and social state of their homelands. However, there are fundamental differences in their portrayal. Whereas Bandele places the blame squarely on the greed, moral corruption and mismanagement of the government, Naiambana situates Sierra Leone's woes within the historical context of western oppression and greed from slavery and colonialism to the international diamond trade and activities of the IMF.<sup>136</sup>

Two Gents began by staging adaptations of Shakespeare performed by Denton Chikura and Tonderai Munyevu and transposed to Zimbabwean settings. Their debut production *Vakomana Vaviri Ve Zimbabwe or Two Gentlemen of Verona* (2008, Oval House; unpublished), was followed by *Kupenga Kwa Hamlet* (2010, Gdansk Shakespeare Festival, Poland; unpublished). Both productions have toured the UK and been performed in Zimbabwe as well as in other international venues. *Vakomana Vaviri Ve Zimbabwe* was also part of the Globe to Globe Festival at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London, where it was translated into Shona. The company's third production, *Magetsi* (2011, Tara Arts, London and national tour; unpublished), written by company member Denton Chikura, explores the theme of immigrant return and the difficulties faced as an outsider in one's own homeland. (Chikura's second play is to be performed by Tiata Fahodzi).

Two Gents' productions avoid the explicitly political in favour of social issues, particularly those concerning gender roles within Zimbabwean culture. For Two Gents, a reason for avoiding a blatant political theatre is due to the company's continued relationship with Zimbabwe where they regularly present their work. While political theatre does occur in Zimbabwe, it is a high-risk activity. The company adopts a more subtle approach whereby any critique of the government is masked by innuendo and allegory.

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<sup>136</sup> Naiambana has created other works under the banner of his Birmingham-based company Tribal Soul in collaboration with continental and diasporic African artists. Other works include *The Gospel of Othello*, a re-working of *Othello* which examines the story as told from the African village where Othello was born. The play, directed by Naiambana with music by Juwon Ogunbe and choreography by Harold George (a Sierra Leonean based in Belgium), was initially conceptualized and workshopped in the UK but premiered in Zimbabwe in 2011 at the Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA). *The Accused*, initially developed with Birmingham Rep and fully developed in Zimbabwe in 2012 explores themes of migration and exile. Naiambana has also worked extensively as an actor for stage and screen in the UK.

The notions of home and exile are central to these plays which stage the in-betweenness of the diasporic experience. On a psychological level, the act of writing plays about the homeland becomes a way to work through issues of departure. The political nature of the pieces also implies a desire to contribute to and intervene in the amelioration of the homeland. In this way the act of writing becomes not only a process to heal the self but an intervention into the public arena.

Critiquing home from the safe haven of the hostland also allows voices to be heard on an international stage which may otherwise have been silenced.<sup>137</sup> To some extent confined to the fringe and ignored by academics, and in some cases not recognized by home or host society, the works themselves occupy the interstitial space of exile. Plays by Two Gents are more transnational as they are regularly performed in the UK and Zimbabwe. Created for an audience in the home and host lands, their performances build bridges between the homeland and its diaspora.

Margaret Busby's works are quite distinct from those by Bandele, Naiambana and Two Gents, and are indicative of her age and the length of time she has been in the UK. For Adzido's *Sankofa* (1999, Connaught Theatre, Worthing; unpublished), Busby chose and shaped the text and poetry that accompanied the dance piece which explored traditional African cultures from a range of countries. In 2001 she wrote *Yaa Asantewaa – Warrior Queen* (2001, West Yorkshire Playhouse and national tour; unpublished), a musical in collaboration with the Pan-African Orchestra of Ghana, Adzido and the a cappella choir Black Voices. The musical told the story of Yaa Asantewaa, the queen mother of the Asante people who led them into battle against the British. Yaa Asantewaa was defeated in 1901 and exiled to the Seychelles where she died in 1921. *Yaa Asantewaa – Warrior Queen* was followed by *An African Cargo* in 2007 (Greenwich Theatre; unpublished), a play about the British owned slave ship

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<sup>137</sup> Naiambana's *The Man Who Committed Thought*, which satirized the corruption and megalomania of the country's dictator through a character aptly named Junta, could never have been performed in Sierra Leone. Interestingly, it was performed in Zimbabwe where it resonated strongly with the audience but maintained enough 'distance' so as not to alarm the Mugabe government. It is perhaps one reason why Two Gents avoid heavily political pieces as their work is frequently staged and devised in Zimbabwe.

Zong. In 1781 the captain of the ship threw one hundred and thirty-two slaves overboard and claimed insurance on the lost 'cargo'. The insurers contested the claim on the basis that the slaves were people and could not be classified as cargo. The court case was a seminal moment in the organization of the Abolitionist movement (Swaminathan, 2009: 97-8).

## **Form and Style**

The influences of African and Euro-American popular and high culture on the work of these first-generation playwrights result in a distinct intercultural idiom. However, this is not the result of exposure to Western culture while living in Britain. The form and style of first-generation African playwrights is quite distinct from that of the second generation, who are much more influenced by specific contemporary British approaches. Rather, the amalgamation of African and Western forms in plays by the first-generation reflects contemporary syncretic African culture.

Although this is the legacy of colonialism, the way in which Euro-American culture is dealt with as something inherited is distinct from that of preceding generations of African playwrights. In the pre-independence and immediate postcolonial period, a key objective of African playwrights was to find a way of working within an imposed European tradition of theatre and to make it their own. Although an autochthonous tradition was unachievable, African theatre practitioners have endeavoured to challenge, dismantle, and re-build Western notions of theatre in an African image. During this period, African playwrights, like their Caribbean and African American counterparts, drew on folk performance forms, language and mythology to shape and 'indigenize' their dramaturgy. In doing so, their work becomes an act of what Okagbue calls 'cultural affirmation', a way in which playwrights 'reclaim and recuperate the denigrated and emasculated cultural systems and practices of African and African-Caribbean peoples' (2009: 70).

Although the work of the first-generation playwrights under discussion continues this trend of weaving together different cultural strands within their dramaturgy, for some, their motivation has shifted away from affirmation. In other words,

their plays can no longer be apprehended by postcolonial discourses that see such syncretism as a challenge to and realignment of an imposed imperial culture. The representation of contemporary African culture in works by Bandele and Two Gents, for example, does not foreground a critique of Euro-American culture but reveals a position that revels in the hybridity that defines contemporary African experience.<sup>138</sup>

The difference in approach between Bandele and Busby is a case in point. Despite Busby's plays coming after Bandele's, her work reflects an important generational distinction. Born in pre-independent Ghana and having spent a considerable time living in England, Busby's plays are redolent of an anti-colonialist approach found in plays produced between the 1950s through to the 1980s. All three works, including *Sankofa* for which she provided and arranged text to accompany the dance piece, are set in the (pre)colonial past and / or make use of pre-colonial forms. They aim to recuperate events and people marginalized by Western historiography, to centre indigenous African performance traditions, and to highlight African heroism (*Yaa Asantewa*) and African suffering at the hands of whites (*An African Cargo*).

The title of Busby's first collaboration, *Sankofa*, is illuminating. Sankofa is the name given to an Akan mythic / proverbial bird which flies forward while looking backwards. Sankofa is both an Asante symbol ('Adinkra') of a bird looking

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<sup>138</sup> In terms of postcolonial African theatre, and playwriting in particular, Soyinka is a prime example because of the way his work has bridged the more conservative nationalist approach in African theatre that has attempted to reject the colonial legacy. The scope, originality and prolificacy of Soyinka's oeuvre (including novels and theory), as well as the kudos of international recognition as a recipient of the Nobel Prize, makes him one of the most influential and emulated Nigerian / African playwrights and theorists to this day. Soyinka's approach can be characterized by a style that blends indigenous Yoruba culture (sacred and profane) with Western, often Classical, dramaturgy. In terms of content, his work explores both the political and metaphysical, often in tandem. Furthermore, his politics is always rooted in challenging, often through satire, the contemporary status quo and is as distrustful of a glorified past as an idealized present and future. The hybrid approach, incorporating Western and indigenous African cultural practices, epitomized by Soyinka defines, to varying degrees, the large majority of contemporary African and much first- and 1.5-generation African British drama. Although Soyinka has been criticized for being elitist, for relying too heavily on Western forms, and for writing in English, within an African British context he provides an accessible model precisely because of these criticisms. Naturally, as a Nigerian, Soyinka has had a very specific influence on later generations of Nigerian theatre practitioners, a number of which re-located to the UK. Commenting on Bandele's approach and influences, King states: 'Biya Bandele-Thomas draws from the range of the world's theatre, especially modern drama, while working in a tradition established by Wole Soyinka' (2004: 316). Writing about *Resurrections*, King states that '[t]he mixture of myth, ritual, and satire on corrupt society and the politicians, along with the free borrowing among the mythologies of many cultures, is part of the tradition which Soyinka established for Nigerians' (2004: 316).

backwards and the word forms an Akan proverb meaning 'Go back and fetch it' (S. Richards, 2007: 103). Sankofa has come to symbolize the importance of the past as a resource for the present and future. According to Anyidoho, the Sankofa bird, and its emphasis on using the past in the present, provides an important model for Ghanaian dramatists who have sought to recuperate indigenous cultural practices in their work. He identifies the 'process of translating the Sankofa principle into creative practice' in the work of writers such as Efua Sutherland and Ama Ata Aidoo (Anyidoho, 2000: 5-6).

The Sankofa has also become a potent diasporic symbol and metaphor which encapsulates an Afrocentric perspective (see Petty, 2008: 16-51). The idea it conveys, of the importance of the past on the present, has also been used as a trope to discuss work by August Wilson (see H. J. Elam, 2004: 8). The concept of the Sankofa bird is useful as a metaphor for diasporic communities, often identified as yearning for their homeland. It works, therefore, to describe first-generation writers who frequently base most of their work in the homeland. This finds articulation in Busby's approach and identity. Despite living most of her life in England, Busby refuses the label English: 'I feel I am African – however long I have been here, I don't feel I am English' (Busby qtd in Roy, 2011).

In contrast, Bandele's sense of self reveals a more fluid position. Despite only moving to the UK in 1990, within a decade Bandele feels at home:

I know London better than any other city in the world – including Lagos – and I know Brixton better than any other part of London. I really like it. It's a crazy place but I love the energy of it. There's a new coffee bar opening every fortnight, it's amazing. So that's home (qtd in Grimley, 1999).

Indeed, Bandele's approach may also be described in terms of a bird that occurs in African mythology. Bandele prefaces his adaption of *Oroonoko* with a Yoruba saying that the trickster-God Eshu 'threw a rock today, and killed a bird yesterday'. Bandele goes on to explain, 'In other words, what is to happen in the future is the cause of what is happening now. The present, says this paradox, is defined by the future' (1999: 5). The proverb is very much forward-

looking as opposed to the idea that the Sankofa bird conveys. The Sankofa bird, which carries an egg in its mouth, suggests that the future must be nurtured by looking to the past – a deeply conservative notion. On the other hand, in Bandele's Yoruba saying, the bird is killed and the present is shattered by the future's relentless thrust. Although both Busby and Bandele write about the past, it is the way in which they approach it that is significant. Bandele is more concerned with discussing the future through the past or present.

Thus Bandele's adaptation of *Oroonoko* for the RSC, which deals with slavery, does not, as one might expect, engage with issues of positive representation. As Wallace points out, Bandele 'situates his play neither in opposition to Behn's text nor as a corrective to her work' (2004: 266). It is neither a recuperation nor an affirmation. Instead, Bandele's adaptation disrupts any easy assumptions of postcolonial counter-discourse where one might expect to find them present. In Behn's version, and later dramatic adaptations by Thomas Southerne and David Garrick, *Oroonoko* is portrayed as a 'noble savage', whose sale into slavery and eventual death is caused by white duplicity and greed. Bandele re-humanizes *Oroonoko*, who was written more as a hero and symbol of anti-slavery than as a real person:

I want to give the audience an idea of the complex society from which *Oroonoko* came, not some false nostalgia trip. Unlike Garrick, I'm not setting out to show the evils of slavery. That was relevant for his time but it's taken as read now. The play I've written has slavery at its heart, but it's also a simple story about a man and a woman, and how everything around them conspires to frustrate their love (Bandele qtd in Cavendish, 1999).

Bandele's adaptation works against the notion of the noble savage by emphasizing the weaknesses and mistakes of the Coromantins and of *Oroonoko* himself. In Bandele's version, *Oroonoko* is not captured by white slavers but instead sold by the King of Coromantin's servant. (Bandele's depiction of servants and slaves in the Coromantin court also highlights a world in which slavery was common and not a Western invention). Bandele describes



Oroonoko not as a helpless and romanticized victim, but someone with his own flaws. For Bandele, Oroonoko 'refuses to have an independent mind. That's what lands him into slavery' (Bandele qtd in Cavendish, 1999).

Postcolonial theory has contributed much to our understanding of the ways in which African adaptations of Western texts provide a 'canonical counter-discourse' (Ashcroft et al., 1989) which challenges the Eurocentric assumptions and ideologies of the Western source texts. In such instances postcolonial critics highlight the political potential of theatre as a form of resistance to cultural (neo)colonialism.

The problem with a postcolonial perspective is that its focus is on adaptation as critique as opposed to empathy with the source text. Such an approach ignores the way in which some adaptations highlight universality in spite of being refracted through a specific cultural context. Bandele describes his first visit to the theatre 'in a manner of speaking' occurring when he watched Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1967, Royal Court; published 1957) on television in Nigeria:

I had encountered such inchoate and atavistic rage before – after all, I was growing up in a society that was still reeling from a 30-month civil war in which more than a million people had died. I had even experienced it at very close range, in Baba, who, for all his clowning and unflappable good humour, could and all too frequently did work up a fiendish black rage that left everyone around him drained, confused and shell-shocked. All it took to set him off was any mention of Burma, or 'Hitler's war', as he called it. And so although I had yet to set foot outside Kafanchan, although I knew nothing about post-war British society, or the Angry Young Men, or anything about Osborne when I met Jimmy Porter on the screen of that hire-purchase television set, I knew there was no need for introductions: I had known Jimmy all my life (Bandele-Thomas, 2003).

A number of adaptations maintain the source texts' ideological and architectural parameters, transposing them to a different socio-cultural and temporal

paradigm in a process which stresses humanism over particularism. Bandele's adaptation of Lorca's *Yerma* is a case in point. Bandele transposed the play from early twentieth century rural Spain to contemporary rural northern Nigeria which he felt shared elements of the Spain Lorca was depicting:

The crucial thing is that the plays are grounded in a pre-technological society, in a culture that has a very immediate relationship with the earth [...] Communities have power over people in a way which is alien to how we think today, especially in the West (Bandele qtd in M. Brown, 2001).

Bandele felt that the rural Nigerian setting would allow the audience to accept the premise of the original more readily, better serving the text's emotional affect. This reveals more about globalization than it does 'writing back': instead of using the text to highlight difference or to challenge Western hegemony, Bandele relies on the audience's knowledge of global cultures which allows them to accept the context of the play and, therefore, its messages.

The critical reception of African British plays set in Africa often reveals British mainstream assumptions of how Africa should be represented. For some British critics, the shift in focus away from the colonial past and consequent shift away from a British-centric perspective (regardless of whether Britain is negatively construed) seems difficult to accept. Billington's response to Bandele's *Marching for Fausa* praised the play's portrayal of 'the evils of dictatorship' but criticized its failure to address 'Western responsibility for African autocracy' (Billington, 1993):

Without doubting the play's documentary accuracy, I just wish it took a wider political perspective: it tells us nothing of the state's colonial history, current alliances or international standing. Bandele explores the symptoms of corruption and oppression without diagnosing their historical origins (Billington, 1993).

But Billington misses Bandele's point, which is to stress African agency. Speaking about his adaptation of *Oroonoko* and how he had chosen to focus on the culpability of the play's characters as opposed to seeking a polemic of

blame, he states: 'I'm not interested in the philosophy of blaming someone else. I find that dishonest. It's important to say 'I am the author of my destiny'' (Bandeled qtd in Cavendish, 1999).

Plays by contemporary first-generation African Britons are less 'nativist' in their approach than those by the independence generation of African playwrights. They do not draw attention to indigenous and Western practices in a dialectical way. Rather, they embrace the contradictions of contemporary Africa and highlight their incongruities without making an argument around indigenous / other. Writing about Bandele's novel *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams* (1991), Berndt manages to succinctly capture Bandele's position and focus of his work, which is equally applicable to his and other contemporary first-generation African immigrant drama:

[Bandeled] creates an image of contemporary Nigeria as perceived by young people who have neither experienced colonialism nor are stuck in 'precolonial traditions'. Linguistic, cultural, and religious hybridity, even syncretism, are what they perceive as normal. This merged and multi-layered postmodern reality is not, however, as one might imagine, made responsible for the moral decay denounced by the author. It is not the optional variety of value systems and social customs that leads to indifference towards righteous behaviour, but the ruling elite's disrespect for every value system available (Berndt, 2007: 82).

The representation of Africa in plays by first-generation immigrants also provides an important contrast to African touring productions, which all too often present a folkloric image of Africa geared for tourist consumption.

For Bandele in particular, whose plays echo Beckett and Pinter, the European tradition of the absurd provides a way in which to convey the social and political turbulence of post-independent Nigeria. His characters and situations demonstrate the human quest for and failure to find meaning in life, but always through laughter. For Bandele life in Nigeria is like living 'in a state of siege' where you have two choices: 'You either say it's crazy and retreat into a shell,

or you just get into the thick of it and laugh' (Bandeled qtd in Ehling, 2001: 94). For him the absurd is 'a way of looking at life, at existence, that is itself full of pathos – and coming out grinning' (94). Comedy, whether drawing on the absurd, surreal, satire or clowning, is integral not only to the works of Bandele but also to *Naiambana* and *Two Gents*. According to *Naiambana*, comedy is a characteristic of the African experience: 'I believe that African people have a way of couching serious things – even tragedy – in humorous forms of expression. That's the way we are' (qtd in Ogungbe, n.d).

When *Two Gents* perform their Shakespearean adaptations with liberal usage of Shona phrases and Zimbabwean accents, this is not a radically new challenge to the language and authority of the colonizer. Instead, their adaptations, which delight in 'riffing' between different languages, cultural references, modes of address, and performance styles, express the cultural polyphony which defines contemporary Africa. Furthermore, as they perform in the UK as well as in Zimbabwe without altering their delivery, their performances highlight the different ways in which their work can be understood and appreciated, depending on the cultural context of the audience. The plays are not aimed at challenging or excluding, but rather appealing to a diverse transcultural and transnational audience.

This strong satiric, slapstick and absurd comedic vein and penchant for playing with the classics found in plays by these first-generation African writers is rarely found in plays by second-generation African playwrights or non-African writers who write about Africa. These humorous plays contrast with the serious tones of white British / Western representations of Africa, and much of the heightened (non-specific) African spirituality that finds representation in plays by a number of black British playwrights who invoke Africa in their work.

Contemporary first-generation African playwrights in Britain provide an important representation of African life that remains marginalized by mainstream white and black British preconceived notions. Its importance lies today in challenging mainstream assumptions in Britain by representing Africa in its complexity. This representation provides an interesting contrast to the black British diasporic relationship with Africa which is apprehended either

through a Black nationalistic (mainly American originated but also Caribbean nationalist) view or a (white / mainstream) British perspective.

### **1.5-Generation African British Playwrights**

The 1.5 generation refers to those who immigrated in their early teenage years. For example, poet / playwright Inua Ellams was born in Nigeria but came to the UK when he was 12 years-old. (Ellams' work is discussed in depth later).

The experience of living in the homeland for a significant period of time, combined with a high level of socialization in the hostland that immigrating at a young age brings, manifests an acute diasporic consciousness. Unlike the first- and second-generation who tend to be more culturally aligned with their respective natal countries, individuals from the 1.5-generation are at ease with dual cultural codes.

There are a small number of 1.5-generation African British theatre practitioners whose experience of migration moves in the opposite direction to the more typical example Ellams represents. Femi Elufowoju Jr. (born in 1962), Oladipo Agboluaje (born in 1968) and Lydia Adetunji (born in 1980) were born in the UK but moved to Nigeria with their parents when they were children and then re-located to Britain as young adults.<sup>139</sup> In many ways the experiences of this group aligns them more closely with the first-generation. Importantly, however, as British citizens, their relocation to the UK as adults is, in effect, a return 'home'. And, although citizenship and a sense of belonging are not necessarily coterminous, the holding of a passport does provide the individual with a sense of entitlement. This perhaps goes some way to explaining the confident and assertive African British idiom that is a hallmark of their work.

These playwrights' works exhibit a high degree of cultural hybridity. The lived experience of Africa is imprinted in their thematic and stylistic approach. Like

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<sup>139</sup> *Fixer* (2009 High Tide Festival, Suffolk; published 2011), Adetunji first full-length play, is set in Nigeria. The play is about foreign journalists in northern Nigeria investigating a story about militants who have attacked an oil pipeline using a local go-between (a fixer) to introduce them to the militants. The play depicts Nigeria beset by corruption and socio-political strife and raises ethical issues in a globalized world where Africa's resources and people continue to be exploited by both multinational companies and the media. To date Adetunji has written only one full-length play.

first-generation playwrights, plays by the 1.5-generation incorporate a diversity of influences and owe a debt to African popular and high theatre. Soyinka's influence is visible particularly in Agboluaje's and Elufowoju Jr.'s adaptations of Western canonical texts. Following in the footsteps of African postcolonial drama Agboluaje's adaptation of Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children* (2004, Nottingham playhouse and national tour; unpublished), set in a fictional West African conflict zone, and Elufowoju Jr.'s *Macbeth*-inspired *Makinde*, re-situate the source texts within an African context. In doing so, these writers provoke a re-evaluation of the source texts from an African perspective.

The use of comedy, especially slapstick, bawdy humour and satire, is a trait that is shared by a number of first and 1.5-generation African British playwrights. Agboluaje acknowledges his debt to Nigerian popular theatre traditions stating: 'I grew up in the Nigerian tradition of satire, which is the main way in which writers attack the Establishment' (Luckie, 2007). Both *The Estate* (2006, New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich; published 2006) and *Iyà-Ilé* (2009, Soho Theatre; published 2009) are caustic portraits of the follies of all levels of Nigerian society. In-line with first-generation playwrights, these 1.5-generation writers also exhibit a deep knowledge of African culture by incorporating a range of ethnically specific elements into their dramas. Different languages, cultural practices and beliefs are utilized to highlight character and situational nuances in a way that brings texture and depth to their representations.<sup>140</sup>

## **Second-generation African British Playwrights**

Second-generation African British refers to those born and raised in Britain. Playwrights include Bola Agbaje, David Addai, Arinze Kene, Ade Solanke, and

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<sup>140</sup> Other plays by Agboluaje, all of which are set in the UK, include *Early Morning* (2003, Oval House Theatre; unpublished 2003), a satire about three Nigerian cleaners in a London office who plot to overthrow their white boss in their first move to take over Britain and create a 'blackocracy'; *The Christ of Coldharbour Lane* (2007, Soho Theatre; published 2007) imagines the Second Coming occurring in Brixton with a Nigerian immigrant, Omo, as the son of God; *The Hounding of David Oluwale* (2009, West Yorkshire Playhouse; published 2009), based on the book *Nationality: Wog – The Hounding of David Oluwale* (2007) by Kester Aspden, about the true-story of David Oluwale, a Nigerian illegal immigrant whose body was found in the River Aire in 1969.

Janice Okoh, all of whom except Addai (of Ghanaian origin) are of Nigerian origin.<sup>141</sup>

Plays by these writers reflect the complex cultural zone in which the second-generation are positioned. Without the lived experience of two different nations, second-generation playwrights tend to set their plays in the UK; however, positioned between their parents' and British culture, their work is no less defined by (at least) two different cultural spaces. Virtually all of their plays privilege African and African-origin characters and the playwrights explore themes pertinent to their respective ethnic communities living in Britain.

Furthermore, as black playwrights in the UK, their work also interfaces with black British modes and discourses established by the dominant Caribbean second-generation who emerged in the 1980 and 1990s. Second-generation African British playwrights share similar traits with writers of the Caribbean second-generation such as Winsome Pinnock, Kwame Kwei-Armah, and Roy Williams. Themes exploring the complexities of navigating a dual culture and identity are typical of second-generation plays regardless of heritage. Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, Agbaje states:

I didn't know if I was African or British. In England I was called African, in Nigeria a black girl with an English accent I was called British [sic] and when I returned to England with an African accent I was called African. I was so confused for a very long time (Agbaje, 2010).

Her words mirror Kwei-Armah's experience of growing up in London during the 1970s and 1980s. The shared sense of disequilibrium engendered by a state of un-belonging manifests itself in the work of both second-generation playwrights. However, the time at which they grew up has shaped their response to this identity crisis in different ways. Kwei-Armah's reaction is typical of the second-generation of black Britons (predominantly of Caribbean origin) who were the first substantial group of blacks who could claim to be British through birthright and who came of age at a time in Britain when racism was particularly virulent.

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<sup>141</sup> Arinze Kene was born in Nigeria in 1988 but moved to the UK in 1991 where he grew up in Hackney, London. Although technically he is first-generation, it is more helpful to see him as second-generation. (The same taxonomy may be applied to Caryl Phillips for example).

For this cohort, their experience of racially motivated exclusion from the 'imaginary community' of the nation, coupled with the difficulty they had in identifying with their parents' backgrounds combined to produce a profound sense of alienation. In reaction, this generation pursued a two-pronged yet interrelated approach: the exploration and creation of an alternate cultural system which drew on the histories and traditions from Africa and the black diaspora, and an assertion of their Britishness achieved by dismantling and reconfiguring in their image what being British signified.

The younger generation of black playwrights in Britain has reaped the benefits of the previous generation's struggle for inclusion. Since the 1990s, the UK has made much progress towards redefining its self-image as an inclusive nation. Government-led multicultural policies have promoted a sense of pride in difference and tolerance of diversity. In this environment, asserting difference is not perceived as a subversive act but rather something to be celebrated and encouraged.

Writing in this period in the twenty-first century, second-generation African British playwrights' expressions of identity are often refracted through multicultural discourses of difference as opposed to being underwritten by a sense of communal exclusion based on racial grounds. Plays by this group are less concerned with challenging the notion of a white and homogenous British identity. In many ways they take their Britishness for granted and are more concerned with highlighting issues specific to youth in contemporary multicultural Britain.

## **Themes**

For some writers, the source of generational conflict stems from the rigid views of the parent-generation versus the more cosmopolitan, liberal outlook of the British-born children. David Addai's *House of Agnes* (2008, Oval House Theatre; published 2008) typifies the culture clash between the British-born second-generation and their African-born parents. The play, with its titular tongue in cheek reference to Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, is about a Ghanaian matriarch named Agnes who, after forty years in the UK, is moving



back to Ghana. Before she leaves her house in her sons' care, she needs them to prove they are ready for the responsibility. However, when her eldest son Sol refuses to end his relationship with girlfriend Davina, who Agnes despises because she is of African Caribbean heritage, and she discovers that her younger son Caleb is having a secret relationship with a white woman and has lied about having a well-paid city job, Agnes decides not to return to Ghana. The matriarchal Agnes is a symbol of tradition personified as conservative and immutable. The play's ending, with Agnes refusing to leave, ultimately points to an irreconcilable difference between the generations.

Retaining one's culture is obviously a high priority amongst the Nigerian British community. The practice of parents sending their children to Nigeria to be schooled is a way of minimizing the cultural gap between Nigerian parents and British-born children. In *Gone Too Far*, Agbaje hints at this practice. Unlike Yemi, the elder Ikudayisi has been schooled in Nigeria. As a result, he speaks Yoruba and is respectful of his elders. In contrast, the rebellious Yemi is told by his mother: 'You have no respect. It not your fault, it not your fault. It's my own, I have spoilt you too much. When I should have taken you to Nigeria, to boarding school, I let you stay here and now look at you' (6).

The theme of sending children to the homeland for an education is explored in Ade Solanke's debut *Pandora's Box* (2011, Oval House Theatre; published 2012). The play depicts a mother contemplating sending her son to school in Nigeria in order to dislocate him from the negative influence of his black British / African Caribbean peers. Solanke brings a new twist to the issue through the character of the mother who, herself, is not first- but second-generation. For both mother and son, the return to Nigeria is a way in which a re-connection to the homeland can be established which will ultimately improve both of their lives. The play suggests a growing conservatism among the Nigerian British population in reaction to what is represented as an environment which is failing the upbringing and education of its youth, particularly young black men.

In the main, second-generation African British plays convey a conservative message. Characters who are too Westernized and reject their heritage are, in general, portrayed in a negative light. The tension between generations in

families which have become increasingly fragmented by diasporization highlights the strain on traditional lifestyles wrought by globalizing processes. Janice Okoh's *Egusi Soup* (2012, Soho Theatre; published 2012), set in London, dramatises this conflict within a Nigerian British family. Mrs Anyia and her two daughters are preparing to return to Nigeria for the funeral of Mr Anyia. Conflict arises when Anne, the eldest daughter, who, according to tradition succeeds her father as head of the family, returns from living in the USA and is unwilling to take on the role tradition demands. The theme of the fragmentation of family and traditional values is underlined in the play's title, which refers to a traditional Nigerian dish which has no fixed ingredients but is made up of whatever foods are available at the time. In this way, African British plays written in the twenty-first century subtly echo African plays by the independence generation writing in the 1960s which examined the impact of colonization and urbanization on the traditional African way of life.

The second-generation's acute sense of cultural mixing engendered by migration processes has given rise to a number of plays which explore the intersecting themes of migration and multiculturalism. Addai's *Oxford Street* (2008, Royal Court; published 2008) presents a microcosm of contemporary London and its complex web of people of different cultures, creeds, and races. The play features characters from a range of nationalities and ethnicities (African, Caribbean, Brazilian, Polish, Bangladeshi, first- and second-generation immigrants) working together in a shop over the Christmas period. Dominic Cooke, artistic director of the Royal Court, referring to his decision to programme the play, stated that: 'Levi's play [...] is the first I've read that nails down precisely the multicultural, multinational world of London right now: there's only one white British character in a cast of 10' (qtd in Billington, 2007). All of the characters, except the manager Steph from Essex, are working in the shop on a temporary basis with their eye on a better job. For example, Emmanuel, the Ghanaian security guard, is studying a Business Management course part time and Kofi (black British of Caribbean origin) wants to be a journalist but is working there as a security guard paying off his student debt. The play, a contemporary Dick Wittington-esque tale about dreams and their inevitable compromise, echoes Agbaje's *Detaining Justice* in its exploration of immigrants struggling to improve their lives.

The promise of a better life emerges in works which explore social mobility or 'migration' from the ghetto: Agbaje's *Off the Endz*, Arinze Kene's *Estate Walls* (2010, Oval House Theatre; unpublished 2010), about upward mobility and the dream of escaping life on an East London housing estate; and his *Little Baby Jesus* (2010, Oval House Theatre; published 2011), about the coming of age of three London-based teenagers, depict African-origin characters struggling to escape the confines of inner-city London. Frequently, in these urban dramas the theme of culture clash is given a new twist as youth of African heritage come into contact with those of African Caribbean origin.

### **Form and Style**

Second-generation African British playwrights occupy a complex position located within an established (black) British theatre tradition as well as within a second-generation African immigrant context which exerts its own specific set of influences on the form and style of their work. Plays by this generation tend to be set in London and represent black British urban youth and employ a linguistic idiom of black 'street' speech pioneered by black British writers such as Kwei-Armah and Williams.

More often than not, plays by second-generation African Britons mirror this trend in terms of subject matter and setting. This inclination is due to writers reacting to the precedent of what 'sells', established by the success of writers such as Roy Williams and Kwame Kwei-Armah as well as being shaped by white-run mainstream organizations, particularly the Royal Court, with a penchant for a particular style and area of focus. Addai and Agbaje (both part of the Royal Court's Young Writers Programme) emerged at a time when black plays being produced in the mainstream were dominated by themes about youth (particularly from the male experience), violence, crime, poverty, drugs, teenage pregnancy, and the 'underclass' written in a predominantly social-realist mode: Addai's *92.3 FM* (2005, Royal Court; published 2006), about two South London community radio DJs, and his *Oxford Street*, Agbaje's *Gone Too Far* and *Off the Endz*, all staged at the Royal Court, fit into this urban 'tradition'. Notably, their other plays, which do not explore such gritty themes, have been

produced at different venues, such as Addai's *House of Agnes* (staged at the more community-orientated Oval House Theatre) and Agbaje's *Detaining Justice* (staged at the politically-aware Tricycle Theatre).

The social-realist style of this second generation also contrasts with first- and 1.5-generation playwrights who draw on a range of African theatre traditions (ritual, storytelling, the absurd, magical realism, satire, adaptation). For this second-generation of African British playwrights, Africa does not tend to exert a strong stylistic influence. Having said that, however, Kene stresses the influence of Nigerian storytelling on his plays which use stories as a method of instruction which reflect the difficulty of real life by not ending 'happily ever after' (Kene, 2010). Similarly, Agbaje's plays also tend to be didactic with a strong moral message in-line with African storytelling practices. The conservative tone of their dramas also reveals a Christian-based morality reflective of contemporary African culture.

Second-generation African British plays also primarily focus on the experience of being black in Britain and of African heritage, or themes pertinent to the African immigrant community. However, in some cases these playwrights don't write African-origin characters. Agbaje's *Off the Endz* and Addai's *93,2 FM* feature black British characters whose origins are not ethnically defined. The ability of these playwrights to write convincing characters and dialogue of various ages and ethnicity reveals how the second-generation occupy a position between, and knowledge of, multiple cultures and demonstrates their ability to move between them. Their experience of growing up as both African and British is a unique selling point, and brings a fresh perspective to similar themes which have already been explored by Caribbean-origin playwrights, as well as providing documentation of new social trends shaping contemporary Britain.

## **Conclusion**

African British theatre brings an increased ethnic complexity to the black British debate. Thematically speaking, it shares many traits in common with first and second-generation black British writers of Caribbean origin. Acculturation is

clearly visible depending on time spent in the UK. However, in African British drama we see an added dimension of interaction, not only with the white British mainstream, but also with the established black Caribbean population.

Ironically, the worry of identification with or being identified as black / Caribbean British drives greater cultural retention and distinction among some African Britons.

The remainder of the chapter discusses Africa in relation to plays by Inua Ellams (Nigerian origin) and Debbie Tucker Green (Caribbean origin) respectively.

## **Inua Ellams (b. 1984)**

### **Biography**

Inua Ellams was born in Nigeria and moved to the UK in 1996 with his parents making him a 1.5-generation African Briton. He describes himself as a word and graphic artist.<sup>142</sup> Combining his interest in the visual and the written word, performance is an ideal medium within which to accommodate both passions. As a performance poet, Ellams has performed his poetry at major UK venues including the Royal Festival Hall and the Barbican. As a playwright, Ellams has written two plays: *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* (2009) and *Untitled* (2010). *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* was commissioned by the Battersea Arts Centre after a showcase in which he dramatized a selection of poems from his debut pamphlet *Thirteen Fairy Negro Tales* (2005). The first full version of the play premiered at the Arcola Theatre, London in 2009 before playing at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival where it was awarded a Fringe First. After a national tour the play transferred to the National Theatre's Cottesloe space. *Untitled* premiered at Bristol Old Vic in 2010 before touring nationally; it was performed in London at the Soho Theatre. His most recent play, *Black T-Shirt Collection* (2012) premiered at the National Theatre, Cottesloe space in 2012.

### **Storytelling and Performance Poetry**

Ellams' style needs to be situated within the tradition of black British performance poetry. As an art form, black performance poetry has historically been distinguished by its subversive nature, challenging white hegemonic discourses through its particular use of language (black vernacular), the centrality of the 'performed' black body and its attendant signifiers of 'blackness' (clothes, posture, hairstyle etc), and themes which are often centred around power and empowerment:

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<sup>142</sup> See his website: <http://phaze05.com/>

Performance poetry is multifaceted and engages in confrontations with issues of class, race, sex and other forms of social injustice and oppression (B.-S. Wright, 2000: 274).

Black British performance poetry emerged among the working-class Caribbean and black British communities of the 1970s and 1980s. Pioneers include Jean 'Binta' Breez, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah. The subject matter has traditionally explored provocative issues, such as critiquing imperialism, racism, (un)belonging, and contemporary political and social issues relevant to being black in Britain.<sup>143</sup> Stylistically, it draws upon a range of transnational influences:

Initial (first-generation) dub and rap poetry is characterized by defiant verse that reminds one of the slave narratives, negritude poetry, South African resistance poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, and the Nigerian Afro-beat of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti since the 1970s (Killam & Kerfoot, 2008: 15).

Black performance poetry has had many incarnations throughout the diaspora:

Depending upon what musical styles are appropriated, the category shifts, hence the terms 'jazz-poetry', 'carnival art', 'rap-poetry', 'rapso' and the well-known and most researched 'dub poetry' amongst others (B.-S. Wright, 2000: 272).

Wright argues that the genre can be traced back to the African oral tradition of storytelling. She discusses the various ways in which performance poetry of the African diaspora is a legacy of African orature, while at the same time is shaped by the specificities of the socio-political context in which it is produced:

What we recognize as performance poetry today derives from the structure and roles of the griot of western Africa [...] But the

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<sup>143</sup> In Britain, performance poetry has also been embraced by a number of black female poets who have brought issues of gender and sexuality to the fore. As Goddard shows, artists such as SuAndi, Susan Lewis (now Subassa Imani Lewis), Valerie Mason-John, and Patience Agbabi, 'draw on their autobiographical experiences to interrogate identity politics and explore themes of belonging, displacement and fragmentation that capture the complex dynamic of black women's lives in Britain' (Goddard, 2007b: 154-5)

contemporary cultural variations do not reflect direct recreations, but represent repetitions of the original 'with a difference'. In Jamaica, for example, performance poetry generally takes the form of dub poetry embedded in reggae *riddims* distinctive of this Caribbean island. Trinidad also sports 'rapso', a version characterized by calypso *riddims*, indigenous to this culture. The performance poetry of Afro-America embraces a jazz-oriented shape, reflecting the familiar groove of the Afro-American sensibility and its cultural development. And in Black Britain, where there is no autochthonous Black cultural repertoire per se, elements are sampled from these other diasporic energies, to create unique and eclectic sounds and patterns, demonstrative of this migrant situation. Over time, many elements of Black American 'works of Blackness' and Caribbean cultural sensibility have been reaccentuated and reappropriated in Britain. (B.-S. Wright, 2000: 285-6).

Both Ellams' plays exhibit his characteristic style of blending genres of black diasporic performance poetry and African storytelling in a traditional theatre setting. *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*, a solo performance without costume-change or props, use of poetic language, and autobiographical subject matter, is more closely aligned to the genre of performance poetry. *Untitled*, although also a solo performance, is a fictional story involving two characters, costume and set, and resembles more of a blend between storytelling and a traditional piece of theatre. Ellams describes his reasons behind wanting to explore theatre as a medium:

I write dense poems, try to pack them with imagery to always keep a mind turning and listening. This means that my work thrives in quiet places and in sobriety. Sometime in 2007, in a big headed kinda way, I got tired of presenting work of the latter description to audiences intoxicated or in an environment of easy distractions. For this reason, I wished to work in solitary confinement, in a blank space where light and sound could be controlled. Theatre gives exactly that opportunity (Ellams, 2011).



Interestingly, Ellams reveals a desire to move away from the participatory and communal elements which define performance poetry, those same elements which are used to authenticate the genre's position with a continuum of African tradition.

It is the audience connection, theorists argue, that not only aligns performance poetry closely with African oral traditions, but also enables the art form with its political potential. Yet Ellams' plays bear no thematic resemblance to the highly charged words of black Britain's most celebrated performance poets. Instead, Ellams' plays are characterized by a more inward-looking exploration of his personal diasporic condition. *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* recounts his early years spent in Nigeria and subsequent immigration to the UK when he was twelve. *Untitled* presents a metaphorical exploration of the diasporic psyche through the tale of two twins separated at birth, one living in Nigeria and the other in Britain. The combination of African(origin) and Western performance modes support and echo his thematic and ontological concerns rather than providing a level of critique of Western hegemonic discourses. His plays indicate a shift in black British theatre discourses away from polemic in favour of foregrounding an exploration of the (middle-class) self before the community.<sup>144</sup>

The following analyses of *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* and *Untitled* explores Ellams' stylistic and dramaturgical approaches and discusses them in relation to the emergence of a contemporary African British aesthetic. The plays, both about diaspora, also shed light on certain key aspects of the diasporic experience and the diasporic individual's relationship to home. The following analysis explores the works' continuities and disruptions with earlier black British performance poetry traditions, African storytelling and black British discourses.

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<sup>144</sup> This trend is also reflected in rap and dub poetry. According to Douglas Killam and Alicia Kerfoot, Britain's black poets such as Zephaniah and Kwesi Johnson have moved 'toward a more middle-class stance', a shift caused by 'apparent improved inner-city conditions, the rise of a black middleclass, and black representation in government' and indicative of the way in which over time 'antiestablishment writing becomes integrated into the critical and cultural majority' (2008: 15-16).

## Performing the Self through the Diasporic Trickster: *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*

Combining different genres of storytelling, performance poetry, autobiography, monodrama and the *bildungsroman*, *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* describes the journey and subsequent transformation of an individual across national spaces and over time, and performs the evolution of the self from boy to man, Nigerian to Nigerian British.

The play begins with Ellams in hospital in the UK where he has just learnt that his father has had a stroke. The event provides the catalyst for his reminiscences of his life. The narrative 'flashes back' to Ellams' birth and continues chronologically through five 'chapters' of his life, briefly returning to the hospital waiting room between sections. In the final section, we return to the present of the hospital waiting room. The narrative then moves forward in time as Ellams recounts the time spent with his father until his death. The five sections of the play (divided into chapters in the text) explore the following key moments:

- i) Birth and early childhood in Nigeria.
- ii) Attending boarding school in Nigeria
- iii) The family moves to London when he is twelve and his school experiences
- iv) The family moves to Dublin when he is in his mid-teens; his school experiences there, his return to London and first experiences with girls
- v) At the hospital and the time spent with his father until his father's death

Although autobiographical, the piece is constructed as a dramatic story with flashbacks, a journey, obstacles, a crisis and a resolution. The events described in the play may be 'true'; however, its dramatic construction blurs the boundaries between autobiography and story, rendering it a coming of age tale.

*The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* describes Ellams' rite of passage from rebel to role of responsibility. The notion of a 'rite of passage' is rooted in traditional African culture whereby such rituals connect the individual with the community. In this light, the play can be seen as a theatricalised *bildungsroman* which presents

the audience with Ellams' moral change from prankster to responsible adult.

Stein outlines the *bildungsroman's* key characteristics:

its focus is an individual protagonist undergoing the process of character formation which takes him or her out of familial or educational institutions (and possibly society at large) and through a crisis, before, and this is crucial, a return to the fold. In the process, the complex relationships between individual and community are scrutinized, hardship and evil are laid bare and (often) overcome, and the individual heads for or assumes a recognized position. In view of this return, and despite its critical potential (i.e., despite its history of pointing to social inequalities), the genre is ultimately marked by a conservative bend (2004: 23).

Ellams presents his impish nature as a hereditary trait passed through the male-line in his family. In doing so, he affirms his African roots. Both his father and grandfather had reputations for being scoundrels and Ellams introduces himself as the next in '[a] line of ash skinned Africans, born with clenched fists and a natural thirst for battle, only quenched by breast milk' (7). Each time he gets into trouble his father reminds him that he will grow out of his naughtiness. His father's advice, 'there's a vague order to things, things happen when they are meant to, don't worry, your time will come' (10) are repeated throughout the piece. When his father passes away, the play ends with a sense that his father's death is both an end and a beginning. It is the event which signals the end of Ellams' youth and the beginning of his manhood. Similarly, as he takes on his new role, the space is left open for the next in line to inherit the family trickster role:

[...] I take my place in front of these ash skinned Africans, born with clenched fists and a natural thirst for battle, only quenched by breast milk. Through the vague order of these things, my time has come like Dad said it would. I wonder when this story will reach my son and wonder more what he will do (28-9).

Alongside the coming of age tale, the play charts the evolution of the multicultural self forged through transnational landscapes:

I left the green of Ireland singed with Celtic fire and  
a mismatched accent: the straight speak of Africans,  
stiff lip cockney and the thrust of Southern Dublin,  
arrived in London more scatterbrained than ever! (22).

This hybrid identity is represented in the set. Above the stage hangs a large strip of black paper which runs the length of the stage displaying black and white images drawn by Ellams in his clip art style: a mobile phone, an elephant, a British hospital sign, a calabash. Each picture signifies a particular moment in the play and creates a jumbled visual narrative with a specific picture coming into focus as Ellams references the incident it represents on stage. Not only do the images act as a sort of mnemonic for the story but they also signify a visual map of the juxtaposed cultures that have defined his life experiences.

The traces of different cultures and lands are also embodied in Ellams' performance. Through re-enactment, Ellams performs himself at different stages of his development. Through changes in physicality, vocal pitch and accent, we witness a personal transformation from boy to man and from Nigerian to Nigerian British. His journey provides him with multiple cultural strands which he knits together to fashion a unique diasporic identity. Having lived in Nigeria, England and Ireland he imitates the different accents to great comic effect. Similarly, his diverse cultural knowledge feeds into his language and the play is peppered with word combinations which render hybrid images in a celebration of cross-pollination. For instance, when he describes kissing his high-school love Donna he states:

we kiss as though Shango [Yoruba god of thunder] flung small  
sweetened lightening bolts between us like firework-flavoured mangoes  
[...] I was caught between wild stallions and electric mangoes (23).

Ellams' identification with the character of the African trickster is another way in which he demonstrates both his African roots and diasporic allegiances. African trickster stories present the trickster (often in animal but sometimes human or

spirit from<sup>145</sup>) as a rule-breaker whose mischief-making provides an entertaining yet moral lesson. (There is overlap here with the 'conservative bend' of the *bildungsroman* genre which also stresses social cohesion). In stories from the Hausa tribe, to which Ellams belongs on his father's side, the trickster Gizo takes a spider form. Identifying himself with the African archetype, Ellams underlines his 'Nigerianness'.

African trickster stories also provide Ellams with a dramaturgical model. By establishing at the beginning of the play that he comes from a long line of tricksters, Ellams lends a mythic quality to his 'tale' redolent of the 'once-upon-a-time' beginning characteristic of folk tales. His journey, characterized by wayward exploits, ingeniously trickery, foolish methods of extricating himself from sticky situations, and crude humour imbue his 'self' character and narrative with the creative mischief and picaresque style which defines many African trickster stories.

The African oral tradition of storytelling from which the trickster tales derive also informs Ellams' performance style which relies more on the spoken word than visual theatrical effects. Dressed in neutral clothes (t-shirt and jeans) against a bare stage except for a chair, Ellams creates images through voice and physicality. However, beyond this, Ellams does not employ other fundamental aspects of the tradition such as audience participation (chanting, call and response), its flexible form (improvisation) and formulaic structure (opening with a song or address to audience and closing with a summary of the tale's moral point) (Okagbue, 1997: 127).

Ellams' understanding of the trickster has been framed by both his exposure to African and African diasporic cultures:

This figure appears in black cultures with such frequency that we can think of it as a repeated theme or topos [...] Within New World African-informed cultures, the presence of this topos, repeated with variations as circumstances apparently dictated, attests to shared belief systems

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<sup>145</sup> The trickster also appears as a human character in some stories, or as a lesser god such as Esu-Elegbra (Yoruba god of chance) or Legba (Fon messenger god) in West Africa.

maintained for well over three centuries, remarkably, by sustained vernacular traditions [...] There can be little doubt that certain fundamental terms for order that the black enslaved brought with them from Africa, and maintained through the mnemonic devices peculiar to oral literature, continued to function both as meaningful units of New World belief systems and as traces of their origins (Gates, 1988: 4-5).

The trickster is characterized differently in African and New World contexts. Shaped by the experience of slavery and racism, trickster tales transported to the New World from Africa during the middle passage emphasized the trickster's potential to subvert authority from within and ability for self-preservation. Similarly, Ellams' move to the UK allowed the young trickster to flourish in different ways as he adapted to his change in circumstances. On discovering that, unlike in Nigeria, British schools don't practice corporal punishment, Ellams exploits the situation and its possibilities for naughtiness. The trickster in him also gives him the wherewithal with which to counter racism. At school in London, he describes 'the first time I'm called a *nig nog*' (15) and he portrays Dublin as 'a world more alien than London was, so far from Nigeria, I was the only Black boy in school' (21). But being a trickster empowers him to revel in his difference as 'half-boy, half-blur, Nigerian thick-accented black attack' (16) providing him with the apparatus to challenge the system: 'My grandfather's fleet feet and my father's contempt for authority catapult me across the swirling new world' (16). This new trickster echoes the transformation of the trickster in tales from African America and the Caribbean.

Ellams' adoption of the character brings new meaning to his diasporic condition. It reflects the way in which Ellams has been shaped by black British / diasporic discourses. His use of performance poetry in particular is testament to this. His play is at once a celebration of his hybrid diasporic identity as well as an affirmation of his Nigerian roots. At the same time, however, he is drawing on African diasporic (Caribbean, African American, black British) influences with which to voice his story.

### ***Untitled: Diaspora***

*Untitled*, like *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*, is a one-man show written and delivered in Ellams' characteristic style which blends storytelling with performance poetry. *Untitled* also combines a range of performance and literary genres and draws on a wide variety of textual sources including traditional Nigerian folk tales, modern Nigerian and other world literature:

I stole from Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri, celebrated Nigerian writers. Their novels 'Things Fall Apart' and 'The Famished Road' inspired parts of *Untitled* as did Salman Rushdie, Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett, Nii Parkes, Roger Robinson, Major Jackson, Jay Bernard, Kayo Chingonyi, Kwame Dawes, Jacob Sam La Rose, Niall O'Sullivan, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Saul Williams, Tracy Chapman, Sekou Sundiata, John Keats... the list goes on (Ellams qtd in Austin, 2010).

Whereas *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* is autobiographical, *Untitled* presents a fictional story about two identical twin brothers X and Y, separated at birth and raised in Nigeria and London respectively. The following analysis examines how *Untitled* operates on a symbolic level (textually and performatively) as an articulation of the complexities of a diasporic identity. The analysis will focus specifically on the 1.5-generation Nigerian British group; however, it does raise implications for the African British experience in general and their relationship to 'home'. Although fictional, the play also contains autobiographical elements which make it possible to collapse the protagonists' experiences with those of the writer / performer.

Ellams is both a diasporan and a twin. Two fundamental aspects of his identity are based on binaries. He describes the genesis of thought for his play:

I was born with the first seed of the play: I have a twin sister. [...] Now, way back when, twins were seen as evil portents in parts of Nigeria. When they were born they were destroyed instantly, sometimes with their mother. Things have changed, twins are celebrated now. There is even a twin worshiping cult that sees us as spiritually powerful, tricksters, gifts from God, two halves of the same soul. And finally, I believe Nigeria's identity to be twinned; split between its indigenous population and its far reaching diasporic communities (Ellams qtd in Austin, 2010).

The notion of the dual or twin provides the conceptual apparatus for Ellams' exploration of diaspora. By constructing the play around binaries – the play is divided into two acts and presents twin protagonists X and Y in two locations – Ellams deconstructs diaspora into its constitutive parts of home and host land.

The play begins with a naming ceremony in which the new-born twins (born on 1 October, Nigeria's Independence Day) are taken to the forest to be named by their parents. According to Nigerian, and many African cultures, a name has a specific meaning which will define the child's future. During the ceremony, Ellams (who plays multiple characters in the play including the narrator) tells us that although Y received a name (we never find out what this is in the play), when it was X's turn he cried and rejected his name. Perceived as an ill omen, X's un-naming causes his parents to fight and separate. X remained in Nigeria with his father and Y was taken to live in Britain with his mother. The remainder of the first act depicts X's childhood. X revels in his namelessness and the freedom it allows him to define himself. However, the village interprets his lack of a name as the reason for his refusal to conform to their traditional way of life. Eventually, he is banished from the village by the elders and given a term of seven days to find a name or be killed. Defiant, X refuses to conform to either the villagers or the gods. The act ends with him being struck by lightning. The second act begins in London and describes a week in Y's life working for an advertising agency. When Y is taken ill with a sudden fever, he is urgently called to his mother's flat where she tells him to return to Nigeria and find his brother. Arriving in Lagos, Y discovers X buried beneath a pile of leaves. He drags him, almost dead, from the earth. At their touch, they share each other's memories, a connection which brings X back to life.

The play, like *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*, is a coming of age story about twins who, despite being raised in completely different environments, find each other through a deep-seated psychic connection. However, the play operates on a more symbolic level beyond the apparent narrative. *Untitled* explores the diasporic psyche as split in two, producing what Du Bois termed a 'double consciousness'. However, unlike Du Bois' use of the term which described African Americans caught between the dialectic of being African-origin (black)



and American (white), *Untitled* is not presented as a dialectic between being Nigerian and British. Rather, the play dramatizes the specific experience of the Nigerian British diasporic condition of double consciousness, caught between the dialectic of being Nigerian and Nigerian British. In this light, the twins represent the psyche of the diasporic individual split between home and host land, with X and Y representing insider and outsider respectively until their unification in the end. Thus the individual is at once at home in Nigeria (X) and not (Y) and likewise he is at home in the UK (Y) and not (X). This double consciousness is echoed in the play's performance in which Ellams plays both characters. In doing so, Ellams himself performs his diasporic dual-belonging, switching in accent and physicality between X and Y. Acting as X he exhibits his Nigerianness and transforming in front of the audience (he puts on a shirt and tie at the start of the second act) he performs his Nigerian Britishness through Y. When Y saves X they, and consequently Ellams who plays both roles, become one.

The depiction of Nigeria (in contrast to contemporary Britain in act two) is deeply reminiscent of the pre-colonial Nigeria portrayed in the first half of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The lack of modern references, characters from village life (including elders, drummers, a medicine man) and the language of the piece with its storytelling style, the poetic, proverb-laden text and evocative vocabulary (mango trees, koala nuts, cassava and cocoyams) combine to evoke a very 'Achebian' imagery and atmosphere. This earthy and fecund depiction is contrasted in the second act with the 'concrete jungle' of London in which the elaborate assonant language and story-telling style of the first act is replaced by a diarized structure and a clipped monosyllabic linguistic delivery. Likewise, the experiences of X and Y could not be more different. In Nigeria, X grows up in a world marked by traditional values and beliefs. He trains as a drummer and then a healer and lives, in line with Nigerian cosmology, in a world where humans and spirits interact. Y, on the other hand, works in corporate London in advertising and lives in a world of mobile phone technology and high-rise buildings.

It is tempting to see this portrayal of the homeland in terms of a typically nostalgic diasporan re-imagining. Similarly, given the significance of the twins'

birth on Nigeria's Independence Day, it is also tempting to view the piece as an Afrocentric polemic, pitting the values and traditions of pre-colonial Nigeria in opposition to those of the West. However, X's experience growing up in Nigeria, marked by his conflict with the conservative society, suggests that such a reading would be incorrect. The significance of the twins' birthday has more to do with the notion of independence from restricting notions of nationalism, authenticity and borders than it does with debates on African nationalism.

X is portrayed as a rebel to conservative tradition. By rejecting his name, X refuses to be defined by social norms. It is his position outside of traditional customs that allows him to find new rhythms as a drummer and express himself creatively. X's rebellion signifies a culture clash; however, this clash is not between child and parent, but between diasporan and homeland. Ellams presents the ambivalence of diasporans towards the homeland. X represents a pre- or latent diasporan wanting to escape the confines of Nigeria. Conversely, Y returns to the homeland and feels a deep connection and simultaneous sense of un-belonging: 'I stand a stranger in my mother's land, feeling the voice of its flora beneath' (65). Together, X and Y represent the conflicting sense of having intimate knowledge of the homeland and yet feeling disconnected from it. They embody the paradox of understanding and identifying with a culture while simultaneously rejecting it. It is this profound ambivalence which characterizes the diasporic individual.

Playing the roles of both X and Y allows Ellams to perform his dual belonging. His representation of X within a traditional Nigerian society enables him to perform his Nigerianness as a public demonstration of his indigeneity. This reveals certain tensions that exist between those in the homeland and its diasporan communities, where the onus is on the diasporan to continue to prove his / her belonging to the homeland. Brah's conception of 'diaspora space' is useful here which she defines as:

'inhabited', not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of *diaspora space* (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put' (1996: 209).

Although this quote refers to the relationship between those constructed as 'indigenous' within the host society and its immigrant (origin) communities, it is equally applicable to the relationship that exists between immigrants and their children with their original homeland communities. Ellams' somewhat romantic depiction of Nigeria, steeped in tradition and conservative values, highlights the diasporic sense of exclusion from belonging to the homeland. The gradual erosion of markers of authenticity which underwrite national belonging, such as the ability to 'perform' certain cultural traditions or speak the language, highlight the dissonance between the diaspora living in the West and their 'people' living in continental Africa.

The play's tagline is 'If we let our children name themselves, will they author their own destinies?' Ultimately, the play is about the freedom to choose your own name / identity and, therefore, your own destiny. According to Hall:

Diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return [...] The diaspora experience [...] is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity (1990: 235).

Therein lies the work's 'resistance': By locating him / herself between places with an allegiance that exists both beyond and within the nation, the diasporan's transnational identification challenges restrictive notions of belonging, identity and culture held by those in both home and hostlands.

### **Conclusion:**

Ellams' borrowings from a diverse range of genres and cultures, while maintaining a close connection to, and interaction with, the cultures of his Nigerian homeland, combine to produce an African / Nigerian British aesthetic which is distinguished by its cosmopolitan transnationalism.

Although Ellams' plays are not specifically performance poetry, nevertheless, the form dominates his style. Given that the form has distinguished itself as counter hegemonic, the absence of race politics is remarkable. Unlike black British playwrights and performance poets (and those that meld the genres such as Lemn Sissay, Mojisola Adebayo etc) from the previous generation, Ellams' plays do not focus on the experience of the individual within the context of a racist British society. Although Ellams does mention encounters with racism in *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*, such experiences are treated in a cursory manner. It is, in fact, his encounter with a Chinese boy in his school which forces him to confront his own racism. Instead, Ellams perceives his and the difference of others as something positive. His portrayal of the UK is of a diverse place, rich in nourishment for personal and artistic growth.

Given that Ellams' works could be characterized as 'privatist' in their focus on the individual's transformation, in what ways do they contribute to a wider sense of social transformation? How do they, as examples of black British theatre, re-define Britishness? In Stein's analysis of the difference between the traditional *bildungsroman* and what he calls the 'black British novel of transformation', he argues that the latter has an inherently '*performative function*'. This adds a political dimension to the works themselves as texts within a specific social context, ascribing to them 'agency' but 'without denying the agency of subjects' (Stein, 2004: 36). Thus,

Apart from coming to terms with the protagonist's identity, the genre is about the *voicing* of this identity; the very voice becomes manifest through the novel. Thus the black British novel of transformation does not predominantly feature the privatist *formation* of an individual: instead, the text constitutes a symbolic act of carving out space, of creating a public sphere [...] the genre is uniquely suitable for the process of the redefining of Britishness. For, through the process of subject formation, the *bildungsroman* negotiates the formation of its protagonist or protagonists within the social world that is encountered and shaped. While the individual, then, struggles with family, education, and the expectations of society at large, this struggle is significantly not without

consequence for the cultures within which it takes place. Rather it is projected outward, beyond the text (Stein, 2004: 30-1).

The performance of plays within a specific historical and social context has an equally and more immediate 'performative function'. Through the performance of Ellams' plays, a number of shifts in British society and in black British theatre are signified. While his lack of engagement with race politics or racial identity does not signify the end of racism in Britain, or the adoption of an all-inclusive ethnically diverse conception of Britishness, it does make a step in that direction. His uncritical (in a postcolonial sense) combination of African, African diasporic and (white) Western sources also suggests an approach which foregrounds a postmodern and globalized identity and identification.

Ellams' plays / performance also represent a changing black British voice which is unselfconsciously hybrid, attached to multiple 'roots' and 'routes'. His 'voice' figuratively and literally, through his middle-class subject matter and well-spoken accent, also implies a move away from what has become a stereotypical image of black Britishness as urban, working-class and linguistically influenced by African American 'street talk' and Caribbean patois.

At the start of *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* Ellams' clothes are covered in a red substance which the stage directions insist must give '*the impression of blood*' (7). It is only towards the very end of the play that we learn that it is, in fact, red paint (he had been playing a trick on his lover who jilted him by putting red paint in her shower head). This ultimate act of his trickster character is to make us think that his play will include a dangerous encounter, probably involving knife-crime. In doing so he deliberately challenges audience assumptions about black theatre as well as black theatre's focus on such themes.

## debbie tucker green

### Introduction

tucker green's work has been staged in high-profile venues across the country to critical acclaim and she has quickly earned a reputation as one of the most exciting (black) British playwrights. Her debut *dirty butterfly* (2003) premiered at The Soho Theatre and was followed by *born bad* (2003), which premiered at The Hampstead Theatre and for which she won the Laurence Olivier Award for Most Promising Newcomer. *trade* (2004), was commissioned by the RSC and premiered at The Other Place in Stratford-upon-Avon as part of the New Work Festival. *generations* (2005) premiered at the National Theatre in 2005 as part of a Platform performance before opening at the Young Vic in 2007. *stoning mary* (2005) opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs and was the first play by a black British woman writer to premiere in their main house. *random* followed at the Royal Court in 2008. Her most recent production, *truth and reconciliation* (2011), premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs.

Her themes and story lines tend to be bold, controversial and epic in their scope. Her treatment of themes such as incest, youth crime, physical and sexual abuse, HIV, sex tourism, genocide and child soldiers are encased in a short play format. This has led numerous critics to remark on her ability to create a powerful effect in a short time (at best) or (at worst) not allowing space to really explore such profound issues. Her plays also foreground, often critically, women's experiences.<sup>146</sup> Her treatment of these themes, which favours exposition over action, could be described as theatrically conservative. In fact, her plays are so word-heavy that some critics have suggested tucker green is better suited to radio than theatre. Yet it is precisely her use of words which defines her originality as a dramatist, a style which has focused much of the critical attention around her work from journalists and academics alike.

tucker green's writing seeks to imitate everyday speech with its overlaps, repetitions, unfinished phrases and silences. Each play is prefaced with

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<sup>146</sup> In particular, *dirty butterfly*, *stoning mary* and *trade* highlight women's collusion in their own suffering and can be read as indictments of so-called female solidarity.

instructions for the delivery of the text: an oblique indicates when dialogue is to overlap; names without dialogue refer to 'active silences' between characters; bracketed words refer to a character's intention and are 'not to be spoken'. This attention to realistic speech pattern is coupled with repetition and a sometimes poetic phraseology, which transcends the real at times, to produce a sometimes heightened, sometimes hypnotic, sometimes deliberately elliptical effect. Osborne defines her aesthetic as characterized by 'an unhooking of language from standard grammatical constraints, its demotic delivery, and the withholding of any catharsis' (Osborne, 2007b: 233).

Ambiguity is also key to tucker green's treatment of character, theme and plot. Most of her characters are given names such as 'mum' or 'wife' and biography and psychological motivation, virtually absent, are left up to the actors to establish through their interaction with the other performers. Typically, tucker green fluctuates between allowing characters to extrapolate issues and explore their dreadful detail, or limits their observations and interactions to seemingly irrelevant moments. The technique provides a poignant subtextual approach where the emotional power is located at the interstice of what is said and what is withheld.

Likewise with plot, her plays often comprise fragmented scenes which tie together in the end, or which provide key information slowly and often without a full explanation, balancing scenes of banality with moments of explicit lucidity which act as exposés as the piece comes to a close. It is in these moments when the themes come into focus most sharply and provide a glimpse into the writer's aims. For the rest of the play, the actions of the characters and the 'politics' of the piece are left deliberately opaque.

tucker green's style has elicited comparisons with a number of white British playwrights such as Pinter and Churchill. Her challenging subject matter has also led to comparisons with the 'in-yer-face' writers of the 1990s. Ken Urban links tucker green to the legacy of writers such as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill. For Urban, what tucker green and the New Brutalists share in common is writing which, through Artaudian cruelty, 'seeks possibilities in an ethical nihilism' and 'challenges the cynicism and opportunism of the historical

moment' (Urban, 2008: 53). In particular, Urban links tucker green's *stoning mary* to Kane's *Blasted*:

tucker green's desire to bring the cruelty of the 'developing world' into the everyday setting of the 'first world' connects her writing to another young playwright whose shocking first play opened ten years earlier. That earlier play imagined what would happen if the horrors on the evening news were brought into a Leeds hotel room (Urban, 2008: 53).

Other critics have argued that, coupled with her approach, her plays' themes are so atypical of black British theatre that her work heralds the beginning of the 'post-black' in British theatre:

At the beginning of the new millennium, in the work of debbie tucker green, there is also a hybrid approach that does not privilege racial difference but explores, from a black woman's perspective, gender, social and domestic relationships. It is still too early to judge whether tucker green's work represents a wider cultural hybridity in which identity politics, considerations of origin, migration, displacement, diaspora, arrival and otherness will no longer be foregrounded, and the designation 'black British drama' will become redundant (Peacock, 2008: 63).<sup>147</sup>

Goddard echoes Peacock to an extent regarding tucker green's thematic diversification. Goddard highlights that tucker green has expanded her focus on issues which have dominated the narratives of black British work in the 1980s and 1990s:

She does not foreground identity politics or concerns with the intersection of race, class and ethnicity in a diversifying Britain, instead focusing on a range of local and global issues, including domestic violence, incest, female sex tourism, poverty in the developing world, AIDS, genocide, child soldiers, death by stoning, urban violence, and teenage knife

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<sup>147</sup> Post-black can be defined as work by black artists that centres upon the black experience without drawing attention to race as a defining element. Examples of this can be seen in tucker green's *dirty butterfly*. Although she stipulates two black and one white character, as Peacock notes, '[r]ace is, however, irrelevant to the concerns of the play, which are power, guilt and voyeurism' (Peacock, 2008: 61).



murder (Goddard, 2011a: n.p.).

For Aston, it is precisely 'her *metisage*, her mix, of black cultural and white theatrical influences and resonances' (2011: 183) that makes her work so compelling. However, arguably tucker green's stylistic, aesthetic and thematic influences remain primarily rooted in the African diaspora. tucker green's ideological approach remains fundamentally shaped by her race and gender:

Obviously I'm a black woman, so I know the conversations I've had with my friends. With Zimbabwe, we were like 'You know what, if it was them, they'd make sure it was on the news, they would make sure it was flagged up 24/7 if it was white people'. So that's from my stand-point, but obviously my standpoint is different to somebody else's standpoint, maybe a white person's standpoint (green qtd in Peacock, 2008: 60).

The comparison of her work to white British playwrights is also an association she refutes (although she does acknowledge the influence of Caryl Churchill):

Critics have likened Tucker Green's work to that of the late Sarah Kane. You can see why: her plays are urgent, angry accounts of the way we live now. There is something raw and direct in their fractured poetry and internal monologues that seems to lay bare the characters' emotional lives with the kind of psychological complexity that you expect of a novel but rarely find on the stage. Tucker Green, however, is having none of it. 'I just don't see it,' she sighs. 'I think it says more about critics' reference points than my work. The influences for me are people like the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett – and music, particularly songwriters such as Jill Scott and Lauryn Hill' (Gardner, 2005)

Critical appraisals which ignore or fail to contextualize tucker green's work within a transnational black tradition (notably African American poet and playwright Ntozake Shange, Jamaican poet Louise Bennett, African American singer / songwriters Lauryn Hill and Jill Scott) reveal, as tucker green notes, a lack of knowledge of black art discourses which results in the persistent re-framing of black British theatre within white mainstream frameworks – a task left to be addressed by black British theatre scholars. Analyzing the mainstream critical reception of tucker green's work, Osborne (2007b) argues that tucker

green destabilizes the critics' paradigms of what theatre should be, while also revealing their inability to discuss her work within a framework which does not subscribe to white male Western orthodoxy. Goddard insists '[i]t is equally imperative to understand black women's work within traditions of black cultural production, and tucker green locates her main inspirations as coming from black music, poetry and performance' (2007b: 185).

tucker green's approach reveals a transnational identification rooted in African diasporic empathy. It is through the African diaspora that one can better understand tucker green's stylistic and aesthetic influences and political perspectives. Tracing these black transnational connections is one way of countering the issue of black British work, such as tucker green's, from being 'read' solely within a white British framework, and reveals the work's potential to critique such limiting discourses. As Gilroy writes, diaspora 'disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location and consciousness' (2000: 123).

### **Style and Themes**

tucker green's debt to Caribbean and especially African American women writers prompts an analysis of her work within the context of the USA or Caribbean. Yet, because of the Afrocentric movement in African American art, especially since the 1970s, the African connection in tucker green's work remains prominent, if mediated through black America. In particular, the legacy of African orature and ritual emerge through her poetic style and structural repetitions respectively.

Her work, both stylistically and thematically, draws on the creative influences and legacy of the African diaspora, Despite Goddard's claim that tucker green's work has moved away from black British playwriting's 'concerns with identity and diaspora' (2011a: n.p.), 'diaspora' and its concerns remain highly relevant to tucker green's work. Four of her plays – *trade*, *generations*, *stoning mary*, and *truth and reconciliation* – are set in the 'Third World' and reveal tucker green's commitment to global black social and political issues. The following analysis will focus upon the latter three plays which deal specifically with

Africa.<sup>148</sup>

### ***stoning mary***

*stoning mary* is divided into sections each focusing on a set of seemingly discreet characters / storylines. The first, 'The AIDS Genocide', portrays HUSBAND and WIFE (who are shadowed by two EGO characters who verbalize the couple's inner thoughts) who are locked in a perpetual battle over a single bottle of antiretrovirals. The second, 'The Child Soldier', features a mother and father and their child soldier son who was kidnapped but briefly returns to visit his family. The scenes featuring this couple focus on their bickering over which of them loves their son most. The last scenario, 'Stoning Mary', is about Mary, the only character with a name in the play, who has been sentenced to death by stoning for murder. In prison she is visited by her older sister. It is only at the end of the play that a connection between the scenes emerges. We learn that Mary has been sentenced to death for killing the child soldier in retribution for him killing her parents, the husband and wife with HIV.

The combined issues of AIDS, child soldiers and death by stoning locate the play somewhere in Africa. However, tucker green stipulates in her stage directions that 'All characters are white' and that 'the play is set in the country it is performed in' (2). When the play premiered at the Royal Court in London it featured an all-white cast who wore contemporary British fashion and spoke with English (Estuary) accents. tucker green explains her rationale for the play and her casting specifications:

with *Stoning Mary* [sic] I was interested in questioning what we don't see and hear. The stories of people who would be in the headlines every day if what was happening to them was happening to white people. It happens all the time. Look at Rwanda. It just fell out of the news. Or Zimbabwe. We're always hearing what is happening to the white farmers but what about the black political activists who are also being killed? Where are the news stories about them? (qtd in Gardner, 2005).

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<sup>148</sup> tucker green's other plays, *dirty butterfly*, *random* and *born bad* examine issues of physical / sexual abuse, gang crime and incest respectively and are set in Britain.

The quote reveals tucker green's dual aims: firstly, to challenge the way in which particular issues are racially prioritized in the media, and secondly, to challenge racialized empathy in an increasingly globalized world.

tucker green's words reveal her belief that the media fail to represent important issues concerning the plight of black people, especially in the third world. By writing a play about issues such as AIDS victims, child soldiers and women being stoned to death, she seeks to bring the plight of Africa's racially and economically marginalized to our attention. In order to underline her point, she inverts the audience's assumptions of the victims she is representing by portraying them not as 'other' but as 'us'. In doing so she poses a challenge to the Royal Court's mainly white middle-class audience: does your relationship to these atrocities change when the victims are white? Do you have more empathy with the suffering of people of your own race?

Peacock believes that '[t]he intention is not to distance the audience, but by altering their perspective and thereby forcing them to read the situations portrayed in terms of their own environment, to generate empathy' (2008: 60). However, watching white people with Estuary accents brandishing machetes or being sentenced to death by stoning is jarring and, at the time of performance, incongruous within a British context. Such a scenario would be shocking and emotional if the realism of the piece allowed us to accept such an event could occur in the UK. However, at no point is the audience un-aware that they are watching what is more of a provocation than a 'fourth wall' drama.

The fact that tucker green's device of re-locating the play's African issues to England became the major focus of every press review reveals the weight of its impact which, regardless of tucker green's intentions to create empathy, resulted in a Brechtian distancing effect. The achieved alienation allowed for a critical engagement with the play's discourses on representation and social responsibility. This is not to say that the play is reducible to a simple polemic. tucker green's characters and scenes are emotionally involving, yet never completely absorbing, creating a tension which yields an empathetic yet critical viewing position.

The various scenes depict characters whose lives have been torn apart by circumstances beyond their control such as poverty and war. MUM and DAD reminisce about happier times with their son before he was kidnapped. Since the event, however, their relationship has soured and the father blames his wife for their loss. HUSBAND and WIFE are forced to fight each other for their own survival because their economic position only allows them to be able to afford one bottle of medicine. MARY is stoned to death in the end for killing the CHILD SOLDIER who killed her parents and the last image of the play is MUM who 'picks up the first stone' (73) and the cycle of violence continues. tucker green does not romanticize her characters, however. The characters are depicted as violent and self-serving. When OLDER SISTER visits MARY in prison she does so begrudgingly and criticizes her sister's appearance in a manner which belies her resentment for the attention MARY has received for killing the child soldier. The result is a complex portrait of the desires, fears and obstacles faced by people living in such circumstances.

Before each scene begins, its title is projected onto the set in a bright white light. For example, the first scene begins with the projection: 'The AIDS Genocide. The Prescription' (3). These titles, reminiscent of newspaper headlines, frame each scene. The tension created by the titles and the scenes of human suffering which follow highlight the media's often sensationalist and skin-deep portrayal of Africa and the human stories behind them. The wider political point this raises is one of social responsibility. As Urban points out:

In a real sense, tucker green's play envisions the consequences of Blair's widely reported statement made to the World Economic Forum in January 2005. There, Blair told his audience, 'If what was happening in Africa today was happening in any other part of the world, there would be such a scandal and clamour that governments would be falling over themselves to act in response' (2008: 52).

This lack of responsibility, tucker green highlights, is rooted primarily in racism. However, she also draws attention to other barriers which prevent the individual from engaging with the politics of global solidarity which must necessarily transgress not only racial divides but also ethnic, economic and national

borders. In particular, she takes women to task as recipients of oppression who refuse to see or act beyond the confines of their own racial / social / ethnic / economic limitations.

When Mary finds out from her sister that only twelve people signed the petition for her release and less than ten marched for her, she launches into a monologue which attacks women ('bitches') who do not support each other:

MARY: So what happened to the womanist bitches? / ...The feminist bitches? / ...The professional bitches. / What happened to them? / What about the burn their bra bitches? / The black bitches / the rootsical bitches / the white the brown bitches / the right-on bitches / what about *them*? (61-62).

By listing different races, Tucker Green speaks to a diverse audience. Although the play is geared towards inverting images of poverty, disease, and violence associated with non-whites, the play also raises questions for a black British audience and their situation within the West and relationship to the third world. For all women, Mary is an example. At the end she asserts herself and says defiantly: 'Least I done something. I done something – / I did' (63).

The relationships between each set of characters adds to the play's overall message in microcosm. Each pairing of characters reveals a relationship of antagonism, disloyalty and selfishness. It is this ego – which finds physical representation in the husband and wife ego-characters, and again in those of the older sister and her boyfriend at the end of the play – which impairs a symbiotic and loving relationship. These relationships reinforce Tucker Green's message of the individual's failure to see through the eyes of the other, and the way in which a culture of greed and selfishness have fostered a world where people dehumanize one another in order to appease guilt, or as a justification for hurting them.

Ultimately, the play is about breaking down divides in an attempt to draw attention to the need for a global humanism. By using white actors to play characters typically associated with black Africans, the play literally brings the

third world into the body of the first and the global into the local where we are them and they, us. The set, an azure playing space surrounded by rocks, reiterates this idea. It represents the sky, which connects and unites the globe. It is on this globalized stage that tucker green's drama unfolds.

### ***generations***

*generations* is a very short piece (less than thirty minutes) and is a simple yet poignant play about the devastations of AIDS in South Africa. The play explores urgent African themes, reflecting tucker green's global black ethical viewpoint. *generations* presents a family of three generations (two sisters, their parents and their grandparents) preparing a meal. The family banter with each other about who taught who to cook and how each couple came together. As the play progresses a family member leaves: first the younger sister, then the elder sister and her boyfriend, the father and then the mother until just the grandparents remain. With each character's 'death' the dialogue between the family begins again and is repeated becoming increasingly shorter as the family dwindles. The cast is supported by a South African choir positioned around the audience area. As the audience enter the space the choir sings a dirge comprising a list of names, which represents the many South Africans who have died from AIDS. As each character leaves the stage, they join the choir and their names are sung and added to the list of the deceased. The play ends with the choir singing the South African national anthem. Without mentioning the word AIDS, which highlights the culture of silence and stigma associated with the disease in Africa where it is still a taboo, the play dramatically portrays the effects of the disease on a personal and national level. As one reviewer noted: 'The statistics are rendered human and the tragedy of an entire continent made personal in Debbie Tucker Green's [sic] devastating play' (Gardner, 2007).

The play's staging at the Young Vic accentuated the emotional impact of the piece by immersing the audience in a participatory and sensuous experience. The theatre space was transformed into a kitchen in a South African township. The floor was covered in red earth (typical of South African soil) and the audience sat around the playing space on up-turned drinks crates. In the centre was the kitchen with pots on the stove and the smell of stew in the air. The choir

was positioned throughout the audience adding a highly emotional soundtrack which amplified the poignancy of the drama. The holistic staging located the drama within a representation of South Africa, signified on multiple sensory levels. The play's highly personal depiction of a family represents the nation in microcosm: the local is made national, and through its performance in London, the national becomes global.

The personal drama is presented through the ritual of cooking. As the family, discuss methods of preparation, boast about personal skills and joke about how they met their partners, tucker green highlights the meal as the nucleus of family: it is through cooking we see a family come together and share their stories and skills with the next generation. The tragedy, tucker green suggests, is not only the breakdown of families in terms of people; the loss of memories, history, traditions and skills are also at stake. By placing the two rituals of cooking and funerals (signified by the choir) together, the former associated with life, the latter with death, tucker green underlines the dark irony of AIDS itself as a deadly virus transmitted through the act of creation.

Presenting complex emotional issues and character interactions through the form of a pared-down ritual is a hallmark of tucker green's dramaturgy. The repetitive sections of dialogue in *generations*, which begin again with each family member's passing, resembles the prescribed order of events which characterizes ritual practices. tucker green does not, however, draw on specific ethnically located African rituals in her dramaturgy (as found, for example, in the works of Soyinka). Instead, she uses the ritual of everyday in order to create a distinctly contemporary ritual theatre.

According to Osita Okagbue:

Two key ideas arising from the African cosmological system and which have affected dramatic structuring as well as providing the ideational matrix for plays both in Africa and the Caribbean are the relationships between the living and the dead, and between them and other forces of nature [...], the other is the cyclic view of life (an expansive universe that is in perpetual flux and thus demands an expansive mode of perception and expression) (1997: 122).



Both notions are present in *generations*. The choir becomes symbolic of the world of the dead, and the play's ritualistic dramatic structure and focus on the ritual of cooking both tap into the notion of the 'cyclic view of life'.

Okagbue identifies the common use of what he refers to as the 'ritual-dream form' in African and Caribbean plays. These plays by writers such as Soyinka and Walcott, typically employ a dream-like structure which disrupts time / space unities and linear plots, and rely on a more circular, episodic structure and use of symbols. The audience's understanding of these plays, in line with African cosmology, 'works more through a process of cumulative association rather than as a linear continuum of events' (1997: 124). Like a dream, the disjointed sequences which find order as a whole on reflection support 'the African cosmological system in which action and events acquire meaning in relation to other events and actions and only when all have been seen or experienced' (1997: 124).

This theatrical representation of an African cosmology may also be traced in Tucker Green's work. Although *generations* explores AIDS, the subject matter is never stated, and the characters are never given the opportunity to rationally express their emotions. Instead, the piece operates more impressionistically, producing a feeling rather than a discussion of loss and the social implications of AIDS. Through the repetitive dialogue and circular action, meaning is made not by linear progression but rather by what Okagbue defines above as 'a process of cumulative association'. And, it is only at the end of the piece that, when considered as a whole, one may reflect on its full implications. The symbolism of the cooking ritual signifying home, nourishment, the passing on of traditions and skills also acquires meaning through repetition. In each cycle a family member disappears. The food is uneaten and preparation begins again. In the process, the notion of waste, futility, and the impact of the regression the disease is causing in society is underlined. Thus the natural order of death is reversed.

## ***truth and reconciliation***

*truth and reconciliation* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 2011. The play also marked tucker green's debut as a theatre director.

Using the form of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC),<sup>149</sup> *truth and reconciliation* stages the meeting (and non-meeting) of victims and perpetrators of crimes against humanity. The play is made up of disconnected and interwoven vignettes set in five countries which share a common experience of prolonged conflict and trauma: Bosnia in 1996, South Africa in 1998, Northern Ireland in 1999, Rwanda in 2005, Zimbabwe in 2007. In each vignette, through the meetings of victims and perpetrators (and in the South African case the refusal of the perpetrator to meet a victim's family), tucker green explores whether the truth can ever be unearthed and if indeed it will lead to reconciliation.

In South Africa, a family of three generations waits in a TRC court for the man who killed MAMA's daughter twenty-two years previously. In a *Gacaca* court in Rwanda, Stella confronts the man who killed her husband. In Bosnia, two war criminals try to shift the blame for acts they committed when confronted by their victim, a pregnant woman. In Zimbabwe, a husband berates his wife for speaking openly against the government. In a later scene the wife has disappeared and the husband accuses a woman of being involved in her disappearance. In Northern Ireland, two mothers who have lost their sons clash over who should take responsibility for their son's actions. The scenes set in Bosnia and Northern Ireland are brief and more attention is paid to the African narratives. The lesser developed 'white' scenes seem somewhat tokenistic – used as an expansive device to highlight the wider, global context of conflict and to disallow any easy racial / third world stereotyping. Nevertheless, the emotional complexity of the African characters and emotional weight of their scenes render clear tucker green's principal focus.

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<sup>149</sup> From 1996 to 1998, the TRC heard evidence from thousands of testimonies of the atrocities of apartheid from both victims and perpetrators. In the play the form of South Africa's TRC is used as a conceit to explore the meetings of victims and perpetrators from a range of national contexts. Rwanda has held a similar process run through its *Gacaca* Court system. However, Zimbabwe, Bosnia and Northern Ireland have not yet undergone truth and reconciliation processes.

The play presents a negative view of the ability to discover the truth and the possibility of reconciliation. Characteristically for Tucker Green, the play explores the pain of the victims mainly from the perspective of women, who are either direct recipients of violence (Bosnia), family members of a victim (South Africa, Rwanda) or perceived as perpetrators (Zimbabwe, Northern Ireland). Characters are nameless and specificities kept to a minimum. Truth in the play is presented as something that is deliberately withheld, framed by power and self-serving. Men in particular are constructed as gatekeepers of truth who try to prevent women from speaking out against injustice (Zimbabwe), prevent them from learning the truth (Rwanda) or try to mediate what is spoken about (Northern Ireland). The nature of truth as highly subjective and illusive is reiterated by Tucker Green's often ambiguous portrayal of character and situation. Tucker Green deliberately resists clarifying who people are and why they are there, forcing the audience to decipher who is a victim or perpetrator and the nature of their crime. The repetitive language and oblique character interactions further highlight how language is used to avoid truth, providing a means to circumvent the facts.

As with *generations*, Tucker Green supports her thematic exploration through a performed everyday ritual. The interactions of the characters hinge on the ritual of meetings. The seemingly banal convention of offering someone a seat and allowing them to speak first in a meeting is a motif repeated throughout the play with such frequency that it becomes ritualized. The effect is a deconstruction of the everyday which reveals the power-dynamics at play that govern human interaction. To sit down (or not) is either to hand over (or withhold) power to (from) the person standing. Where one sits is equally an indicator of one's guilt or innocence. In Zimbabwe when HUSBAND confronts WOMAN whom he accuses of being behind his wife's disappearance she refuses to sit opposite him in the designated chair of the guilty party. Instead she accuses him of being responsible for his wife's abduction for not being a proper man / husband and not preventing his wife from becoming involved in political activities, and offers him the 'guilty chair'. In the court in South Africa the grandmother vainly tries to coax her daughter to sit down with the rest of the family as a sign of solidarity

for when the perpetrator arrives. However, the mother refuses, saying '[n]ot before / one of / *them* / sits down / in front of me / on their hard chair / first' (44).

The audience sit on the same hard chairs in a circle around the playing area. The implication is that the audience is also on trial and the power dynamics of seating positions are echoed by the audience's position in the round: each audience member is confronted by a person opposite them, replicating the power dynamic in the play that hinges around a confrontational separation of 'them' and 'us'.

The implication of the audience in the drama and its positioning, which highlights and destabilizes the them / us divide, echoes a major theme of the piece: the divide between the living and the dead. As Okagbue states, an African world-view does not include a clear demarcation between the worlds of the living and the dead:

Despite the diverse cultures and peoples that make up the African world, there exist certain cultural and perceptual constants which constitute what can rightly be called the African world and cosmological system. The African cosmology is predicated upon the notion of life as an experience of totality...It is a cosmology which assumes a mutual dependency between its three realms of existence: of the living, the dead, the unborn and the three time schemes of past, present and future (Okagbue, 1997: 122).

For Okagbue, this fundamental belief system informs the dramaturgy and thematic choices of African and African diasporic playwrights. (Only the African characters are visited by spirits and in performance the scenes where the spirits appear to the living are not accompanied by surprise but are played as if such an experience is expected and quotidian).

tucker green dramatizes this African world-view by incorporating two spirit characters in the play. Mama's murdered daughter visits the policeman who shot her, and Rwandan widow Stella's husband Moses appears to his killer. These spirits resemble the African ancestors who are spirits of the community's

deceased. Because of their maintained interest in and contact with the community, they occupy a position between the living and the dead.

In the play, the spirit characters, in line with African belief systems, are there to assist their families. Their role is not to achieve reconciliation between themselves and their perpetrators but rather to secure the well-being of their living families and to seek vengeance for their murders. The ghost of Moses tells his Hutu murderer that, 'We are not honourable dead...we are not forgiving' (72) and that he will continue to haunt him until he tells Stella the truth. It is only through the interaction between the living and the dead that victims engage directly with perpetrators, reiterating the appalling truth that these truths are literally buried forever. The conversations between the living and the dead provided the only moments in the play that shed light upon what happened to the victims. When the dead South African Child haunts the white South African Officer we learn the details of how she was killed. Bleakly, these are truths her family will never know. The visitation takes place when she died 22 years ago where she tells the officer:

CHILD: Twenty-two years from now / you will sit opposite my mama / my nana / my brother / and my sister... / you will tell them [...] You will go / You will go / You will not be late / You will not be willing / But you will go / And you will tell them.

OFFICER:

CHILD:

OFFICER: ... Ja / I will go. (79-80)

However, Tucker Green reveals the future and we know that he never attended the TRC hearing. The implication is that the truth can only be really known between the victim and perpetrator. As the victims are all dead / missing (except in the Bosnia situation), Tucker Green implies that reconciliation can never truly be achieved.

## **Conclusion**

tucker green's representation of Africa has not avoided criticism. The reviewer for *The Guardian* felt that *stoning mary* did not conform enough to notions of African theatrical aesthetics:

But, in the end, it feels like a staged poem: what I'd really like to see Tucker Green [sic] do is combine her verbal gifts with song and dance to create a real piece of total theatre (Billington, 2005).

And *The Independent* felt that in the same play her representation of Africa was endemic of a Western homogenized representation:

And by clumping together these different situations [HIV, stoning, child soldiers], Tucker Green seems to imply a generic Africa; a dark continent (Hanks, 2005).

While the former point is somewhat racist in its assumptions of black aesthetics, the latter fails to understand the point of the play which was to challenge such typically Western two-dimensional representations of the African 'other' by casting them in white roles.

Globalization has brought about a heightened interest in locales outside of the parochial nation. The 'Third World', particularly Africa, is increasingly becoming a focus and setting in contemporary British plays by white British playwrights. For black playwrights, Africa as inspiration and setting is nothing new. tucker green's representations seem to be influenced by both positions. Unlike a number of her black British counterparts and African American influences, tucker green does not access African symbolism, history, and mythology in order to explore her own identity. Neither does she represent Africa in terms of a spiritual or ancestral home. What distinguishes her work, however, from mainstream white Western plays about Africa is her dramaturgy, which draws on an African cosmological system, while her position as an African diasporic woman engenders an ethical and political engagement with Africa based on global black solidarity.

Although her plays deal with important social and political issues about Africa, her treatment is less concerned with a political interrogation of the continent's failing, and is more geared towards examining the very human consequences of the issues being explored. Through their staging in mainstream British venues, her plays force a black and white Western reassessment of issues confronting the third world. Osborne defines her thematic approach as an exploration of the 'epic dimensions of humanity's moral universe' (Osborne, 2007b: 239). However, that is not to say that she fits into some 'post-Black' category. Indeed it is through staging blackness (or its absence) that she draws attention to black global issues.

# Conclusion



This thesis has explored what a transnational lens brings to an analysis of black British theatre. In the introduction, I discussed how existing scholarship has tended towards using the nation as the dominant analytic framework. I argued that even discussions that employ less nation-centric parameters (by using diaspora as a framework or a postcolonial methodology) have tended to fall back on the nation as the principal unit of analysis. In such cases, the concept of hybridity (or syncretism) has occupied a prominent position in theoretical approaches that decode black British theatre as demonstrative of the evolution and re-definition of Britishness. Some discussions, following a multicultural model, conclude that British theatre, and by extension Britishness, have been radically altered in a positive way as a result of the black presence in Britain. Others, however, retain a belief that black theatre, and indeed the black experience, continues to suffer from marginalization as a result of an ingrained racism foundational to what being British and what British theatre mean. My thesis follows and supports existing scholarship that claims black British theatre has re-defined Britishness and the British theatre landscape; yet, racism, albeit in increasingly subtle ways, continues to influence its formation, production and reception. However, this thesis also acknowledges, following Gilroy, that the historical experience of marginalization and racism has led to the formation of sustained ties with the original homeland and other diasporic black communities. It also takes the view that as a result of globalization (facilitated by enhanced communication and transportation technologies), diasporic communities have been reconfigured and strengthened in ways that cannot solely be explained through the experience of marginalization in the host society.

If one is to account for the historical processes that have shaped black British theatre and the complex spatial, cultural and political contexts in which it has been generated, a broader analytic framework is necessary. By examining the connections between black theatre practitioners in Britain with the spaces of the USA, Africa and the Caribbean, I have sought to reveal the circulation of ideas, people and products that have brought into being complex networks of identification, influence and exchange. These networks have shaped black British theatre in various ways that stretch beyond the geographic, political and / or imagined confines of the nation-space. Concurrently, I acknowledge the UK

as a site that structures these connections in specific and unique ways. In this light, my approach has not sought to reinstate a binary, suggesting that the nation should be supplanted and that black British theatre is proof of a trend of global deterritorialization. A transnational model, I have argued, provides a more appropriate framework, which can accommodate both national and outer-national influences. Ultimately, I believe that this approach enhances our understanding while not, in any way, diminishing the importance of a national approach when looking at the specificity of a material anti-racist politics as expressed through black British theatre.

A transnational approach forces one to confront questions of the origination of particular sets of ideas, practices or people; how and why they have travelled; whether they have undergone a transformation in the process; and the purpose which that adaptation serves. Dividing the thesis into the spaces of the USA, the Caribbean and Africa allows one to filter and track these circulations. Individually, each chapter reveals the impact of each geo-cultural-political space on black British identity formation (as expressed through theatre), as well as their specific material and ideological effect on black British theatre creation. The divisions reiterate that I am looking at complex heterogeneous material informed by multiple strands of influence. Nevertheless, connections between the chapters emerge, which illustrate historically embedded circuits of influence and exchange that have routinely transgressed national borders. Taken as a whole, the thesis supports the idea that black British theatre not only merits a transnational approach, but is, in fact, a transnational practice in itself.

Momentarily sidelining the *British* part of the term 'black British' forces an approach that must look beyond the nation. This is most apparent if we look at black theatre in Britain as an expression of a heterogeneous group of people characterized by a recent and continued experience of immigration and the resultant formation of diasporic communities. The African and Caribbean chapters highlight the necessity of seeing Britain's black population in terms of its ethnic diversity. Britain's black population comprises first-generation immigrants predominantly from Africa and the Caribbean, as well as British-born blacks with immigrant (grand)parents. (In addition, there is the mixed-race population, some of whom also identify as 'black'). Too often, the internal

complexities of the black British demographic are ignored in favour of a catchall that provides an inaccurate sense of cohesion. When internal differences are examined, they are viewed from the position of class, gender or sexuality, while ethnic differences remain unchallenged. Although second- and third-generation black Britons are differentiated from their (grand)parents by being born in the UK and therefore share commonality in that respect, this thesis has found that their specific heritage continues to play an important role in their identity formation and has a substantial impact upon theatre creation.

The Caribbean chapter reveals that the trend of disassociating 'indigenous' black Britons from their (grand)parental homeland is premature. Like all immigrant communities, there are shifts between the experiences and perspectives of first and later generations. However, recent plays by Caribbean-origin playwrights continue to be set in the Caribbean. Such plays continue to represent black British communities as generationally stratified, whereby fundamental differences between characters are articulated through their proximity to the moment of migration. In other words, migration remains a major organizing factor for a playwright's construction of characters, thus revealing how black Britishness is still defined in relation to the Caribbean. And, despite the fact British-born black youth are often discussed in ways that highlight their increased disentanglement from their grandparental homeland, their representation in theatre draws attention to how the Caribbean continues to inflect identity formation. The representation of urban youth sub-cultures, in particular, has persistently highlighted how their sense of self throughout the decades has been shaped by the Caribbean, whether by adopting Rastafarian culture in the 1980s or yardie culture in the 1990s and new millennium. Investigations into the transnational economic, political and social relationships that exist between second and third-generation black Britons and the Caribbean are only beginning. Drawing conclusions based on a playwright's representation as indicative of the practices of an entire sector of the population should be treated with caution; however, given the number of plays written in a realist mode that draw attention to this relationship, the evidence would suggest that transnational ties with the Caribbean remain integral to black British cultural expression and identity formation. Indeed, a significant majority of theatre makers take an active role in perpetuating these links, whether through

programming plays by Caribbean writers (e.g. Talawa) or by playwrights who, in their dramas, persistently draw attention to the past and its impact on the present. These issues complicate perspectives that view the contemporary black British population in light of an increasingly diminished connection with the (grand)parental homeland whereby the moment of migration is relegated to an historical event that is no longer consequential.

Contemporary plays by second-generation African-origin playwrights grapple with similar themes of identity, belonging and culture-clash dealt with by the Caribbean-origin second-generation writers that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s – Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues* (1991) and Agbaje's *Belong* (2012), for example. However, the overview of African playwrights in Britain reveals important differences that emerge as a result of different patterns of settlement and cultural origins. In terms of settlement, many African plays by first-generation immigrants (up until the 1990s) were written by temporary residents, reflecting the trend of Africans coming to the UK for education or fleeing persecution and then returning to the homeland. These plays tended to remain politically engaged with Africa or to take on the theme of exile. A number of South African plays, in particular, emerged at this time by touring companies, as well as by South Africans resident in Britain who had fled the Apartheid regime. However, the political engagement with Africa has not abated. More recent plays by permanent residents continue to engage with the homeland such as Biyi Bandele (Abacha regime in Nigeria), Patrice Naiambana (the Civil War in Sierra Leone) and *Two Gents* (Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe). The African presence complicates now normative narratives of the black experience in Britain, which follow that blacks were invited to Britain in the immediate post-war period to supply labour and, due to a racist reception, were blamed for increased social problems, leading to greater immigration control targeted specifically at limiting black settlement. In the post-war period, the African presence presents an image of Britain as a safe-haven, a liberal and tolerant space committed to helping people and supportive of struggles against injustice. The market for plays that explore African politics and African refugees in Britain, coupled with their warm reception in the media, also conflict with ideas of a subliminally racist audience. The spike in the African population since the 1990s also draws attention to less stringent British immigration control (and

the concurrent deepening political and economic crises in a number of African countries). The establishment of African British theatre companies, such as Tiata Fahodzi, and the proliferation of plays, reflect the growing, particularly Nigerian British, demographic. This increased visibility draws attention to the need African Britons have felt to create theatre that represents their specific experience. Implicitly, this critiques the black British theatre establishment, which, despite claiming to be representative of the black experience in Britain, was not adequately responding to this sector's needs.

Contemporary African British plays reflect this complex and growing demographic, characterized by different African nationalities as well as their status as either refugees, asylum seekers, or middle-class economic migrants and their British-born children, growing up in a society that continues to bear the legacy of the black Caribbean experience of the post-war period. As well as reflecting a more tolerant British society (in term of black / white relations), they also register the effects of intra-racial agitation, multicultural policies, which have not prioritized integration, and globalization, which has facilitated the possibility of increased connection with the homeland. As a result, diasporic communities have emerged which are characterized by political, economic, social and cultural dual belonging. Dramas by African Britons produced in the new millennium reflect these changes. They reflect less of a need to assert a black British identity, and instead explore the occupation of dual identities structured around dual national spaces.

Black plays that traditionally have represented Caribbean culture and tended to focus on the urban working-class in a realist mode, are enriched by the presence of plays that represent specific African cultures, languages, values and performance styles. In particular, satire, the absurd and physical theatre styles have been carried across from Africa. Since the 1990s, dramas by Nigerian Britons are the most prominent, reflecting the largest African British demographic and the country's well-entrenched theatrical culture. The styles of African British plays also challenge assumptions of African theatre as rooted in storytelling and ritual, notions commonly adopted by black (non-African) theatre practitioners to justify their work as influenced by and in dialogue / continuum with a black African diasporic aesthetic.

The juxtaposition of the Caribbean and African chapters reveals how the recent history of immigration continues to define the black population in Britain in specific and differentiated ways. It challenges discourses of belonging that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s which, relegating the moment of arrival to Britain to the 1950s and 1960s, effectively closed the door on the way in which the black British demography is understood. An increased focus on theatre by second-generation black Britons representing the third-generation has been accompanied by assumptions that the legacy of migration has decreased in importance to British-born blacks with only a (grand)parental connection to an original immigrant. This analysis challenges the idea that British-born blacks become less connected to their ancestral homelands. On the contrary, this thesis finds that transnational practices, which maintain connection with the homeland, persist. Accepting a model of immigration that is not entirely based upon the premise of eventual acculturation is vital to a transnational perspective, which, on a macro level, argues that globalization has resulted in major shifts to patterns of migration, settlement and the way in which identity, national belonging and citizenship are perceived and practiced.

When read together, however, as interfacing chapters, other interesting issues are raised. The chapters reveal playwrights on both sides who have examined the relationship between African and Caribbean Britons. Themes of hostility emerge, drawing attention to the existence of old antagonisms that lie at the heart of Caribbean / African relations. The plays, as expressions of difference, undermine easy notions of solidarity; yet, at the same time, they act as calls for greater unity. Black Britishness is frequently perceived as a bad influence on African British youth (e.g. Agbaje's *Gone Too Far*). Interestingly, the same vilification emerges in Williams' *Fallout* and *Joe Guy*. However, in Kwei-Armah's plays, particularly in *Statement of Regret*, the African characters are drawn as arrogant and dismissive of black British issues, particularly those confronting young men. Thematically, the African British plays draw attention to the difficulty new African arrivals have in terms of fitting into a black British identity framed by Caribbeanness and a historical context of anti-racist struggle and working-class experience. New African arrivals and their children have not inherited these legacies, yet find themselves in a context very much defined by past

experiences of race and class-based tensions. This also has aesthetic and dramaturgical implications, as plays by African Britons must negotiate an established model. A number of African British plays reflect this conformity (Agbaje), while others reject it (Ellams). Plays by new African arrivals contrast with African-origin black British playwrights who have had less contact with their African roots. Second-generation playwrights such as Tunde Ikoli, Mojisola Adebayo, Valerie Mason-John and Lemn Sissay, who were cut off from their African roots through an absent parent(s), rarely reflect their African origins in any specific ways. Instead, they were acculturated into the black (Caribbean) community and their works reflect its thematic and stylistic influences.

The presence of the 'new' African diaspora and their dramatic output problematizes the notion of African diasporic identification based upon a shared experience of slavery. In the past, the African diaspora has usually been understood to refer to blacks forcibly removed from Africa during the slave trade. The slave trade, which emerges as a persistent trope in black British drama, lies at the heart of Caribbean and African American identity. However, beyond it being seen in terms of a broad shared-experience of racial oppression, it remains unrelated to the history and culture of the majority of Africans. Yet, the impact of slavery remains visible in black British theatre aesthetics by the way in which, in some black British plays, there is an underlying belief that all blacks are African. This Afrocentrism positions Africa as a place undifferentiated by ethnicity and / or race and forces it into a pre-colonial timeframe. In theatre, this emerges when artists claim that their aesthetic is somehow 'black' because it uses ritual and storytelling performance modes. This belief seems blind to the fact that all theatre is based on ritual and storytelling and that these modes exist in every culture and form the backbone of their respective performance / theatre traditions. Contemporary African theatre, which often embraces Western theatre forms and texts (sometimes critically, but increasingly less so since African independence), forces a re-evaluation of the idea that ritual and storytelling are signifiers of a somehow authentic and unique African approach. Furthermore, the non-specific use of ritual or storytelling in some black British theatre (in contrast to a writer such as Soyinka whose dramas weave Yoruba culture, traditions and language) is in danger of being no different to the West's appropriation of the theatrical

techniques from the East. The un-critical use of 'African' performance raises broader issues in relation to solidarity between Western blacks and third world blacks.

By juxtaposing the symbolic with lived experience in representations of Africa, the chapters bring into focus a long overdue comparison of old and new imaginings of the African homeland and its consequences for defining black theatre. Both the Caribbean and Africa chapters discuss black Britons in relation to their (ancestral) homelands and chart the persistent presence of the homeland upon their sense of self as diasporic communities. The chapters also reveal how first-generation immigrants' experience of (post)colonialism (in conjunction with African American Black Power discourses) were reformulated in the British context in important ways which shaped second-generation black British identity. Similarly, cultural practices from both zones have also inflected the content and form of black British theatre. The meeting of black Caribbean and African-origin people on British soil has also contributed to how both communities come into being and to their self-perception as diasporic communities and black Britons. The theatrical representation of ethnic difference within the black British population and its ramifications, both positive and negative, provides the bridge between the Caribbean and Africa chapters.

The USA chapter, which begins the thesis, examines the Americanization of black Britain and black British theatre. The chapter, representative of a space that has not meaningfully contributed to the black British demographic, adds a third dimension to discussions of diaspora, which have tended to focus only on the relationship between home and hostlands. It complicates questions of inheritance by highlighting how influences, not constrained by geography, birthplace or ancestral origins, are circulated through networks underwritten by race-based identification. In such instances, the circulation of ideas through cultural products (music, books, plays, films) as well as international travel, as opposed to permanent settlement, become the focus. The USA chapter demonstrates how Black Power politics and its legacy contributed to a redefinition of a black British sense of self and black British political organization. The similarity in experience in terms of being a minority suffering racial discrimination and the global visibility of black American politics and



culture have meant that African America has provided a strong site of comparative identification for blacks in Britain. This has had important ramifications whereby the African American experience has often been mapped onto the black British one. In particular, Black Power politics and its legacy have had a sizeable impact on black British theatre's formation and specific ideological approaches that remain visible today. Aesthetic innovations have also crossed the Atlantic, as have African American histories, myths, role models and culture – particularly music – which continue to fascinate and resonate with black Britons and consequently find dramatic representation. African American individuals, both activists and theatre practitioners, have also played important shaping roles, both in Britain and from afar. However, despite their own internal struggles for equality, African Americans, by dint of being housed within the body of the world's super power, have achieved a level of global visibility unrivalled by other black communities. As a result, the line between influence and dominance becomes blurred when looking at the African American / black British relationship. Given the influential relationship between black America and Britain, it is unsurprising that the factors that have constituted a definable 'black' aesthetic, a quest so crucial to the history and development of African American theatre, are visible in black British theatre. In particular, discourses that see Africa as the ancestral homeland and slavery as the starting point of the African diaspora have shaped this aesthetic.

This thesis finds that an African American theatrical aesthetic rooted in diasporic discourse that draws on Africanisms (or cultural practices seen to have developed in the USA but which can be traced back to West Africa) in order to highlight the impact of the past on the present and its dialogic interplay, forms the bedrock of an African American approach which has been transferred to black Britain. (It has also had an equal impact in theorizing black British theatre). Thus, as seen in Kwei-Armah's and Adebayo's plays, black Britishness is persistently seen through a prism of slavery. And, although this forms the history of Caribbean and African American settlement, it does not account for the historical settlement of blacks in Britain in the post-war period. Neither, as discussed in the Africa chapter, does it include African British settlement. Black women's theatre in Britain is also very influenced by African American women playwrights, whose approaches also developed in reaction to the heterosexual,

male-oriented politics of Black Power. Although the politics of black women theatre practitioners in Britain is informed by the Caribbean (Yvonne Brewster, Jacqueline Rudet, Debbie Tucker Green) and, to some extent, Africa (Tucker Green), black women's approaches to theatre seem on the whole to operate much more along Western lines (UK-USA). Overwhelmingly across black British theatre, role models and heroic figures that are either the focus of the play or receive mention (as well as influences cited by artists in interviews) are African Americans, suggesting the USA's key position as a site of potent inspiration and emulation.

The USA chapter, because of its placement at the start of the thesis, underwrites much of the discussion in the Caribbean and Africa chapters. Attempts to foster a 'black' aesthetic and the politics that inform this quest emerge concurrently in the USA, Africa and the Caribbean, and are inextricably connected with various transnationally informed political and cultural nationalist movements including anti-slavery, Pan-Africanism, the Harlem Renaissance, Negritude, anti-colonialism and Civil Rights / Black Power. The aim of providing a counter-discourse on ideological, thematic and aesthetic levels emerges across black theatre, making their lineages virtually impossible to disentangle. However, as the USA has the oldest tradition of black theatre and because the political movements seemed to emerge from the USA (even though they were led by many Caribbean and African immigrants) and because of its global visibility, the USA is positioned in such a way that draws attention to its constant influence. Thus, the Caribbean chapter draws attention to how creolization (a concept seen as 'indigenous' to the Caribbean) was informed by African America, particularly the Harlem Renaissance and later Black Power, especially in regards to exploring and exposing Africanisms in Caribbean culture. A black British identity informed by Caribbean culture and politics is therefore already heavily intertwined with African America. Thus, the new African arrivals to the UK who confront an established black Britishness are confronting a community which is already shaped by its relationship with the USA both directly and, more complexly, via the Caribbean. Indeed, many Africans arrive in the UK with their own cultures and politics already meshed in these global circuits with African America at their helm. The USA section also draws attention to discourses of

black solidarity based on essentialist belief systems, which continue to operate in the black British context.

While a transnational perspective raises an awareness of the need for increased differentiation when using the descriptor 'black', it also acknowledges the importance of 'black' as an identification based on the assumption of shared experience. Griffin states that the theatre of black and Asian women

does not readily fall into the remit of postcolonial, intercultural or world theatre. The latter frequently perpetuate historical divisions by exploring 'the other' as *other*. Instead, I want to argue that although the plays under consideration bear the mark of those divisions, the work itself is produced by writers who do not necessarily view themselves as 'other' within Britain and who are now claiming their place at the table of British high culture (2003: 9).

While Griffin centres black and Asian women playwrights as rightfully British, this thesis attempts to foster a narrative which does not have a single centre. In other words, identifying oneself as British does not necessarily preclude an *other* identification. Blacks, as a result of being historically interpolated as 'other', have forged solidarity underwritten by a global shared experience of racism. Despite the massive complications in talking of a 'black' community, 'blackness' as a political position based upon assumptions of commonality continues to be a pervasive shaper of subjectivity. In this way, this thesis supports Hall's claims of the co-existence of two 'phases' or 'moments' which inform evolving conceptions of blackness in Britain: the collective use of the term which elides difference in favour of unity and the internally differentiated position which refutes the heterosexist hegemony of the latter. Whilst Hall acknowledges that the overarching notion of 'Blackness' has yielded to incorporate multiple subject positions based on difference, the political importance of the project based upon a constructed collective identity nevertheless endures, so long as racism exists:

they are two phases of the same movement, which constantly overlap and interweave. Both are framed by the same historical conjuncture and

both are rooted in the politics of anti-racism and the post-war black experience in Britain (Hall, 1988: 27).

Acceptance of the notion of black solidarity binds this thesis; allowing one to explain blackness in collective terms draws attention to the links that have been forged between remote black communities, giving credence to the notion of a black diaspora. Diaspora in this sense needs to be understood in terms of discourses of nationalism. In this light, a diaspora is understood in the same way as a nation, conceived as an imaginary community who share a common history and origin.

By focusing on the influence of three black spaces, the thesis shifts the discourse away from the post-colonial undercurrent that has channelled much black British scholarship into binaries of margin / centre, black / white, victim / oppressor. Instead, the focus of the thesis, driven by its structure, draws attention to intra-racial influence and exchange. In no way does this deny the resistance model. The roots of the approaches and influences discussed can all be traced back to the struggle for self-determination and representation. However, by shifting the lens away from a white / black dialectic, new possibilities of seeing emerge which look at other ways in which black Britons may imagine themselves. To see black British theatre solely in relation to white resistance has important implications. Firstly, such an approach divests attention away from the internal workings of black British theatre. In other words, its aims beyond resistance become obscured. Its messages to a black (or even a 'universal') audience are sidelined by interpretations, which, filtered through anti-racist politics, persistently view black theatre only in relation to whiteness. In much the same way that postcolonialism as a theory has been criticized for maintaining the West at the centre of its discourse, this thesis attempts to reconfigure such interpretive models. Thus, in the African chapter, postcolonialism is critiqued. In the Caribbean chapter, the creolization model is used and mapped onto the British situation to look at British cultural production not as a battle over black and white but to see it in productive terms – in other words, producing a new culture. In the USA chapter, a Black Power reading strategy is used which explicitly ignores the white audience. Furthermore, although these influences may have stemmed from a resistance method and

may be rooted in that history, they are not necessarily automatically resistant. Therefore, it complicates assumptions that storytelling or African traditions are in some way inherently resistant. Just as a play by a black person cannot automatically be assumed to be resistant, neither can a particular tradition. In many instances, the reverse is happening. Caribbean culture has moved from initially feeding a politics of resistance to becoming harnessed by some youths to inform anti-social behaviour. African theatre rarely demonstrates the values of resistance which inform postcolonial theory; yet, it remains trapped within such interpretations, as it is insistently seen to be challenging the West even when it embraces and revels in Western culture or critiques traditional African practices. In the USA chapter, the fine line that exists between influence and hegemony is explored. Intra-racial networks also force a consideration of unequal exchange between Western and Third World blacks, raising issues of cultural appropriation that is often masked by a veneer of imagined communion. Using an African cosmological methodology to analyze texts may bring a new understanding to a play's meaning; however, it also highlights a romantic relationship with Africa that ultimately maintains notions of Africa as homogenous, black and, in the worst-cases, primitive.

Although the UK is not given a separate chapter, its presence as a space runs throughout the thesis providing it with cohesion. Although the influences of the USA, Caribbean and Africa are traced, it is within the space of the nation that these networks coalesce and produce distinct results which differentiate black British theatre practices from those in the USA, Caribbean or Africa. Issues in the plays are directed specifically at life in Britain. They reveal the material issues that black Britons confront vis-à-vis their local positioning; however, these issues are not approached and framed solely through the national and therefore should be interpreted through the various and complex transnational networks that exist. For this reason, the thesis has not focused on highlighting the differences between black British theatre and other black theatre practices, but the connections. The UK should also be seen as a space that has provided the possibility for and sustenance of these transnational connections. This has been the result of both negative and positive experiences. As previously discussed, racism has disallowed full acculturation, as have attempts to combat racism, such as multiculturalism which, in promoting tolerance of difference, has

also hindered full integration. On the positive side, the UK has not only continued to allow entry to new immigrants as well as asylum seekers, it has provided an economically stable, tolerant and democratic space, which has attracted people in search of a better life and allowed them to pursue their various political, cultural and social agendas. In terms of theatre, the possibility of free speech as well as the existence of subsidized theatre has afforded black British theatre the opportunity to grow and for artists to express themselves in ways largely unimaginable in Africa or the Caribbean. In comparison with the economically poor Caribbean and Africa, many of which have draconian governments that limit free speech and / or expressions of difference (especially in terms of women and homosexuals), the UK is a space of nurture and possibility. Likewise, it is in the UK where intra-racial and inter-ethnic connections have been facilitated and unity not only imagined, but also made possible. The UK should be seen as a common denominator, not only as a place of historical dominance against which people have struggled for self determination, but also as a place which brings the three disparate spaces of the USA, Caribbean and Africa together. In this light the UK becomes a crucible whereby black Britishness comes into being as a composite of ethnicities, cultural practices and political approaches defined by difference and cohesion.

What emerges from a transnational perspective is the perpetual interplay between the collective and the individual, solidarity yet differentiation. By drawing attention to influence, this thesis has been able to highlight networks of kinship and circuits along which ideas and practices travel and are reconfigured to meet the specific demands of the black British population. On one level, this contributes to our understanding of 'black' as a political category which enables solidarity and a sense of community which exists transnationally as a diaspora. On the other hand, it also draws attention to internal hegemonies that have emerged in relation to what black British means and the need for greater differentiation. To analyze black British theatre in relation to the spaces of the USA, the Caribbean and Africa is not to see it in isolation, as a discrete entity forged within a single social / cultural / political / geographical space, but in terms of a practice that emerges within and as a result of these connections. Despite being disparate, the spaces are all historically linked and this imbrication has manifested relationships that continue to be played out on the

British stage in ideological and aesthetic ways. It also draws attention to political strategies that have been transmitted between Africa, the Caribbean, the USA and the UK. It reveals how these strategies have been appropriated and appropriately transformed within a specific British context. Yet, nevertheless, despite their adaptation, the links suggest empathetic alliances which give credence to an overarching black solidarity that has existed historically and continues into the present, while also highlighting differentiation. This thesis, through its structure, allows one to contemplate how each space has impacted upon black British theatre in different ways over time, thus reiterating that black British theatre should be analyzed relationally and transnationally.

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