

**THEATRE, PERFORMANCE AND REPRESENTATION:**

**AFRICAN DIASPORIC IDENTITY ON THE BRITISH STAGE**

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**PHD THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE**

**JANUARY 2015**

**Submitted in partial fulfilment for the PhD in theatre and  
performance**

## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I give thanks to my maker, God Almighty, without whom this research would not have been possible.

I give thanks also for the support, understanding and patient diligence of my supervisor, Professor Osita Okagbue, who has been more like a father figure to me on this academic journey. He gave me the space to broaden and deepen my academic vocabulary and instilled a love of critical thinking.

I would like to extend special gratitude to Prof Robert Gordon, the Lead Investigator on the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project *Beyond the Linear Narrative- Fractured Narratives in Diasporic Writing and Performance in the Postcolonial Era*, with the support of Prof Helen Carr, Prof Blake Morrison and my supervisor Prof Osita Okagbue for the opportunity given me to serve as a postgraduate student on this project. My sincerest thanks goes to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for supporting this research project and sponsoring a conference trip to Kampala, Uganda in 2010.

I am extremely grateful to Dr Victor Ukaegbu, Dr Lynette Goddard, Ben Pester, and Dr Deirdre Osborne for their time and invaluable rigorous feedback on my writing that greatly impacted this research.

The roots of this research lie in my involvement with the theatre company Tiata Fahodzi and I am thankful to its founder Femi Elufowoju Jr. for his generosity in making the time to speak with me about his term with the company.

To my family and friends who are like family, I am eternally indebted to you for your patience, understanding, encouragement and the diverse ways in which you all kept me grounded and focused. I love you and thank you!

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my father, Mr Alexander Akyempon Ekumah, who did not live to see me finish this research but you were there at the start.

## ABSTRACT

The focus of this thesis is the performance of African diasporic identities through a unique theatre emerging from the second and third generations of peoples and communities of the African Diaspora in Britain. The politics, the dynamics, articulation and representation of these identities on the British stage, forms a major part of this investigation, which also goes beyond the stage to comment on British society itself.

The discipline of theatre and performance are appropriate vehicles to research the notion of African diasporic identity because they continue to be an essential part of any nation's cultural discourse on who, what and why they are. Nadine Holdsworth argues that theatre at a basic level is

intrinsically connected to nation because it enhances "national" life by providing a space for shared civil discourse... Theatre as a material, social and cultural practice, offers the chance to explore histories, behaviours, events and preoccupations in a creative communal realm that opens up potential for reflection and debate.  
(2010, p. 6)

The relationship between the current context of Britain and an emotional or physical link to Africa or the Caribbean and the negotiations that characterize that relationship underpin the examination of the constantly shifting diasporic identities

in this study. The theatre coming from these African diaspora communities is exhibiting characters on the British stage that are a reflection of African diasporic individuals who are no longer agreeing to be confined to the margins of society by claiming their rightful place in the public domain, in the centre themselves. The theatre is reflecting that by beginning to move outside the confines of the margins.

This investigation looks at a spectrum of African diasporic dramatists and theatre companies, examining how they use the theatre to explore the complex, multifaceted and subtly layered identities that the African in the diaspora has become, whilst revealing whether the current prominence of African diasporic dramatists in the mainstream is only perceived or confirm that indeed African diasporic identity has claimed the space to articulate being 'here' and also relating to 'there'

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## INTRODUCTION

### Setting the Stage

The landscape of contemporary British theatre, particularly in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has witnessed a certain vibrancy and diversity that has produced a proliferation of theatrical practices, unprecedented forms of representation and a new generation of playwrights, all of which has changed the face of British theatre from a predictable traditional canon to a more relevant and innovative field. This eclectic mix of work has been in response to major shifts, nationally and internationally, on the political, economic, social and cultural spheres. These include the terrorist attacks on the USA on 11 September 2001, Britain's support and alignment with USA to confront and put a stop to militant Islamism<sup>1</sup> and its resultant 'War on Terror' (2001) in Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The 7 July 2005 London bombings, by British born Muslims and its international repercussions have also given rise to questions of national identity, cultural representations and political legitimacy as positions shift and civil liberties tighten as Britain, the USA and its allies fight to protect their citizens and borders. Along side these world events, national shifts were also taking place, most significantly in the change in government from Conservative to Tony Blair's New Labour government in 1997, whose cultural and social policies had a direct impact on British theatre. Aleks Sierz' exploration into the phenomenon of new writing over the last decade explains:

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<sup>1</sup> See Aboul-Enein, (2010)

New Labour's financial generosity meant that all cultural institutions, including theatres, had to deliver on social policies: their mission was to create wider audience access, greater ethnic diversity and a more innovative product (Sierz, 2011, p. 2).

The policies under both Prime Minister Tony Blair (1997-2007) and his successor, Gordon Brown, (2007-2010) were indicative of an awareness of the tensions arising from the increased migration to Britain,<sup>2</sup> the cultural segregation that excluded minority communities from having their share and parity in a national debate, and the government's general concern for a national and cultural identity. Studies in this area have been instigated most significantly with the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, at the University of Birmingham, particularly under the decade long leadership of Stuart Hall, (1969-1979) because of the important links he made with race and ethnicity in the research into cultural studies. The work of Paul Gilroy, particularly in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) in which he examines the contribution of ethnic identities to the specific areas of British society in which he points out that

the scholarship and the political strategies that Britain's black settlers have generated and the underlying sense of England as a

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<sup>2</sup> These include for example, the early migrants arriving from Somalia during the 1990s who were escaping the civil war and the later arrival of the second generation who came to reunite with family members who were granted asylum in Britain. The arrival also of large numbers of Nigerians following the oil crisis and the turbulent years in the 90s during Sani Abacha's reign (1993-97) contributed to the already growing numbers of Nigerians and West Africans who have gradually settled in the UK since the 1960s. The mass migration of 2004 primarily from Europe also affected the tensions within the nation.

cohesive cultural community against which their self-conception has so often been denied. (Gilroy, 1993, p.2)

is equally strong with regards the place of diasporic Africans within the British space.<sup>3</sup>

The coalition government of a Conservative party and a Liberal Democratic party, led respectively by David Cameron and Nick Clegg (2010-2015) has had its own impact on the arts, engendering a considerable cut in the funding and support for the arts and creative industries. On 7<sup>th</sup> May 2015, the British public elected David Cameron back into 10 Downing Street as the British Prime Minister with a majority vote. Nick Clegg resigned as the leader of the Liberal Democrats following poor results at the polls. The most significant cuts of the coalition have been the Arts Council of England (ACE) 2011 cuts and its impact on the dramatists and practitioners within this study.<sup>4</sup> These are some of the undeniable concerns of the contemporary age that dramatists and practitioners in Britain are expressing on the contemporary British stage.

Amongst this transforming landscape, new voices of previously silent communities in Britain were beginning to emerge onto the field. This thesis concentrates on one strand of the multi-layered cultural tapestry that makes up contemporary Britain in which diverse communities strive to coexist and argues for a deeper understanding of the complexities therein, a broadening of the

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<sup>3</sup> See University of Birmingham et al., (1982) for Gilroy's early collaborative work with Hall and Gilroy (1991)

<sup>4</sup> See Peacock, D. Keith. (2015) and Harvie, Jen. (2013) They provide a broader analysis of the effects government funding and policies have on art and performance making.

definition of these communities and examines the negotiations of the management of the collective identity/ identities.

### **Creating Africa's Diaspora in Britain**

The presence of African diasporic peoples in the British Isles dates back to the first millennium, contrary to the common western misconception that it was through slavery and the post-war migration from Britain's colonies that Africans came to Britain. The documentation of their presence, however, has often been subjected to a fixed system of derogatory representations, managed by white systems of knowledge and power that kept Africans and their descendants in positions of inferiority, often juxtaposed against white supremacy. This was as a result of the historical context of the slave trade and colonialism, which greatly shifted notions of race. The effects and consequences of these shifts had far reaching implications, particularly in this postmodern era that Hall has defined as the 'politics of representation'(Hall, 2006 ,p.200) which include how identities are formed, how power is distributed, and defines how a particular group is 'represented, thought about, practised and studied' (Hall et al., 1997,p.6)

This phenomenon is catalogued by Deirdre Osborne's 2006 article 'Writing Black Back: An Overview of Black Theatre and Performance in Britain', which provides an extensive history of black representation and presence on British stages from the first millennium to present day. It argues that

the first stage of surveying the presence of black people in

British theatre history resides imperfectly in exploring how black characters are represented in the plays of white writers from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. (Osborne, 2006,p.13)

Osborne further argues that this is due to the consequence of imperialism and the racism inherent within that ideology.(2006) The stereotypical images of Africans in Britain, particularly in performance, over the periods stated in Osborne's article, collectively served to justify and reinforce ideas of white power and supremacy. The inclusion then of people of African descent amongst the theatrical canon of Britain from as far back as the Roman era till the twentieth century has not been on their terms, essentially because they were not the authors of their own narrative. The often-distorted perspectives of representation and perception of African identities, particularly in performance are discussed in a number of informative studies.'<sup>5</sup>

It was not until the mid-nineteenth century through Ira Aldridge that an artist of African descent had the autonomy to represent an African diasporic identity on the British stage. This was a lonely pursuit until a decade later, when Paul Robeson, another notable African American, came onto the scene, and added to an increasing group of touring African American performers on British stages in the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> A good example is the transfer of the whole African American cast of Philip Yorden's Broadway play *Anna Lucasta* (1944)

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<sup>5</sup> See, Vaughan,(2005); Lindfors, (1999) Nicholson, Steve. (2010)

<sup>6</sup> See Cochrane, (2011;143) and Osborne, (2006;14) for further discussions on this and how it affected the beginnings of The Black British Theatre Movement.

which played at His Majesty's Theatre in London. It also toured to Paris and other European cities.

The most significant turn of events, which not only changed the face of the cultural landscape of Britain and British attitude towards the people of the colonies, but also marked the beginning of the fight for recognition within the dominant culture by African diasporic communities, was shaped by the largest post 2<sup>nd</sup> World War influx of immigrants from the Caribbean and later from West Africa to Britain. The notion of a Black British identity, which became synonymous with this group of immigrants and in particular their children, was still very much at the early stages in the process of them developing an autonomous cultural identity. This political and problematic label of 'Black British' offered at the time, a collective shared experience based on the hostility and racism that united minority communities in Britain, against a white majority society. The notion of being black or 'other' was seen to be in contrast to any sense of belonging to the nation considered the 'mother country' or to the idea of a national identity. The realities of the isolation felt by the new immigrants and the strength of the binary constructs of black against white in Britain necessitated the forging of new postcolonial identities. A movement in literature emerged, which was evident in the theatre too, that embodied a sense of autonomy, of writing the self to counter the misrepresentation of being written about and positioned and viewing oneself as the 'other'. Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (1956) became the first play by an African Caribbean now living in Britain to use the power of the written word to redefine his identity. By setting the play in post war Trinidad and Tobago; his country of origin, John was able to recreate his home, particularly through the use of non-standard English language (nation

language)<sup>7</sup> to explore themes of poverty, immigration and the post-colonial legacy in the Caribbean and also explain his presence here in Britain. He showed a human condition while remaking and reshaping African diasporic perceptions. Theatrically, the 1950s and 60s belonged to a crop of young men born in the Caribbean and Africa, such as Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Michael Abbensett, Barry Reckord and others, writing initially about the homes they left behind and by the late 50s, the common idea of struggling against racial discrimination in their new environment. Global transformations taking place such as the struggle for civil rights and the black power movement of the 1960s in the USA coincided with the fight for independence taking place on the African continent.<sup>8</sup> These struggles found equivalents in Britain and the Caribbean too around the same period and later gave birth to identities being articulated in the theatres of Britain,<sup>9</sup> classified a decade later in the 1970s as the emergence of Black British theatre.

Today, understandings and perceptions of blackness and British-ness have been widely challenged, due in part to the postmodern thinking of global dispersal, which has seen the increased movement of people from all backgrounds converging in Britain. The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed a phenomenon taking place in British theatre that has seen the prominence of the works of black British dramatists as they move from the

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<sup>7</sup> See Brathwaite, Kamau. (1984) for a broader discussion on nation language and the Caribbean national identity.

<sup>8</sup> Ghana was amongst the first of the sub Saharan African nations to gain independence in 1957, followed by Guinea in 1958. The 1960s saw a long list of nations including Cameroon, Senegal, Somalia and Nigeria attain independence from their British and French colonial rulers.

<sup>9</sup> See Chambers, Colin. (no date) for a historical account of African diasporic artists /activities in Britain post World War II.

margins into a more centralized position on the British theatre landscape. This theatre that is emanating from African diasporic communities in Britain is the main research area of this thesis, with a specific focus being on how the second and third generation dramatists writing essentially from the centre of their experiences perform African diasporic identities on the British stage.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

Within this study, African diasporic refers to the multi-generational members of the African and African Caribbean communities born in or living in Britain but focuses more specifically on the second and third generations within these communities. The term has been specifically chosen not only to define the origins of the communities and their current locations but also to signal a distinct shift away from the term black British often used, to collectively define minority arts/communities. African diasporic is a broader term that takes into account the depth and breadth of this constituency in Britain whilst being more inclusive because it acknowledges the presence of Africans born or living in Britain, who are often excluded from the more widely used black British term which is limited in its range as it often references a Caribbean experience in Britain. Gilroy's book, *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack* (1991), for instance speaks very particularly of the British social context and its interaction with its African diasporic community. He advocates for a clearer definition of the broad and ambiguous interpretation adding that the contemporary 'Black British' are significantly different from the 'Black British' people of the eighties- (referring to the newer migrant) Gilroy argues, 'Blacks born, nurtured and schooled in this country are, in



significant measure, British, even as their presence redefines the meaning of the term' (Gilroy, 1991, p. 155) and therefore cannot be grouped under the same heading as those born outside of the UK who migrated to Britain in the eighties. This notion is developed in Osborne's valid argument for black British indigeneity to be claimed by dramatists born and bred in Britain, where she advocates for an 'automatic constituency within British culture.'(Osborne, 2011a, p. ,185) This claim however does not acknowledge the multiplicity of identities and cultures that these second and third generation dramatists/practitioners access in the performance/representation of who they are within the context of Britain. The reference point of Britain, which is central to this thesis, does not mean a denial of other spaces or cultures. The dramatists and practitioners within this study do not limit themselves to one cultural experience but are open to all experiences available to them.

I am making a case for the more inclusive term of African diasporic particularly as it falls in line with Hall's notion of the process of cultural identity. His thesis is that cultural identity functions simultaneously on two axes for postcolonial identities. These are a 'shared culture'(Hall, 1990 p., 98) and history that they have in common and the second axis which takes into account 'critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute... what [they] have become.' (98) He suggests that 'a reclamation of the past is actually a process of production. It is an *imaginative* act of discovery, which gives an imaginary coherence to a broken and fractured sense of identity.(Davis, 2004 p. ,185) These fractured and dislocated postcolonial identities can become unified under this term which is shaping and expressing new identities that access multiple spaces, allowing the artists/identities the space to define who they are, and

removes the dilemma of having to choose either being British, African or African Caribbean.

A mix of playwrights, three 'monodramatists' and two theatre companies, who have all contributed in diverse ways towards a collective performance of African diasporic presence on the British stage, represent the African diasporic theatre that will be studied here. Some fundamental questions that this thesis asks are has the African diasporic population increased in Britain now and as such have formed a major constituency in Britain? Is this constituency then asking more questions about themselves, and how they are being represented, who is representing them and where are the representations taking place?

A text analysis combined where possible with a performance analysis forms the methodological bases for investigating the work of the dramatists and practitioners, which will be interrogated through primary and secondary sources of my chosen theorists to be discussed below.

The case studies have been chosen based on the way in which culture feeds their sense of identity and this thesis investigates how these artists use the theatre to articulate their African diasporic identities variously through their practice. The position of these identities within British life and the need for them to be visible on the British stage is a critical element for the artists in this study. The management and control therefore of African diasporic identity is a major through line that informs the chosen case studies and the structure of this thesis, which are linked primarily through the levels of control that the artists or companies have in relation to the representation and performance of African diasporic identities in Britain which links to the fundamental questions stated above.

The playwrights begin the case studies; primarily because of their current prominence within the British cultural space and as such represent the first stage in examining how African diasporic identities are being defined or redefined on the British stage. This study consists of performance and text analysis of the works of the following playwrights; Oladipo Agboluaje, Bola Agbaje, and Ade Solanke, who have been selected for their unprecedented prominence and or emergence (in the case of Solanke) onto the British theatre scene in the last decade. The disproportionate attention given to the three dramatists of Nigerian heritage is acknowledged but is necessary in this instance to highlight the presence of emerging voices within the field and its distinctiveness from British Caribbean heritaged dramatists, which is discussed further in Chapter Two.

The three 'monodramatists' namely Mojisola Adebayo, Inua Ellams and Lemn Sissay, are the next group in the progression of case studies. Their work represent the inimitable practice emerging from the community of writing and performing the self, using poetry or play. This middle group occupy a unique place within this study because of the greater autonomy that their position affords them compared to the playwrights. This opportunity to write and perform their identity heightens the level of control they have in its performance and representation. The monodramatists create a natural link in terms of the trajectory of the levels of autonomy between the playwrights and the two African diasporic led theatre companies under investigation, namely Tiata Fahodzi and Collective Artistes who cater specifically for an African diasporic community in Britain. Whilst Tiata Fahodzi's work aims to control African diasporic identity on the stage, shifting the focus from the mainstream/centre and creating their own centres, Collective Artistes manage African diasporic identities in the theatre

through the community. This study explores the significance of the unique combination of the three case studies. It also explores the accumulative strengthening of the notion of control over artistic interpretation and the presentation and representation of the work and its implications for the construction and management of African diasporic identities.

A trans disciplinary approach has informed the choice of theorists for this thesis that come from different disciplines of postcolonial studies, cultural studies and crossover into the postmodern. This approach is necessary to effectively examine African diasporic identities because of the multiplicity of their condition. Hall, Gilroy, Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon amongst others are authorities on both postcolonial studies through the guise of cultural studies, which makes some of their theories useful for discussing African diasporic identities. Hall in particular states

Lots of things that I've written about which don't appear to be about that [diaspora] are seen through the prism of trying to work out who the people of the diaspora are, who they think they are, where they want to go, where have they come from, what's their relation to the past, what's their memories etc and how they express their creativity, how they express where they want to go to next. That's what has been in a sense my subject. (Hall et al., 2009)

The focus and different interpretations that all chosen theorist give to race and minority communities within the context of a dominant society have informed my inclusion of their theories in this study. The field of cultural studies particularly

for the research into African diasporic identity is key to this study because it speaks to the peculiarities and complexities of these identities in the ways described by Kwesi Owusu as being

incredibly adept in reinventing critical traditions within its constantly expanding field,- that is constituting and reconstituting its objects of study and methodologies through borrowings from other sources and fields of study.

(Owusu, 2000.1)

This multidisciplinary approach fits in with the diasporic way of looking at the world and opens up possibilities of alternatives to understanding its complexities as opposed to narrowing or closing them.

Another layer of this study involves the investigation into the performance of identity, which is informed as a starting point by Judith Butler's theory of performative statements, (Butler, 1990) or the performative use of language. She melds this with Derrida's idea of citation, (Derrida, 1981) where he argues that one never says anything originally, as one is always citing something which is before, so it is always a performance and a re-performance. Butler applies this to gender and argues that gender is not something that is in any way natural or innate, rather it is something one performs. One performs being a woman or a man and she argues that the way that one does this is governed in different ways that are available to one. Butler's ideas on the performance of identity are derived from Simone De Beauvoir's(2014) central thesis that a woman is not born but made. She believes that you can be born with the female sexual organs but that does not necessarily make you a woman, what it does is to confer a sex on you. The actual behaviour expected of that sex, is learned, meaning that one

becomes a woman and performs as society expects you to. The pink for girls and blue for boys for example are all constructed ideas particular to a Western frame of reference that feeds into socially accepted behaviour for the sexes. The centrepiece of what Butler is therefore saying is that sex is natural but gender is not.

We accumulate through social practice performance practices, activities, behaviours and attitudes that define gender. If you do not perform or conform accordingly you are 'punished' for it in the way that your society perceives you and interacts with you. How then does this relate to the idea of performance in general and the analysis of identity formation and to the performance of race in particular? Sara Salih's book on Butler points out that

race, like gender, sex and sexuality is constructed rather than natural, assumed in response to the interpellative 'call' of discourse and the law. (Salih, 2002)

This suggests that race is performative in the same way that gender, sex and sexuality have been described, as they work along the same power axis. There is a performative dimension to identity and how we call ourselves and there is also a provisionality that we respond according to what might seem to be strategic, when collaborative and collective unified identity might be the answer to a particular context.

This thesis therefore applies Butler's theory to race; particularly how the black race in Britain, referred to collectively in this thesis as African diasporic is performed and that the dramatists under investigation are writing and performing particular kinds of African diasporic identities that are informed by

what is available to them. The historical, geographical and political circumstances surrounding African diasporic presence in Britain shows the many 'contaminations'(Brydon, 2006) in terms of cultural differences being brought together through colonial and postcolonial realities and transformations that the African in Africa and the African in the diaspora has undergone. In spite of the many advances in human and social rights, political power and economic mobility, the paradox of race remains irrepressible. These factors create a certain way of being, a particular way of using language- in its multiple uses and contexts, of telling a story, of resisting and subverting the 'master' gaze and particularly within postmodernist thinking, Hall, makes a case for the instability of identity, centralising and giving agency to a marginalised community. Hall writes that identity

'insists on difference- on the fact that every identity is placed, positioned in a culture, a language, a history. Every statement comes from somewhere, from somebody in particular. It insists on specificity, on conjecture. But it is not necessarily armour- plated against other identities. It is not tied to fixed, permanent, unalterable positions. It is not wholly defined by exclusion.' (Hall, 1986, p. 46)

In other words identity is not something that is fixed; it is in constant flux informed by various and sometimes contradictory social practices. We construct our identity in relation to and within the context of where we are. The claiming of that instability is what makes the second and third generation unique in that they are not allowing themselves to be defined by others or fixed by location any longer, but embracing the totality of their experiences. This is seen in the shift

from identity politics to the politics of representation, which has implications of who controls it. This is an underlying theme in the work of the practitioners in this study

The performance then of African diasporic identities on the British stage will be examined through the combined theories of Hall and Butler. The concept of race being used here, takes full account of the scientific findings that 'race' does not exist in a genetic sense but the concept continues to shape notions of ethnicity. The move to use ethnicity instead of race to describe difference, unfortunately, for cultures that are rooted in Africa and the Caribbean, the damaged ideology of race already places those ethnic cultures in an inferior position. Race has already and still is used to define it.

The central concern and context of this study is Britain, and how the diasporic 'character'/individual constructs his/her identity within this space whilst being inextricably linked to another space. This study is however interested in exploring the 'perception and engagement' of the second and third generation of Africans in the diaspora with the British 'world', as compared to how the first generation negotiated this world. Bhabha's concept of hybridity in relation to negotiating two cultures, results in the creation of what he categorises as 'The Third Space' which allows other positions to emerge informed by the two cultures. The dramatists under investigation in this study are all operating within this 'third space' where they have to think simultaneously, drawing consciously and unconsciously from two or more cultures when producing their work. They inhabit the space of different trajectories, which has resulted in the diverse range of identities being performed on British stages. The conflict then of the second



and third generation dramatists suggests a dichotomy of past and present or it is the difference between where they are from and where they are.

The exploration of this constituency lies in factors that make it different from the indigenous British identity that does not have that kind of link but whose lives do not depend on the link, but rather on their presence in Britain. The exploration therefore will be focused primarily on the tensions of diaspora. The pull and also the lack of it is what makes African diasporic identities what they are. For this study, the link with the parents' heritage is important but not fundamental to the exploration. Rather, it is the negotiation of that relationship which is more fundamental to the identity being performed.

In order to examine the relationship between the current location of Britain and an emotional or physical link to the Caribbean or Africa, the negotiations that characterise that relationship will underpin the examination of the constantly shifting diasporic identities of African peoples as a result of slavery, colonialism and postcolonialism; the very factors that cause the tension.

The stage becomes a unique arena upon which the conscious and carefully thought out aspects of identity politics and the unconscious aspects are cited. Actors repeat or 'reiterate', in Derrida's sense, the identities constructed by African diasporic dramatists with the potential to be repeatable in a different capacity- on stage. The significance of this is that in this arena, particularly the ones moving from the margins into more centralised positions are being read alongside other identities on the British stage, which is increasingly becoming the place to contest long held assumptions and the space in which to create new ones. This thesis will consequently be exploring how the tensions of diaspora and the complexities that come with that are mapped out in the practice and or writing of

the selected African diasporic artists. The artists present characters and identities from the first, second and third generations, pushing, stretching and mocking them and in so doing opening up spaces for the articulation of race and identity politics in/through performance.

The question of why now with regards to coming out of the margins has strong links with how the second and third generations are defining their own identities through the tensions of being in Britain and this study explores through them the question of how relevant this theatre is to the project of articulating and documenting African diasporic experiences in the United Kingdom. This thesis addresses questions concerning how this theatre is trying to write African diasporic experiences and how it attempts to re-shape perceptions and history. Another central question of importance that this thesis examines is whether this African diasporic theatre is considered part of the British landscape, and what contribution this theatre is making and how it is dealing with that landscape.

## **Literature Review**

The notion of diaspora being assumed within this study is borrowed from McLeod's extensive discussion of diaspora and its interrelations with postcolonialism, specifically where 'diaspora' has come to signify *generally* the movement and relocation of groups of different kinds of peoples throughout the world. (McLeod, 2010, p. 236)

But the historical journey of the term from its origin to its modern usage and the theory associated with it, find McLeod concluding that ...within postcolonialism

'diaspora' also names a new way of being, an emergent mode of perception and engagement with the world (2010, p. 237)

This shows the term shifting drastically from the notion of dispersion of the Jews to take into account global movements of peoples and how this phenomenon can be applied as a theory that changes how different groups associate with the world. This falls in line with the multidisciplinary theoretical approach/method chosen for this study. It is the articulation and representation in the theatre of this 'new way of being' that I intend to interrogate further within this study. The theatre practitioners under investigation represent a cross-section of African Diasporic identities that appear to have moved from the margins into the centre, performing these identities variously in prominent theatre houses, such as the National Theatre, Tricycle Theatre, Royal Court and Soho Theatre amongst others hosting productions by African diasporic dramatists.

I propose to use Du Bois's theory of 'double consciousness', which spells out the psyche of the American 'Negro' in the aftermath of slavery and describes how this identity, which has been forcibly 'removed' from its roots and dehumanized in the New World, tries to assert its humanity within an environment that does not recognize the 'negro' as human. The fundamental idea here, which underpins the historical journey of Africans into the diaspora, is this fact of being viewed as not human. Double consciousness is not solely the predicament of the American 'Negro' but relates also to Africans and Africans in the diaspora, who because of the combined history of slavery and colonization, find their identity has become an object of constant contestation. Du Bois's definition of this battle, which is often a psychological one, describes it as

a peculiar sensation... this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others; of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn apart.

(Du Bois, 1994, p. 3)

The dual identity of both the enslaved and the colonised is where I intend to start my investigation. Using primarily postcolonial theory to guide my investigation at this stage, I want to combine the notion of the physical uprooting from Africa to the Caribbean, for this study specifically, and the Americas, with the psychological uprooting or imprisonment of the colonised mind. Both experiences within imperialistic indoctrination position the enslaved and colonised as the 'other'. The foundation of European colonialism as mentioned earlier was based on 'seeing' the 'other' as inferior to 'white', which is always positioned in the centre, as the looker. Certain ways of 'seeing' the world advanced by colonialism, justified to colonial nationals their place within society, because the colonial enterprise had so distorted perceptions of the colonised that what the colonisers/ westerners saw ultimately were images that reflected back to them their superiority based on historical and cultural assumptions of the colonised; a position the colonised were made to accept because the colonisers were armed with power and knowledge. As the editors of the *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* point out,

The most formidable ally of economic and political control had long been the business of 'knowing' other peoples because this 'knowing' underpinned imperial dominance and became the mode by which they were increasingly persuaded to know themselves: that is, as subordinates to Europe. (Ashcroft et al., 2006, p. 1)

Knowing the self, contrasted with the image of the 'self' projected by colonialism is a double identity the colonised had to contend with. Much of postcolonial theory addresses the issue of the 'other', but I am particularly interested in the ideas of Fanon. Fanon's awareness of his difference and this imposed subordination began in France, where he experienced the white gaze fixing him into the position of the 'other', a place he had not been aware he was supposed to occupy whilst living in his French-colonised Martinique. It was not until his encounter with whites in France that his blackness was pointed out to him. The 'trauma' he experienced was already anticipated by Du Bois's theory. Conscious of himself as a man, Fanon wanted to be treated as such, but he found himself pushed back into place:

The White world, the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man- or at least like a nigger... I was told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged.

(Fanon, 2008, p. 86)

The particular reaction of a small white child to his blackness causes Fanon to expand further on Du Bois's notion of double consciousness. "Look, a Negro!... "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened" (2008, p. 84)

The deeply felt denial of his identity, without his permission; the simple but significant act of 'looking', but not 'seeing' him, seeing only an imagined construct that in the final analysis renders his identity invisible, is how Fanon constructed his theory of racism and difference between the coloniser and the colonised. He based it on the idea of recognition. If one is recognised as a fellow human being and their difference is recognised, that is one thing. This for Fanon was the fundamental difference between the American Negro and the colonised African. But if you are not recognised as human, then you are not even there. Whilst the American Negro was fighting for social rights, the colonised African was fighting for human recognition. Such was the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised that Fanon wanted to address in his two polemic books, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth*. (1965)

Charles Taylor's essay, 'The Politics of Recognition,' further examines the theory of recognition, whilst addressing the challenges of multiculturalism in modern democratic societies. In agreement with Fanon, he states very clearly that: 'Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.' (Gutmann et al., 1994, p. 26)

One needs to be recognised as human by other human beings in order to exist in effect. He advances the notion of reciprocal recognition and how it is bound up with identity and ultimately what happens if someone is denied recognition.

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or

demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (1994, p. 25)

The above, in my opinion, is a modern analysis of Du Bois's double-consciousness and arguably the predicament of a majority of Africa's diasporic community in Britain, in varying degrees. Fanon's theory, that the dominant group's idea of superiority becomes entrenched as they instil an image of inferiority in the minority groups is precisely what is taking place across many institutions, which has an impact on the collective identity of any minority group. The lack of recognition for example, of the contributions of minority communities in Britain is seen in the low numbers of their representation particularly in managerial roles in these institutions. Taylor suggests that in order for freedom and equality to prevail, particularly where identity is concerned, and to aid in reciprocal recognition, a 'revision of those images' must take place. The revision requires a new way of thinking and reassessing how to change long held assumptions about minority groups.

Like Du Bois, Fanon was concerned with the psyche of the colonised. He used his medical knowledge as a psychiatrist to examine the psychological effects of colonialism, not only on the colonised but also the colonisers. His ideas in the books were fundamentally a warning to the 'black skin' not to accept the identity and the stereotypes created for it by those in power. He asks that 'black' people should not live up to these images, as they are false. They should resist and define themselves instead. He was advocating for a new way of thinking of the self

within that period of colonialism. He addresses the issues of language when it comes to creating an identity, particularly from a colonial history and colonised mind.

Within the many issues handled in Fanon's two books, the overarching theme is the need to find new ways of thinking about the current situation that one finds oneself in, whether it means a new way of thinking about which language to use, or how to use the language you have, or how dominant theories about the order of society might have to change, or terminology and meaning being addressed; the resistance of the 'other' demands a different perception from those in power.

### **Multicultural Britain**

In this modern age, the 'other' has evolved into many alternatives, since the 1950s, particularly in Britain, where the debate has moved along race lines to categorise the different nationalities now living in and calling Britain home, because of their colonial links. Multiculturalism is one term that was hotly debated in Britain and first used by government in the 1972 as a cultural policy because of the increased presence of visibly different economic migrants after the war.

This area of the research is a significant one as it marks the arrival of people of Caribbean origin into Britain. The transformations outlined earlier relating to the uprooting of African Caribbean people from Africa is now twice removed, as compared to the Commonwealth West Africans, most of whom were migrating for the first time. The psychic transformation, however, applies to both groups. I say this because the collective identity being performed is from a



position of the periphery. Hall's explanation suggests another duality for the first generation to deal with as he outlines the complexities of identity for the postcolonial migrant.

Identity is formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture. And since he/she is positioned in relation to cultured narratives which have been profoundly expropriated the colonised subject is always 'somewhere else'; doubly marginalised, displaced always *other* than where he or she is able to speak from.

(Hall, 1986, p. 44)

The investigation of this first group will address the context of the Britain they settled in, a nation, which was a former ruler. How have the migrants dealt with the feelings of inferiority they have carried over with them, psychologically, historically and geographically in the new society, and - even more key to the problematic of this settlement - their perceived inferiority by the society of Britain? The distorted perceptions of the colonial enterprise mentioned earlier did not allow the colonisers to see the reality of the complexities of how the colonised defined and perceived their own identity, who were in turn trying to live up to the standards set by the colonialists and demeaning themselves when they fail to attain them. (See Fanon's 2008 *Black Skin, White Masks*) The concept of 'home' in relation to the 'host' nation they now occupy will inevitably function within the realms of Benedict Anderson's discourse of 'imagined communities, (Anderson, 1991) which will apply to any community that especially finds itself under threat, which was the case for the first generation of African diasporic migrants. The difficulty they faced with regards to integration, establishing a new

home and surviving economically in difficult economic times had the added difficulty observed by Sheila Patterson in her study of West Indians in Britain.

This immigrant situation is undoubtedly complicated by the fact of skin colour, which makes these particular immigrants, whether they are West Indians, West Africans, or Asians, more immediately visible and more strange than the thousands of other immigrants who have entered the country since the Second World War (Patterson, 1965, p. 17).

This 'visible' difference inadvertently became a unifying factor for the Africans and African Caribbeans in Britain because they found themselves in the minority in terms of race and they encountered discrimination because of it. In an effort to survive under these trying conditions when their sense of identity was constantly questioned, threatened and undermined, it became necessary within these moments of crisis to construct a new identity in this new environment. The construction of this identity was inevitable because their current environment contaminated their identity, with traces from their previous identities. They resisted by showing an awareness that their identity was under attack and their sense of self was also attacked constantly by racism. This was manifested (particularly in the youth) in a politicised and unified community that was highly influenced by the 1950s Black Power movement from the USA.<sup>10</sup> This politicised and eventual radicalised community, which soon consisted largely of the children of these migrants culminated in the 1980s race riots of Handsworth, Brixton and Tottenham.

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<sup>10</sup> See (Hughes, 2006) (Procter, 2000)

Hall identifies this historical moment and the matrix of cultural strands that came together under the 'Black British' umbrella in his seminal article 'New Ethnicities', where he states

Politically, this is the moment when the term 'black' was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, amongst groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities (1990, p. 223).

From its usage in the middle ages as a fundamental element in binary constructs to distinguish between good and evil, the beautiful and the bestial, where black was always depicted as inferior to white to the pride galvanised by the Black Power Movement, initiated by the Civil Rights Movements in the USA, which resonated across the Caribbean, Africa and Britain, the 'recuperated' (Hall 1989) term in Britain, came to represent a unifying ideology.

The political associations of the term black meant that any minority group that felt excluded and discriminated against by British society and its structures were perceived by policy makers as being included under the term. The South Asian community, for instance, are a significantly large minority community in Britain that is recognised as inhabiting the common political ground as Africans and African Caribbeans in Britain. But the realities, which quickly became apparent, were that the levels of racism and discrimination towards the different communities with different experiences were not always equal. This also points to another element with regards to 'subject positions' that was part of the debate,

particularly about 'Black theatre' which found many artists objecting to its usage.

Simon Shepherd quotes Jatinder Verma of Tara Arts, explaining that

Although theatre groups may have a range of racial identities, they are all 'black' insofar as they are structurally positioned in the same place: outside white control, opposing a white racist mainstream, dealing with contemporary or historical 'black' issues, demanding an equal share of the funding. (Shepherd, 2009, p. 205)

Brewster is equally candid in her analysis of the meaning associated with the term, indicating the level of resistance and also an understanding of the workings of the industry and their perceptions of African diasporic constituencies. Brewster affirms categorically that, 'Black became a political colour. Black became synonymous with underdeveloped, underprivileged, under-represented and a convenient umbrella term given to those in search of relatively small amounts of earmarked funding or attention.' (2009, p. 65)

This idea has of course been an ongoing debate, started in the 1960s with the first generation's more outspoken dramatists, such as Mustapha Matura, who was instrumental in challenging those kinds of assumptions in his work which became the foundation for a radical period in British society, a period that was categorized by a lot of negative press but also within that, the emergence of a vibrant arts scene representing 'Black British culture'. The history of this vibrant period of Black British Theatre, particularly in the 1980s to early 90s has been well documented in the works of Yvonne Brewster,(2010) Meenakshi

Ponnuswani,(2006) Lynette Goddard,(2007) Deirdre Osborne,(2005,2006) Colin Chambers (2011) and others.

Homi Bhabha's introduction to *The Location of Culture* situates the culture/identity of this era within a space of what he calls the "borderlines of the present", the hybrid, a space where one is seemingly caught between two worlds that Bhabha refers to as "the beyond" is a positive binary that combines the two worlds to create a new space informed by both worlds.

We find ourselves in the moment of transit, where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1)

The two groups of migrants in such a position exist in two worlds, 'here' and 'there', and because of their experience of discrimination have created a hybrid space, within what Bhabha calls the 'moment of transit.' It is an idea that builds on the notion of new ways of thinking and being, which is a definite move away from fixity, and purity of culture or identity to exploring the space 'in between', the 'border'. The notion of the 'border' is very central in relation to the idea of duality explored in the study. The 'border' as a space is fixed but the movement that takes place within it articulates what has gone before and what is ahead. The space allows for the diasporic identity to complicate accepted dominant ways of thinking and essentializing cultural identities. The motion of passing through borders, be it physically for migrants, or imaginatively for the second generation, by 'disturbing' the binary constructs moves them from the margin to the centre, by articulating a new way of 'perceiving and engaging with the world. This is in

line with Hall's 'Minimal Selves' essay, which advances the question of race in relation to identity and movement from the margins to the centre. He states,

thinking about my own sense of identity, I realize that it has always depended on the fact of being a *migrant*, on the *difference* from the rest of you.... Now that, in the postmodern age, you feel so dispersed, I become centered. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically to be *the* representative modern experience. (Hall, 1986, p. 44)

The remainder of the essay questions whether indeed difference is now centralised and addresses the importance of difference in the construction of identity. His example of young black people in London, who are "marginalized, fragmented, disenfranchised, disadvantaged and dispersed", yet able to occupy a "new space at the centre" (Hall, 1986, p. 44), speaks of a certain confidence, which Kobena Mercer's book, *Welcome to the Jungle*, examines across black cultural forms in the 1980s:

Building upon structures and spaces created by our forebears, and seizing opportunities in the gaps and fissures arising from the chaos of the coincidence between the postcolonial and the postmodern, it is the younger generations who came to voice in the 1980s. (Mercer, 1994, p. 2)

British cultural life from the 'Black' diasporic perspective pointing out influences on this 'younger generation' from within British society, the first generation of African Diasporic migrants and of course the dominant American culture, provided very useful cultural, political and social context within which to place 'Black British' theatre. What this book is silent on, however, is the same energy

and confidence that was taking place within the field of theatre in the specific constituency of the Black community in Britain. Yvonne Brewster, the founder and artistic director of Talawa Theatre Company, redresses this imbalance with her article, 'Black British Theatre in London 1972-89' in *African Theatre: Diasporas* (2009) by providing a largely personal account of the history of Black British theatre .

### **Shifting the Centre**

Osborne is one of the key academics mentioned earlier that have written critically about contemporary Black British theatre, their works follow chronologically on from the work of Brewster. Keenly aware of the trajectory of 'Black British theatre' from its inception to its current position, which is one of moving from the margins into prominent well-established theatre houses, after the period of the funding cuts, in the 1990s, one of Osborne's essays makes a clear point of the continuance of,

traditional British theatrical hegemonies, illustrated by the  
"White men [who] continue to remain at the helm despite the  
forays into cross-cultural programming. (Osborne, 2005, p. 130)

Here, Osborne gestures towards what appears to be cosmetic policies on diversity implemented by Blair's government that tackled ethnic inequalities largely in social terms within British society. The ticking of social policy boxes, which characterised this period, meant that on the surface, there was evidence of a move towards creating a more equal workforce/society in Britain. The realities

however proved to be a system of institutionalised racism that still sat at the heart of British society.<sup>11</sup> For the arts, as discussed in Aleks Sierz's book, *Rewriting the Nation* (2011), there were initiatives that looked into the creation of a more diverse audience, participant access and culturally focused programming in mainstream theatre houses. Osborne's statement, however, draws attention to one of the elements in effecting any real change where 'diversity' is concerned, and that has to do with those who control the decision making process.

This point raised by Osborne is supported by Brewster, who ends her article by commenting on the lack of a "black controlled theatre building in which to experiment": an idea she said was advocated by the African American playwright, August Wilson, whose successes in playwriting have won him many awards, having a theatre The Virginia Theatre on New York City's Broadway as well as The African American Cultural Center of Greater Pittsburgh named after him; the first African American to be given that privilege. Brewster concludes,

Black theatre is not dead, it has merely been returned into the hands of white artistic directors with venues to programme, and also into the hands of funding-body-determined priorities once again. These organizations truly are the arbiters of black taste, the determinant of style and content, as their approval of what is allowed to be explored and presented is essential to getting work presented in the venues in the first place. They say the circle is an African concept. So, full circle. (Brewster, 2009, p. 78)

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<sup>11</sup> See MacPerson Report discussed in Chapter Two.



Lynette Goddard, another prominent academic, voices her concern over the type of work that is allowed to be visible by commenting on how institutionalized attitudes impact on 'the more fundamental level of black writing.' She adds,

Spaces have been created for black theatre to be produced during the 1980s boom and within the current policies that award funds on the basis of culturally diverse programming. However, the institutions can continue to select the plays and productions that support hegemonic ideas about black people, and plays that defy expectations might not be produced.

(2007a, p. 37)

One of the central ideas that instigated this thesis is the perceived prominence of African diasporic dramatists moving into more prominent and central theatre houses. Although the idea of moving from the margins to the mainstream is ostensibly what is perceived, I still feel this has not been achieved as the above discussions help to reinforce the idea that there is still a wall, a kind of sifting or sieving that goes on within the funding mechanisms that say that it is still not mainstream. The concept of 'gate keepers' that was implied by Brewster (2009) is a term generally used to refer to someone or a body that controls access to something. In this instance I apply the term to the funding bodies and artistic directors and casting agents who manage mainstream theatre houses because of the power they have in deciding what and who gets produced in the mainstream. The priorities of these institutions that ultimately have the final say, may not always marry with the priorities of the artists and the communities they cater for.

This is significant in the processes involved with producing African diasporic cultural products. Kene Igweonu suggests that

Because most diasporic communities tend to operate on the margins of British society, their theatres also play from those margins, often as a way of serving their respective peoples and cultures. (Igweonu, 2013, p.83)

This arguable statement confirms Kwesi Owusu's 1986 study on 'Black Arts in Britain' which points to 'an inseparable link between 'arts' and 'politics' and between Black arts and the Black community which nurtures and sustains them.'(Owusu, 1986a, p. 22) There is however a suggestion of static conditions where the dramatists are confined to the margins because that is where their communities are. But I submit that this is not the case. The noted prominence of African diasporic dramatists, moving into a more central space within the theatrical scene indicates a sociological shift too. Their position in British society of operating within the margins is being challenged as they now occupy spaces alongside their white contemporaries in terms of class and status. African diasporic communities are broadening out from the prescribed confines classified by McMillan as an 'Eurocentric discourse'(McMillan, 2006, p. 47)in his exploration of 'Black Theatre and Live Arts in Britain.' He elaborates further on this notion, saying that 'Black cultural traditions were represented as homogenous, marginal to the European canon, unsophisticated derivatives of Western forms and traditions,'(McMillan, 2006, p. 47), thus describing what has been the historical experience of the representation by the dominant society of minority communities in Britain. In contrast, the collective works of contemporary African diasporic dramatists, particularly over the first decade of the twenty-first century,

has shifted and broadened its focus, showing the evidence of a renegotiation of cultural identities within a British context. Instead of the preoccupation with 'home' that marked the majority of the work from first generation dramatists, the central focus has been about Britain and how the dramatists define themselves within this space.

Closer analysis has shown that even though there have been definite increases in the number of African diasporic plays produced in mainstream spaces, over the last decade, the artists who have made this 'crossover' so to speak have been the more well known dramatists like Kwame Kwei-Armah, Roy Williams, Debbie Tucker Green and more recently Bola Agbaje. These four have in a sense been the 'safe bets' in terms of the risks that the mainstream theatre houses are likely or willing to take based on the successes of the works of the above mentioned dramatists.<sup>12</sup>

So what is the situation for emerging dramatists who do not have or are now building a track record? Do they remain in the margins? I am suggesting that another phenomenon is taking place, one not so bound by the politics of funding bodies and artistic directors who manage mainstream theatre houses, and I refer to these theatres as the sidestreams. The works of some of the dramatists in this study have been produced or co produced in partnership with

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<sup>12</sup> Kwame Kwei-Armah stands out with his triptych of plays at the National theatre beginning with *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003) *Fix Up* (2004) and *Statement of Regret* (2007). Roy Williams' *Fallout* (2003) at the Royal Court and Tucker Green's *Dirty Butterfly* (2003) at the Soho Theatre and later in the same year *Born Bad* (2003) at the Hampstead Theatre were also followed by other commissions in other mainstream spaces. Agbaje on the other hand has had her exposure focused mainly at the Royal Court with her debut *Gone Too Far!* (2007) who also produced her second and fourth of her four published plays.

fringe/influential theatre<sup>13</sup> houses- the sidestreams- that are in their own way supporting the work of African diasporic artists, perhaps because they are in positions where they can take more strategic and calculated risks when compared to the mainstream theatres. An example is a recommendation that came out from the Eclipse conference; (discussed in Chapter 4) that of the consortium model, which involves three or more regional theatres coming together to commission and produce productions, thereby minimising the risks but providing a wider platform for the productions.

I am proposing that the idea of the sidestreams represent a postcolonial argument constructed by the dramatists who are creating new centres, to borrow Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's theory (1993) for the presentations of their work, and are either rejecting the mainstream or producing their work alongside the mainstream, building on the opportunity of fluidity of movement between the two spaces as productions take place in both streams.

This movement towards the centre of the British theatrical and cultural landscape, and the subsequent creation of the sidestreams alongside it have been identified Osborne as a,

shift [that] has occurred towards perceiving Black British drama as commercially viable, moving away from traditional assumptions of its genesis and production as residing primarily within community or non-mainstream theatre contexts.(Osborne, 2005, p. 130)

This observation refers typically to the theatre industry and its perceptions of African diasporic communities in Britain, largely perceived as a homogenous entity, which differs greatly from what second generation dramatists within this

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<sup>13</sup> These include Soho Theatre, Tricycle Theatre, The Arcola and The Oval House

disparate community were/are aiming to achieve on the British stage. The works constantly reference and enter into a dialogue with the particular communities the dramatists come from by presenting specific narratives and experiences of living in Britain, reinforcing the importance of the link between the two, as suggested by Owusu. Through their characters, they present the complex identities that engage with and underscore the hybrid nature of being both African diasporic and British at the same time, on the British stage; exposing, challenging and dismantling long established assumptions of their community to a wider British audience.

The second and third generation dramatists in this study have come to understand how intrinsic their specific communities are to sustaining their work,, wherever that community may be, and also acknowledge that one cannot rely on the mainstream to attract a new audience demographic and sustain it, when the modern British stage already has a full contact list of a typical white middle class British audience to fill their 'centres'.

The general view of the mainstream among African diasporic artists is rather sceptical. Patricia Cumper, a dramatist and former artistic director of Talawa Theatre Company, declares that

What the mainstream are doing is pandering to a general sense of what might please the powers that be than actually representing the communities. (Cumper, 2009)

She puts this down to the fact that 'The closer you move towards the powers that decide what makes it on stage, the fewer of us there are'. In this way she acknowledges the importance of the involvement of people of the African diaspora in instigating any change in the way the mainstream realizes a more

diverse representation of Britain in their programming. Dawn Walton, the artistic director of Eclipse Theatre Company, is of the same mind when she laments that,

Whenever we address the issue of diversity, we always focus on casting. For me this issue isn't just about casting but who gets to actually *do* the casting: directors, artistic directors, producers, associates and so on. Insist on diversity at that level and you will improve theatre overnight. (Dawn Walton,2013)

In 2011, 'Black British Voices', one of the many seminars, platforms or conferences with a focus on 'Black British Theatre' was held at the National Theatre, and the theme was a celebration of Black British Theatre. When the veteran actor Don Warrington was asked to assess the state of 'Black British theatre', he had this to say.

It is getting better, it's much better but its not quite where it should be. But it's better, and getting better and the visibility of Black actors is becoming more and more and more. And when we stop noticing it is when I think we would have arrived at where it should be. ('Black Voices in British Theatre', 2011)

It is accepted that it is not a level playing field and there needs to be a push towards casting actors 'of colour' in roles that were not originally written for them. Warrington believes it shouldn't work the other way round, 'because that way it remains unbalanced.'('Black Voices in British Theatre', 2011)

This different and valid argument is tested in Rufus Norris' National Theatre production of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (2009) that had an all black cast, despite the presence of white characters in the play. Lucian Msamati,

who incidentally played one of the lead roles of Simon Pilkings, the white District Officer in the play, also adds his voice to the debate, when asked about the number of recent African centered productions on British stages. In an interview to promote his first production as the new artistic director of the company, Tiata Fahodzi, he responded saying

Unfortunately, the truth is, for all the great strides that have been made, socially, racially, politically and economically, there are still a lot of issues... I think we are artists first and foremost. Ultimately and idealistically, one's colour or culture should be incidental and not the cause, as much as it might be the inspiration for what one does. The fact that these issues keep coming up and the fact that they are continuously being discussed and wrestled with, is testament to the fact that they do still play a role and as much as there are great strides that have been made, it isn't all rosy. (Otas, 2011)

This argument is certainly relevant to the job of articulating and making visible the African diasporic identity without always having to negotiate the burden of race. This notion was popularised by Kobena Mercer (1994) where minority groups feel pressured, conspicuously from funding bodies/agencies to either only present a certain collectively received opinion of themselves, particularly in dominant contexts or where the artists feel the burden of representing their whole community because of their colour. Mercer discusses the dangers faced by minority artists who find themselves in this confining position to counter the view of the majority culture. He says,

I have discussed this predicament in terms of the “burden of representation,” whereby the artistic discourse of hitherto marginalized subjects is circumscribed by the assumption that such artists speak as ‘representatives’ of the communities from which they come- a role which not only creates a burden that is logically impossible for any one individual to bear, but which is also integral to the iron law of the stereotype that reinforces the view from the majority culture that every minority subject is the same.(Mercer, 1994, p. 214)

I return to the notion of ‘shifting the centre’ noting that it has not only been acknowledged by African diasporic artists, but there are some exceptions within the mainstream that are interested in making it more diverse. The Royal Court is an example of a mainstream theatre house that has produced the work of some of the African diasporic dramatists to be discussed in this study. In 2008, they initiated their Theatre Local Project, which was about taking productions in their main space in Sloane Square, Chelsea, an affluent area in the city to ‘alternative spaces at the heart of London life.’ (Royal Court Website 2010) This was done with the view to broadening the reach of the work of the theatre in terms of making it more accessible by bringing the theatre to the people. The theatre has acknowledged the successes it has achieved through its ‘marginal’ dramatists like Bola Agbaje and recognises the intrinsic links that these dramatists have with their communities. Levi David Addai, one of the crop of second generation African diasporic dramatist ’s third play, *Oxford Street* (2008), initiated the project with a short run in a disused furniture shop front in Elephant and Castle Shopping



Centre, following a full run at the Royal Court. In 2010 The Theatre Local occupied the space for a six-month sold-out season that started with a revival of debbie tucker green's *Random* (2008), another prominent African diasporic dramatist, followed by three more productions from the main space.<sup>14</sup> The following year the project continued by transferring to the Bussey Building in Peckham, with tucker green's new play *Truth and Reconciliation* (2011) following its premier at the Royal Court Upstairs. This play was joined by Rachel De Lahay's *The Westbridge* (2011), which was premiered in Peckham. Clint Dyer, the director of the production, confirms that 'this type of work brings the theatre to the heart of the community. These plays are intrinsically about the ethnic minority community, and it puts it right in the heart of where they live'. ('Going local', 2011) The idea of making the audience, particularly traditional theatre goers, embrace the realities of what the community experience on a daily basis by walking through that community before engaging with the work, which invariably addresses issues within that space, adds another level of appreciation and understanding of the challenges faced and choices made by characters in the play, further enhancing the theatre experience.

Mickey Smith, the director of the Bussey Building in Peckham, commends the project because of the way it involved not only traditional theatre audiences but local members of the community some of whom were experiencing theatre for the first time and those who come to other music events within the venue. Other events such as workshops on script writing organised for local youth, give something back to the community rather than seeing the space as just another

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<sup>14</sup> The other three productions to join *Random* were *Disconnect*,(2010) by Anupama Chandrasekhar, *The Empire*, (2010) by DC Moore and *Spur of the Moment*, (2010) by Anya Reiss.

venue but one that the community can also access. In Smith's own words 'it appeals to a mass market.' (*Guardian* 2011) At the time of writing, Bola Agbaje's most recent production, *Belong* (2012), with the Royal Court, enjoyed a further three-week run at the Bussey Building in 2012. The project has found more 'locals' in the Rose Lipman Building in Haggerston and at the London Welsh Centre near Kings Cross.

The example above shows how the role and vision of artistic directors of prominent theatre houses, can impact the programming of African diasporic work. Nosheen Iqbal's article in the *London Evening Standard* for example credited the recent 'Black Actor Boom.' to

a number of artistic directors at popular, publicly subsidised theatres — David Lan at the Young Vic, Dominic Cooke at The Royal Court and Nicholas Kent at the Tricycle —(who) continue to support integrated casting. (2010)

This position taken by these artistic directors certainly aids in representation of African diasporic identities on the British stage, but a critical analysis of the type of work being programmed in the identified theatres, placed within the larger framework of the Arts Council, will help identify the nature of the gatekeeping, whether it is supportive of the African diasporic community at large or it is in fact being commercially astute and endorsing through their support a particular monolithic image of the community.

This line of thinking is instigated by an industry that has come through the aftermath of both the Scarman and MacPherson reports of 1981 and 1999

respectively, and their recommendations on community relations.<sup>15</sup> Sarah Neal's article concedes this when she says that both 'reports have framed the changing story of 'race relations' in Britain in the last quarter of the twentieth century'. (Neal, 2003, p. 55) It is clear that more needs to be done to redress this vast imbalance in management positions. The findings of the *Eclipse Report*, for instance, with its specific agenda on combatting racism in theatre is another initiative that produced a theatre company that addressed the needs of minority communities in Britain. This company is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, but the importance of a company with a specific mandate to cater to the needs of the minority community in regional Britain was identified and deemed essential. Agboluaje, to be discussed in Chapter Two has benefitted from its existence through Eclipse Theatre Company commissioning him to do an adaptation of Kester Aspden's *The Hounding of David Oluwale* (2009).

The end of Osborne's essay questions how stable this 'phenomenon' is, when she cautions

Black British writing may have been taken up by the mainstream at the moment, but there is no indication that it has a stable and permanent place in it. (2005, p. 146).

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<sup>15</sup> The Scarman Report, named after Lord Scarman, was the outcome of a commissioned inquiry by the UK Government following the Brixton riots of 1981. It reported a crisis in policing, particularly in its dealings with minority communities in Britain. It was however inconclusive about institutional racism. The MacPherson Report was commissioned as a result of the racial murder of the 'Black Teenager' Stephen Lawrence in London in 1993. The report concluded that there was 'institutional racism' within the police force. Both reports highlighted the systemic and pervasive nature of institutionalized racism that existed in Britain and the need for a greater awareness of racial and cultural issues and experiences at a national level.

It is interesting that ten years on, the trend appears to be continuing but there is no doubt that a number of African diasporic theatre practitioners such as Paulette Randall and Steven Luckie,<sup>16</sup> amongst others harbour the same feeling as Osborne with regard to the permanence in the 'shift' in programming and perception of the work coming from minority communities.

*Staging New Britain: Aspects of Black and South Asian British Theatre Practice*, edited by Geoffrey V. Davis and Anna Fuchs, is the theatre companion to Mercer's on culture. The essays and interviews collected in this volume are unique because they all come from practitioners who are deeply immersed in the practice of creating theatre that represents the culturally diverse society that Britain has now become. They all speak from a position of 'doing,' which is vital for this study because their research emerges out of practice and not solely from theory. Their work is grounded in experience, which is often omitted in academic discourses. Michael McMillan's statement which opens this book puts it succinctly

Much of the history and critical analysis of Black performance in Britain is yet to be done, and a lot of it will be found not in university libraries but on the lips of pioneers, practitioners, and players. (Davis et al., 2006, p. 15)

The interviews with Roy Williams, Kwame Kwei-Armah, and Courttia Newland give an insight into the backgrounds of these playwrights and as such one gets a

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<sup>16</sup> See their discussion with Andrea Enisuh on Theatre Voice('Debate', 2004)

sense of what their different concerns are and how they evidence them in their work.

The South Asian companies producing work in the regions and in London are a good point of reference for the companies this study focusing on. Tiata Fahodzi have looked at the work of Tamasha Theatre Company and Tara Arts as companies that were set up to provide a voice for their community. Talawa's history and Nitro's journey into uncharted waters give an account of the role the companies played in the 'Black' communities.

The problematic issue of terminology is addressed across the board within most of the essays and interviews. The term "Black", in particular, remains a point of contention as it has taken on so many meanings since it started being used in the 1950s. The political associations are well-known and the mere fact that everyone who uses it, including myself, has to either explain what is meant by it, who it addresses, or signal its contestation by putting it in quotation marks, shows how complicated the term is. Artists like Courttia Newland and Felix Cross, the artistic director of Nitro Theatre Company, accept the term and identify it as a term specific to a British experience. Roy Williams states in his interview with Alex Sierz,

I don't really care whether you call me a black playwright or just a playwright, as long as you don't miss out the playwright. (2006, p. 186)

Kwame Kwei-Armah, on the other hand, identifies himself as 'tri-cultural'

I'm African, Caribbean and British. And each of those has an equal part to play and I can be one or all at the same time depending on what it is. Which means that at the World Cup I have lots of teams that I can support. (2006, p. 240)

The sourcing from African indigenous theatrical practices and language usage is an area that fascinates me in this study. It relates to the main thesis through my treatment essentially of the two companies, Tiata Fahodzi and Collective Artists, who both pay homage to West African traditional forms in their theatrical aesthetics. The playwrights, like Kwame Kwei-Armah and Courttia Newland, speak of the influence of African indigenous cultures on their use of language. The language issue is also another element that playwrights such as Oladipo Agboluaje and Bola Agbaje have a different perspective on, much in the same way that Jatinder Verma has with the advantage of having another language in his linguistic vocabulary. (2006, p.26)

The second and third generation of African Diasporic immigrants do not constitute a homogenous identity, clearly evidenced by the spectrum of work, which invariably represents their individual identities. Hall presents the argument that

Diasporic identities are those, which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (Hall, 1990, p. 235).

The different 'presences' of Africa, Europe, and America (the New World) affect how one positions oneself and/or is positioned by others.

It is this same sentiment that compels Christine Matzke and Osita Okagbue to choose the term "diasporas" instead of diaspora for their collection of essays "to indicate that the 'African experience' refers to a myriad of groups and communities with widely differing histories, and cultural identities, dispersed nationalities, geographical origins and current locations. This is also evident in their theatre". (Matzke et al., 2009, p. ivx) The unique constituency of theatre practitioners under investigation for this study, bear witness to this statement on the stages of Britain. The uniqueness of this constituency comes from their connection, no matter how tenuous, to another nation or nations. McLeod's analysis of Robin Cohen's study of diaspora points out the same connection between the generations of diasporic peoples, which is another fundamental factor that runs through this investigation:

Generational differences are important here. Children born to migrant peoples may lay claim to British citizenship, but their sense of identity and subjectivity, born from living in a diaspora community can be influenced by the 'past migratory history' of their parents or grandparents, that makes them forge cultural and imaginative bonds with more than one nation. The emotional and affective link these people might have to a distant location can be powerful and strong - perhaps more so than that of migrants, in some instances- even if they have never lived in or indeed visited the place in question. (McLeod, 2010, p. 239).

This unique diasporic condition is evidenced in a multitude of combinations either through the identities of the dramatists in this study or of the characters

they write about in their work. Their sense of Britishness is broader than the narrow view of holding a British passport.

The claiming of British citizenship, particularly for the second and third generations who are born here, opens up another arena for the contestation of identity. The official documentation suggests a 'belonging' but the visible racial 'difference', complicates the issue of belonging, interrogated by Percy Hintzen.

Thus residence in the jurisdictional space of the state does not necessarily come with claims of belonging and with contingent rights of citizenships that legitimize access to the deserved materialities of the nation. It does not lead, necessarily, to participation in the performative imaginaries and the poetics and aesthetics of national identification. The tension this produces is played out around cultural politics of inclusion and exclusion that, in the final analysis, is racialized. (2007, pp. 250–251).

The society that the first generation has come into is a liberal democratic environment that believes in the rights of the individual. The expectation is that everyone will participate in citizenship; the idea of equality, participation, involvement in democratic processes, public participation and practice of citizenship. The unwritten law is that it does not necessarily apply to all resident within the nation. The first generation were too busy trying to survive, so participation in the nation state was really a luxury. The second and third generation, however, do have more of a claim to the nation state than their parents' generation, yet they find themselves in the position where the



discrimination experienced by the first generation becomes transferred to the second.

With regard to the ideas being explored at the beginning of this thesis, the notion of double consciousness, diaspora and a new way of being, of perceiving and engaging with the world, will be addressed through the work of the selected playwrights and companies. A critical analysis of the plays and the work produced by the companies' shows how they are representing characters that the writers no longer agree to be side-lined. The thrust of the investigation lies in what the playwrights are doing and how they are doing it in order to claim their rightful place in the public domain.

Hall's interesting discussion of difference and identity shows clearly how the new ways of thinking and how 'difference' is viewed currently functions in identity politics. According to him,

All identity is constructed across difference and begins to live with the politics of difference....All the social movements which have tried to transform society and have required the constitution of new subjectivities, have had to accept the necessarily fictional, but also the fictional necessity, of the arbitrary closure which is not the end, but which makes both politics and identity possible (Hall, 1986, p. 45).

He advocates for the use of 'ethnicity' rather than 'race' in defining identity. Fully aware of the dangers ethnicity can bring, Hall situates the modern usage of ethnicity within the context of the African diasporic community:

But in our times, as an imaginary community, it is also beginning to carry some other meanings, and to define a new space for identity. It insists on difference- on the fact that every identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history. Every statement comes from somewhere, from somebody in particular. It insists on specificity, conjuncture. But it is not necessarily armour-plated against other identities. It is not tied to fixed permanent, unalterable oppositions. It is not wholly defined by exclusion (1986, p. 46).

African diasporic identity is claiming its own space and position, making sure it retains its own identity, as it has a shared/public space alongside other British theatre. This thesis is suggesting that what the society has been refusing to accept, the theatre has now started accepting. These characters now appearing on the mainstream stage confirm this.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **New Directions or Same Old Story?**

Historically, the African diasporic community in Britain has been known by a long list of labels, most of which have been imposed upon them by 'others' as a way of categorising them with many political implications. The more encompassing African diasporic term proposed in this study aims to identify the complexities of the second and third generations of this constituency whilst allowing the space for the members to decide on their own distinctions.

Ato Quayson's article in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* (2013) provided an interesting and a unique perspective on Africa's diasporas. In his bid to answer the question 'what is Africa in the world today' (2013, p. 628) Quayson found it necessary to offer a two-pronged analysis that underlies the dispersal of Africans from the continent into Africa's current diasporas suggesting that these inform the different types of Black cultural identity constructed in the various diasporas, as well as the different forms of identification that these identities have with the continent itself. He identifies these two routes as the 'maritime' and the 'plantation' route metaphors. He uses these terms to capture the carry-over from one cultural location to another, which characterizes the formation of African diasporic identities. The 'maritime' route creation refers to Africa's diaspora, specifically in the 1560s in Britain who arrived via slave and merchant ships and he discusses the impact of the varying degrees of interaction with British indigenes through a historical trajectory of the presence of Africa's

diaspora in Britain via this route. The docking of the *Empire Windrush* in 1948 of course marked a major turning point on the British cultural landscape and has undoubtedly been a significant determinant in the construction of African diasporic identity in Britain. This was a useful distinction for my work initially because of the clear differentiation between Africa's diaspora in the 'New World', South America and the Caribbean, who made up Quayson's 'plantation route' metaphor; a group who are clearly an African diasporic community, but a community that did not fall under my research parameters.

Whilst Quayson's analysis provides a detailed chronicling of the maritime route identity formation, his summation that 'Caribbean cultural forms have arguably been the most influential single factor in the formation of Black identities in Liverpool and other parts of the UK.'(Quayson, 2013, p. 638) is problematic. I would agree with this summation in part, as I do argue the same about the domination of Caribbean influence on 'black British' identity, certainly since the post 2<sup>nd</sup> World War migration due largely to the fact that people of Caribbean extraction made up a greater percentage of Britain's African diasporic population at the time and quickly established strong though marginalised communities in Britain. A Caribbean register therefore understandably influenced the theatre that emanated from this diasporic constituency.

My contention is that Quayson appears to have failed to recognise neither the presence nor the contribution that Africa's diaspora via the 'plantation route' have made to African diasporic identity in Britain. The plantation route by Quayson's interpretation finds its largest diaspora in America's New World, and he explores the extent to which African cultural and social practices have migrated and been transferred from Africa to the new spaces. He provides examples of

Yoruba traditional practices transferring to Brazil and even returning to affect the original space. He does not, however, acknowledge the recent emergence of second and third generation Africans born or raised in Britain who are also experimenting with cultural and traditional practices that have equally been transferred from the continent.

The three dramatists of Nigerian heritage treated in Chapter Two of this study are a case in point of the emergence of dramatists with an inextricable link to Africa, which is being explicitly scrutinised in their work. The two theatre companies Collective Artistes and Tiata Fahodzi centralise Africa in their work by sourcing from the vast traditional performance practices on the continent and reimagining them within the context of Britain. The three mono-dramatists identify in very distinctive ways with the continent through the telling and promotion of their personal narratives.

On the larger cultural scene, Africa has come into prominence since the new millennium, evidenced by the myriad of African centered festivals taking place in the capital and around Britain. *Africa 05*, for instance, a BBC initiative placed the continent at the centre of its programming with a series of events across the capital that linked with African communities in Britain and also reported on events from the continent. The 2005 World Cup recognised the presence and contribution of the continent by highlighting the promise of some African nations such as Ghana, Nigeria and the introduction of South Africa to the tournament. The lead up to the 2012 London Olympics was invested with music festivals, such as *Back 2Black*, part of the Barbican London Festival and The South Bank Festivals showcasing African musicians such as Angelique Kidjo, Hugh Masekela, King Sonny Ade, feeding the diversity that won the London Olympic bid.

Within theatre, the legacy of the Nigerian musician/activist Fela Anikulapo Kuti was made into a musical *Fela!* in 2008 in the USA, the National Theatre, London, housed the production in the Olivier in 2010. The previous year saw Soyinka's classic, *Death and the King's Horseman*,(1975) with an all-black cast dominate the same space. The notion that African-centred work was considered more commercially viable now compared to a decade ago was a received perception that saw mainstream theatres viewing this culturally specific work as less risky. The 'successes' of the Nigerian film industry in terms of its consumption nationally and its tremendous international reach and impact, cannot be underestimated. This mapping suggests that there exists in Britain a vibrant and multifaceted relationship with the African continent.

Quayson prompts that '[t]he two route metaphors are not to be seen as mutually exclusive, but rather as interdependent and inter-animating.'(Quayson, 2013, p. 631) This falls in line with African diasporic dramatists/artists such as Kwame Kwei-Armah's conscious routing from his 'Black British lived experience, through his parents' filtered Caribbean culture to root himself within an African heritage. His physical tracing of his cultural roots beyond his parents Grenadian heritage to his ancestral roots in Ghana West Africa, which instigated his name change from Ian Roberts to the Ghanaian Kwame Kwei-Armah is proof of this. It also explains why second generation Ghanaian playwright, David Levi Addai, identifies himself as a product of Lewisham, a borough of London, without the explicit connection to Ghana/the continent.

It is better to speak of multiple identifications of Africa's diaspora, forged on the continent, on the plantations or on the ships. This study however keeps in mind Quayson's caution.

A diaspora, whether African or otherwise, should not be perceived as a discrete entity but rather as being formed by a series of often contradictory convergences of peoples, ideas, and even cultural orientations.’(Quayson, 2013, p. 631)

Rather than the term being a limiting ‘entity’ it opens up the possibilities for postcolonial identities to define themselves, whilst keeping Africa within the frame.

### **Shifts in ‘Black British’ Theatre**

Errol John’s *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (1956) staged in 1958, alongside Barry Reckord’s *Flesh to a Tiger* (1958)(Reckord et al., 2010) and Wole Soyinka’s *The Invention* (1959), all at the Royal Court, marked the beginning of the recognition in British theatre that social change was taking place, the Royal Court being the first theatre in Britain to produce plays written by Commonwealth migrants. Arriving on the British Isles as part of the post-war migration, these dramatists came initially to further their studies in Britain and later found work in the theatre, coming as they did from ‘privileged backgrounds’. (Matzke et al., 2009, p. 66) Their backgrounds and education would have exposed them to an orientation of European theatre that would have facilitated their finding work in the theatre industry in Britain. These key productions, joined later by other productions at Theatre Royal Stratford East, marked the beginning of a shift in the British cultural landscape and theatre that projected a sense of a cultural identity amongst/for the first generation migrants that was deeply rooted in a sense of home, located in an ‘other’ place. This was the first time that Africans and people

of African descent had the autonomy to represent themselves in their own voice on the British stage.

The situation before this, particularly in the context of 1920's London is discussed in great detail in Steve Nicholson's essay in *African Theatre: Histories 1850-1950* (Hutchison, 2010). The representations of Africans 'in Early Twentieth-Century British Theatre' were of white actors 'blacking up' to play their stereotypical perceptions of Africans gleaned mainly from Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, (Conrad, University of Virginia et al., 1996) and according to Nicholson, written by playwrights 'most of whom had probably never visited the countries or continent they wrote about.' (Nicholson et al., 2010, p. 123) The representations of Africans then bore no relations to their original culture, but rather a stereotypical image created by the British playwrights of what they expected to find in the "heart of darkness".

Virginia Mason Vaughan's *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500-1800* provides a broader and earlier historical account of the 'impersonations of black Africans' (2005) in England, noting, like Osborne (2006), that 'the performance practice of "blacking up" thrived in religious pageants of the middle ages as a *simple* way of discriminating evil from good. (2005) Of course, the association of blackness with evil shifted to a racial association with England's first contact with Africa and its subsequent slave trade and colonialism. Blackness in these enterprises was a convenient justification for Empire. Osborne's article (2006) indicates an extensive list of documentations discussing the racialised position of Africans in Britain. The resultant projection of the colonial mission in the mother country through novels, exhibitions, plays and later films, cast Africans 'doubly' as demonic and sub-human; a notion that gets



repeated and modified in its performance over time until it has become an accepted signifier to help in the construction of race, particularly of the other.

Apart from the 'blackened up' white actors impersonating Africans, Nicholson informs ironically, that 'occasionally, African performers were cast in minor roles- adding a touch of extra glamour and perhaps legitimacy to a production.' (Nicholson et al., 2010, p. 123)

These rare times when Africans were 'allowed' to represent themselves were not on their own terms. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century, with the significant presence of the African-American actor, Ira Aldridge, and his singular interpretation of both black and white roles to international acclaim can one pinpoint the beginnings of what Osborne describes as 'a limited autonomy over representing a black character in mainstream theatre.' (2006, p. 13)

The fight for recognition within the black community was shaped by the presence of African-Americans who helped give a wider meaning to blackness, which extended beyond geographical boundaries. Black British identity at this time was still very much at the early stages of developing an autonomous cultural visibility. This historical trajectory of the representation of Africa and its diaspora in Britain is analysed in Osborne's article leading up to the prominence of African diasporic dramatists in Britain in the new millennium.

The works of playwrights such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Ola Rotimi, Ama Ata Aidoo, Soyinka, Efua Sutherland and Derek Walcott, part of the group collectively known as the first generation of postcolonial writers, particularly in African and Caribbean nations, contributed greatly to shifts not only in their home nations but internationally too. The primary function of their writing was to create a unitary sense of cultural and national identity that often linked with the newly formed

political process of nation building. This process of decolonisation within the theatre involved identifying and helping eradicate the destructive mental effects of the colonial experience. This was done in varying forms and styles amongst the identified playwrights, but essentially the retrieving and reinterpreting of indigenous histories, social and cultural practices and traditions of the people was the driving force behind this theatre. Brian Crow and Chris Banfield consider the African dramatists had an advantage in this project, stating that

Whereas the dramatist of a subordinated culture often has only a tenuous and problematic relationship with the traditions of his or her people's past, for the African playwright the full resources of tradition are usually available, to be used (or rejected) alongside European models. (Crow et al., 1996, p. 80)

This claim is substantiated by the work of the numerous African playwrights mentioned above and those that came before and after them, such as J. P. Clark, Kobina Sekyi, Femi Osofisan, Mohammed ben Abdullah, Werewere Liking and many more who continue to create literary theatre and performance sourcing from their traditional resources.

Ngũgĩ writes

[t]his was the sixties when the centre of the universe was moving from Europe or, to put it another way, when many countries particularly in Asia and Africa were demanding and asserting their right to define themselves and their relationships to the

universe from their own centres in Africa and Asia'.(Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1993, p. 2)

This provides a clear context of the shifts that were taking place in nations that were formally governed by the British and other European powers, which were involved in the struggle for gaining their independence. The response to the move towards the projection of a national identity was clearly evidenced in the literature and drama coming from these nations, which celebrated cultural practices through the amalgamation of traditional theatrical performances with European models. Ngũgĩ describes this literature as 'celebrating the right to name the world for ourselves.' And how the literature was challenging the more dominant one in which Asia, Africa and South America were always being defined from the capitals of Europe by Europeans who often saw the world in colour tinted glasses'. (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1993, p. 3)

The interconnections witnessed in the creation of these 'new literatures' (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1993), particularly within African and Caribbean nations, found their reverberations in their diasporas too, which is the main concern of this thesis. This notion of self-definition in the home nations of the dramatists, some of who now found themselves in Britain was echoed in the diasporic space. The initial productions of the migrant dramatists can be constructed as a shifting of centres of a kind following in the footsteps of their colleagues in their home nations. The moving of the centre as expressed so passionately by Ngugi, was not about 'replacing one centre for another', but for him, 'the problem arose only when people tried to use the vision from any one centre and generalise it as the universal reality'. (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1993, p. 4)

For the first time, reading the 'new literatures' he felt the characters and situations were including him and his experience. They were speaking of 'voices coming out of the centres outside Europe' (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1993, p. 4). The shared history, though from opposite sides in terms of experience for the coloniser and the colonised, provides different centres. Ngugi writes about Lamming, who 'unlike Conrad, wrote very clearly from the other side of the empire, from the side of those who were crying out 'Let My People Go'... Lamming wrote from the centre of those struggling against empire. (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1993, p. 6)

The shifting of the bases upon which the world is read from needed to take place not only in literature but also in critical and academic institutions – as Ngugi says. Theatre was also playing its part. Ngugi was interested in how one centre interacted with another centre, a pluralism of cultures where, regardless of where they were situated, institutions of learning 'should reflect other streams' of the human imagination. ( 7)

The early plays, as mentioned above, represent the beginnings of a shift in British theatre, particularly in terms of autonomy of representation. The presentations of 'home' characterise the work of the early migrants, which falls in line with the movement of national identity and critiquing the state of their home nations.

The 1970s marked a historical starting point in Britain when the term black started to establish itself as a political signifier. The creation of a unified culture and identity where that was denied resulted in the black British culture/identity. The playwrights of note during this period were Michael Abensetts, Mustapha Matura, Alfred Fagon, who came to Britain as young men

and became a new breed of playwrights and theatre practitioners who concerned themselves with addressing the particular issue of the harsh experience and needs of Black people in the foreign surroundings of Britain.

The term Black British discussed previously became synonymous with this breed and also with the children of the first generation migrants who were now claiming British citizenship because the 1949 Nationality Act legislated that people from the Empire and Commonwealth were allowed access to Britain because they carried British passports. This legislation however did not come with the automatic claim of belonging nor a mandatory inclusion in the nation that white Britons have the advantage of. The official invitation did not extend to full national integration essentially because of racial difference.

The ambiguity of the Black British constituency, with explicit reference to who constitutes its membership particularly during the 1980s, had political implications, which became the foundation for a radical period in British society, a period categorized by the unrest and frustrations within the 'black' community against white institutions, particularly the police force and its unprecedented harassment of black youth. The resultant race riots became a defining moment that changed the face of race relations in Britain that Ponnuswami illustrates. 'The riots of the 1980s played a critical role in demonstrating that the black community in Britain saw itself as fully British, ready to respond as a citizenry.'(Ponnuswami, 2015 p.80) The post-war migrants addressed earlier and their subsequent descendants faced a myriad of minority inequalities in housing, employment, education and healthcare, particularly from Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. The racialised disadvantages suffered by Britain's

minority communities, the policies put in place to address them and the minority communities' reactions to them over the decades are well documented.<sup>17</sup>

The contentions outlined of the political, social and cultural context of 1980s Britain specifically for its minority communities also created within it, the emergence of a vibrant arts scene collectively known within the British cultural sphere as representing 'Black British culture'. This impact was evidenced in the theatre of the 1970s into the 80s.

The struggles of the practitioners of the 70s with the setting up of Black Theatre companies such as Temba and Black Art Centres like Keskodee and the Dark and Light Theatre club in their bid to provide avenues for the expression of Black Art, paid off in the 1980s. The 80s proved to be the celebration of a Black British collective. This period saw a most positive growth in the setting up of black led theatre companies that became known as Black British Theatre. Black Theatre Co-operative, Carib Theatre Company, Staunch Players, The Black Theatre Forum, Black Mime, Umoja, Double Edge, and Talawa, amongst others, were all vibrant, energised and prolific young companies that were producing theatre that was topical, edgy and very relevant to the diverse needs of its African diasporic audience, who were developing, through training, an appreciation for the different types of work being produced. Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama, for instance, was one such institution for training artists, whose value and relevance to the contribution of Black British theatre particularly of the 1980s needs noting. Yvonne Brewster, the co-founder of Talawa Theatre Company, is described as being 'the first black drama student in Britain' (Rose Bruford

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<sup>17</sup> (See, for instance, Proctor, James ed. (2000) ; Patterson, Sheila (1965) ; Fryer, Peter. (1984)

website, 2012) under Rose Bruford herself. Helen Kolawole's article informs that 'Brewster: in 1956, on her first day as a drama student at Rose Bruford college, London, she was told she would never work.' (Kolawole, 2003) On her return to her native Jamaica, after her studies, she set up an indigenous professional Jamaican theatre company together with the playwright, Trevor Rhone, who was also taught by Bruford, called The Barn Theatre, in 1965, named after the Barn Theatre at Rose Bruford's Lamobey Park, Sidcup site. Ironically, Brewster is now a fellow of the drama college; a testament to her feistiness- which translates in Jamaican patois as 'Talawa', the company she later formed in the United Kingdom, and her trail-blazing ability in creating opportunity where there were none. Denise Wong, the artistic director of Black Mime Theatre Company, was also a student at Rose Bruford, as were the trio of Paulette Randall, Bernadine Evaristo and Patricia Hilaire, members of the first Theatre of Black Women, an alternative/activist theatre company (1982-88) whose presence within the history of Black theatre in Britain is often missing. This oversight is as a result of the distinctly ephemeral and anecdotal nature of their work and that of many of the companies mentioned above. The history lives on in the artists and their collaborators involved in creating the work and those who witnessed and shared in the experience; but this will eventually disappear. The lack of documentation in terms of publications of the play scripts, and of a critical infrastructure that takes into account the complexities of African diasporic identity in theatre and performance, particularly of this period of black British theatre history removes it from the debate of the development of British theatre. The Arts Council's commissioned report on identity, aesthetics and ethnicity in theatre, *Speaking Truth to Power* (2008) asked very specifically

What is the Arts Council doing to ensure that the struggles of black people in theatre and the arts dating back to World War II are recorded and understood such that the present and future generations of arts practitioners, black and white, could inform themselves and their practice about the foundations on which their work is built? In this regard, the *Whose Theatre* report noted that: 'There are many experienced practitioners with documents, images and memories that could make a contribution to an archive that is dynamic and engages across generations and cultures.' (John et al., 2008, p. 10)

The answers to the questions posed can be found in the establishment of facilities such as the Black Cultural Archives, set up in 1981 as a grassroots local project, by the late Len Garrison. On 24<sup>th</sup> July 2014 the official opening of the centre saw it move into its new purpose built facility in Brixton - 'the spiritual capital of Britain's Black community, ...on Windrush Square, named in honour of the first arrivals from the Caribbean.' (Black Cultural Archives website, 2012)

There is also the online platform of the National Theatre Black Plays Archive, housed at the National Theatre, in partnership with Sustained Theatre. The aim is to record excerpts of every African, African Caribbean and Black British play produced in the last 60 years. The Unfinished Histories project is another online facility archiving alternative British Theatre history covering 1968-1988. Their work extends to setting up exhibitions showcasing their archive that includes Black British theatre within its scope. Future Histories 'the UK's first national repository for African, Asian and Caribbean performing arts'



(‘FutureHistories’, 2005) is also another archive set up to house the work initially for Asian work in Britain, and soon realised that the work of African and African Caribbean artists faced the same if not worse marginality in Britain. The genesis of the archive followed a conversation with an experienced performer who, viewed and experienced theatre as an event hinged on the moment, impossible to preserve or transcribe in other formats, inextricably bound to its audiences and their memories, transient as the variety of people producing and witnessing its enactment.’

(‘FutureHistories’, 2005)

The repository now houses the archive of Black Theatre Co-operative; the company founded by Charlie Hanson and Mustapha Matura in 1979 with the latter’s play, *Welcome Home Jacko* (1979)(Matura et al., 1980), that marked a shift in the identity politics of the plays and companies of the decade that followed, which was concerned with interrogating the realities of being an immigrant in Britain. The company was set up essentially as a reaction to the play being rejected by the Royal Court on the grounds that they were already producing a black play. The ‘Do it Yourself’ disposition, which I argue to be a fundamental component of African diasporic performance practice because of the many obstacles practitioners face in trying to articulate their story within the British context, consists of artists having to rely on themselves and the goodwill of others when they are let down by the structures that are set up to support them. I suggest that this notion arguably gave birth to the boom of Black British theatre, which informed the ideology behind many of the companies who were creating work for themselves and starting the process of establishing themselves on their own terms within Britain. The success of the

company and the many others that sprouted up in the 1980s came from its co-operative values and the understanding of the mutual benefits members gained from the company who were not officially paid to be together. But the mission of self-created work, discussed earlier was a driving force for all the companies. The model of providing a platform but not nurturing it to allow for growth and sustainability is a recurring theme when it comes to arts institutions and minority arts in Britain. The Black Theatre Co-operative has now become Nitro, and still maintains the documentation of the company work under Future Histories, who also archive the work of Moti Roti, a theatre/arts project set up by Keith Khan and Ali Zaidi.

The work of the skilled theatre historian and archivist, Michael MacMillan, uses the collected ephemeral material and personal narratives to create and unearth these hidden trajectories, not only of Black British theatre histories but also their cultural lives in Britain. These facilities collectively prove how important they are in providing a space for African diasporic visibility in the current British cultural scene. An example is the publication of his exhibition of the narratives of migrant experience as represented through the arrangements of their front rooms. *The Front room: Migrant aesthetics in the home.* (2009)

It is important to return to Rose Bruford College, which, in 1979 had an unprecedented 'large' in-take of (5) African diasporic students to their groundbreaking Community Theatre Arts course. This is significant in that it was unique in comparison to other drama schools, who according to Evaristo 'were loathe to accept black students at that time, let alone women. The argument was that as there was no work for us, it wasn't worth training us.' ('Unfinished Histories » Bernardine Evaristo Talk') This confirming the unfortunate continuation of the

opinion that Brewster was told some 20 years prior. Apart from its unprecedented intake, the offering of the Community Theatre Arts course was in line with the founder's mission of shifting drama training from an elitist activity to a more inclusive one. The school's website confirms that 'Rose Bruford was interested in the community of theatre and the role of the theatre in the life of the community.' (Rose Bruford website, 2013) Evaristo, one of the five students, revealed at a seminar that 'Over the years of seeing mainstream and alternative theatre, something lodged in my mind that alternative community theatre would be more receptive to black people. ('Unfinished Histories') She confirms that her training in Community Theatre Arts paid off as she and her colleagues acquired the necessary skills to 'be politically conscious actors, it also trained us to be proactive in creating our own theatre. ('Unfinished Histories') 'This was the natural and logical solution/answer to the scarcity of acting roles available for African diasporic people, particularly at that time, and even more scarce, were roles for women. The demand for self-created work that spoke to a particular community, their own, was a signature for the 1980s into 90s. The setting up of Theatre of Black Women and the proliferation of other culturally specific companies mentioned above were united in a number of things. The creation of their new identities was reflected in the names they gave their companies. With names such as Black Theatre Co-operative, Carib Theatre Company, The Black Theatre Forum, Black Mime, Umoja and Talawa, there was no ambiguity about their identity as they referenced their difference or cultural heritage. The initial objective for most of the companies was to tell their unique narratives and to represent themselves. Talawa's website for example lays out the company's mission.

Talawa was created in direct response to the lack of creative opportunities for actors from minority ethnic backgrounds and the marginalisation of Black peoples from cultural processes prevalent at the time of the Company's inception.(Talawa.com )

Their mission statement had resonances of the other companies whose work catered to multiple groups and interests. With particular reference to Theatre of Black Women, their work could be read as defiance because the majority of the companies were highly male dominated and not only within the black British scene but also at all levels of the theatre industry. The uncompromising proclamation of being at the helm of their own creativity and declaring their sense of identity embedded in their company name cut across all the above-mentioned black theatre companies of the 80s into the 90s.

Established British theatres such as the Royal Court, the Tricycle Theatre and Theatre Royal Stratford East, and other smaller non-producing venues like Oval House Theatre, Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) and The Albany, amongst others, identified the importance of the work and were homes for many of these companies' productions.

The Greater London Council, established in 1965, was a government appointed body that was responsible for running strategic services in conjunction with the local authorities, such as roads, housing and leisure services. Ken Livingstone's leadership role from 1979-1986 when it was abolished is significant when considering the trajectory of Black British theatre. In 1981 Livingstone incorporated the Ethnic Minorities Committee into the services provided by the GLC in his bid to help change social attitudes towards ethnic minorities in Britain

at the time. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government over this period had to deal with recession in the British economy in her first term. High unemployment, which resulted from her economic policies with cuts to industry and the robust move towards privatisation in her bid to improve the economy of Britain, had a rather negative impact on black British communities. In the absence of a significantly strong race relation's act/policy, the African diasporic population became an easy target for the frustrations of the nation concerning the state of the economy. This situation is highlighted in Jimmy Atkinson's article that states

the arrival of large numbers of migrants, particularly in inner city areas with the most acute housing problems, inevitably exacerbated already serious shortages and supplied ready-made scapegoats on whom already extant problems could be blamed.

(Atkinson, 2003 jimmyatkinson.com)

Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government's management of the minority issue in Britain during her term had a direct impact on the theatre coming out from that community. As Lynette Goddard argues:

The boom of black theatre in Britain and the start of its demise coincide directly with the beginning and the end of Margaret Thatcher's time as Conservative Party Prime Minister. (Goddard, 2007b, p. 28)

The newfound 'politics of resistance' was filtering through into the theatre that represented the presence of the migrants in Britain.

The GLC which was a lifeline to the creation and sustenance of Black British theatre at the time was viewed as a socialist run body that Livingstone used as a way to antagonise Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government's management of the minority crisis. In 1983 Yvonne Brewster and Anton Phillips, actors, directors and theatre practitioners/producers in their own right, came together to put forward an application to the GLC with a view to creating an artistic hub for black arts by putting on a season of black plays at the Arts Theatre in London's West End. The idea was to consolidate and celebrate the vibrant and culturally diverse black arts scene in Britain, which involved theatre practitioners not only of African and African Caribbean descent but also of South Asian descent. 'The point of producing black plays in the West End was precisely to stimulate the emergence of new theatregoers both within white and black communities, while opening the mainstream to black theatre aesthetics'. (Alda Terracciano, 2010)

The *Whose Theatre Report* documents that 'Running from 1983 to 1990, the Black Theatre Season Company developed a five-year plan, which articulated an artistic vision, plans for expansion and the need for a permanent home for the company producing the work'. (2006)

As the lack of work for African diasporic artists in the decades discussed above engendered a 'DIY' consciousness that blossomed into the historic and unprecedented variety of black British work, so too did the funding that was subsequently made available, through the Arts Council of England, supposedly to sustain and develop the work, in my opinion, gradually aided in suffocating the art. The amount of power and control wielded by funding bodies that ultimately are the ones who decide on the work remove that vital element of 'self-created' work from the equation, thereby distancing the artists from the work, which

consequently will not connect with the audience at a fundamental level. It is not by chance that the numerous self-created companies, who managed to fit within a specific criteria to qualify to access funding were gradually but poignantly denied the same funds, this scenario being repeated across 'black British Arts'.

The thriving 'Black British' theatre movement therefore suffered as subsidised theatres under the Arts Council faced large government cuts, which resulted in the eventual decline of so many black led companies in Britain.

Postcolonial discourses and identities are always working first from a place of having to assert and affirm a long denied sense of identity. This falls in line with the work coming from first generation identities.

From the expanse of work produced in the eighties to the steady integration of African diasporic work into mainstream contemporary theatre, one is able to examine the changes that have occurred in British society. In exploring the modes of cultural production one can assess not just the difference in the themes and characters explored by the writers, but also the changes that have occurred within the theatrical establishment's approach to producing theatre that lies outside of the mainstream Western canon. These elements ultimately reflect the notions of identity held by both African diasporic community and white British society. The difference in identity issues experienced from the eighties to the Twenty-First century can be explored through looking at the new formations of identity expressed in contemporary plays.

### **Enter Africa**

I revert to the point where Britain had to come face to face with its former colonies; the point when the children of the 'empire' returned 'home' and Britain

had to acknowledge its responsibility to those nations. Osborne captures the breadth of reasons that changed the face of Britain post World War II.

Post-war immigration was impelled by many factors that created a mutual supply and demand dynamic between Britain and its colonized (or decolonizing) people. Reconstruction of war-ravaged Europe, refuge from political and social tyranny, the impetus to seek employment, the reassurance of state welfare systems, educational opportunities and recruitment of a workforce were some of the key factors which produced a trans-global movement of people. The island of Britain began to attract an influx of non-Anglo-Saxon people in numbers not previously experienced. (Osborne, 2006, p. 23)

The first generation of non-white people to arrive on the shores of Britain in response to the call for help to rebuild post-war Britain came initially from the Caribbean. The Windrush Generation, as they have become known in British history due to the iconic status of the SS Empire Windrush Ship and its inhabitants was largely from Jamaica, with the other islands represented in much smaller numbers. The West African migration into Britain, which started a little later than the Caribbean influx in the late 1940s, was governed by a different premise to that of the Caribbean peoples. The first wave of West Africans during this period belonged to the elite classes. Their purpose here in Britain was for a British education, a status symbol that was firmly linked to their British colonial history. 'In 1966, the number of households for West Indians without children



was 38 per cent and for West Africans was 69 per cent. This shows that West Africans were mainly single people at the time'. (Dabydeen et al., 2007, p. 220) Even before independence, the practice of members of the elite classes sending their children to Britain as a way of maintaining their high status was commonplace. Post-independence, the 'mimicking' of British values, an occurrence cautioned against by Fanon,(2004) found an increasing number of children from the ruling classes in British West African nations such as Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria pour into Britain.

There was a fundamental difference between the Caribbeans and West Africans at the early stages of their migration. The Caribbeans were working whilst the West Africans were studying. This also meant that the West Africans were financially better off than their Caribbean counterparts who were struggling within an already challenging economic period in Britain. The introduction then of a class difference between the Africans and the Caribbeans because of the disparity in their economic status and the status given to education, particularly by the West Africans resulted in an unspoken rivalry, which went unnoticed by the host nation who saw both groups of migrants as a homogenous constituency. The history of slavery and the burden of blame for it was another element of unspoken rivalry that exists between the two. The meeting in Britain was the first time the Caribbeans and West Africans had encountered each other and the realities of their bitter histories have proved to be the source of many years of tension between them, which is still evident today as some of the dramatists in this study draw upon in the expression of their African diasporic identities..

Plays of the 1950s and 60s did not to my knowledge address this tension, but what is worthy of note is the subtle acknowledgment of the distinction

between Africans and Caribbeans through television of the 70s onwards. Don Warrington's character Philip, the supposed African prince in *Rising Damp*, represented an early shift in the stereotypical way Africans were depicted, as discussed earlier. This sitcom developed from a stage play, *The Banana Box*, into the iconic sitcom, with Warrington as the only black character. He was a 'town and country planning' student at the university, which aligns with the early African migrants in Britain who came to study and return to rebuild their nations after gaining independence. Hakim Adi's specific study on West Africans in Britain from 1900-1960 documents that

West African students have been coming to Britain since the days of the Atlantic Slave Trade. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century British and African traders found it mutually advantageous to educate African children, especially males in Britain, and each party strove to maximize advantage from the arrangement.(Adi, 1998, p. 6)

The 'mutual advantages' consisted of learning the 'white man's book' for the African chiefs who were among the first to send their children, and an opportunity for the British to use the education of these well positioned children as a means through which to spread Christianity and Western 'enlightenment' in West Africa. This was the beginning of a long tradition of a paradoxical relationship between Britain and West African nations through slavery, education, Christianity and philanthropy and exploitation, a complex association that is still relevant today. The following decades have shown education has become one of the fundamental factors that brought West Africans to Britain. This was exemplified by the setting up of the West African Student Christian Union- (WASCU) in 1916, affiliated to The Student's Christian Movement (SCU).

Its aim was bible study; it grew to include West Indians in 1919, and then slowly took a more secular form. The more influential West African Students Union (WASU) described as: ‘ One of the most important and long lasting black organisations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.’(Dabydeen et al., 2007, p. 515) was set up in 1925 by Ladipo Solanke, a Nigerian and Bankole Bright, a Sierra Leonean, with 21 West African law students studying in Britain. It ‘established itself as the main cultural and political focus for West Africans in Britain for the next 35 years. (2007, p. 515)

The political energy driving WASU was spurred on by a collective desire to gain independence from Britain, and that ideology found its training ground in WASU. With key members like Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe and other politically influential individuals the association gave birth to the new leaders of West Africa. The association was affiliated to so many other groups in Britain and internationally too.

Over the next decade Ghana had gained independence from the British in 1957, other neighbouring countries such as Nigeria achieved theirs in 1960. Robert C. Young’s analysis however of the real meaning of independence states that it is

a shift from colonial rule and domination to a position not so much of independence as of being in-dependence... For the most part, the same (ex-)imperial countries continue to dominate those countries that they formally ruled as colonies.

This was certainly the case with the British ex colonies; the connection with Britain has not been completely severed. The migration, which started in the late forties, was still on-going. The difference now was that the Africans were also considering Britain as a second home. My personal perspective, taken from my parents, who both came to Britain on Ghana Government Scholarships in the 1960s stayed after they had completed their studies because they had met, gotten married and had started their family. My mother returned to Ghana to fulfil her 'bond' with the government, in the 1970s, but my father remained here in Britain, when that was never the intention. This phenomenon is touched on in the work of some of the dramatists in this study. (eg Tiata Fahodzi and Ade Solanke) The change of perception on the part of the Africans perhaps coincided with the British race act discussed earlier that allowed families to be reunited in Britain. The subsequent starting of families would have an impact on how the first-generation migrants then perceived Britain.

Adi's book, in relation to the WASU, documents how politicised the various groups were. He concludes his book by saying,

West African students and their organisations such as WASU, played a significant part in the struggle for self-government in West Africa. These organisations also fulfilled a very vital welfare role as support networks and refuges, providing a 'home from home' for West Africans in Britain.(Adi, 1998, p. 186)

The migratory presence of Africans, particularly West Africans, who were evidently present and active in British life, has apparently been written out of 'black British history, with the dominance of the Windrush generation.

Companies like Tiata Fahodzi and Collective Artistes to be discussed in chapters four and five respectively have been instrumental in centering the migratory presence in the narratives they address in their productions. The position of Africa in the work of current second and third generation dramatists is varied. The examination of the tensions between the two communities is now being explored. The prominent playwrights Kwame Kwei-Armah and Roy Williams, both coming from a Caribbean heritage, have tackled the tensions that exist within African and African Caribbean communities in Britain in some of their plays, specifically Kwei-Armah's *Statement of Regret* (2007) and Williams' *Joe Guy* (2007). So too have Femi Ogun and Bola Agbaje, both writing from their Nigerian cultural perspective. Natasha Tipney's review of Femi Ogun's re-run of *Torn* (2007) had this to say:

These are social divisions that have been touched upon with some frequency of late, in plays such as Roy Williams' *Joe Guy* and Kwame Kwei Armah's *Statement of Regret* but whereas in those productions, these issues were part of a larger collage, in this *Romeo and Juliet* tale they are brought to the fore, providing the main thrust of the drama.' (Tipney, 2008)

The fatal stabbing of Damilola Taylor, a Nigerian-born 10-year old in 2000, was the catalyst for Williams' *Fallout* (2003, now adapted into a film for Channel 4) which presented the only African character in the play as the victim of a gang beating which resulted in his death. The main issues being addressed in this play were race, law and order and how these factors affected knife and gun crime in the black community. But the undercurrent subject of the relationship between

Africans and African-Caribbeans was not the focal thrust of the production. Williams' *Joe Guy* (2007) is a better example in terms of the focus as the main character Joe struggles with his Ghanaian heritage within a Caribbean dominant popular culture as he strives to define himself. Bola Agbaje, with her debut and award-winning play, *Gone Too Far!*(2007) brought a refreshing take on the youth culture being addressed by her contemporaries by pointing the spotlight on a specific African diasporic experience in Britain that up until this point was largely invisible in a Caribbean dominated cultural scene. Like Oguns, the tension between the two African diasporic communities was the driving force behind the action of the play. This was certainly significant and points to a subtle shift taking place amongst African diasporic communities in Britain that would later be reflected on British stages within this decade.

A new generation of Africans migrating to Britain in the 1990s, coming from nations like Somalia, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, Democratic Rep of Congo and Nigeria, out-numbered the Caribbean presence in Britain. Fueled by changes in immigration laws in Britain, war, and civil and political unrest across nations in Africa, this migration phenomenon added another level of prejudice within African diasporic communities because of the cultural and religious difference and historical tensions between the African Caribbean and African communities, who were often perceived as a homogenized black community by the host nation. (Hughes, 2006). This highlights Quayson's point that 'Racial, cultural and language differences have their part to play in the shaping of *diaspora space* as do the politics of the ruling elites of the recipient nations.' (Quayson, 2013, p. 636) Gilroy's new introduction to his 1978 book, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, confirms this idea. 'The recent history of African countries like Somalia, Sierra

Leone and Nigeria is dislodging the Caribbean from the centre of British Blackness.’ (Gilroy, 1991, p. xiii) He consolidates this statement by putting it within the context of the 1970s as Quayson argues; the Caribbean influenced black British identity. ‘The combative mood of the 1970s was buoyed by the Caribbean and American political traditions that had politicised blackness all over the world. This was a profound change but not a permanent one.’ (Gilroy, 1991, p. xiii)

It is significant therefore that in the same year as Agbaje’s *Gone Too Far!* (2007), three other plays, Williams’s *Joe Guy* (2007), Kwei-Armah’s *Statement of Regret* (2007) and Femi Ogun’s *Torn* (2007) examined this tension within black communities. Sierz suggests that “when two or more plays explore the same social issues, it’s a clear signal of national concerns”(Sierz, 2011); the African presence and its added complication to African diasporic identity was now being felt. A number of reasons could account for this shift. First of all this was the year to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the 1807 slavery act. Numerous events to mark this monumental historical moment centralised Africa and the Caribbean on a national scale. The other more tangible reason points to the sharp increase in the British population of people from different African nations, all with different languages, religion and cultures, as stated by Quayson were now adding to the now ‘normalised’ British African and Caribbean diaspora population. The arrival of these new immigrants was under very different circumstances from the first wave; many seeking asylum from political unrest in their nations. The new wave of African migration is also highly driven by class and economics. They are economic migrants in the opposite direction, needing to survive, coming to Britain

for a better quality of life as opposed to the first wave that were 'invited' here to help rebuild the British economy.

Agbaje and Oguns explicitly present sharply observed African diasporic communities viewed through an African cultural lens. Both dramatists incidentally have also acknowledged the Eastern European communities in their plays. Agbaje's *Detaining Justice* (2009) and Oguns' *Torn*. (2007) Whereas the Caribbean influenced dramatists failed to centralize the tensions, its impact and significance is nonetheless felt in the articulation of the African diasporic identity within the British setting.

But within theatre and certainly over the last decade there has been a distinct ideological shift in the representation of the African community, that has moved from exoticism towards a more realistic representation. The new identity being presented by the second-generation African dramatists, many of whom have come to the fore in the last decade, appear to be renegotiating the new identities by moving from just concentrating on their black Britishness to writing material through their specific African cultural lens. The increased numbers of black British dramatists with an African heritage, who have come to the fore during this period, particularly those under investigation as well as Valerie Mason John, Arinze Kene, David Levi Addai and Lizzy Dijeh, to name a few, have contributed greatly to this positional shift. Chapter Two concentrates more on this specific constituency.



## CHAPTER TWO

### **A Coming of Age: The Distinct Voice of a New African**

#### **Diaspora Identity**

As human beings and cultural participants, studies<sup>18</sup> have shown that people use performance to announce themselves to the world, to claim their space and display their identities through the communities into which they have been socialised. The notion that identity does not exist until it is 'performed' and that it is only when it is placed in the arena against a set of others does it take on a reality, implies a level of performance that is the main concern of Ric Knowles's *Theatre & Interculturalism*. He proposes that

[C]ulture – the fluid day-to-day, lived realities of specific peoples in specific places at specific times- exists only insofar as it is enacted, performed into being by the daily and (extradaily) ritual and performative activities of individuals and communities as they negotiate their place in the world.(2010, p. 1)

As such, the heightened theatre space, particularly within postmodern thinking, offers a unique platform upon which the complexities of identity can be played out. With regard to the specificity of African diasporic identity, the need for the construction and reconstruction of identity have found the stage to offer a

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<sup>18</sup> See (Schechner et al., 1985)

multidisciplinary platform upon which African diasporic practitioners perform themselves.

It is clear that the second-generation dramatists in Britain recognize the importance and the role of theatre as a site and instrument for the articulation and contestation of cultural identities, particularly of race and ethnicity. This represents a significant shift from the concerns of the first generation dramatists discussed in chapter one. Mustapha Matura's work, for example, spearheaded this shift, coming out robustly in the eighties to redefine particularly the Caribbean migrant experience in Britain. Keith Peacock affirms this when he states: 'Here, for the first time, Matura reproduced the authentic voice of the working class, black West Indians who were attempting to settle in Britain.'(Peacock, 1999, p. 174) His refusal to be fixed within a narrow definition of the dominant society's perception of migrant communities is unmistakable in Peacock's chapter - 'So People Know We Are Here: Black Theatre in Britain'(Peacock, 1999) - which examines the debate around what constitutes the phenomenon categorised as 'Black theatre' in the 1980s. Attention needs to be drawn to the opening lines of the chapter, which reads: 'In 1981, the left-wing theatre periodical *Platform*, hosted a discussion concerned with the neglected status of black playwrights in Britain.'(1999) It is interesting to note the arguable shift in concerns within migrant communities with regards to the theatre landscape moving from one of status to recognition. The unprecedented prominence of African diasporic artists over the last decade validates to a certain degree a positive progression in the status of African diasporic artists within the British cultural field. There was an identifiable shift, in a contemporary theatrical

landscape that was consciously becoming more reflective of its diverse population.

To return to Owusu's study, he notes that,

'there is a clear contradiction between the functional contribution of black arts to British culture, and the failure or the refusal of the dominant media to recognise and celebrate this.'

(Owusu, 1986b, p. 22)

The period that this study covers has proved to be a turning-point in the level of critical reception African diasporic dramatists, have received in Britain. Making the move from the margins into a more visible space has shifted the centre and necessitated a critical engagement from 'dominant media' ranging from theatre reviews and interviews, the publishing of works and the beginnings of a permeation and an interaction with this theatre in academic institutions, which is vital to the future debate that these plays instigate in their subject matter. In addressing the critical perception of Debbie Tucker Green's work, for example, one of the prominent and prolific playwrights of this period, Osborne acknowledges,

the degree to which such processes, in tandem with archiving [...] still detrimentally affect the longevity and canonical recognition of a black dramatist's work. (Osborne, 2011b, p. 182)

There still remains a struggle for African diasporic dramatists to achieve a level of recognition within the British cultural space that equates to the contributions their artistic and cultural products have made to British culture. The type of recognition being demanded by second-generation African diasporic artists

resonates with Charles Taylor's examination of the 'politics of recognition,' which reminds one of the vital link between recognition and identity.

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.(Gutmann et al., 1994, p. 25)

African diasporic artists are striving for a sense of reciprocal recognition, of being viewed as equal, and as Appiah puts it, 'not [a] mere acknowledgement of existence,'(Gutmann et al., 1994, p. 155) which marks the nature of the shift in the reception of African diasporic work within the British cultural space. On the one hand, African diasporic artists are finally being acknowledged within the dominant society, but not on their own terms. The markers of British artistic merit, mentioned above, do not always fit into or fully understand the theatre that artists of this constituency are creating that redefines their identities. The commentary therefore and response to their work tends to keep them fixed within the '*misrecognition of others*'(1994, p. 25) and the perpetuation of a collective identity that does not show any regard for individual identity or the different theatrical traditions that inform the work. The diversity inherent within this constituency appears not to be effectively harnessed to benefit not only the

constituency but also British society at large. McMaster's report on arts funding makes a crucial link between diversity and excellence, suggesting that

We live in one of the most diverse societies the world has ever seen, yet this is not reflected in the culture we produce, or in who is producing it. Out of this society, the greatest culture could grow. As I have said, it is my belief that culture can only be excellent when it is relevant, and thus nothing can be excellent without reflecting the society which produces and experiences it.

(McMaster, 2008, p. 11)

Making diversity a priority within Britain's culture field, at all levels demands what has been suggested earlier of including more members from ethnic minorities in positions where they can be more effective because of their unique position. Mercer discusses this in particular relation to black gay and lesbian artists, stating that the 'important' work they produce that questions identity is

because they have made strategic cultural and political choices out of their experiences of marginality which situate them at the interface between different traditions as a site from which critical insights and interventions are made possible. (Mercer, 1994, p. 214)

Lending her voice to this notion on diversity, Patricia Cumper in her interview with Kene Igweonu argues that,

'essentially if you want to have new ideas, fresh ideas, new influences, new energies coming from any art form, you look as widely as possible. (Igweonu, 2013, p. 94)

She adds,

A lot of the time, people from minorities know the majority better than they know themselves, because we have to live with them, but what we [people from minorities] also know is ourselves (in ways the majority does not know us). We (Talawa) look at things through a different lens. (2013, p. 94)

This continuous battle for inclusion and acceptance marks the work of African diasporic artists.

The debates of the 1980s continue to occupy current African diasporic artists, namely the issues of race. Whether they address the issues explicitly or not through their work, there is an unmistakable engagement with race and ethnicity that is born of their hybrid condition. Kwei Armah's work is an example of this. His profile within the industry, given his popularity, not only as an actor, singer, playwright and a director, is very prominent which affords him the luxury of being able to draw a cross-section of British audiences. He serves on a number of boards, a significant one being the National Theatre's Executive Board, the space where he was commissioned to write his triptych of plays (*Elmina's Kitchen* (2003); *Fix Up* (2004) and *Statement of Regret* (2007) chronicling the 'Black British' experience from his unique point of view. He was also instrumental in the setting up of the National Theatre Black Plays archives housed at the National Theatre online platform. His prominence within the British cultural field means that he becomes a

role model and spokesperson for his community. He has a compelling argument for consciously writing race and ethnicity into his work, fully aware of his position within the African diasporic community and the theatre establishment and his ability to 'exploit' the gaps in the representation of minority identities. He maintains that:

It is terribly important for my art to represent the culture which I have come from. And that my children and my children's children will be able to look back at my triptych of work and say that was my great-grand-father's view of being a man of African descent in Britain at this point of the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That for me is important. When I hear from Black students in RADA saying that we don't want to hear about Black politics, we don't want to see black stuff, and all of that Black stuff is regressive, I simply say that in 1787 1 in 4 of the population of central London was Black. Because their stories were not recorded when my parents came in the 50s, they did not meet (Osborne, 2011b, p. 440)them, they did not meet their stories and we had to begin again. And any generation that has to continually begin again, will stay at the bottom. (Kwei-Armah, 2009a)

This passage has been quoted at length to demonstrate how an understanding of Kwei-Armah's positioning within his cultural heritage is important here as it clearly shows how it becomes manifested in his work. This is evident in his triptych plays, which present consciously provocatively drawn characters to debate pressing issues within the African diasporic community. Osborne's

analysis of *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003) rings true for all his plays. 'He writes from a British born standpoint and creates a play which negotiates the complexities of identity afflictions (cultural, geographic and ethnic) possible for black citizens.'(Osborne, 2011b, p.440) The only difference is how he reads his 'British born status,' which he traces further back to its country of origin rather than limiting it to birth. As mentioned earlier, he describes himself as tri-cultural: I'm African, Caribbean and British. (Davis et al., 2006, p. 240)

He acknowledges his African, Caribbean and British cultural heritages and lived experience, merging several identities with his tri-culturality right at the centre. Kwei-Armah's new post as Artistic Director of The Centre Stage in Baltimore, MD USA has undoubtedly added a further complexity to his identity, as he positions himself within America's cultural field. This complexity is viewed positively in the article announcing his appointment. "'The fact that Kwame is of African/Caribbean descent and has lived in Britain his whole life just brings a richness of diversity," said Jay Smith, Center Stage board president. "We found that very attractive."(Smith, 2011) He is a synergy of the mixture of all those cultures, which applies to all second-generation African diasporic artists. Whether they acknowledge it or not, they are in the process of creating and articulating a particular experience.

Similar ideas and patterns can be observed in the writings of many of the African diasporic playwrights who form part of the initial upsurge in African diasporic work on the British theatrical landscape at the beginning of the millennium. Osborne's analysis of this early period confirms and consolidates the unmistakable element of race that features in their work, stating emphatically that,



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. (Osborne, 2005, p. 132)

This assertion rings true for early plays by these new dramatists as the need to establish themselves makes it necessary for them to focus on such issues because the dominant society uses them to define these artists. Subsequent plays, however, show a natural progression and growth away from the explicit engagement with race, and rather finding more universal themes to communicate their individual stories and negotiations that come with being African diasporic artists in Britain. Dawn Walton's observation on THEATRE BLOGWITHLYNGARDNER highlights the uniqueness of this position and the notion of moving beyond race, which African diasporic artists in Britain exemplify:

To define black British theatre in terms of race alone is to miss the point. Black practitioners are uniquely placed to deliver an incisive view of Britain today because we view it from two perspectives. Black and White. We ask more questions, we challenge perceptions we stimulate more debate. And this approach can only enrich the canon of British theatre. (Dawn Walton, 2008)

The works of playwrights like Roy Williams, whose works have been a reflection of his multicultural reality, are not exclusively for black actors. He cites in an

interview with the *Guardian* that the work of Barrie Keeffe, an Irish playwright who he read as a schoolboy, as representing the cultural and working class community he grew up in. (Hattenstone, 2010) Others like Debbie Tucker Green are described, again by Osborne, as ‘one whose *oeuvre* plants her as an uncompromising presence in British theatre in a number of ways that reshape public and critical perceptions.’ (Osborne, 2011a, p. 181) Osborne rightly adds elsewhere that ‘Tucker Green is the most radical black British experimenter [...] with her unique re-workings of norms in language, casting demands and treatments.’ (Osborne, 2011b, p. 438) Her play, *Stoning Mary* (2005), for example, stipulates an all white cast, a deliberate political statement critiqued thus by Billington. ‘You can see what Tucker Green is trying to do: shock us into a new awareness by transposing three putative third world stories into a white culture.’ (Billington, 2005) Tucker Green’s themes and subject matter reference the African continent even as they address a British audience.<sup>19</sup> But what differentiates the work of the second generation from those that have gone before them, is the tensions of diaspora. By this I mean a multi-layered experience that takes inspiration from all areas of their lived experience. Colin Chambers’ historical and ‘multivalent’ (Chambers, 2011:3) account of Black and Asian theatre in Britain probably captures it best when trying to define the complexities involved in the collective theatre coming from African diasporic communities. He writes, ‘It is British and not British, diasporic and not diasporic, drawing on and producing a culture both of exile and belonging, and of neither.’ (Chambers, 2011, p. 3)

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<sup>19</sup> See Osborne, (2011b) and Sierz, (2011, p. 97-8) for further discussions on how she disrupts the everyday sociocultural issues to make them ‘speak’ differently

Such is the level of diversity of the new theatre practice that intriguingly is being referred to as Black British theatre. Victor Ukaegbu outlines in his introduction to Agboluaje's collection of plays in more specific terms what distinguishes this constituency from the dramatists who came before them as their:

Adopt[ing] different tropes, from indigenous African and Asian conventions, as well as from postcolonialism and postmodernism, they draw their subjects and inspirations from both discourses and write specifically for heterogeneous audiences and multicultural societies with different layers of interdependencies.(Agboluaje et al., 2013, p.7)

The artists exist within an inherited collective history bound up with a colonial and postcolonial experience that defines the positionality of the artists with regards to their identity. I argue that their work is an articulation of their identity in relation to how the artists situate themselves within what has gone before them and where they are presently.

My contention with the discussion and analysis of the ascendancy of this new theatre practice is that it still remains within a primarily 'Eurocentric discourse'. The overarching theory and critics of British cultural fields such as Michael Billington, Lyn Gardiner, Alex Sierz and Fiona Mountford have been unable to deal adequately with the varied complexities of the cultural provenance of African diasporic theatre practice, because it references a multicultural experience. The strange and the familiar co-exist in the theatre of the African Diaspora, yet its distinctions are often not noticed, resulting in a homogenised commentary that represents a collective diasporic experience. Kate Fox's

ethnographic research, 'Watching the English', states what is often missing from the commentary:

Ethnic minorities in Britain are if anything increasingly keen to maintain their distinctive cultural identities, and the English are becoming ever more fretful about their own cultural "identity crisis"(Fox, 2005, pp. 7-8)

The debates that this new theatre has provoked have tended to address the tensions of a national identity that challenge the notion of Britishness but have not really dealt with the intrinsic differences within this new community of African diasporic artists.

The celebration of difference, in my opinion, has gradually become associated with the theatre coming from the community under investigation in this study. There has been a prominent presence for particular African diasporic writers mentioned earlier over this first decade of the new millennium, which has to be applauded, but it is equally important to look at other shifts that are taking place within the same community that create work that is wide and deep.

### **Different Perspectives, One Nation**

This section of the chapter looks at the multiple trajectories that inform the present identities of three second generation African diasporic dramatists who are prominent or emerging artists on the British cultural field. Oladipo Agboluaje, Bola Agbaje and Ade Solanke have been chosen specifically for the distinctly 'African flavour' that they bring to the wider picture and constituency of the extended African diasporic theatre in Britain. It is important at this point to

note the presence of a number of other dramatists with the same distinct 'African flavour' distinguishing their work in various degrees. Levi David Addai<sup>20</sup>, and Kofi Agyemang both with Ghanaian heritages, Valerie Mason John's Sierra Leonean and Arinze Kene and Janice Okoh with their Nigerian influences are amongst a host of others who have also emerged onto the British cultural/theatrical landscape within this period. The work of these dramatists, by default access a different history from the likes of Williams and Kwei Armah, telling a different African diasporic narrative from the perspective of an African influenced experience, irrespective of its subtleties. Another thing of significance worth pointing out about this specific group is the resistance to the dominance of the African Caribbean narrative in Britain that their work and presence engenders. They introduced a new register that countered the template of the recognisable black British social drama. The African names of characters, cultural practices that have been adopted or adapted to fit the British context and bringing attention to bear on a different migratory presence of black people on the British Isles, are amongst some of the distinct differences that this group brings to the 'black British field. These elements begin to allow the presence of a different African diasporic community be felt in the day-to-day interactions with British theatre. An observation of the collective work shows a general similarity in terms of the linear structure and a commonality of subject matter running through most of their plays. These include the clash of the generations as they try to co exist within the same space..

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<sup>20</sup>David Levi Addai- *93.2FM*,( 2006); *The House of Agnes* (2008a); and *Oxford Street*, (2008b). Kofi Agyemang- *Urban Afro Saxons* (2012) Valerie Mason John- *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1999) Arinze Kene- *Little Baby Jesus* (2011) and Janice Okoh's *Egusi Soup* (2012)

The Nigerian bias of the three dramatists mentioned above is a conscious one, due in part to the specific claims made by the playwrights of how their cultural heritages influence their work within the British context. They are unambiguous about the source of their cultural influence in defining the complexities of African diasporic identities of the characters they present on the British stage. The unity they have in their Nigerian cultural heritage and their British citizenship suggests a commonality in experience that an analysis of their work surprisingly disproves. They also explicitly identify closely with their Nigerian cultural heritage even though they write from and for a British context. Centralising African diasporic characters, these dramatists are consciously exploring their multicultural heritages as British and African individuals whilst they demonstrate the flexible boundaries of identity and belonging to a particular group.

Their plays have contributed significantly to the new African diasporic theatre practice that this study is investigating, but this chapter will concentrate more closely on how their cultural heritage impacts their work. It also asks how they present their Nigerian culture to a British audience and how they are adding to the British cultural landscape. The distinctions between the three dramatists become more apparent within these parameters, as well as identifying what appears to be a differentiation between the British African Caribbean and British African dramatists seen in how they write their identities. The three dramatists write very specifically from a West African perspective, whether they set their plays in Britain or not and interrogate the tensions that exist between the two cultures. An African experience which was previously muted has become the new 'other' that appeals not only to the specific cultural community that the

playwrights belong to. I am suggesting that the West African perspective that the playwrights draw from provides a further complication to the notion of Britishness in contemporary British theatre. The strength of this African identity is not necessarily within the 'Black British' fold. It is therefore vital to acknowledge the diversity inherent in that term now.

The fact that the setting for most of the plays of the three dramatists being studied here are set in homes or front rooms shows how close to home the complexities of identity and culture are. It is not just external forces such as racism, geographical boundaries or distance that impact identity, but the facing up to the contradictions, desires, emotions and anxieties involved in that inextricable link between Britain and Africa. The use of the domestic sphere as a dramatic device connects the three dramatists which adds what Gilroy describes as 'a dimension less public and visible, but often more intimate and revealing'(Gilroy et al., 2007, p.8) This is a unique and significant feature of the second generation of diasporic Africans, which provides thematic mileage for the dramatist.

### **Oladipo Agboluaje- African Roots on the British Stage**

Oladipo Agboluaje can be described as a ground-breaker in terms of the trajectory of his work and also within the context of the community under investigation. Born in Hackney, London, England, Agboluaje moved to Nigeria at the age of nine where his formal Nigerian education culminated with him gaining a BA in Theatre Arts from the Benin University and introduced him to a fundamental approach to theatre that is rooted in a Nigerian practice. The popular

theatre forms of the Yoruba Travelling theatre are the foundations of this contemporary Nigerian theatre practice that has influenced Agboluaje in his formative years in 1980s Nigeria as a theatre arts student.<sup>21</sup> This popular contemporary artform driven by the local comedians, particularly the ones who used the local languages struck a chord with Agboluaje, because, first of all, Karin Barber's research revealed that 'The fascination of Yoruba Popular theatre comes from its exploitation of 'deep' registers of the Yoruba language combined with its incessant new coinage.' (Barber et al., 1997, p. 49)

Secondly, Agboluaje expressed during the *Stages of Independence-Omo London* (2010) seminar that he was impressed with the skill with which these artists used satire to comment on social issues that engaged the audience. Agboluaje was nurtured on the satire of artists such as Moses Olaiya, Ojo Ladipo and Jaguar - and the dramas of Duro Ladipo and Ade Afulanyo who drew heavily from the Yoruba Travelling theatre traditions. Joachim Fiebach's representation of the context within which the Yoruba Travelling theatre emerged in 1940s provides an insight into the intricacies of the context in which it thrived.

The structure and attitudes of the Travelling theatre negotiated typical popular experiences of and the reflections on the complex, contradictorily tangled socioeconomic and cultural web that is a Nigerian society in transition at the periphery of the capitalist world market, burdened with the deformations of colonialism. (Fiebach, 1996, p. 53)

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<sup>21</sup> See Jeyifo, (1984)



The plurality of the context in which this form of theatre operated is reflected in its varied styles which leads Kacke Götrick to conclude in his review of Jeyifo's book that the Travelling Theatre is 'marked by variability and multiplicity rather than uniformity...in an ever changing complex whole'(Götrick, 1987, p.105)

The form's contemporary evolution in the 1980s moved from its itinerant phase to being produced on TV in order to reach a wider audience. This was a more accessible way for Agboluaje to engage with the form, which still maintained all its original elements, such as using moralistic stories from the bible because of the European genealogy of the form and its missionary agenda. It also drew from Yoruba history, myth and legends but made to speak to the current sociocultural environment, which all helped to mould Agboluaje's unique satirical style.

The political activist music of Fela Anikulapo Kuti and King Sunny Ade, also moulded his political ideology in equal measure. Agboluaje outlines just how influential Fela in particular was to his aesthetic principles.

The music of Fela governed my aesthetics as a theatre practitioner. He had taken the esoteric art form of jazz and married it with a political aesthetic/message and managed to turn it into a popular artform. (Agboluaje, 2010b)

Agboluaje has applied this syncretic aesthetic principle to his own work, looking particularly at the ways in which the popular theatre and the music of Fela analysed their society. They dealt with issues on the ground that he could relate to that made its audience want to aspire to change. It is in this way that Agboluaje's plays, particularly about Nigeria are formulated. This is also why he says of his

writing that it is a political act.(Agboluaje, 2010a) There exists particularly within the popular theatre genre, a dialectic relationship between the performance and its audience, this is something that Agboluaje strives to find ways in which to project this same ideal through an aesthetic principle like Fela did with his music. This is the kind of space he wants to create for himself to make his work, for a Nigerian audience.

Returning to England in 1995, Agboluaje pursued an MA in literature and a PhD involving a comparative study of South African and Nigerian Drama. The application of higher levels of theory to the practical theatre practice he was nurtured on and practices as a dramatist are significant to an analysis of his work. Ideologically, Agboluaje identifies with Stuart Hall in that he too forges links with academic scholarship through his involvement in theoretical practice as well as his practical art form. He involves himself in an array of theoretical and performative enterprises that provide him with a worldly perspective, which he brings to the culturally specific work he produces on the British stage. Examples include his participation or membership of numerous writers' groups, including Tricycle theatre's writer's group and the Soho Theatre; he received seed commission from Talawa to help develop scripts. He has been involved in collaborations with theatre companies such as his current collaboration with Nitro Black Music Theatre and academic theatrical associations.

Emerging onto the theatrical scene in 2003 with his first stage play, *Early Morning*, a political satire about Nigerian cleaners in London who plot a coup to take over the world, Agboluaje distinguished himself by 'voicing the margins' of a minority community who existed within a Caribbean dominated experience in

Britain. From the outset, Agboluaje acknowledges that he is 'engaged in a dialogue with a community that has issues specific to its constituency: racism, under-achievement, misrepresentation etc.'(Agboluaje et al., 2004) His work shows a continued growth in this practice in that Agboluaje manages to fulfil his responsibility to his community without allowing the weight of that responsibility to orchestrate the nature of the dialogue. This falls in line with that aesthetic principal outlined earlier of striving to insert the dialectic element that is fundamental to the popular form subtly into his work. Coming to the fore during this 'phenomenal' period of what has been described as 'a cultural renaissance' (Davis et al., 2006, p. 240) Agboluaje's plays have been a welcome shift in the body of work asserting a 'black British' identity which dominated the work of the new millennium. New African diasporic dramatists such as David Levi Addai, Rashan Stone, Michael Bhim, amongst others, were driven by a sense of urgency and a particular rhythm that was born of a need to speak a current truth, asserting a presence through their self-determining theatre that spoke of a particular 'Black British' reality and shift that hinged on the now. The early works of Kwame Kwei Armah and Roy Williams exemplify this also, notably in conjunction with the critical response their works received. This became the accepted template of what 'Black British theatre' should look like.

Agboluaje identifies institutionalised assumptions about what becomes acceptable as the status quo of 'black theatre' and he sees his work as an opportunity or an attempt to break out of typically fixed representations of African diasporic characters. He says:

The thing about British theatre is naturalism is the dominant force and the problem with naturalism is that it keeps us in our

subject position. We can never break out of who we are in terms of our class, upbringing and all; what it means is that your characters can be limited by what they can say or what they can think by extension...when they see a black person on the stage or a working class person on the stage, they expect them to speak in a certain way and act in a certain way, and therefore when they speak in an intellectually informed way or in a heightened sort of register, it jars. (Fatunla, 2013)

In comparison to what is largely known as black British theatre, Agboluaje's work is clearly inspired particularly by his Nigerian heritage and its theatrical traditions, which through his socialisation and orientation became manifested as satire. He explains, '[t]his satire was what I had imbibed from most of the post-independence drama of Soyinka and Osofisan, from the music of Fela and the popular comedies'(Agboluaje, 2010a) of the time. What Agboluaje does is to strive to convey this tradition through the context of Britain.

This is evidenced from the outset of his work in the subject matter and dialogue of the three Nigerian office cleaners in *Early Morning*.(2003) Their speech is dominated by a discussion about their lives as Nigerians and why their presence in Britain was being deconstructed rather than the acceptance of a black British identity. In this way, Agboluaje uses the play to not only challenge the black British debate but goes further to ask questions about racial and cultural integration in Britain. He presents both a collective Nigerian identity as the workers unite to confront their white boss and their personal individual identities

that undergo transformations within the context of Britain as they interact with each other.

He followed his debut with a West African adaptation of *Mother Courage and Her Children* (2004) at Nottingham Playhouse, and this was followed by a national tour. What is clear from Agboluaje's *oeuvre* is an insistence on difference, which is a constant feature in his work. His subsequent commissions have sought that 'different' element from him, which came to its fruition with Agboluaje's collaboration with the company, Tiata Fahodzi. This union and the writing and production of *The Estate* (2006) and *Iya Ile* (2009a), which won the Alfred Fagon Prize, offer an intimate insight into Agboluaje's point of view and process, and it identifies exactly what he brings to the field. These two plays will form the analysis of Agboluaje's performance of African diasporic identities within the British context from his specific West African perspective. The fact that both plays are set in Nigeria, dealing with very specific Nigerian sociocultural issues does not mean it cannot be conceived as black British in the same way that the other dramatists are viewed. I propose that he presents an alternative reality of a Black British experience, which has an insider's knowledge of another space with a different set of experiences, which he draws from heavily to function in the British space. But even more pertinent is his first hand knowledge of Nigerian theatre practices that he now merges with British conventions to tell a diasporic narrative. There are elements of merging forms to achieve an artistically crafted new 'popular' form in the way in which he has represented African diasporic identity. It is fair to say that his presence at the beginning of the new millennium when diversity was a key word in programming and securing funding for theatre houses, helped to open doors for more stories exploring the African in black

British communities. Agbaje and Solanke's work have perhaps benefitted from the success of Agboluaje's work within the British cultural field.

*The Estate* and *Iya Ile* are part of a trilogy commission and partnership between Tiata Fahodzi, under the directorship of its founder, Femi Elufowoju Jnr. and Agboluaje. In an interview with Gillian Fisher Agboluaje speaks about *Fragments* as being the third and final instalment of plays that follow the story of the Adeyemi family. 'This particular installment is more political than the previous two; it looks very much at contemporary Nigeria through the eyes of the same family that we've been following.'(Fisher, 2013) At the time of completing this thesis the production dates were yet to be announced.

The commonality of cultural heritage and the distinctions that Agboluaje and Elufowoju Jnr have made in their work to infuse that culture into the dominant Caribbean-led 'Black British' field began an important shift that identified the presence and need for other African diasporic voices to be heard, and the need also for a more comprehensive commentary that takes the complexities within African diasporic communities into account and refrain from perpetuating the hegemonic discourse of a singular/collective 'Black British' community. This union was also significant as it sits at the heart of this study with regards to representation and who speaks for whom. The setting up of Tiata Fahodzi's writers' festival, a now well-established model, providing a platform for Africans in the diaspora to voice their stories, created the opportunity for writers and theatre companies to collaborate in bringing these stories to a wider British audience.

Agboluaje's first encounter with the company was his taking part in Tiata Fahodzi's first ever-African Writer's Festival in 2004 at the Arcola Theatre.

Agboluaje returned in 2005 with the beginnings of *The Estate*, which developed into the trilogy commission, a first for the company.<sup>22</sup> He presented a paper chronicling his journey through British theatre and he had this to say about the process.

It is considered that theatre in Britain is writer-led, in that the writer is the main source of and for dramatic interpretation. The playwright's intentions are given primacy and it is the director's role to articulate them. (Agboluaje, 2010a)

This statement is a poignant one in that Agboluaje implies his disagreement, to some extent, with this notion. Contemporary British theatre has been writer-led, a claim backed by Sierz's statement that 'At a very rough count, there were some 3,000 new plays produced during the 2000s, more than double the amount of the previous year'(Sierz, 2011, p. 1), but it is also possible to detect the beginnings of a shift towards a collaboration that Agboluaje alludes to at the beginning of his paper. The involvement of directors and dramaturges can greatly influence the interpretation and intention of a playwright's work. This becomes problematic when the playwright and the director belong to different social classes and experiences, which is something that has marked the productions of dramatists from minority communities in Britain. Agboluaje himself had to quickly come to

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<sup>22</sup> The idea behind the *Tiata Delights* was to showcase African dramatists in Britain to industry professionals who would then produce the text. It was not for the company to produce. (Personal Interview 2011) But this union was a particularly unique one.

terms with a set of negotiations that existed in the British context in his career as a writer. Coming as he did from a Nigerian context with its own negotiations and perceptions of the arts, Agboluaje was unprepared for the political and social parameters of the British context that he could not ignore in relation to his work. These aspects permeated all areas of the playwriting process, from conception to the commission and the dramaturgy. He believes

this was because it was seen as a play about a cultural translation to an audience, or was it about plot or a dramaturge representing an audience or the position of a theatre that wants a play done in a certain way? [Or] This is how they might see how the play might be marketed to a wider audience, perhaps. (Agboluaje, 2010b)

The political, social, cultural and linguistic elements of his Nigerianness are strategically scrutinised in a British context because of the cultural specificity of his work. The industry did not know how to ‘manage’ this cultural product. This knowledge is exemplified in his interview with the Royal African Society’s Dele Meiji Fatunla .

Selling an African play to a mainstream audience that didn’t involve genocide or starvation was very difficult. Even more difficult was selling a play to a mainstream audience that was written particularly for a Nigerian audience. *The Estate* and *Iya Ile* were written partly in Yoruba, pidgin English and Nigerian Standard English. *The Estate* was a Chekhovian family drama about a wealthy Nigerian family whose fortunes were declining.



*Iya Ile* went back to look at how the characters in *The Estate* came to be. It was also an occasion for me to look back at Nigeria in a time of military rule.(Fatunla, 2013)

Solanke's production of *Pandora's Box* originally scheduled in 2011 at the Oval House as part of the Omo London festival to commemorate Nigeria's 50<sup>th</sup> year of independence is an example and a casualty of a clash of cultures and representational ideas. The playwright had very strong views about how she wanted to represent the characters in her play. The director Ben Evans also had contrary views that ended with the director walking away from the production. Particularly within this period of the upsurge of new African diasporic dramatists, it has been noted that many 'were directed by white directors, primarily male.'(Osborne, 2005;130) Given that the directors and dramaturges do not always have the same cultural, social and political narrative as the minority writers, the interpretation of 'authenticity' raises a number of questions regarding who is speaking for whom and the notion of 'otherness' in relation to culturally specific work produced in Britain. The notion of control over artistic interpretation, which is the main focus of chapter three, opens up issues voiced emphatically by Yvonne Brewster's warning quoted earlier about those in control and in the position to decide 'black taste', (Matzke et al., 2009, p. 78)

This is where the fusion between Agboluaje and Tiata Fahodzi becomes significant and seems to present a more viable option for the representation of minority communities within a majority society. The knowledge of the unspoken codes and practices of the Nigerian culture that the collaborators had in common,

transcended the written word into the rehearsal process, and into the performance. I had the permission of the director to observe the rehearsal process for one week during the rehearsal period. I observed a rehearsal practice that was governed by a unity in vision and experience between Agboluaje and Elufowoju Jnr., who mirrored each other's experience culturally. Elufowoju Jnr. too spent his formative years in Nigeria, accessing the same forms of Nigerian theatre that Agboluaje had. The result of this collaboration was the creation of a mini Nigeria in their London rehearsal space where both playwright and director were able to source from the same cultural pool to guide a British born African diasporic cast and a largely white British crew to realise the vision of a specific Nigeria on the British stage. One cast member (Javone Prince) was from a Caribbean heritage and both Agboluaje and Elufowoju Jnr. were instrumental in helping him with cultural nuances particularly in language to arrive at the appropriate interpretation. The rest of the cast were mostly actively involved in their Nigerian heritage and as such did not have a problem of sounding authentically like Nigerians. What I did observe throughout my stay was an insistence on clarity and playing an emotional line rather than accents, which will eventually result in an emotional authenticity, which is always more desirable than just a technically accurate accent. This observation period is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

I believe the need to achieve a mutual understanding between dramatist and director/dramaturge is compelling modern contemporary playwrights, especially African diasporic playwrights, to increasingly become more and more involved in the casting, rehearsal process and production of their works. Solanke

is a case in point with her unprecedented involvement in all areas of her first production, *Pandora's Box* (2012), following the 'conflict of interpretation' between herself and Evans which led to the postponement of the play's original debut performance at the Oval House Theatre in 2011. This production will be discussed in more detail below. Kwame Kwei-Armah's involvement in his plays, particularly *Elmina's Kitchen*(2003) in which he played the starring role, when it moved to the West End and his *Let There Be Love*,(2009b) which he also directed, are other examples of levels of involvement that have greatly impacted the work. Roy Williams' collaboration with Tiata Fahodzi on *Joe Guy* resulted in a successful exploration of the tensions between Africans and African Caribbeans in Britain observed through the prism of football and celebrity status. Likewise, the collaboration between Agboluaje and Tiata Fahodzi in presenting Nigerian identities through the two plays that form part of the proposed trilogy of the Adeyemi family have been unique in their portrayal of a distinct Nigerian representation on British stages.

The popular theatre genre discussed earlier was used as a central focus in the two plays seen particularly in the way Agboluaje uses language in the plays. Hall reminds us that

Language... operates as a *representational system*. In language we use signs and symbols- to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings. Representation through language is therefore central to the process by which meaning is produced (Hall, Open University, 19971)

The representation of the complexities of Nigerian and more specifically Yoruba identities in this union was done through the ways in which characters use language- in all its forms. Cultural codes, such as gestures, words, music, movement, fashion all function in particular ways to communicate meaning to those who understand that worldview. It also provides for those who do not originate from that culture a glimpse into this new world, giving them a chance to discover similar meanings of their own or show an appreciation for other worldviews, which is significant in this multicultural context.

Class and status for example are easily distinguishable by the way in which a character speaks. Agboluaje's choice of the three different spoken languages in the plays function on two levels. First of all they are distinctive elements of his Nigerian culture and a way of establishing his cultural identity onto the British stage, which would be viewed as different from other 'black British' productions. The second and more fundamental is his illustration of a deep understanding of the Yoruba culture in terms of the meanings associated with them

The Yoruba language for instance is spoken by everyone in the play and creates a Yoruba ethnic solidarity. This solidarity transcends the world of the play and connects with Yoruba speakers in the audience who would recognise the 'standard Yoruba'<sup>23</sup> that was established in Nigeria to create a sense of 'Yorubanness' that united them all, despite class or status. The standard Nigerian English identifies the upper and middle classes and a definite signal of formal education, which is integral to Nigeria's class system, whilst the contact language of Nigerian pigeon English was used to identify the working class.

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<sup>23</sup> See Fagborun, (1994) for a further discussion on the standardisation of the Yoruba language.

Afolabi, Ekong and Abasina in *The Estate* speak Nigerian pigeon English, which shows their education and status level. They represent the servants in the Adeyemi household but even amongst them there exists a hierarchy.

The eldest and longest serving member, Afolabi is given his due respect and even Helen, the new 'Madame' of the house in the *Estate* addresses him as 'Mr Afolabi.' Even though she has risen through her social mobility to become Chief Adeyemi's wife, in the prequel *Iya Ile*, she did start off in the house as a servant, just like the others. The acknowledgment of his seniority through his name is a cultural practice that cuts across most West African nations. They do not just call people by their names; some kind of title is used to qualify the cultural standing of the person, particularly if they are older.

In this way, Helen cannot disregard the traditional practice of showing Afolabi some level of respect. She sees him as a father figure. Her stepsons on the other hand call her Helen, which is a reflection of her original status, whilst she tries to raise herself in their esteem by aligning herself to them and calling them 'brother'. Here lies some of the contradictions in this community. Helen is able to move from the bottom of one social class to the top of another group on the personal whim of Chief Adeyemi. But there are other cultural practices aside from language that continuously reminds one of their place/origins. This does not suggest fixity but rather demonstrates the fluidity and multiplicity of the community.

That Agboluaje writes with a specific Nigerian audience in mind does not mean he excludes non-Nigerians from his work. On the contrary, he has mastered how to write within a culturally specific setting whilst managing to communicate to multiple audiences by projecting recognisable worldly themes about the

human condition that appeal to all. It is through his style of writing, how he uses dramaturgy and his performance ethics that he is able to distinguish his particular Nigerian culture through his work. He reveals the humanity of his characters in the way he presents each one with flaws, which provide the audience with the opportunity to not judge them but rather see themselves in them.. The character of Mrs Toyin Adeyemi in *Iya Ile* is an example; she is a woman who is initially presented as the long suffering wife of Chief Adeyemi, struggling to maintain a level of dignity to the outside world as a respected retired principal, a mother of two teenage sons, amidst her husband's lewd sexual innuendoes and extra-marital affairs. This image is juxtaposed against the archetypal maid-beater/abuser, a familiar character in most West African popular dramas. The mental abuse that Toyin suffers from her husband is visited on her young maid, Helen, who is put in a position where she is 'obliged' to perform sexual favours for Chief Adeyemi. Helen, the maid, is presented as an ambitious young woman who uses every opportunity to her advantage, fully aware of her place at the bottom of the rung, but she clearly has her eyes set at the top. The harrowing role reversal at the end of *Iya Ile*, where Toyin is brutally beaten up and dragged out of her family home in front of her sons and pointedly replaced with her maid, Helen, is a painful but effective comment not only on the treatment of maids but a caution that the rule of those in power will not last. As harrowing as Toyin's exit is, one cannot help but make the connection to the parallel beatings Toyin inflicted on Helen.

The two teenage boys, Yinka and Soji Adeyemi, represent the two extremes of the same axis. Yinka, the older of the sons, relishes the privileged life, following almost too closely in his father's footsteps, particularly where women are

concerned, whilst his younger brother, Soji, described by his mother as 'you behave as if the golden spoon in your mouth is made of plastic' (Agboluaje et al., 2013, p. 292) shows misguided militant tendencies, without understanding the full political import of certain decisions taken. An example is the judgemental position he takes with 'Arch Bishop Robertson.

SOJI: Why does he choose to reward you so richly when the majority of your flock are suffering? You're not blind to the tragedies that pass you on the street. You're no better than the soldiers who keep us in bondage with their guns. You do it with false promises. You're nothing but a 'Brother Jero'

ROBERTSON: You who has never known poverty, you want to preach to me. I was roaming the streets hungry while your father and his friends were eating the national cake like there was no tomorrow.

SOJI: So you've come for your share.

ROBERTSON: I am just a man trying to make it in this world like everybody else.

SOJI: By selling your people to a foreign god.

ROBERTSON: (*Grabs SOJI by the neck.*) And how did your father make his money? Was it not on the back of import license? Even candles he brought in. Anyone who made products locally he made sure he ruined that person. My father grew rice but your kind treated it like it was poison. You ate only 'Uncle Ben's'. This house, I bet you not one thing is made in this country and you

want to prove to me, you this bloody aje butter. I will...(*Throttles SOJI*)(p. 328)

Amongst the three dramatists in focus in this chapter, Agboluaje shows a particular concern with class by conspicuously inserting the voice of the underclasses of Nigeria into his work. For the two plays, the working class characters of Afolabi, Pakimi and Helen are instrumental in his construction of the dynamics within Nigeria's class system. The obvious economic division between the haves and the have nots is further complicated by the involvement of the military in terms of its enforced governments since 1966, that highlighted divisions in education and politics which they dominated for the next thirty years.

It is however the attention Agboluaje brings to the masses that is of importance here. The years of military rule has created an environment of instability where those who have will do anything to maintain their status and position in society by pandering to the will of the ones in power, thereby reinforcing the structures that keep the lower classes immobile. Adeleke's study states that 'In the contemporary Nigeria, the acquisition of formal education and skills with high market value has been found to be the root of social status distinction and thus mobility.'(Adeleke. A et al., 2014, p. 12), but those with little education, particularly the younger generation are finding ingenious ways to be socially mobile.

Agboluaje uses his plays to address the developmental and social problems faced by the community he writes about and belongs to. He presents characters in both *The Estate* and again in *Iya Ile*, who are given the rare opportunity to present life from their under-privileged perspective. Traditionally, they are



usually voiceless entities that are presented as victims without agency. Agboluaje affords his audience a glimpse into their worldview, which is a significant shift from how such characters are portrayed within their originating cultural setting. Agboluaje is explicit about his intentions particularly in writing about Nigeria.

I used to say to myself, if I have the opportunity to write a play about Nigeria, I'm going to write it in a very conservative, traditional class setting, but I will look at the character's from a class [conscious] point of view, so in *The Estate*, you have the driver telling the house-girl that they need to strike...trying to conscientize her about what's going on in the country and their place in it. (Fatunla, 2013)

Agboluaje challenges accepted norms by presenting West African stock characters such as the house girl, drivers and gardeners, most of them will be recognisable to his target audience; and subverts them through their actions. The class system that this constituency operate in appears to be a closed system, similar to a caste system, because of the lack of opportunity they have in access to education, which in turn will translate into jobs that can lead to the mobility they seek. As mentioned above, the younger generation who have only known the military rule have been nurtured on its instability. They therefore have to create opportunities for themselves to aid in their survival. Discussions between Abasina, the house girl, and Ekong, the driver, (from a different generation to Abasina) in *The Estate* show clearly that they have an understanding of the politics and complexities of their position both in the house which acts as a microcosm of the Nigerian nation. Ekong's pipedream to return with Abasina to

the village 'instead of doing slave to rich people' (Agboluaje, 2013, p. 92) is impeded by Abasina who sees no future in a life in the village. 'Mr Ekong, this life is matter of money. And na here money dey.'(2013, p. 92) She adds, 'Opportunity is here. When the chance come, I will take it. That is how Nigeria is. That is how we have to live.'(2013, p. 93) She displays that even though she comes from the rural community she has a full grasp of economics and can recognise when her brother who brought her to the Adeyemi's house cheats her out of her hard earned money by collecting her pay, under the guise that he was saving it for her. The semblance of romantic relationships amongst the underclass is explored further in *Iya Ile* through the characters Helen and Pakimi, the servants who graduate to ruling the roost twenty years later in *The Estate*. The relationship between the two manages to sustain the physical and mental abuse from Toyin Adeyemi, the madam of the house, on Helen. The frequent advances of Chief Adeyemi and his mid-teen son, Yinka, on the same house girl, is a typical narrative that Agboluaje challenges. Agboluaje presents it in a way that makes us understand the choices that particularly Helen has to make in order for her to survive in the transient political and economic conditions of 1980s Nigeria. Like any young ambitious individual, Helen is driven by her dreams.

HELEN: I wan' be woman of my own house like dis.

You hear?

PAKIMI: I hear you.

HELEN: I wan' my own duplex with swimming pool and garden.

PAKIMI: Ehen, ehen. Swimming pool and garden.

HELEN: I wan' car and driver.

PAKIMI: Car and driver. Batteries included

HELEN: As our Mama and Papa dey pray, our children go better pass us. My parents' struggle no go be in vain. I no go pass from poor to poverty.(Agboluaje, 2013, p. 281)

Ironically, she does achieve her goals/dreams but through means that are as a result of her position in society. Chief Adeyemi throws out his first wife, Toyin, replacing her with Helen, the house-girl. *The Estate* reveals some of the feats Helen has had to go through to maintain her new found status, whilst she competes for respect from Chief Adeyemi's sons and her own daughter, Sola, a product of her union with the chief; who appears disgusted by her mother's attempts to please. The irony in *The Estate* is seen in Helen's treatment of the servants of the house, particularly Abasina, the house girl, who follows the same trajectory as Helen did twenty years before. Helen inflicts the same abuse she endured from her mistress on Abasina, whilst Abasina takes refuge in the comfort of the Chief's bed, swiftly replaced by his eldest son, Yinka, in his absence. Agboluaje highlights the repetitious nature of this world with everyone living for the now. But we see how he comments on this behaviour through Ekong who cautions Abasina in *The Estate* 'If you get driver and house help, no treat dem like dirty, oh.'(Agboluaje, 2013, p. 136)

The character Afolabi, however, represents a generation of working class people who do not see themselves moving out of their prescribed class. He has been a loyal gardener for the Adeyemis since the teenage boys were babies. His completely unshakeable reliance and dependence on the chief and his family is illustrated in his inability to provide for his own family, even his sick child unless

the family give him some money. Helen, the opportunist tells him bluntly

HELEN: Anyway, me I thank God. I no go do servant for sixteen years.

AFOLABI: Hey. I am not servant. I am gardener.

HELEN: But sixteen years! You don become Adeyemi. Once you tell Madam say your pikin no well, she suppose to put hand for pocket one time. (Agboluaje, 2013, p. 297)

Whereas the younger servants are saving money to build their own futures away from the Adeyemi household, Afolabi in his disillusion sees himself like a member of the family. The family however do not view him as such, shown in the manner in which he is taken for granted by them, knowing he will always be there. Ironically, as the play ends and we see the destruction of Toyin and the rise of Helen, Afolabi's position remains unchanged. The stage directions describe the scene.

*HELEN enters. She sees PAKIMI and stops. LANRE (CHIEF ADEYEMI) beckons to her to join him on the sofa. HELEN sits beside LANRE. She is timid at first. Slowly, she eases into the confidence of the lady of the house. She crosses her legs.*

HELEN: (*Authoritatively*) Afolabi!

AFOLABI: (*Off*) Ma! (Agboluaje, 2013, p. 343)

The transformation is complete, and Afolabi knows and remains in his place.

Agboluaje reveals an illuminating observation he has made of his Nigerian community, especially when viewed through the context of the transient world of Nigerian politics, which underscores *Iya Ile*. Agboluaje says

I've always been interested in the dreams and ambitions of people, Nigerians in particular. We seem to have no limit to our dreams and therefore treat barriers as hurdles to be crossed, legally or illegally. That creates a mind-set that can be threatening to non-Nigerians. But as we say, 'we know ourselves'!(Agboluaje, 2009b)

In this regard, Agboluaje represents his Nigerian culture, warts and all, in an honest manner, rejecting the burden of the politics of representation, discussed earlier.

Here, Agboluaje opts for artistic individualism and tells a very specific story sourced from his Nigerian cultural background, told from his perspective. He chooses to depict and highlight the harsher realities of the class divisions within the society he writes about. He is unapologetic about his mode of presentation or his subject matter because he is clear about what he wants to say and who his main target audience is. He writes for a very specific audience that he knows exists in London/Britain who will engage with the work in a particular way. He allows himself the freedom to work for his society, both 'here and there',

critiquing its present and its future, and particularly for *Iya Ile*, he draws on the past to challenge the future of Nigeria's society.

The Popular theatre form that Agboluaje engages with in this collaboration with Tiata Fahodzi was bound up in a common understanding between playwright and company on the fundamentals of this genre that allows for the merging of styles. The elements of song and dance, for example, are central to many ritual practices and performances in the daily lives of most West Africans. Its inclusion in the performances of Agboluaje's plays was an expression of a cultural identity that Ngugi wa Thiong'o confirms. 'What is important is that song and dance are not just decorations; they are an integral part of that conversation, that drinking session, that ritual, that ceremony.' (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 45)

Music and dance was used in a contemporary fashion to maintain its connection with its audience and functioned on a realistic level in the performance when it took place within the content of the play. It was also used as a contextualising tool, particularly in *Iya Ile*. An example is during the birthday celebrations of Toyin. The singing of her birthday song was to King Sunny Ade's '*Congratulations (Happy Birthday)*'. All the cast members joined to sing and dance to wish her happy birthday. This moment was turned into an extended dance piece where the whole ensemble changed into the same traditional attire that women wear to show solidarity and closeness to the celebrant. In true satirical style even the male members of the cast partook in this performance of celebration. Another moment that exemplified the contextual use of music and dance was the abstract moment, again involving the ensemble when Fela's political song *Zombie* was played to accompany a choreographed piece illustrating the subtext that is only suggested in the text. An example is the affair between

Chief Adeyemi and Mrs Okomile, the wife of the military Governor being played out in the choreography.

The multiple styles in the productions come from the syncretic foundations that a Nigerian theatre history has given both Agboluaje and Elufowoju Jnr., with its principles of merging forms to achieve the artistically crafted 'popular' form, which Agboluaje strives for. Banham's characterisation of modern African theatre states that it

refuses to be compartmentalised into a particular form of presentation. Instead it draws on indigenous performance traditions including dance, music, storytelling and mime, and combines them with ideas of drama drawn from experiences of Western colonialism, to create theatre forms which are syncretic and inclusive in both form and content. (Banham et al., 1999, p.vii)

Music and dance therefore in the two productions were used in a very unique way as they created contemporary manifestations of African cultural practices. Even as the form, style and content of both plays borrow heavily from a West African cultural source they are also layered with Western social realities. Okagbue's assessment of this type of African diasporic work with particular reference to Caribbean and South American performance applies directly to the collaboration between Agboluaje and Tiata Fahodzi in their British context. He explains that 'the plays in different ways achieve a flexibility of structure and form which allows for the easy passages between different realities, different time schemes,

and different geographical spaces. ' (Okagbue, 2004:446) The form and style of both productions are recognisable western modes which are then interrupted through the use of music and movement/dance, then heightened to achieve the particular Nigerian perspective that also has a universal appeal. This has now come to define the work of Tiata Fahodzi under Elufowoju Jr. to be discussed in Chapter Four.

Agboluaje's satirical style is featured in another form, particularly in *Iya Ile*, which displays a contemporary interpretation of the popular theatre form. His treatment of the African video movie genre popularly known, as 'Nollywood', which is a modern day popular artform was an intriguing choice for his mixed audience who accessed it from different levels/perspectives. He used it to critically comment on Nigeria's upper and middle classes and their treatment of the lower classes and their complete oblivion to the rise of the working class.

My suggestion is that a mutation occurred, with the incorporation of elements of the popular cultural Nigerian video film, which was used as a mechanism to frame this production. The exaggerated and featured elements such as the massive 'gele' worn by Mrs Okomile, the music of Fela and Sonny Ade which were used to pre-empt scenes and as montage, and the specifics of language choice were all engaging features of the 'Nollywood' genre and aesthetic which a Nigerian audience would recognize, but not only Nigerians will understand. The far-reaching spread of the 'Nollywood' phenomenon makes it a



recognisable form beyond its Nigerian geographical boundaries.<sup>24</sup> Its inclusion into the production functioned on many levels. It was used to attract a particular kind of audience; those who were used to watching video films in their homes in Nigeria and other parts of the continent and continued the practice in the diaspora. According to Agboluaje,(Agboluaje, 2010a) word of mouth was an essential publicity tool in attracting this audience, with the phrase ‘it is just like a Nigerian movie’ enough to confirm their attendance. The image used on the publicity material as well as the programme script, which depicted a bare chested man wearing a string of opulent traditional Nigerian beads, caressing a young maiden from behind, also adorned in beads looking mischievous. This had resonances of a particular breed of African video film set in the rural communities. This also helped to promote the production to specific groups of diasporic Africans. This group from my observation consisted mostly of direct African immigrants to Britain who would have been witnesses to the era Agboluaje set the play in. The generation of Africans born in the diaspora who often express a dislike for these films, usually because of the far-fetched storylines and preoccupation with the supernatural were able to engage with Agboluaje’s treatment of the genre.

Regardless of the ambivalence of the reception and perception of ‘Nollywood’, particularly in the diaspora, Agboluaje showed his awareness of how the films function as a reflective tool in the lives of Africans in the diaspora. Okagbue’s research into the area suggests that for some, it was an essential link to a memory of home or even an educative tool to aid in passing on cultural practices

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<sup>24</sup> See Krings et al., (2013) for essays on the global impact of Nollywood on other African nations such as Ghana, Tanzania and South Africa, and Africa’s diasporas.

to those far removed from 'home'. Okagbue's article on the genre with a particular reference to its consumption in the diaspora reveals that the distinctions and assumptions of its audience differ greatly in the diasporic space.

He explains that,

there is a class character and distinction in the viewing audience of African video movies in Nigeria. This viewpoint suggests that the upper/middle classes are not particularly keen on the movies, whereas the masses and lower middle class can't seem to get enough of them. This distinction seems not to apply to the audience in the diaspora. This may well be because notions and boundaries of class are rather blurred and difficult to define or maintain in the diaspora setting. A kind of levelling out happens in the diaspora and often is able to wipe away such distinctions and tastes in and between people.(Okagbue, 1990, pp. 53-54)

It was within this familiar and therefore safe frame that Agboluaje situated the more sinister dialogue in the harrowing moments of the play, such as the disturbing ending of the play, with the brutal throwing out of Toyin from Chief Adeyemi's house. The technique of creating a sense of familiarity with his choice of form and then subverting it like he does at the end opens up spaces for challenging accepted norms within his targeted community/audience. With particular reference to his use of the video film genre, this most popular form is

often criticised<sup>25</sup> most strongly by Nigerian academics and the general public for its lack of challenging themes, relying instead on the predictable moral that most films end with, such as a quote from the bible. Agboluaje uses it to problematise certain practices and beliefs in his community, both home and abroad. What is clear is that the impact of the genre cannot be dismissed. Solanke confirms this in a panel discussion which posed the question *Will the creative industry make Africa flourish?* in Austria saying:

It [the video film] is so powerful in its reach; its connectedness to the African audience throughout the continent and in the diaspora cannot be challenged at the moment. (*Will the creative industry make Africa flourish?*, 2013)

She adds that there is a fundamental reason for the ‘success’ of this phenomenon, which is that ‘Nollywood has connected to the home indigenous audience, it is loved at home’. (Solanke, 2013) Its large diasporic population also plays a part in its success because they were receptive to it and consumed that culture.

The mutation, in my opinion, worked because like the audience, the form is out of its originating space and can speak and relate to the multiple complexities of a largely African diasporic audience as well as the inclusive British audience present. The ‘method of allusion’(Fanon et al., 2004) as described in Fanon’s essay on ‘National Culture’ finds Agboluaje returning to reclaim aspects of his national and cultural past ‘and now bring[s] them alive and introduce[s] into

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<sup>25</sup> See Onookome Okome’s chapter, ‘Nollywood and its Critics’ in Saul et al., (2010)

them modifications which are increasingly fundamental.' (2004) This syncretic form therefore corresponds directly with Christopher Balme's notion of syncretism and its creation of a new theatrical form. Agboluaje's interest and connection to the social transformation of Nigeria is an issue that compels him to write such social dramas that function by holding up a mirror to his society, irrespective of whether he or his audience are in Nigeria or whether the image reflected is good or bad. He is more interested in the cultural value he brings to his work by combining both traditional/indigenous forms with contemporary ones that engage more effectively with his target audience.

### **Bola Agbaje- Language as Identity**

Bola Agbaje's debut play, *Gone Too Far!*, was first performed at the Royal Court in 2007 as part of their Young Writers Festival, after Agbaje took part in the theatre's Critical Mass Writer's Group in 2006. In 2008 she won an Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in an Affiliated Theatre and was also nominated for Most Promising Playwright at the *Evening Standard* Awards. In 2009, together with Kwame Kwei Armah and Roy Williams, Agbaje was commissioned to write *Detaining Justice* (2009) for the Tricycle Theatre's 'Not Black and White' season, which examined the complexities of Britain's cultural diversity at the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Agbaje's *Off the Endz* (2010), the second for Royal Court Theatre, came out of its Rough Cuts writers' initiative.

Agbaje's recent presence within the theatre landscape appears to be firmly established, given the recognition she has received from the theatre establishment. Writing as she does with sharp and clear observation, particularly of urban youth culture, Agbaje provides an accurate voice for the third generation

of Africans in the diaspora, even though she belongs to the second generation and works within an arena dominated by second generation African diasporic, largely male, dramatists. Speaking with the voice of the third generation, Agbaje's fresh energy and boldness sets her writing apart from her second-generation contemporaries, such as Williams, Kwei-Armah and Agboluaje, with whom she shares the limelight. She represents the continuity of the recent formation of an African diasporic canon on the British stage. She returns her audience to the idea of difference and diversity in a very bold way that centralizes and complicates the modern notion of Britishness, which has been questioned in the new millennium.

The main concern of this chapter therefore, is how Agbaje's treatment of this notion of Britishness makes a case for a Nigerian experience in a Caribbean dominated minority space, giving a voice to a growing community of British Africans. The motive force behind this comes essentially from the influences of her cultural heritage on her work.. She says,

my heritage has an effect on what I write about. I am proud to be Nigerian and my upbringing influences my work both consciously and subconsciously.”(Agbaje, 2011 Personal interview)

This assertion is significant within the context of Britain and the fact that Agbaje spent only a few years as a child in Nigeria. Her emotional acknowledgement to another space is quite profound, which McLeod rationalises in relation to diaspora.

*Generational differences* are important here. Children born to migrant peoples in Britain may lay claim to British citizenship, but

their sense of identity and subjectivity borne from living in a diaspora community can be influenced by the 'past migration history' of their parents or their grandparents that makes them forge emotional, cultural and imaginative bonds with more than just one nation.(McLeod, 2010, p. 237)

The above relates in all aspects to Agbaje whose Nigerian cultural experience is filtered down from her parents and then through her British experience. But it is her emotional connection to her Nigerian culture, heritage and history that informs her body of work. The result of her exploration of this multiple existence is clearly mapped out in the four published plays. The plays show a progressive evolution of her interaction between her Nigerian culture and her lived experience in Britain. There is a sense of Agbaje contesting the unifying modes of representation of black British identity, which characterises the commentary on its prominence as a whole over the last decade. Agbaje rather interrogates what appears to be a collective black British experience, showing up its contradictions and doing this from a Nigerian cultural perspective and claiming a space for an alternative African diasporic narrative.

Agbaje's first play, *Gone Too Far!*, places this African/British experience at the centre of her writing and explores the complexities of the multi-layered identities that co-exist in Britain. Her focus on the 'urban Black youth' constituency is cleverly mined through the detail she paints of the complexities involved in belonging to this youth culture, in which perceptions of history, cultural differences, collective and individual narratives play essential roles.

*Gone Too Far!* presents the story of two diametrically opposed brothers, one (Ikudayisi) born and brought up in Nigeria and the other (Yemi), born in Britain. It explores the relationship between the brothers but mostly their encounters with other 'youths' on their London council estate. The setting of the council estate with its concomitant urban youth culture is often used by the critical media to describe Agbaje's work. The fact that she grew up on a council estate and her closeness in age to the third generation youth she writes about affords her the opportunity to 'authentically' represent that often silenced voice. With the amount of negative press the council estate receives through dominant media like TV, film, and music videos, Agbaje's play moves the debate of the victim narrative of the youth and their council estate setting out of its victimised position and really presents an insider's take on the dynamics of estate culture. The 'authentic voice' often associated with Agbaje's work comes from her ability and skill in effectively reproducing the urban reality she knows so well, and which she is able to translate onto the page.

*Detaining Justice*, Agbaje's second play, focuses on the underclasses of British society, namely the illegal new wave of African immigrants and the new migrant community of Eastern Europeans discussed in Chapter One. Her exploration of immigration and asylum seekers in Britain helps provide a human face to this invisible community. The story centres on Justice, the Zimbabwean asylum seeker whose fate lies in the hands of two British-born second-generation migrant Home Office bureaucrat caseworkers. Agbaje displays with the play an awareness of the contradictions of nation, identity and belonging when it comes to the contentious subject of British immigration.

*Off the Endz*, reads as a progression of Agbaje's personal growth as she returns to the council estate in this controversial play. The choices made by young 'Black' professionals is the subject matter of this production, and controversial because it was felt explicitly by an article by *Evening Standard* journalist Lindsay Johns that it perpetuates stereotypes of black characters and their involvement in drugs, violence and criminality, the very tools used by dominant media to define and discredit council estate culture. The article opened up a long overdue debate by asking uncomfortable questions about the state of 'black theatre' in Britain. His argument was against the dangers of plays that he defined as being 'cruelly blighted by the ghetto mentality which passes for the only acceptable face of black British culture'(Johns, 2010). The 'street spelling' of *Off the Endz*, in the title of the play, and not the content, instigated his rather scathing report, as he had not watched the production at the time of his article.

Agbaje's actual treatment of the council estate and how her characters negotiated their identities within that context challenged the accepted stereotypes that her production was accused of perpetuating. Her Nigerian culture, which always features in her plays, functioned as the positive foundation that the gang leader, Blazer, in *Gone too Far!* identified with in establishing his status within the volatile world of the estate. Agbaje presents this identification with cultural roots as one of the solutions to beginning to define one's self as well as being a way that the young characters solve their problems. This same culture functions differently in *Off the Endz*. The absence of an explicit engagement with an African culture by the characters in this play was a subtle comment by Agbaje showing the dangers of the disconnection that currently exists amongst certain



African diasporic communities, particularly those born in Britain, with their African cultures/heritages.

Agbaje's final published play, *Belong*, a commission and, like Agboluaje, a collaboration with the company, Tiata Fahodzi, was a long awaited wish of Agbaje to write a play set in Nigeria. The final play was set in both Britain and Nigeria. Kayode has just lost the elections in London and puts it down to racism. He runs to Lagos to escape from the London press and finds himself embroiled in Nigerian politics, where he thinks he can make a difference and is hailed as the New Obama! He soon has to accept that the realities of living and working in Nigeria are far more complicated than he thought and has to decide if he can in fact function in Nigeria. The play asks where does he really belong? It draws attention to Agbaje's relationship to Nigeria and also highlights the inevitable contentions between the continent and the diaspora

The use of Nigerian indigenous languages in Agbaje's plays with a particular focus on *Gone Too Far!* and her most recent published play, *Belong* deserves special attention because of the manner in which language operates in them. The indigenous languages are strategically incorporated into her plays and centralised in a conscious attempt to use them as a dramatic device to foreground her Nigerian cultural heritage and particularly for *Gone Too Far!*, how it negotiates the British context. She spoke to this directly at a post show discussion, saying

I was born here, my parents are Nigerians, at home they speak Yoruba. That is the world that I grew up in; I just wanted to put

that world on stage and I think that it is important that we mix cultures on stage.(Agbaje, 2013)

The 'mixing of cultures ' certainly takes place in her first play, *Gone Too Far!*, where the discourse of the typical urban estate community, which is perceived to be driven largely by a Caribbean hegemony, is treated through a specific West African culturally specific lens. Agbaje's positioning of her Nigerian heritage within this world is most evident in how she uses the Yoruba language in this play. She deliberately constructs through her characters, Ikudayisi, Mum and Blazer - the three who speak Yoruba - an African diasporic experience that is unapologetic about its cultural heritage. The fact that their interjections in the indigenous language are not translated in performance suggests a calculated choice by Agbaje on the use of the Yoruba language in the production without the obligatory mediation for a British audience.

This choice is noteworthy because both Agboluaje and Solanke also incorporate Yoruba in their plays as an immediate way of identifying their distinctive cultural perspectives. Agboluaje provides footnotes explaining the Yoruba or colloquial terms and phrases in both his plays set in Nigeria discussed earlier. Solanke incorporates the explanation into the lines of the text to help convey the meaning of what was said in the indigenous language. The plays of the two dramatists are set in Nigeria so the use of the Yoruba language will therefore be commonplace.

I suggest that Agbaje is consciously making a postcolonial statement about the position of language in a culture in the way in which she situates the Yoruba language in *Gone Too Far!* Because unlike *Belong*, with its dual locality, *Gone Too*

*Far!* is located in London in a council estate. The Yoruba language is not expected in that space. Her introduction of the language in the home is viable because of the character of Mum. She is designated in the character list as '**Mum**, has an African accent and speaks Yoruba'(Agbaje, 2007, p. 2) The first time we hear Yoruba is only when she is in conversation with Ikudayisi her son born in Nigeria and not Yemi, born and bred in London; they only operate in English. As the conversation is not translated in any form in performance the audience will have to follow the emotional line of the characters to interpret what is being said. Agbaje suggests above that she uses Yoruba to show a mix of cultures on stage by presenting a slice of her life on the British stage. I argue she is strategically setting up the Yoruba language to function as a tool of power and control when she moves it from the confines of the family home. Agbaje allows the language to spill out onto the estate, forcing it to interact with the community youth that the two brothers encounter.

The confrontation first of all with the girls Armani and Paris and later on with the boys, Razer, Flamer and Blazer, unleashes into the contemporary space of the estate, another 'language' with new vocabulary that speaks of the now, a grammatically challenged, innovative 'street', talk which Goddard outlines below.

Language is a key motif of their identities, reflecting a diversity in which Jamaican, Nigerian, formal English and street jargon all merge to form the complex identities of young multicultural Britain.(Goddard, 2011a, P. XXIII)

The language of the street in this sense becomes not only a means of communication between them but also a carrier of their unique diasporic cultural

identity and history. This is the same language that features in Arinze Kene's *Estate Walls* (2010) which he refers to in his *Guardian newspaper* interview as

"slanguage" or street vernacular... It's a language no one has taught us...'It's a poetry we've taught ourselves.' The audience might not understand it on the page, but they do when watching it performed.(Masters)

It is into this already complex space where the members of this diasporic youth constituency are vying for recognition through boastful and egotistical language that Agbaje inserts Ikudayisi with his Yoruba. Leaving aside his fake American accent to impress the girls, Ikudayisi is confident and well grounded in who he is demonstrated in the pride he has in his cultural heritage. This pride is juxtaposed against Yemi, who rather wants to align himself with a black British; Caribbean dominated ancestry that is also influenced by social class.

The Yoruba language in this environment particularly in its encounter with Armani, the offensive mixed raced girl is met with curiosity then frustration from Armani, Paris and even Yemi because of their lack of understanding of the language.

**Ikudayisi:** *Omo girl e omo jaku jaku.* [This silly girl] *Oti so ro so ro ju.* [She talks too much.] *Werre.* [Crazy.]

**Armani:** Listen, Adebatunde, or whatever your name is, yeah, we are in England so tell ya people to speak fucking English if they got something to say.

**Yemi:** IS THE WORDS EVEN COMING OUT OF MY MOUTH?

I TOLD YOU I DON'T SPEAK THAT LANGUAGE. GET OUT OF MY  
FACE.

**Armani:** AND WHAT YOU GONNA DO, YOU AFRICAN  
BUBU?(Agbaje, 2007, p. 21)

Ikudayisi is immediately put in a position of power because he has knowledge on his side. It is said, 'To name the world is to 'understand' it to know it and have control over it'(Ashcroft et al., 2006, p.261) Yemi is out of control and beside himself with anger towards Armani, first of all for making derogatory remarks about Africans, then expecting him to be able to translate Ikudayidi's Yoruba. Armani's ignorance and provocative barrage of insults is also born out of a loss of control that pushes her to use such offensive language to Yemi. Here the tension between Africans and Caribbeans is exposed in its most painful way through second and third generation children in Britain. The hurtful word of 'BUBU' a most derogatory term used by Caribbeans to describe Africans bringing back personal unpleasant memories of my own school days.

Both Yemi and Armani are distanced from their cultural heritage seen in Yemi's inability to speak or understand Yoruba and again in Armani's lack of acknowledgement of her African roots, which Ikudayisi asserts. 'All of us are black. We are all from Africa-oh.'(p. 18) The street language reduced their disagreement to a point of them almost getting physical with each other, where '**Yemi goes for Armani and pokes her in the head**'(p. 20) It is only when Yemi begins to show an interest in the Yoruba that his brother spoke, seeking meaning

in the Yoruba that we see an improvement in the relationship between Yemi and Ikudayisi. Yemi does however allow his ego to get in the way.

It is when the brothers encounter Blazer that Yemi is able to begin to understand how to use his Nigerian cultural heritage, especially through the language to negotiate his presence on the estate. Yemi respects Blazer because of the status he has as the leader of the gang on the estate. He is shocked to discover that he is Nigerian and also speaks Yoruba like his brother and mother. Agbaje displays through Blazer how a fundamental understanding of the language system which comes from the past and is cherished, respected and passed on, informs the negotiation of his Nigerian culture in Britain. The culture is embedded in the language, which Blazer understands and is able to transpose its principles onto the space of the estate. He teaches Yemi

**Blazer:** Don't talk to your brother like dat man. I swear he said he is older than you.

**Yemi:** So?

**Blazer:** So you need to learn to respect him, you nah. You can't go around talking to him like that. That is what makes us different.

**Yemi:** What does?

**Blazer:** Respect.

**Yemi:** From who?

**Blazer:** Da West Indians. (Agbaje, 2007, p. 50)

The respect comes from his cultural heritage and here Blazer uses it to differentiate between Africans and Caribbeans. He also explains that he transferred that cultural importance given to respect to his daily existence on the street.

Agbaje uses Blazer as a mediator for Yemi to begin the journey of rediscovering his cultural heritage and thereby himself. Ngũgĩ informs us that 'How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture.'(Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986, p.16) Yemi's confusion as to which cultural heritage he identifies with is exemplified in the conflict he faces in rejecting his Nigerian culture over the Caribbean dominated street culture of the estate. He then finds himself defending the Nigerian culture when it is under attack from the abuse of Armani. He has a complex about his African heritage when viewed from the perspective of his brother and mother who are both too far removed from his realities to understand the complexities of his lived experience on the estate as an African diasporic youth. Blazer on the other hand represents a hybrid and fluid identity that has succeeded in negotiating the urban youth cultural space whilst he draws on his Nigerian cultural heritage.

Yemi thus begins his journey of self-discovery by learning what his name means, after Blazer gives him the 'mission' of finding it out for himself. Ikudayisi explains to him that 'Nigerians believe names hold power... cos they think that people will live up to it, they have special meaning.' (Agbaje,p. 56-7) Names like Yemi and Ikudayisi are consciously placed against the incendiary street nicknames of Blazer, Flamer and Razor as a way of showing their distinctiveness in cultural heritages and the meanings associated with the names. Even Blazer is

revealed to have a traditional Nigerian name, which corresponds with the construction of his multiple identity. Agbaje's continued interrogation of the British space through her plays inserts these names not only into her plays but also into the British cultural sphere by extension.

Agbaje's exploration into indigenous languages becomes an extended feature in *Belong*, her third production at the Royal Court, by incorporating larger and more significant moments in the play where Nigerian indigenous languages are spoken, again without translation in the production. The Yoruba language in *Belong*, in the first instance, was used to create the environment. The setting of the play switched between London, where the protagonist, Kayode, was running for public office, and Lagos, Nigeria, where he ran to for solace, having lost his political campaign. Yoruba, used only in the Lagos scenes became the vital element needed for Kayode to be accepted by the market crowd during his political speech, once he decided to try his hand at Nigerian politics, which ended with him being hailed as the African 'Obama.' The other characters used it to punctuate and express poignant moments in their speech, and it was as a distinctive way of identifying a specific collective Yoruba cultural identity discussed earlier.

The significant moments when Agbaje chose to insert large portions of Yoruba was in the first instance when Mama was giving thanks for the safe arrival of her son Kayode back to Nigeria. The incantation was performed in its entirety and also marked the first time that Agbaje introduced a different religion other than Christianity into her work and the British space for that matter. The Muslim religion is one of the main differences that the African diaspora have brought into



the British equation apart from the fundamental difference of language. She explores this religious difference in more depth with *The Burial*. (2013)

Kayode's political speech was also a lengthy one, with the audience expected to follow the emotional line. The other characters, as mentioned earlier, pepper their speech with the Yoruba, making this feature something that can now be expected in her work.

Members of the audience may struggle to understand parts of the work in the way that she presents it. The sound of the Yoruba language, be it subtlety through names or in its more expanded use as in *Belong* and *The Burial* is being 'pronounced' through her work on the British stage which has to receive it on Agbaje's terms. I read this increase in the Yoruba language use as a growing in confidence on the part of Agbaje in finding ways in which her newly discovered heritage can have a dialogue with the British space.

Agbaje uses the hybrid identity of Kayode, who is torn, between where he originated from and where he lives now- London to explore the dynamics of the two spaces. He does not feel he belongs in either space as he battles with fixed binary notions of identity. He is no longer considered a 'real Nigerian' for instance because he eats with a fork and knife, but is accepted by the market folk because he speaks Yoruba. The thinking of cultures as being pure and steeped in knowledge that gets passed down results in them becoming fixed. McLeod reminds us that 'Hybrid identities are never total and complete in themselves, like orderly pathways built from crazy paving. Instead they remain perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription.'(McLeod, 2010, p.254) Instead he suggests 'culture is regarded as

intermingled and manifold something which migration and diasporas especially facilitate and emphasise. (p.254)

## Historical Shifts and Agbaje

*Gone Too Far!* was a unique and timely play/production which came out of the Royal Court's special initiative to address the lack of ethnic minority dramatists within the industry.<sup>26</sup> The long history of new British writing that finds its roots at the Royal Court<sup>27</sup>, a theatre celebrated as a writer's theatre, gave birth to generations of established dramatists who are ranked in the canon of British contemporary theatre, but ethnic minority communities were excluded from this movement which marks a significant period in British theatre because it put new writing back on the British theatrical map. It is this kind of phenomenon that the *Critical Mass* initiative of the theatre was hoping to foster amongst minority communities and then sustain through its festivals. The theatre's website states that the Studio and the writers forum at the theatre 'aims to seek out, nurture and support emerging playwrights, enabling them to develop innovative, original and exciting new plays'. (Website Royal Court 2012) It is fair to say that the new writing initiatives have certainly helped to launch the career of Agbaje, who is now considered an important voice in 'black British theatre. What this study would question, however, is the development of these young writers in helping them find their own voice within the industry. Agbaje makes

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<sup>26</sup> Alia Bano's *Shades* (2009), for instance, was another successful project for the Royal Court Theatre that addressed issues within Asian communities in Britain.

<sup>27</sup> See (Little et al., 2007) for a historical account of the Theatre. (Billington, 2007) and (Sierz, 2011) provide a critical analysis of New Writing.

an intriguing case study with regards to the trajectory of her work since her appearance on the theatrical scene. Her two notable plays produced and published at the Royal Court, namely *Gone Too Far!* and *Off the Endz* had a common subject matter; that of the environment of the council estate and the African diasporic characters that inhabit that space. From this perspective, it is possible to see why Johns' article was levelled at Agbaje, suggesting the often-debated notion of gatekeepers who control the type of African diasporic narratives that are allowed to be produced. Kwei Armah challenges these 'gatekeepers' in a presentation by insisting that:

The responsibility of the establishment that perpetuates and rewards that stereotype that keep young writers confined to the narrow negative bandwidth of popular culture must be resisted and writers must break out from that confinement. (Kwei-Armah et al., 2010)

The perceived presence of gatekeepers within and the funding system through the Arts Council of Britain who represent the 'establishment' that Kwei Armah refers to, create a filter or sieve by which funding bodies, theatres and diversity initiatives, are able to pick what they want to be produced. The debates about the scepticism and caution surrounding the current prominence of African diasporic work from practitioners and academics indicated earlier often circulate around who holds the power and has control over what gets produced and published; the type of subject matter preferred and what gets supported.<sup>28</sup> It is important to

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<sup>28</sup> Examples of the kinds of debates taking place regarding who controls the type of work allowed to be visible and the sustainability of the work, can be found in King (2000), Osborne, D (2005), Goddard. L (2007), Goddard.L (2015)

consider this notion of gatekeepers even as African diasporic work is making strides towards the centre. A retrospective survey, which constitutes part of this study, shows how the work in general is no longer relegated to the margins, but looks at the type of work being produced from the beginning of the millennium, when the shift really started, to its current position on the British cultural landscape. There have been changes in subject matter and previously unheard voices within minority communities are also now coming to the fore. Agbaje's other two published plays, for instance, show a departure from the council estate and a continued exploration of her Nigerian culture.

The perception of Agbaje by the industry conflicts with how Agbaje sees herself. Her work has shown a bold and assertive hybridity that originates from her refusal to be confined within the homogenous codified parameters of a British notion of blackness and black representation. She does this through embracing her Nigerian cultural heritage and openly admits that she is learning more about the culture and is trying to incorporate aspects of it within her work.(Agbaje, 2013) She reveals in a post show discussion for instance, that her exposure to African traditional storytelling forms has been a recent discovery. She is daring and unafraid to tackle issues that are considered taboo within West African communities in Britain. Examples are immigration in relation to the generation of illegal Africans migrating to Britain in *Detaining Justice*, the subtle dip into incarceration in *Off the Endz*, a subject matter which is treated in more depth in her self-produced *House of Correction* (2012) at the Riverside Studios,

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Brewster, Y, (2009) and Theatre Voice's Debate: The State of Black British theatre (2004). <http://www.theatrevoice.com/1965/the-theatrevoice-debate-state-of-black-theatre-22-kwame/#.USqqu6XV0dK>

Hammersmith, which is unpublished and the issues of religion, the diaspora in Africa and vice versa have been addressed in her last two productions *Belong* and *The Burial* (2013), the last is unpublished.

Her work in form can be traced directly to a Western style, consisting of linear narratives, which is also the case for Agboluaje and Solanke's writing. Agbaje is, however, with her most recent production (*The Burial*) trying to experiment with form, borrowing from her newly acquired understanding of Nigerian traditional performance practices. She consciously experimented with the use of music in this play, which functioned as a significant element in the progression of the narrative. Music, which was a combination of recorded and live songs, sang by the performers introduced the different religions of Christianity, Buddhism and Traditional Nigerian religion explored in the play, which also had the effect of fracturing the linearity of the play.

### **Engaging the Sidestreams**

It is notable is that Agbaje's exploration into further negotiations of her hybrid condition, since her last production at the Royal Court, have been either instigated or produced by herself, and in less prominent venues.<sup>29</sup> Theatres such as The Oval House and The Albany have a long history of providing support to

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<sup>29</sup> Examples include *Where Are We Now* (2011), a festival Agbaje organized to explore the lives of Nigerians living in London who were directly affected by the Nigeria-Biafra War, *House of Correction*, (2012) a self-produced play that coincided with Riverside Studio's celebration of Black History Month, *Take A Deep Breath And Breathe* (2013) part of Oval House's 33% festival, 'for young artists. By young artists'2013. *Take a Deep Breath and Breathe* [Online]. Oval House Website. Available:<http://www.ovalhouse.com/whatson/detail/take-a-deep-breath-and-breathe> [Accessed 21st September 2013].

minority communities in their respective boroughs of Lambeth and Lewisham. Solanke's play (the subject of the next section) was given expression at the Arcola Tent, whilst Agboluaje's most recent experimental exploration into the life of the residents of Fela Kuti's Kalakuta Republic in *The Kalakutians* (2012) was given a showing at The Rich Mix, two venues in East London that also have a mandate to serve their multicultural communities. The Rich Mix also provided the space for Solanke to do a performed reading of her next play in development, *East End Boys and West End Girls* (2013). It is intriguing that these less prominent venues are the ones that take the risk in providing the platform and avenues for the expression of the distinct experiences in Britain faced by these dramatists and at the same time giving them an opportunity to develop their craft.

It may sound contradictory to the argument I put forward that African dramatists are carving out a space in the centre/ mainstream. This is true to a degree, and outlined in the introduction but, concomitantly, the reality that the 'centre' appears to be reticent when it comes to the development of these dramatists is illustrated not only in one dramatist but all three who have had to find other venues to produce their more experimental works. I argue that the time dedicated to developing the craft of writing is a vital component that needs addressing especially in relation to sustaining the prominence of African diasporic artists that have emerged over the last decade. I also argue that if the centres do not take on these challenges, the dramatists will eventually create their own centres, which seems to be happening.

Writing initiatives have certainly been instrumental in 'discovering' new writers as discussed earlier in this chapter. It is fair to say that New Writing and its promotion especially in London over the last decade has resulted in an influx

of previously unheard voices coming to the foreground. The publishing of the play scripts, largely by Oberon books, Methuen Drama, Nick Hern Books, and most recently, Bloomsbury, sold at minimal cost as programmes during the run of these plays have also contributed to a level of visibility and recognition of African diasporic dramatists within the literary canon of British theatre history and illustrates the shifts and new trends in contemporary British theatre. Osborne, however, voices some of the unique obstacles faced by African diasporic playwrights, even established ones with particular reference to the lack of long term support from established theatres in the nurturing of their talent. Below, she outlines the specific impositions placed on minority playwrights by mainstream theatre houses:

The demand from mainstream programmers for quick results (to fulfil new writing and funding imperatives, to attract new audiences from younger generations, to meet cultural diversity targets) can forestall the germination and evolution of the writer's work whose retention of future opportunities is contingent upon creating plays that get staged. (Osborne, 2011a, p. 184)

It appears that the more established theatre houses are, the less willing they are to support what they might deem to be risky in the 'experiments' and evolution of new African diasporic writers. Instead, what tends to happen is a reliance on a tried and tested formula of 'success' that tends to recycle long held assumptions that reduce the expression of minority communities to only be viewed through the celebration of its dysfunction.

This notion is certainly not lost on the three dramatists who show an intricate knowledge of the workings of the theatre establishment and how they function within it, whilst they avoid the constraints of the expectations of the mainstream. The conscious insertion of their Nigerian culture into their work disturbs and adds a different perspective to the 'Black' British theatre community.

What is clear is that Agbaje uses her cultural heritage, which is best expressed in her use of the Nigerian indigenous language, as a tool in defining and articulating her specific voice within a homogenized and prescribed Black British theatrical landscape. Aiden Yeh's observation that follows speaks directly of both Agbaje and Agboluaje in terms of how their cultural heritage functions in the diasporic space of Britain.

In the threat of a loss of identity in the face of modernisation or globalisation, which seems to suggest a homogenisation of sorts, language and culture become the contesting forces that write back and speak back. These acts of identity are about securing and retaining power - power to speak for and against, power to wield economic influence and clout, power to claim space for one's self, community and nation.'-(Yeh, 2007)

This notion of the power to claim a space underpins the work of all diasporic dramatists under investigation in this study and applies more explicitly to Agbaje and Agboluaje because of the conscious way in which they choose to perform their cultural heritage through their characters on British stages.



## **Ade Solanke-Africa Rising**

Ade Solanke has been referred to in this chapter as an ‘emerging’ dramatist, only because her debut play, *Pandora’s Box* (2012), has just recently been featured on the British theatrical scene. Solanke, however, has a long relationship with and presence within the British cultural scene through her educational training as well as her professional life. She holds an honours degree in English Literature from Sheffield University and a post-graduate diploma in Creative Writing from Goldsmiths College, University of London, where she also teaches screen writing as a Visiting Lecturer. She won a Fulbright Scholarship, which took her to the USA, at the University of Southern California (USC) Film School in Los Angeles where Solanke graduated with an MFA in Screenwriting. She had the opportunity to work in the story departments of Disney, Sundance and New Line film companies whilst in LA. Solanke’s period in the USA has played a significant part in her perceptions of blackness as she comments that she ‘got an insight into the African-American experience’ (Africa, 2012) and in particular her Africanness. In her capacity as an arts journalist, Solanke has written for a number of publications including *Art Monthly*, *The Voice*, *West Africa*, BBC Radio 4, *The Guardian*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Royal Television Society Journal*, amongst others. And now as a playwright, Solanke joins the wave of prominent African diasporic dramatists who have made a significant impact on African diasporic theatre in Britain.

Solanke is the founder and creative director of *Spora Stories*, a company set

up to provide an avenue to express and maximise the potential of the African continent in the diaspora. Through theatre and film, which are the two mediums she has chosen to carry and document the narratives of the African in the diaspora, Solanke creates opportunities for these narratives to connect with the continent and vice versa through specific projects and workshops produced and run by the company. *Pandora's Box* became the company's debut production, as it took on a vital role in the dissemination of the play, which received an Off West End Theatre Award (Offies) nomination for Best New Play in 2012. The play has received further recognition by winning Best Playwright at the Nigerian Entertainment Awards and Best Play at the African Film Awards in 2012.

The duality of the African diasporic identity is viewed as an essential asset that must be used 'to help grow the African Creative economy.'(Solanke, 2011) She embraces the Nigerian film phenomenon in her capacity as a screenwriter, writing the script for the film *Family Legacy* - a film about sickle cell disorder.

What soon becomes clear from interactions with Solanke is a strong sense of looking to the African continent as the source of much of her inspiration. She is keenly aware of the potential inherent in the continent. Born and brought up in Britain, much like Agboluaje, who is of the same generation, Solanke never spent any time as a child in Nigeria, which both Agboluaje and Agbaje have experienced from a young age. Solanke's personal experience of her Nigerian culture has been filtered mainly through her British experience. It has been through her capacity as a journalist in her working adult life that she has acquired a different perspective and a deeper understanding of Nigeria and of other African nations. But what makes her experience differ from that of Agbaje has to do with

generations, a topic which features greatly in her play. Solanke was born in Britain but says while growing up she was always so embracing of her 'Nigerianness' that she tried to negate her Englishness. This is an interesting position as the opposite is often the case, exemplified in Agbaje's own story, which she dramatised through the story of Yemi and Ikudayisi in *Gone Too Far!* Solanke confesses that she was caught up in 'a myth/fiction thing of I am African', (Theatre Voice <http://www.theatrevoice.com/8133/three-british-nigerian-playwrights-discuss-their-latest-work/#.UvZi5nmPWMI>)

She says she felt inferior to her siblings who were born in Nigeria, thinking they were better off, something that is clearly evident in her treatment of that subject matter in the play. Her affirmative perception of Africa and Nigeria in particular is unique and one I believe to be driven by her experience of British society. She states in her interview with Sophia Jackson that 'If you are in a country where you are not portrayed or shown as worthy how can you love yourself and therefore love others? I think not celebrating our diversity affects young people.' (Jackson, 2012) This sense of a lack of recognition within the British space underpins that inferiority she felt about herself in comparison to her Nigerian siblings who are from her perspective surrounded by their cultural heritage, which reflects a sense of self-pride.

The plot of *Pandora's Box* revolves around the decision that Toyin, a young mother of a teenage boy, Timi, has to make concerning what Lyn Gardner describes as 'a growing trend that sees second-generation black British families sending their teenage children back to the place of their parents' birth to be

educated.’(Gardner, 2012) This trend, which is becoming prevalent within African diasporic communities, is essentially about the practice of taking British-born African children to Africa and or the Caribbean to be schooled in strict boarding schools that were originally missionary schools. The idea is to instil a sense of a cultural identity and a level of discipline in these young diaspora Africans who appear to be disconnected from any idea of a cultural root, growing up in postmodern Britain as third generation immigrants. This echoes concerns demonstrated in Agbaje’s work discussed earlier about how fundamental the African cultural heritage is in the development of second and third generation diasporic Africans living in Britain. The value of the African cultural heritage advocated by both Agbaje and Solanke is interrogated in the following discussion between Pandora and her elder brother, Baba. He discourages the traditional practice of prostrating before one’s elders as a sign of respect declaring,

*Joh, get up, stand up. All this bowing and scraping. Its unnecessary. See that, Pandora? Why should our children bow like minions? How can they become confident when they are so downtrodden? That’s why they grow up to let rouges and vagabonds seize power and bully them. They learn deference in childhood.*

Pandora replies,

*Oh you want to see confidence? Come and see them in London! They are running wild! We say we mustn’t abuse them, then they start abusing us. (Solanke, 2012a, p. 64)*

This demonstrates some of the tensions and challenges Africans in the diaspora have to contend with. The trend or thinking is that this move to Africa or the

Caribbean will equip these young people with the necessary cultural tools to survive as diasporic identities in this location of Britain. Solanke's play opens up the debate as to which nation is better equipped to provide the best environment for these young people to thrive in. She explains the reason why she wrote the play.

I think it's because the play is entertaining and it deals with an issue that's so close to peoples' hearts: helping diaspora children achieve their full potential. In fact, what inspired me to write the play was seeing so many friends struggle with that very issue, and seeing kids at risk in the UK transformed after a stint in Africa! What do they get there that they're not getting here? That's the question I asked myself, so I just designed the story around that situation, and made the main character a mother who gets cold feet about leaving her son behind in Nigeria.'(Solanke, 2012 reconnectafrica.com)

Solanke parallels this plot with the equally challenging decisions made by first generation African and African Caribbean migrants, decades earlier, who chose to travel to Britain. The response to the call from Britain, in the post war era, whether for economic or educational reasons engendered the fracturing of the African and African Caribbean family, creating the African diaspora, a constituency that the African Union considers as the 6<sup>th</sup> region of the Continent. (El-madani, 2012) The leaving of children and family behind within these African and

Caribbean communities was a common practice.<sup>30</sup> Solanke inserts an article into the introduction of her play that substantiates this practice in her own home:

The oddest thing I learned at school was that not all children have brothers and sisters they have never met. But in my experience, that of an African born in England, having close but geographically distant family (three older sisters in my case) was unremarkable. (Solanke, 1999, qtd in Solanke, 2012a, p. iii)

Solanke does not however focus on this phenomenon but rather deals more with the guilt the mother, Pandora, feels towards her daughter, Ronke, who was left behind. The mother is caught in the collision of Britain and a strong attachment to 'home', where she wonders if she had failed the daughter she left behind. By all intents and purposes, Ronke seems to have fared better than her sibling, Toyin, who was born and brought up in London. Toyin is a single parent who works for a council in London. She fears what the future holds in terms of bringing up her son in Britain with its ever-present fear of gang life, especially where some young black boys are concerned. Nigeria seems to be a foreign but more viable option. Ronke, on the other hand, is presented as a Nigerian socialite, an entrepreneur who is at the top of her game, managing a thriving telecommunication business. Her success is captured and illustrated in an eight page spread in a society magazine equivalent to that of the society/celebrity magazine *OK!*. This drama of guilt, bitterness, love and uncertainty takes place in her home.

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<sup>30</sup> See (Smith et al., 2004) for a discussion on the impact of migration on parent children relationships.

As the two mothers from different generations grapple with the choices they have to make for their children, the trunk, which serves as a most recognisable piece of furniture in a majority of African and African Caribbean migrant homes in Britain, symbolises Pandora's act of both sacrifice and generosity. The contents of the trunk, which have been collected over the years, are somehow to mend the ties and heal the wounds of years of separation and guilt felt by Pandora. They also represent a form of justification for the separations that, McMillan's study on migrant aesthetics in the home discusses. He explains that

the returnee perpetuates the myth that somehow they must have done well abroad otherwise why would they have been away so long, by trying to bring back as much material evidence as possible. (McMillan, 2009, p. 138)

Pandora performs this expected duty of the migrant and provides for those left behind. She constructs a relationship with her absent first daughter through the things she buys for her over the period and packs them in the trunk. Thirty years later, the eventual opening of the trunk is supposed to reconstruct that relationship but rather brings home the reality of separations and reunions and what that does to relationships. The idea that the first generation had that movement abroad would better their lives is sharply contrasted by her reality. Mama-Ronke laments to her daughter 'buying things and storing them up for years. I don't know why. Because I was too proud to come home without my qualifications. I did it all wrong.(Solanke, 2012a, p. 60) We glimpse the pain, guilt and eventual forgiveness between Pandora and her eldest daughter, Ronke, as

they reconcile their differences, now as adults. At the same time, it also highlights the unknown journey that Toyin and her son, Timi, have to embark on when the final decision is made to leave him in Nigeria, illustrated in the separation of his suitcase from his mother's and grandmother's; a reversal of Pandora's choice, decades ago. The reversal of movement starting now from Britain with the Continent of Africa as the destination of choice follows in Solanke's line of thinking which advocates for seeing Africa as the new frontier. Solanke's play argues that the difference this time is Africa is seen as the space that can provide the missing link for young African diasporic identities to function fully as hybrid individuals in Britain.

The character of Tope, Timi's cousin and contemporary, is presented as the success story of a failing black youth from Britain who was 'tricked' into a holiday in Nigeria, then admitted into a strict private school there. After a year in Nigeria, he represents the example of a successful integration into Nigerian culture and educational system. Tope has learnt Nigerian cultural practices like how to show respect to his elders by prostrating, and is described in the stage directions as '*wearing an agbada*<sup>31</sup> and carrying a Bible' (Solanke, 2012a, p. 61). These are all a far cry from the gang member, label wearing and street talking black youth who was plucked out of Britain. He defends this newfound identity when Timi questions it, saying 'Its what we all wear. I'm an African man.' (Solanke, 2012a, p. 62) classifying himself in line with his new Nigerian cultural identity. We glean from his conversation with Timi how he tried to resist being in Nigeria by trying

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<sup>31</sup> A traditional *agbada* is a long -four piece flowing, voluminous robe worn by men in parts of West Africa. The one worn by the character Tope consists of just two parts, the loose round neck top with elbow length sleeves and drawstring trousers.



to run away and then things started to change.

TOPE: Then ...about Easter time, I think...yeah just before the end of the second term – I got a good mark for some geography and I got praised in front of the whole school. I was, like top. Top of the class. Me? Tope, top! I never thought I could do that. It was a funny feeling. They were all cheering and the Principal! He was crying. He was for real. And the girls here, they admire you. Like, it's cool to be clever. I dunno. I just started getting on with it.  
(Solanke, 2012a, pp. 77–78)

The pressure to be seen as cool for being bad, which leads to the trend of especially African diasporic male youths failing in British schools, was now replaced in Nigeria with being cool by achieving. The shift from being a minority in Britain with its concomitant difficulties in establishing one's own self-esteem and identity to the sense of ownership that one feels in their own nation where they are the majority, plays a major part in this elevated self-esteem that Tope experienced and began to flourish in. Toyin's best friend, Bev, who is of Antiguan heritage appreciates this privileged position, pointing it out to her undecided friend concerning leaving Timi in Nigeria or not.

'BEV: Look out there. What do you see? People, right? Just people. Because there are no 'black' people in Africa. Let him have that for a change. Let him grow, develop, succeed.' (2012a, p. 35)

In Bev we see a representation of an African Caribbean descendant looking to

Africa as a place where she can grow, not only economically, as Ronke offers her work, but emotionally too; she meets a Nigerian man and decides to stay in Nigeria.

Even though Tope is presented as the example of the move to Nigeria working, we also see the challenges and contradictions of this situation. As much as Tope appears to have fitted in, we see the pain he still feels for feeling abandoned by his mother, a motif that is echoed in the relationship between Pandora and her eldest daughter, Ronke. The rituals of respect that he is able to 'perform' described in Solanke's stage directions as '(Switching code to Naija mode,(2012a, p. 61) when the need arises and his concealment of his ability to speak Yoruba from his elders are survival mechanisms that he has perfected as an African diasporic youth to live in Nigeria. In contrast to Timi, Tope is shown to be more fluid in his identity, knowing for instance when to prostrate to those who expect it, like Ronke, Principal Osun and Pandora and when not to. He hugs Toyin, and Timi, displaying fundamental differences in his relationship with each person. He is able to see his own development through his cousin, Timi, who is at the stage that Tope was a year ago. At the same time, he can quickly 'switch' back into British mode to find out about the latest phones, labels and games that Timi has. How those 'skills' will serve him in Britain remain to be seen.

Interestingly, it is Baba, the elder brother of Pandora, who makes the counter argument for Timi to be sent back to Britain. He recounts the stories of other young diasporic Africans that were not so successful, highlighting some of the risks involved with this trend. He questions the validity of some of the cultural practices, such as prostrating, discussed above and whether it instils any

real discipline or just fear of elders in young people. Baba's argument is that those born and brought up in Britain should stay and fight for their rights there. He declares, 'Did Nigeria educate you? No, England did! So use your skills there. If you want to be equal, commit, stick it out, as Oyinbo<sup>32</sup> do. Work to make changes there.'(2012a, p. 83) The driving force for him is to accept the realities of the diasporic condition and making it work wherever you find yourself. The idea of admitting to failing in the upbringing of her son finds Toyin agreeing with Baba, until the reality of the real danger of gang life that her son looks to be on the verge of joining confronts her. There appears to be only one choice now, that Timi has to stay in Nigeria as his mother admits, 'I need help to help you'.(2012a, p. 94)

It is at this crisis moment that this family that has been fragmented due to the postcolonial condition finds its strength in coming together to support each other. Even as Toyin tries to convince Bev that she does not belong in Nigeria, saying, 'You really overestimate this me being African stuff. Just because we have African names and relatives... that doesn't mean that we belong. Or that they accept us' (2012a, p. 36). Here we see the tension of the African in the diaspora struggling with issues of identity and having to confront where she belongs and calls home. Solanke shows how complex this journey/condition is, especially when Bev, Toyin's African Caribbean friend, appears to connect far more easily to the continent than Toyin, proving the idea discussed in Okagbue's book, *Culture and Identity in African and Caribbean Theatre* that suggests that 'Africa somehow managed to survive and in fact still survives in the souls of her dispersed

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<sup>32</sup> The literal meaning of the Yoruba word *Oyinbo* is a white man, however, it also connotes those considered foreigners in Nigeria. In this instance, Baba intends the literal meaning.

children.’(Okagbue, 2007, p. 144)

Moments like these in the play are juxtaposed against revelations between the younger generation of Timi and Tope discovering continuity in family lineage as they learn about their heritage in their villages that extend beyond the geographical boundaries into the diaspora. Pictures of their mothers as children and the boys as babies illustrate the link that still exists despite the distance. Just as ‘valuables’ are collected in London to bring to Nigeria, valuables from Nigeria are sent back to London in the shea butter and chewing sticks to be delivered to family abroad; another way of maintaining the links to the continent. Solanke’s conscious insertion of her cultural heritage into the work is an example of how she is using the stage to explore the challenges of British-born Africans like herself. She uses the text and stage to educate the audience/reader of her cultural heritage, exemplified in her stage directions- ‘MRS PANDORA OLADURO (65) A stout and kindly woman...As per Yoruba culture, she’s addressed by the name of her eldest, Ronke’ (Solanke, 2012a, p. 24) In this way Solanke explains why the character named Pandora Oladuro is known as MAMA RONKE.

The thematic import that lies at the heart of this narrative is the fragmentation of the African family into its diasporas, viewed through the perspective of mothers and the choices they have to make. Solanke’s play shows us that the African extended family, even in these modern times, is still functional as we see the different negotiations that make it what it is. The negotiations between Pandora and her two daughters represent two extremes of the same axis with different tensions for each individual to contend with. What Solanke explores more explicitly in her play is how the different linkages to an African

cultural heritage can equip the third generation to gain a more rounded and grounded sense of who they are as Africans in the diaspora. In this sense, Solanke positions Africa as central to the development of Africans in the diaspora.

The original draft of *Pandora's Box* was initially developed as part of Tiata Fahodzi's *Tiata Delights 08* at The Almeida Theatre. Further development work took place at Talawa Theatre Company and a final writer-in-residence opportunity at the Pinter Centre at Goldsmiths through the AHRC funded project, *Beyond the Linear Narrative: Fractured Narratives in Writing and Performance in the Postcolonial Era*, aided the final draft of the script which was produced at the Arcola Tent in May, 2012.

For plays from minority communities to become box office successes, marketing has to become a fundamental strategy. This is particularly true for new writers who need to work hard to draw on their social networks, especially if their work needs a specific target audience who can engage with it. Ade Solanke is a case in point, and I would go as far as saying that she even over-publicised her play, *Pandora's Box*; but she most certainly reaped the rewards by the critical acclaim she received, including a nomination for the Best New Play Off West End in her first week of opening. She was the producer for the production and therefore had a vested interest in its success. The Oval House incident, in which she had disagreements with the director's interpretation of her script, also propelled her to make sure the play did not fail. Being a journalist, her network is vast, and she used every strand of it at her disposal. She thanks them all on her Facebook page, showing a public appreciation of their efforts. She says of Sophia Jackson of Afridiziak (theatre news) that she 'transformed our marketing'.

(Facebook page 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2012)

Agbaje does the same. She states that it is her job also to promote her work, and that she does not leave it to the theatre's marketing department. She uses her social networks too, such as Facebook and Twitter. Agboluaje has had the experience of having his work marketed under the 'Black British label with productions such as *Christ of Cold Harbour Lane* (2007), where as *The Estate* and *Iya Ile*, which were written from as close to Agboluaje and Elufowoju Jnr's experience- were marketed as Nigerian plays.

The importance of marketing is a fundamental element in the performance and representation of African diasporic identities. All three dramatists are acutely aware of their responsibility to re-engage their communities to the theatre, and it is something that goes beyond the focus of most of the New Writing theatres, which have drives to discover new audiences. Most are focused on young audiences, such as Royal Court. My personal observations, in attending most of these performances were the mix of generations of African diasporic peoples in attendance.

All three dramatists have the luxury of distance, which allows them to look at the Nigerian nation from a more objective perspective. It allows them the ability to judge both what has changed and what opportunities for change exist. Collectively, they present alternative options to the African narrative. What is, however, common and constant in the work of the three dramatists, is identity. The issue of identity is so present in the lives of second-generation African diasporic individuals because they function in an environment that is highly aware of the politically and culturally constructed nature particularly of African

diasporic identities. It is therefore not surprising that it is a constant subject matter that runs through the work of many dramatists. The exposure to so many other cultures throws up valid questions about where one belongs, which creates tensions that need to be explored through the various plays. What is, however, more intriguing about African diasporic dramatists is that a lot of them are displaying through their characters experiences of these tensions of culture and identity, which suggest that the dramatists themselves might have experienced them too. Both Agbaje and Solanke in particular speak about drawing from their own personal experiences. Solanke, for instance, in a recent interview talking about the national tour of *Pandora's Box* explains

The play is based on the story of the son of a friend of mine. He was sent to school in Lagos after getting into trouble in London. I saw him a few days after he returned, having come back to London with a clutch of GCSEs. He actually said to me, 'Auntie Ade, I never thought I could pass exams.' It broke my heart to hear that. It still makes me sombre when I remember those words'. ('Opening Pandora's Box - Ade Solanke takes on Britain's school system', 2014)

All three dramatists explore complex ideas about a British, African and Caribbean community that is informed by the specifics of their Nigerian cultural heritage. Ukaegbu describes the playwrights under investigation as being

'unequivocal and confident about their place in society; they celebrate their dual heritage with vigour and ideological

radicalism, whilst abjuring the angst of their predecessors.(Ukaegbu et al., 2013, p. 9)

The work of the three dramatists opens up spaces that challenge perceptions of African diasporic families by allowing a host of family realities to exist within a wider platform by its representation in prominent and influential theatre houses. Their presence and sustained visibility offers the artists and African diasporic communities the opportunity to negotiate and demand a foothold within the broader framework of a British cultural landscape whilst also challenging fixed perceptions.

It is clear that the three dramatists have identified what is critical to their needs as artists before trying to satisfy the set agenda by others, be they directors, producers, funding bodies for their own gain. In this respect, the three playwrights have a sense of who their audience is; Agboluaje makes it clear when he declares that 'I am writing for Nigerians' in Britain; Agbaje too is unequivocal about her Nigerian influences on her 'black British identity. Solanke passionately straddles both cultures with a sense of ownership in both camps.

Who validates their work? Who gives it value? The audience who turn up in their droves, creating box office successes for these productions? Acknowledgement by critical press is also important, and an engagement with their work on an analytical and critical level within academia, accumulate into creating a history, or an archive of the social conditions they write about, whether in Britain or elsewhere.

There are still so many stories to be told about why African diasporic



individuals are here in Britain, who they are, what they are, how they negotiate that tension of the liminal space of being British and other. The telling of African diasporic stories articulates how in so many diverse ways they have been part of the foundations of the wealth of Britain, as we know it now.

The study of Britain's second generation of African diasporic playwrights reveals a multiplicity of forms, styles and subject matter that connect in various ways to the African continent. Okagbue's chapter which was a study on Africa's diasporas in the Caribbean and South America provides a useful parallel and summary for the work of Britain's African diaspora:

What emerges from the study of the history of performances of peoples of African descent in the diaspora is that some African theatrical sensibilities have, like the African cultures, been transferred and underpin most theatre practices. The most significant is the idea of function or relevance.

(Okagbue, 2004, p. 445)

This statement returns us to the notion of popular theatre addressed with regards to Agboluaje at the beginning of this chapter but at an essential level the idea of function and relevance sits at the heart of African performance practices. The dramatists are borrowing from many arenas but that vital element of functionality or relevance of the work to their community or chosen audience is always discernable.

Sierz's exploration of cultural hybrids within new writing in Britain over the first decade of the new millennium concludes that,

Currently, the new Britishness is not a fixed identity, but a state of permanent tension. What is interesting about hybrids is not that they offer a solution to the puzzles of identity, but that they pose the question of who we are in such a clear way.(Sierz, 2011, p. 231)

The era of multiculturalism that had a prominent place within Britain's political agenda, particularly at the early part of the new millennium, culminating in David Cameron announcing its death on the BBC News in 2011, was idealistically based on the idea of integration of minority communities into British society. The word has now become quite discredited in many ways due to the challenges it has received not only in the press but also strongly debated in academia, based largely on the inequality and racism associated with it, particularly with the rise in anti-Islamist sentiments in the USA, Britain and around the world.<sup>33</sup> The policy of integration recognises in principle that you are two things at once and promotes the notion of tolerance towards people of different cultures, lifestyles and ideas. At the heart of it, is the idea about maintaining your specificity in terms of your ethnic origins and indicating at the same time your national, citizenship and political adherence. The realities of multiculturalism however were such that ethnic minority communities, particularly those born and bred in Britain started to demand more than to be simply tolerated in Britain. They considered themselves British citizens and wanted to remake and be recognised by the society they were living in. The policy of multiculturalism became

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<sup>33</sup> See Tom Baldwin and Gabriel Rozenberg's article "[Britain 'must scrap multiculturalism'](#)", *The Times*, 3 April 2004. Cameron: State Multiculturalism has failed.<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsGQvOq8cEs>

politicised which meant it took on a certain level of control, a way of maintaining the status quo, that moved it from its initial defensive/ reactionary mode.<sup>34</sup>

Within the world of theatre, state multiculturalism made an impact there too as the tensions between integration and diversity were played out in governmental policies within the arts. The shifts from the idea of integration to one of diversity was a particular New Labour policy that perhaps one could argue was instrumental to a degree in the level of prominence of African diasporic artists within the British cultural landscape, discussed in Chapter One. The institutionalisation of multiculturalism, particularly for the arts was felt most greatly in how it ethicised funding within minority communities. Rukhsana Ahmad the Artistic Director of Kali Theatre provides this personal account, which illustrates this compartmentalisation in funding.

Britain was in the throes of a multicultural experiment and this ethnicity trap became a rich source of work for me as a writer.

In that approach to inclusion there was a tendency to ethnicise the work – we felt compelled to speak about experiences connected with our racial identity at the cost of the wholeness of our experiences as individuals. It imposed a corresponding silence – as if our view of the world was irrelevant, as if we had no opinions about global issues. To break that silence seemed impossible.(Ahmad quoted in Brown et al., 2001,p. 63)

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<sup>34</sup> See (Ponnuswami, 2015) for a contextual overview of multiculturalism and its political implications in Britain. See also (Malik, 2010)

Situations like these and others resulted in the divisions that were witnessed within those communities who were fighting for the same funding opportunities as the state created a parallel system of homogenised ethnic representatives.

It is interesting that at the height of the move towards the government imposed promotion of diversity within arts establishments, Talawa Theatre Company created a platform for the discussion of where those who make, partake and enjoy African diasporic theatre see it going after the era of multiculturalism. Christopher Rodriguez, the company's executive producer, explains the origins of the theme 'Post Multiculturalism: What Colour are we Now?':

There is a sense that multiculturalism somehow didn't work. We seem to be going into a new era, particularly with theatre, there seems to be a sense that it's ok now because the mainstream is dealing with everything. That multiculturalism means that we didn't celebrate difference, we maintained divisions' and for Black theatre companies, like Talawa going into the future, if multiculturalism is not seen as a policy that there might be a reason for a company like this not to exist. Because it's *already* being taken care of by the bigger powers'. (Theatre Company, 2009)

These were legitimate concerns for companies and artists working within culturally specific arenas to debate; particularly with the perceived multiplicity and upsurge of African diasporic playwriting that British theatre has witnessed in the past decade. What stands out as the success of the new millennium and the prominence of African diasporic theatre has been the creation of different voices

within the community that have contributed to the central experience of being migrants in Britain.

The three case study dramatists have all embarked on their own experiments, whether in form, language or aesthetic practices that respond to the concerns of their diasporic condition and contemporary age. They have all contributed in their unique ways to making visible the performance and representation of distinctive West African migratory presences within the British cultural space. They have also managed to engage with and addressed their work to a predominantly yet disparate African diasporic community/audience who recognise their unique experiences, be it through the distinctive language, nuances, styles and subject matter in the work of the dramatists, that locates them within a specific cultural environment.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Bridging the Gap: Control and Identity**

This chapter is dedicated to three 'monodramatists'<sup>35</sup> or solo artists, namely Mojisola Adebayo, Inua Ellams and Lemn Sissay. They are unique among the spectrum of artists under investigation in this study because of the level of control naturally inherent in how they have chosen to perform their African diasporic identity. The fact that they write and also perform their own material, which is partly autobiographical, means they display the evolution of their personal African diasporic identities on the British stage as they publically make sense of who they are in the context of their personal histories and experiences of living in Britain. They have evolved a new practice or way of working which enables them to take more control over their artistic product, which is no longer dependent on how their identities are being performed or where it is performed because they control a large proportion of the artistic process and output.

Amongst the important adjustments taking place in the theatre landscape with African diasporic dramatists making visible strides on the British cultural landscape, the unconventional performance practices such as the mixing of genres

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<sup>35</sup> Deirdre Osborne coined the term to distinguish the growing group of artists who 'in performing their monodramas... represent a synthesis of their physical body as a tool for articulating the text (visually and verbally), the social, gendered, racialised bodies that have been attributed to them and the theatre and performance sign-systems in which it all takes place.' ZELEZA, P. T. 2002. Contemporary African Migrations in a Global Context. *African Issues*, 30, 9-14.) This unique threefold amalgamation in effect sets these artists apart from other performers/actors.

favoured by the monodramatists have created a significant shift, which marked a turning point or the realisation of how vital control is in the politics of representation.

A new trend increasingly becoming noticeable, certainly over the first decade of the new millennium, has been the blurring of boundaries in performance practices. Michael McMillan's blog, 'THEATREBLOGWITHLYN GARDNER, urges us not to get 'too focused on plays,' in his response to Roy Williams' article about the 'healthy state of black theatre' (Williams, 2009) after he counted twenty-eight (28) black playwrights who over a period of two years had had their work produced in 'influential leading theatres in Britain.' Rather, McMillan draws attention to the spectrum of 'black performance' that deploys unconventional modes in their presentation. The array of what he calls 'performance pieces' includes the works of performance poets, dancers, live artists and installations that function in a multi-disciplinary way. McMillan concludes,

So, in a way, I'm even more optimistic than Roy about the future of black theatre. It's no longer based on the work of playwrights, but part of a wider practice of black performance, where different disciplines and art forms combine and collaborate.(McMillan, M. 2009)

The work of the monodramatists exemplifies McMillan's observations, as the means of expressing themselves is not located on one media platform, but integrate different media forms, genres and platforms in intriguing ways that allow them to express very specific and personal identities. This variety and versatility of their cultural package has allowed their work to be performed and

made public in unexpected locations. Sissay leads the way in this regard, particularly through his poetry, which are published/etched into walls of buildings in Manchester and London for example. The medium of poetry that unites all three monodramatists has its own performance circuit, consisting of small bars, arts/cultural centres and festivals to mention a few. It also has a following that is different to the theatre sphere addressed in this study.

The crossing over of the work of the three artists from the specific world of poetry performance into the world of theatre/play performance brings these two performing arenas into contact. The solo nature of their performance practice means they have a wider variety of spaces in which to perform their work; this is also concomitant with its economical status and creating work for themselves. They are therefore in the more privileged position, compared to the playwrights in the previous chapter who are often controlled and limited by the commissions offered to them by specific theatre houses.

In this sense, the level of control that the monodramatists possess can be viewed as representing a kind of shift, in which the reliance is no longer on the mainstream so to speak, to decide on the outlets, subject matter and nature of their work. The artists have put themselves in positions where they can decide on their own narrative and remove the burden of having to fall in line with the tastes and criteria of funding bodies, who, as has been discussed in Chapter Two, are in dominant positions where they can determine, maintain or shape the kinds of narratives that are allowed to be visible whilst others are suppressed.



## **Autobiographical Performance**

The role of theatre as a site for the articulation and contestation of identities of culture, race and ethnicity has been addressed with particular reference to the playwrights in Chapter Two in this study. The monodramatists' position as authors and performers presents a new dynamic to the conceptualisation of identity politics.

Autobiographical performance is usually a solo performance and as the name suggests is based on the real life of the performer. The fascination with making sense of our lives sits at the heart of this process, which at a fundamental level explores how we engage with the world through our relationships, our identities and the stories we tell about ourselves. The work of a vast number of artists from Jerzy Grotowski's work in the Laboratory theatre with its focus on the actor to the performance artist Bobby Baker's performance of her life experiences to the poetry commentary of the artist/poet SuAndi, there are many more artists and scholars exploring the dichotomy of the real in the autobiographic and the invented or performed in the performance of the real.

The performer and academic Deirdre Heddon who acknowledges Bobby Baker's work as being instrumental in her own work is interested in the doubling of personas where the subject matter is the artist and the performance of the subject matter is also the artist. She speaks of a natural gap that exists between the performer and the performed, and that this gap according to Heddon becomes visible in artists who perform the self.(Heddon, 2002) The three monodramatists have different levels of this visibility, which I argue comes from their different levels of performance experience to be discussed in due course.

Heddon's introduction which I link with McMillan's observations of the trajectory of black performance suggests that

the majority of artists who use autobiography in their work are marginalised subjects;... many of these artists are lesbian or gay and/or black and/or transgender, and their work also addresses explicitly their particular location(s) and the experiences that are inscribed there' (Heddon, 2008, p. 2)

This summary encapsulates precisely the three monodramatists in this chapter who are all speaking from a marginalised space but I argue that they are 'shifting the centre' again in relation to Ngugi's theory and the perception of African diasporic identities with their work. They are doing this through the taking of the centre stage, owning and telling their story and history their way, where and how they want to tell it and are shifting themselves and their particular narratives out of the margins into centralised subject positions with agency.

This chapter examines the relationship between the artist as author and as performer and assesses its impact on artistic control; firstly, with regards to the autobiographical nature of the work of the three artists and secondly, how that translates into what can be defined as an African diasporic identity asserting itself. I will analyse two productions from each artist, which represent different stages in their personal and artistic developments, as well as constituting the performed narratives through which the monodramatists produce and project ideas and ideologies about their community, culture and ultimately, their identity.

Hall's notion of 'the politics of representation' (Hall, 2006) discussed in his essay, 'New Ethnicities', focuses on the emergence of a new kind of identity

politics which he distinguishes as ‘a change from the struggle over the relations of representations to a politics of representation itself... a very radical displacement of that unproblematic notion of the concept of representation’. (2006, p. 200) This shift acknowledges and celebrates African and African Caribbean cultural heritages as it simultaneously engages with and conceptualises the historical and geographical factors, ‘conditions, limits and modalities’(2006, p. 200) of the colonised in a postcolonial situation. He adds, ‘I think it is the move towards this second sense of representation which is taking place and which is transforming the politics of representation in black culture.’ (2006, p. 200) This article was written as far back as 1989 and this thesis confirms that African diasporic cultural production on the British stage is not only ‘moving towards’ but is gripped by the politics of representation. The work of second-generation African diasporic artists is underpinned by a constant engagement with the politics of how their identities are represented. The position of the monodramatists is unique because the element of control, which is an aspect of the politics of representation, significantly changes the dynamics of their representation because of the personal narratives involved and/in the inherent performativity of their African diasporic identities.

Beth-Sarah Wright’s article, ‘Dub Poet Lekka Me’, in *Black British Culture and Society*, interrogates the phenomenon of performance poetry in the African diasporic community, showing how it functions as a practice and a tool through which the community redefines itself. Aligned with Hall’s findings on the cultural shifts taking place within African diasporic communities, Wright’s article identifies three fundamental elements that constitute the struggles in the representations of African diasporic identity. The struggle to assert a more

positive and accurate image of African diasporic identity, taking into account the 'historical experience characterised by dislocation, fragmentation, alienation and exclusion'(Wright, 2000, p. 272); the second element invests in the factors that make up the performance of identity, such as 'speech, gesture, customs, rites and rituals, collectively known as orature'(2000, p. 272), and lastly what Wright refers to as 'the preservation of an African oral aesthetic.'(p. 272) All three elements are evident and distinguishable in the work of the three monodramatists who all have a background in performance poetry, and use the practice as an anchor in their expressions of 'self.' Their varied and particular experiences and relationships to history, geography and their current location of Britain is examined in this chapter, to support Hall's claim of the 'recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subject positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black;... [and] the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects.'(Hall, 2006, p. 200) Reading their personal narratives while combining Hall's theory and Wright's investigation into this very specific cultural practice provides an insight into the particular narratives of the individual artists whilst simultaneously engaging with a wider perspective of the culture of performance within African diasporic communities.

The flexibility with which the three monodramatists operate in comparison to the playwrights discussed previously is captured by Sandra J. Richards' chapter "Function at the Junction": African Diaspora Studies and Theatre Studies' that seeks to articulate the relationship between the two areas of study. She outlines her findings from analysing African diasporic theatrical work in America that echoes the work being done by the monodramatists:

Ethnographic research in particular will introduce a different worldview and conception of theatre beyond the ocular-centricism, linearity and narrative closure, characteristic of much of Western drama. These dramas theorize diaspora through their very construction. In their rehearsal, production and performance, they possibly enact a diaspora consciousness for the actors, production teams and spectators. In their circulations to other locations in the African diaspora, they also engage issues of cultural translation and [mis]recognition, raising in a different register issues central to a diasporic sensibility. (Richards, 2010, p. 200)

The idea of a construction of a 'diasporic sensibility' as evoked in this quote in reference to working methods in the creation and production of the work is a vital element that is often not addressed. Its relevance to the monodramatists is apparent particularly in the ways in which they interpret the conventions of Western theatre and their knowledge and interaction with traditional African forms, to reflect their diasporic condition. I argue that it finds its genesis in their work. It is necessary at this point to provide a brief historical context to the genre of performance poetry in African diasporic communities, which unites the dramatists.

## **Performance Poetry**

The rise in performance poetry involving African diasporic poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, who grew up in Britain but maintained strong Caribbean

cultural roots, popularised what was then known as *dub poetry*, a distinctive culturally influenced performance poetry style that originated in the Caribbean in the 1970s. Dealing primarily with political and social justice issues, *dub poetry* borrows from the popular dancehall form of 'toasting' in which the deejay or the Master of Ceremony entertains the gathered community with made up skits and catchphrases spoken over the music. Geoffrey Philips's blog states:

dub poetry resembles the chanting style of dancehall deejays, but whereas the deejay is bound to the *riddim* track, the dub poet experiments with words/sounds (almost like a jazz musician) and transcription to the page aims at reproducing the effect of the beat.(Philips, 2007)

Experimentation with language and music in this way resulted in the substitution of the bravado usually associated with the dancehall scene with far more politically conscious material that commented on current events whilst maintaining the characteristic Jamaican patois and the heavy reggae dub baseline that accompanied the poetry, or in instances where the music was not used, it was still distinguishable because the reggae rhythm was written into the poem. The subsequent transportation of the form to Britain, led by Johnson, allowed African diasporic poets to address the challenges of racism faced by migrants living in Britain whilst drawing on indigenous and popular cultural practices that asserted and celebrated their heritage. This was indicative of the wave of political resistance taking place in 1970s - 1980s Britain that challenged the representation of African Caribbean migrant identities in Britain, as the focus shifted from how they were represented to finding ways of celebrating their culture in Britain. As discussed in Chapter One, the setting up of the Caribbean

Arts Movement with its emphasis on reflecting the cultural heritage of the Caribbean was instrumental in a significant outpouring of artistic works that referenced and drew inspiration from the Caribbean. Kamau Brathwaite's championing of the Caribbean aesthetic of 'Nation language'<sup>36</sup> and its influence on Caribbean artists was evidenced largely in the literary novels that mark that era. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's postcolonial thinking on changing the centre-periphery dynamics by proclaiming where you are to be the centre, moving away from the dependence on and viewing Europe as the centre, was substantiated through his encounter with most of this Caribbean literature as a student, which is discussed in Chapter One.

This new tradition migrated to Britain and spread across black cultural arts. Mustapha Matura was naming his world through the characters he wrote and put on the British stage, whilst Johnson re-imagined the poetry scene with his introduction of dub poetry into Britain. His publications of *Voice of the Living Dead* (1974) and *Dread Beat and Blood* (1975), two collections of dub poetry with indignant commentary on life as a black Briton, established him very early on in his career as a leading artist in the field. Johnson was joining a new group of artists, whose work was described by Onyekachi Wambu as

a potent and angry new brew:... which heralded the emergence of the voice of an angry new generation. This was the voice of those who had been born or grew up in Britain and who were not going to put up with the challenges of Britain in the polite way that their parents had done.(Wambu, 2011)

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<sup>36</sup> He describes it as a linguistic expression of Caribbean culture.

What is also notable about Johnson's contribution was how he managed to connect with the Caribbean and Britain seamlessly through his use of language, described as 'a local London-Jamaican patois, which had never been placed in print before. (Thompson, 2004)

The development of the form has helped to broaden the notion of British poetry conventions that had been considered 'rigid' by African diasporic poets. The newfound freedom to explore cultural identities gave birth to a myriad of styles and practices not only on the poetry circuit. Returning to McMillan's notion of the collaboration of art forms, the mono-dramatic style represents an emerging form of the collaboration between poetry and theatre. The immediacy of performance poetry combined with the made up world of the theatre calls for a new way of reading and assessing this work. As Wright explains, 'the audience believes the words of the poet-performer (the truth-teller) as opposed to appreciating his or her work.'(Wright, 2000) Audience members are invited to engage with the truthfulness of the narratives of the performers, as they express the cultural conflicts associated with their experiences and identities in a theatrical setting. The successful results of this include the three monodramatists in this chapter and others that the last decade of the new millennium produced. This chapter will now look at the three monodramatists being studied to see how while sharing a common artistic platform/form, each still brings a unique sensibility and quality to their art.

### **Lemn Sissay-Writing Himself into Existence**



*Something Dark* (2004), an award-winning play by Lemn Sissay performed at the Battersea Arts Centre and *Why I Don't Hate White People* (2009), at the Lyric Hammersmith are 'monodramas', which blur the lines of actor, writer, poet and self. His first play, *Something Dark*, directed by John E. McGrath, essentially is about Sissay's unrelenting search for his family, having grown up in the British care system alone, without encountering another black person until the age of 18. The search for family for Sissay become a conduit to aid him in his mission to find out who he is, thereby creating an identity for himself. This 'writing himself into existence' is aptly captured by Deirdre Osborne in her introduction to the play when she says '[a]s the creator and actor, Sissay literally and literarily performs himself into being.' (Newland et al., 2008)

Framing the beginning of his existence within a political context, Sissay immediately identifies his birth within the binary constructs of black and white and its political implications. Sissay is unambiguous about his popular cultural reference points:

It was 1968. It's the year of the Enoch Powell speech. The year Martin Luther King was killed and the year that the Beatles released *The White Album*. (Sissay, 2008, p. 331)

Born to a single Ethiopian woman, who had arrived in England in the late 1960s to study, Sissay's mother found herself placed in a 'mother and baby home' in Northern England. Unaware of the context she found herself in, she planned to foster her son for a short time while she finished her studies. The home, however, was not set up by the state to foster but to permanently find adoptive parents for the children through social workers. Sissay's retrospective evaluation of the system he was brought up in is captured as 'an industrious, utilitarian solution.

The government - the farmer, the adopting parents -the consumer, the mother - the earth and the child, the crop!'(TED. com, 2012) This scathing evaluation shows how Sissay interprets Britain's vestiges of its colonial legacies that have been maintained into a postcolonial age. The ideology of sustaining a dominant political, racial and cultural hegemony over other nations was a rooted practice in Britain. The same ideology in its inverted form was being practised in the British care system with particular reference to migrants born into the system. A similar system is described by the Canadian writer Margery Fee from her Canadian context as where 'the majority society has either actively caused or passively allowed the loss of traditional and indigenous languages and cultures worldwide.'(Fee, 2011, p. 169) The sending of indigenous children in Canada to white only boarding schools and foster homes is repeated in this instance.

The severing of the boy from his biological mother was not just a way of maintaining a certain equilibrium in British society, that saw single parents as a threat to the community,<sup>37</sup> the state's involvement in this dislocation represented an ideological continuum of 'cultural obliteration,'(2011, p. 169) carried out initially through religious indoctrination. Given the name, Norman Mark Greenwood, this 'crop' was handed over to a white devout Christian couple who saw him as 'a sign, a message from God'(Sissay, 2008, p. 331) when they were told he had been 'abandoned by his negro mother.'(2008, p. 331) Decades later, in 1995, a BBC documentary about Sissay uncovers letters his mother wrote to the social worker asking 'If I want to get Lemn out here, [Ethiopia] what steps should I take? I would very much like to bring him. I want him to be in his own country

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<sup>37</sup> See Kiernan, Kathleen E. Land, Hilary. Lewis, Jane E. *Lone Motherhood in Twentieth Century Britain: From Footnote to Front Page* (Oxford University Press 1998) pp. 38-40.

with his own people, I don't want him to face discrimination.' (Sissay, 2012) Sissay spent eleven years living as the only one of his kind in a Northern Lancashire town. The only family he knew handed him back into the state system, having concluded that he had the devil in him at the age of 11. He was never to hear from them again. Four children's homes later, this young adolescent was trying to make sense of his life, by tattooing the racist nicknames he was given into himself, he self-harmed, walked barefooted for a year, grew locks, was incarcerated in a young offender's prison for a year for pouring red, gold and green paint (the colours of Africa) down a wall. He withdrew further and further into himself, into a place of 'darkness' (Sissay, 2008) searching desperately for a sense of himself, searching for 'light'. (2008) Sissay plays with binary opposites, which operate as a significant motif right from the opening of the play until the end. His constant shifting between the two states literally on stage through the use of the theatrical lights, moving between dark states and light, playing with shadows and linking it to his emotional states, illustrated the challenges he faced in claiming his identity. He elaborates on what his experiences in life have taught him, adding,

I have learned that binary opposites are a primary way of controlling society and its people. If you think you only have two choices (binary opposites) then you are easier to control. If you offer two choices you can control others. (Benoît, 2006)

At the age of 18, no longer a child of the state, his social worker reveals to him,

'Your name isn't Norman'

See, legally the government was no longer my parent and therefore had to pass over one incredible document and that

document was my birth certificate. It had two pieces of information- my name Lemn Sissay and my mother's name Etsegenet Amare. It was a dark afternoon mid-winter. But there was so much light in that front room – I was someone! (Sissay, 2008, p. 339)

He then made a clear decision as a young adult, responsible for the rest of his existence. To begin with, he changed his name from Norman to Lemn Sissay. 'I had a birth certificate and a fist full of poems and I was going to Manchester and there would be no going back'... (Sissay, 2008, p. 339)

Thus ends the first act of this monodrama, *Something Dark*, and Sissay's life in care- the darkness.

The second act is bathed in 'light' as he immerses himself into his newfound 'black' culture, which consisted of food, language, and hair and for the first time positive images of his own kind. He was elated, but deep down there was still 'darkness' (Sissay, 2008); he was still in search of family. He still had no one to call family. Then the search produced more light, which found him on a plane to The Gambia, to a long awaited meeting with his birth mother.

And I am hugging her and she's hugging me. And I am hugging her hugging me.(Sissay, 2008, p. 342)

Meeting his birth mother after twenty-two years is supposed to be all the 'light' he needs. Yet the encounter opens up old wounds as his mother avoids confronting his many questions. He discovers he has siblings, yet his mother is not ready to reveal his true identity to them. He came to his mother looking for answers, and

he found himself faced with rather more questions. He returns to a 'darkness' expressed at the opening of the play which makes him decide to leave, just before his mother reveals to him, "Look, there's no other way of putting this. I was raped". (Sissay, 2008, p. 344) This painful and devastating secret of the circumstances of how he came into existence has a profound impact on him evidenced in the final stages of this play. Sissay returns to England and hurtles to the end of his narrative, feeling helpless, defending his mother and for the first time in this piece recites a full poem he dedicated to her. Perhaps, this moment shows Sissay at his most vulnerable as he retreats to the comforts and security of poetry, a medium through which he started his journey of self-discovery.

He loses contact with his mother again, finds out his rapist father died in a plane crash, with an unexplained film crew in tow; finds out the meaning of his name; 'Lemn. It means Why!' (Sissay, 2008, p. 347) and makes contact with his siblings. All these snippets of his newfound life are captured, extended and conceptualised in his documentary, *Internal Flight* (1995). He concludes the work with a return to poetry, the medium through which he has been able to express his identity.

So now I have a fully dysfunctional family like everyone else...

It's not black, its not white, not dark, not light

Secrets are the stones that sink the boat

Take them out, look at them, throw them out and float

(Sissay, 2008, p. 347)

There is a sense of release and acceptance from Sissay, after a long journey in search of family; the reality of having one does not necessarily live up to his expectations. He refuses to be burdened by its

secrets, a position he makes clear to Osborne in a private interview. 'I think all I needed to do was know that I wasn't anybody's secret. I wouldn't allow my mother or anybody to define me as a secret,'(Osborne, 2008, p. 321) and choosing the elements that aid him in moving forward. He has been through worse experiences and still managed to find the 'light'; he found himself.

Sissay gave a talk in 2012 at the Houses of Parliament's organised TEDx talks (TED. com, 2012), where he gave a fifteen-minute summation of *Something Dark*. Apart from providing me with an opportunity to view a recording of the piece, Sissay also had the opportunity to re-contextualise the work eight years after it was first written/performed. He framed this talk around the notion of 'looked after children'. Concerned by the lack of recognition given children in care, particularly by the government, Sissay makes a point by highlighting how writers of popular cultural fiction have made the connection of how vital these children are to our society's growth. Aligning himself with these fictional characters such as Batman, Harry Potter, Jane Eyre, Matilda, Oliver Twist, Luke Skywalker, even Moses and Celie in *The Color Purple*, Refugee Boy- by Benjamin Zephaniah- (a novel Sissay has now adapted into a theatre script), Michael Morpurgo's novel *Friends or Foe*, *The-Girl-with-the-Dragon-Tattoo*, Sissay makes the connection between the fictional world that these characters operate in and his own experience. All the characters were orphaned, fostered or adopted; and 'all of whom', Sissay adds, 'were hurt by their condition.'(TED. com, 2012) They represent a group within our society who do not belong, like Sissay, to a traditional notion of what a family unit is. They rather present us with what family should be, which is about those who survive and looking out for those who

look out for you. In spite of existing outside of these traditional notions, Sissay explains how the characters all display extraordinary skills and character to deal with extraordinary situations on a daily basis. Sissay, speaking from a personal point of view, believes 'they need our respect, not our pity.'(TED.com, 2012) As a writer himself who has become who he is in the public realm through writing about his traumatic, isolated and fragmented childhood, the act/art of writing is Sissay's 'extraordinary skill.' This skill is shown in the manner in which he is able to narrate and relive a harrowing personal narrative whilst avoiding turning the piece into an emotive experience. Maxie Szalswinska's review captures this skill.

Sissay, so good-natured he seems illuminated from within, gives an adrenaline-fuelled performance. The actor's glorious smile and his flair for turning personal struggle into stand-up and poetry is effortlessly entertaining. There's a terrific riff on the difficulty of flagging down a taxi when you're a tall black guy: six taxis in a row zoom past Sissay, their lights "pissing a yellow stream" all over him. (Szalwinska, 2006)

The number of years spent honing his craft, from 1988 when his first volume of poetry, *Tender Feet in a Clenched Fist*, was published, to the writing and performance of *Something Dark*, a total of sixteen years, was a necessary trajectory for Sissay. He expresses in an interview with Jane Plastow that:

Artistically, I had reached the point where I could translate the story and where personally I would not be distraught, by the story.... I was personally in a place where I wanted to tell the story clearly, and that I was professionally in a place where I

could interpret the story without it becoming one big therapy session, which is the sign of all bad art, that of sort of self-indulgence. (Plastow, 2009, p. 80)

His chosen mode of presentation, the stand-up genre, akin to performance poetry/spoken word, has also been helpful in this regard. Punctuated with what can be described as a strategic use of humour and satire, Sissay defuses moments of tension with humour or uses it to create opportunities for the audience to distance themselves from the emotion and rather engage with the facts. His humour is not what one would describe as 'laugh out loud' humour; it is more a laughter of recognition, and of an ironic play on words, illustrating his control of the English language and his ability to manipulate it effectively to narrate his story.

Telling his story is vital to Sissay as it is the only way through which he can reach back and piece his lost identity back together, thereby setting in motion the process to begin to heal the fractures of his existence. He admits to Plastow, 'I struggle with depression, and depression is dark and light.'(Plastow, 2009, p. 81) His lack of any real sense of a family, even a 'dysfunctional' one, is held responsible for his depression. The care system failed him; his writing saved him, by providing him with a medium through which he can 'speak'. Sissay claims that many 'cared for children' grow up into their adult lives with the stigma of speaking about their background. .(TED. com, 2012) Sissay feels strongly about shifting that mind-set when he came to the realisation that 'I was the only proof of my own existence, my own echo, tattooing myself into myself.'(Sissay, 2008, p. 336) Without a 'family' to provide what Sissay calls 'a reference point', the



responsibility of recording his existence fell to him. So he wrote poetry and through his monodramas, performs himself. He says this about his writing,

In creativity, I found light. In the imagination I saw endless possibility of life, the endless truth. The permanent creation of reality. The place where anger was an expression in search for love. A place where dysfunction is a true reaction to untruth.(TED. com, 2012)

He declares, 'children in care, who have had a life in care, deserve the right to own and live the memory of their own childhood.'(TED.com, 2012) In returning to the responsibility of the state, Sissay is explicit in his assessment of it when he affirms that: 'You can define how strong a democracy is by how its governments treat its child, I don't mean children, I mean child of the state.'(TED. com, 2012)

*Why I Don't Hate White People* (2009) is Sissay's second monodrama, performed this time at the Lyric Hammersmith, directed again by John E McGrath. This monodrama, unlike *Something Dark*, which is preoccupied with his search for family, explores a fundamental element of his identity, his race, which has been at the foreground of how other people define him. Kwame Anthony Appiah discusses the way that the category of race is set up, as a kind of identity; explaining that you can in principle only be one race - black, white, etc. or a mix of races. But the overlaps of different forms of identity like gender, race, sexuality, religion, class, and nationality all occur in a single person. So then, what does it mean when one speaks of identity? What is an/or one's identity? Context, Appiah suggests, is important in answering this question. What is relevant to the context you find yourself in determines which form of your different dimensions of

identity to use. With regards to Sissay, it would be fair to say that even without him instigating it, race has always been a 'relevant' factor no matter the context he found himself in. *Why I Don't Hate White People* is an exploration of Sissay's personal journey living consciously as an ethnic minority person in Britain. Deliberately political, Sissay uses the same stand-up format and his unique brand of humour to reveal the subtleties of white Britain's ingrained racism. Born and brought up in Lancashire, Sissay spent the first eighteen years of his life experiencing his 'difference' being pointed out at him as he interacted with a completely white community. Never knowing another black person until the age of 18 meant that his associations with blackness came from a white society that was largely ignorant of and prejudiced against any other ethnicity. When asked in an interview what that experience was like he replies,

It means all the things I had learned were the same things they (white people) had learned about black people. That's the central theme of the play. I'm a detective in the white community and their attitude towards race has shown itself to me. When I was 18, I was very scared of black people and now I realise that they were scared.(Jackson, 2009)

Being brought up in a society or community without images of his own kind, Sissay did not have the appropriate vocabulary with which to develop a language to articulate his identity. Sissay's progression to move onto race was born out of a culmination of repeated incidents, which had come to mark his existence as a lone ethnic minority person, being brought up in a predominantly white majority society. The constant reminders of his 'otherness' came to represent the

mundaneness of racism in Britain, which Sissay felt compelled to investigate. He says:

I wanted to investigate why I don't hate white people. Hate is a valid emotion; it's a valid feeling to hate someone for hurting you. I think black people are very forgiving when you consider the amount of obstacles that are flung their way. I'm not saying I do or don't hate white people but the play is an investigation into all the little incidents that have happened in my life that would make me have an emotional reaction to race and white people.(Jackson, 2009)

The narrative unfolds in the form of anecdotes, poetic commentary and enactment. Again providing a vivid political context, Sissay uses his unique position of being an 'insider' in the sense that he lived 'in the belly of the beast', acquiring and digesting the subconscious imperialistic discourses of knowing and naming the 'other' and then coming to the realisation that that construction of the 'other' was of him. 'I was the only one; I got an insight into them in their early formation on the subject of race'. The million pieces of information about black people he had received influenced his ideas about what he was. If he had that idea about himself, what would white people make of him? Sissay demonstrates these best in the anecdotal sequences of the frequent events he has had to endure, which he describes as 'the indefinable twitches, the unspoken fears that encapsulate in a person who has not experienced or not sought out experiences of people from other races.' (Sissay, 2010) The old Lancashire lady on the bus asking him 'and where are you come from', the students asking him for 'rizlas' because he was the only black person in the pub, to the liberal Brits who claim they are

colour blind, and many more besides, are all dramatized by Sissay. His reactions to them are an analysis of his experiences of what it is like to be British, and Britain's contemporary attitudes to race. The notion of colour-blindness is alien and an illness to him but one he encounters on a daily basis. It is the crux of *Why I Don't Hate White People*. He explains that 'Lots of people talk of being colour blind as a uniting force, which often it isn't. It is a way of placating an issue and not dealing with the real thing'(Sissay, 2010)- difference. He would rather people acknowledge his difference and engage with it than pretend it was not there. His exploration of race in this piece is from his very particular and peculiar perspective, in which his difference has been the 'issue' that ironically, was never mentioned.

In a politically correct obsessed Britain, where difference is still constructed as negative, Sissay pushes the boundaries on the concept of race by moving away from the expected scenarios of why he 'should' hate white people, to the reasons why he does not. He is aware of the industry that profits from the notion of 'the angry black man,' which is a viable assumption to make of Sissay, given his particular experience of race. Yet he is able to exist outside those confines and is able to subvert those concepts to explore his engagement with difference, which is captured by Matt Boothman's review:

To this end he's filmed a selection of white Britons responding to his query, "What does 'white' mean to you?" Primed by the aforementioned anecdotes, we don't have to strain very hard to hear the interviewees' subconscious minds screaming, "Don't mention race! Say anything but race!" The result is a series of varyingly eloquent but uniformly evasive meditations on

blizzards, laundry, Snow White, weddings, cleanliness and every other connotation of 'white' bar race. (Boothman, 2009)

Having spent his life justifying what black meant to him in a predominantly white society, Sissay turned the tables on the majority community. Their guarded responses exposed an unhealthy reluctance to engage with race or contest it when confronted with difference. What Sissay does with this play is to both contextualize and contest the notion of race and difference in contemporary Britain. Sissay was deprived of his indigenous mother-tongue by the state, but he has fashioned an English language to articulate the complexities of his identity. He is an 'indigenous' Lancashire lad, his language reflects that heritage as he uses it to discover and write himself into his biological heritage. In addressing the notion of indigeneity in reference to 'black British' artists in Britain, Osborne repeatedly makes a case for the adoption of the term 'indigenous Britons,' asserting

the writers' automatic constituency within British culture (as indigenous Britons) rather than making some kind of case for their inclusion. Indigenous Black British playwrights are just as much inheritors of Britain's aesthetic cultural legacies as their white peers, while also frequently offering the unique perspective of African diasporic influences shaped within and by a British context.(Osborne, 2011a, p. 185)

Sissay, perhaps more than any other African diasporic artist, best encapsulates this idea of British indigeneity. His particular upbringing places him in the unique position of laying a justified claim to Britain and Britishness than other diasporic Africans who had access to and were influenced by an 'other' cultural heritage.

And yet the uncontrollable urge to find and engage with his country and heritage of origin harks back to Okagbue's statement of Africa's spirit living on in her children in the diaspora. Sissay's lived experience may have been constructed from a white British cultural perspective, but this same British culture's engagement with him has been from the perspective of the other.

Sissay's connection to the continent is from a very personal perspective, and one done to help him piece together his dislocation from who he is. Indeed, his isolation and disconnect from Africa is noted in his first monodrama, *Something Dark*, when his interview with Plastow draws attention to this fact. She asks,

You didn't say a lot in the piece about finding that you're African as opposed to Afro-Caribbean or anything like that; and your reaction to being in Africa. I wonder how important that African aspect of your identity is to you?(Plastow, 2009, p. 82)

And he responds, saying,

Wherever I was from was important to me... the more I grow, the more important Ethiopia becomes in some way, shape or form- and Eritrea. I was just glad to know where I was from.'( p. 82)

Sissay's most recent theatre piece is a stage adaptation of Benjamin Zephaniah's 2001 novel, *Refugee Boy* (2013), for the West Yorkshire Playhouse, which speaks of his continued search for a deeper understanding of his cultural heritage. It tells the story of a half-Ethiopian and half-Eritrean 14-year-old boy, Alem, who has been left in England by his father, sparing him the horrors of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war. Alem's experience of children's homes and foster parents and its

parallels to Sissay's own life in the state care system could not be closer. Zephaniah recalls their conversation about the adaptation: 'Lemn called me and he said, "This is my story, Benjamin. I've got to do this. It's so close to my experience."'(Youngs, 2013) Sissay seeks out Africa, acquainting himself with her through every opportunity he finds.

The answer that concludes the question that is the title of the play 'Why don't I hate white people?' is simply answered 'Because white people made me.'(Sissay, 2009) I have a very distinct memory of my reaction to the definitive and uncomfortable, (for me,) ending of the play. As a black man lays claim to being 'made' by white people, it has echoes of a colonial ideology and relationship taking place in the mother country. The experiment of his foster parents to turn him into a missionary to return to 'Africa' to save other African babies is subverted through the owning and telling of the story of Sissay's existence. He says this about Lancashire, and its community. "They were all I'd ever known, and yet I was all they'd never known.'(Sissay, 2009) Through his monodramas, Sissay has taken back the 'two indivisible foundations of imperial authority-knowledge and power,'(Ashcroft et al., 2006) and shown the British public, and the world, who he is and why he is on his own terms. Using the tools given him as an 'indigenous Briton, such as the cultural legacy of British canonical literature, starting with the Bible, T.S. Elliot, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* or *The Famous Five* which, he inherited from his foster-father; who was an English teacher, and Sissay cultivated his 'love of English, which was subconscious.'(Sissay, 2008, p. 324) Sissay acknowledges that 'what they did emotionally was terrible, but what I had was my first eleven years crammed full

of stories. [...] I loved the metaphor and trying to work out what a story meant.'(2008, p. 324) Sissay has developed that love of English and story into an art form through which he has displayed an affecting, thought-provoking piece of work that is an intelligent exploration of the concept of difference. He frees himself from his limited and painful story by authoring a more empowering story that allows him to shift his perception of reality and transform his way of engaging with the world and his being.

Sissay has made a name for himself, initially as a poet, a form that encourages a natural tendency to self-promotion. His success within that arena has translated to his shift to the British stage, where he has used it as a platform from and on which to take control of his personal narrative and visibility, not only on the stage but within the cultural landscape too. He has become more than a poet; he is also an actor and a playwright. Sissay is an associate artist at London's Southbank Centre, is joint patron with Jaclyn Wilson of the Letterbox Club; he has been awarded an MBE and his Landmark poems have been etched onto locations ranging from the London 2012 Olympic Park to the side of a Manchester pub. Sissay has taken control and ownership over writing himself not only into being but also into British cultural history by being present, visible and a product of it.

## **Mojisola Adebayo: Decentring the African**

### **Diasporic Narrative.**

Mojisola Adebayo primarily comes from a performance background that has evolved to include devising, writing and performing her own work, and creating a useful bridge between her dramaturgy and her performance. A line from Hanif



Kureishi's *The Rainbow Sign*, 'Stories help me see my place in the world and give me a sense of the past which could go into making a life in the present and the future...' (Kureishi, 1986) describes precisely Adebayo's motivations for writing and performing. She sees her writing as an extension of performing, in that most of her writing emerged out of a devising practice, in which she fuses the skill of devising within a performance space, to the physical act of putting pen to paper, creating a unique hybrid form of theatre to tell a particular story, which she felt, was silenced or been untold on British stages. In this regard, Adebayo joins the playwrights discussed in the previous chapter in the 'do-it-yourself notion and has become known for putting 'Black' History on stage; a subject matter that manifests in a majority of her work, but in her own words she says she is 'more interested in the Black present and the Black future' (Adebayo, 2009) and she uses the history of Africa to explore what those realities are.

Adebayo identifies her 'cultural identity/heritage as Black Nigerian (Yoruba) and Danish' (Adebayo, nd)- significantly distinguishing between the two nations that make up her bi-racial background. It is however the links to the African Continent through her Nigerian father, a link she describes as 'distant' because they do not communicate that greatly impacts her sense of self and therefore her work. She informs me in a personal interview that she has visited the country once, yet she has strong connections in her musicality, storytelling style, moralistic stance that resonate with a sense of 'home' an 'other' space, different from her lived experience in Britain that this section of the study will explore. I question where that comes from and link it in some degree to Sissay's quest by asking if these are particular features to Adebayo or do other diasporic artists feel the same, or differently?

Strictly speaking, Adebayo's first play, *Moj of the Antarctic* (2006), is her only monodrama in the sense expressed by Osborne. Her other productions which she writes and performs in, such as *Muhammed Ali and Me* (2008) and *I Stand Corrected* (2012) involve other actors/performers. This chapter will therefore focus primarily on *Moj of the Antarctic* but with references made however to her other plays.

Adebayo's work tackles far-reaching ideas and subject matter, particularly in the way that it questions perceptions of gender, sexuality, history and race. This sets her apart from her contemporaries, whilst it also demonstrates Hall's claim of the diversity within African diasporic communities. Adebayo's interest in how Africans in the diaspora perform themselves in their everyday lives is what she explores to find ways in which she can draw on that to use in her theatre practice. Her play, *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey*, was first performed in 2006 at the Lyric Hammersmith and again in 2007 at the Oval House Theatre, with a performance at Goldsmith's College, University of London in the same year. It is a DVD recording of the Goldsmith's production that I have been able to access for this chapter.

*Moj of the Antarctic* addresses, among other things, the contentious issue of climate change. It also has as its central narrative the real life 'story of nineteenth-century African American slave, Ellen Craft, who daringly escaped from slavery by disguising herself as a white man,'(Goddard, 2011b, p. 13) because she was light skinned enough to 'pass' as white, accompanied by her husband, William Craft, as her servant, who is the author of their memoir, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. Adebayo's consciously gendered stance falls in line with John Brockway Schmor's article with its exploration into a form of solo performance that he

terms confessional performance because he sees it as ‘an act of survival rather than recovery, fashioning a self immune to present reality rather than tracing a “true self” in a coherent past.’(Brockway Schmor, 1994, p. 2) Performers’ identities in this scenario become central to the performance as opposed to the text or subject matter. Of particular interest is his discussion on the position of women’s status in society and how they challenge those positions by removing themselves from the position of objects without agency and rather naming themselves .

The woman's self-identification insists on her status as subject, disavowing her conventional role as object and thus the traditional confession of dominant male authorship is appropriated by the woman performer as a political tool of subversive power. (Brockway Schmor, 1994)

Adebayo removes the conventional role of Ellen Craft’s husband as author and firmly reinstates Craft in the position of the subject of her own narrative, re-enacting how she challenges assumptions associated with race and gender in her daily life while telling an original tale that brings the continent of Africa and the Antarctic together: the story/plot is informed by a variety of historical and literary sources and Adebayo’s own narrative- as a queer performer. These unique features are in line with Richards’ analysis mentioned earlier in the way that Adebayo successfully subverts classic British texts, mostly written by white men and inserts herself and other female authors like Phyllis Wheatley, the first published African America woman into that canon. Adebayo’s feminist stance allows her to make the shift from keeping women as objects and turning them

into subjects, Adebayo and Ellen Craft become the 'observing eye'.(Young, 2003,p.

5) Adebayo confirms Eva-Marie Cersovsky's analysis that

Many, especially feminist, scholars have pointed to the fact that black women are marginalized as well as silenced and othered in British cultural and political discourse and regimes of representation [...] Consequently, the search for identity very often is an issue black female playwrights are concerned with in their writings about black women's lives.'(Cersovsky, 2013)

Adebayo uses the privilege that theatre allows of artistic license to compress time and space, and make a direct connection of Africa and Antarctica, Ellen Craft and Moj. In this way Adebayo's interpretation of the autobiographic performance differs from that of Sissay and Ellams, who follows. Her unique approach tallies with the performer Lisa Krone's interpretation mentioned in Heddon's introduction who believes the goal of autobiographical work 'should not be to tell stories about yourself, but instead to use the details of your own life to illuminate or explore something more universal' (Heddon, 2008,p. 5) Adebayo's monodrama incorporates multiple characters, whilst drawing on her personal narrative simultaneously displaying the potential for multiple identities and experiences in her 'odyssey.'

Adebayo explains to Goddard the particular inspiration behind Ellen Craft's narrative in the introduction to *Moj of the Antarctic*: 'I was interested in her crossing boundaries in terms of race and gender, but also the geographical boundaries.'(Goddard, 2008, p. 142)

Employing the skill of devising in what she calls ‘collaborating and [...] devising with the dead, in a spiritual sense and also a material sense,’ (2008, p. 142), Adebayo is able to create a performative way of placing the story of Ellen Craft within the context of a conversation between the past and the present that also speaks to the future. Adebayo’s monodrama borrows the words and voices from history such as the slave narratives of Frances Ellen Harper, Frederick Douglas, Phyllis Wheatley, amongst others, set against predominant European writers of the same time, such as Karl Marx with his *Communist Manifesto*, Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, and Shakespeare because they coincided with Ellen and William Craft’s escape from slavery. Adebayo then consciously names and inserts herself into the narrative, removing William Craft from her version of the story. It is important to note at this point how influential Alex Haley’s 1976 novel and TV series *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, which was based on Haley’s family history, was to Adebayo. She makes it known that ‘Following Haley’s trajectory, I work from biography to fiction and in turn the process of making this work has become part of my own autobiography, the story of my life.’(Broadhurst and Machon, 2009)

The act of including Adebayo’s personal narrative becomes a political act when the husband and wife relationship between Ellen and William Craft is ‘queered’ and replaced with a lesbian one, providing Adebayo with an opportunity to include her own personal gender story/politics within the epic tale. She explains in a conversation with Goddard how important this decision was for her:

My play is inspired by William and Ellen’s love story, but I also wanted it to be true to my experience, and to weave in the queer stories that have always been there in African history and the

African Diaspora that are not told. [...] I see what Ellen Craft did as a wonderfully queer thing, part of a queer history and legacy.(2008, p. 144)

Adebayo's use of 'queer' here does not refer solely to sexual orientation but the fundamental theory of a positional stance against the accepted norms in society, with a particular gender and racial bias illustrated in the crossing of boundaries and binaries, which are embodied in Ellen Craft's narrative and Adebayo's own political stance. David Halperin's definition is helpful in understanding this.

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer', then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.(Halperin, 1995)

Adebayo thus uses her theatre to challenge, question and de-stabilise identity categories embedded in race and gender that fix identities within a single, restrictive category through a very particular African diasporic perspective.

The indignation that Adebayo feels about the theatre establishment and its narrow vision of African diasporic work drives her creativity and positive action by showing other alternative perspectives in her work. In meeting with the artist, it is clear that she turns her anger into action, clearly visible in her theatrical creations. She was also influenced by the feminist literature that was coming out of the USA in the 80s and early 90s when she started performing. They articulated and supported the marginalisation she was experiencing in Britain but had not as yet found a voice for it.

*Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey* begins with Wright's third principle mentioned above which relates to 'the preservation of an African oral aesthetic.'(2000, p. 272) This is seen in the prologue with a female storyteller in the form of a West African *griot*, named 'The Ancient', performing a libation, and purifying the space whilst situating the 'beginning' of the journey on the African Continent. She contextualises the vast, almost disparate, themes of global warming, and its devastating effects and links it with questions about gender, sexuality and racial oppression and the true meaning of progress. The reader/audience meets Moj on a slave plantation in the Deep South; they also meet her 'defiler' father, her lover 'May', who taught 'Moj' how to read. Here is one of many examples of Adebayo's subversions of the master narrative by placing May in the position of the educator, the black woman teaching Moj to read even though May subsequently loses her life for committing the crime of 'reading'. 'Moj's' life is spared by her master/father, as 'Writing is forgivable, and almost a natural pastime to select in one as ...fair as you.'(Newland *et al.*, 2008;164) Here Adebayo addresses inequalities she experiences on a daily basis of being a person of mixed heritage and sometimes being favoured over 'Black' people, even though she says 'I know I may be treated differently, but in terms of how I feel, I feel Black'(Goddard, 2008, p. 148)

The realization that the only ones truly free are white men, gives Moj the idea to use her skin and the act of cross-dressing to 'pass' out of slavery into freedom in the North. 'And so my plan was simply to divest of the cloth of victimhood and transvest to liberty.'(Adebayo, 2008, p. 167) Adebayo uses every opportunity and shows her mastery of the English language by infusing her choice of language and words with double meaning. The binary constructs of victimhood and liberty and

the use of the word 'transvest' and the associations Adebayo makes with cloth/clothes cannot go by unnoticed. She notes in the introduction of the scripted play about not wanting 'to confine the story in twenty-first century language' particularly in relation to sexuality, and so she therefore has been strategic in avoiding what she calls 'the confinement of language around sexuality.'(Goddard, 2008, p. 144) She, however, explicitly writes female sexuality into her text.

The 'Rehearsal' which marks the sixth division of the odyssey is a recipe of 'How to make a white man.'(Adebayo, 2008, p. 168) The highly comical sequence is laced with archetypes and stereotypes of both black and white identities. The practical involvement of the audience, which started during the prologue with The Ancient, is advanced even further in this scene, as Moj implicates them in her escape by asking for their help, a practice that characterises the oral traditions of West African storytelling. Audience participation is a major feature of this oral practice and its use in this piece draws the audience into the play in a way that gives them a level of ownership. Their involvement in the production via the various tasks such as the call and response at the beginning, the practical involvement of making body parts during 'The rehearsal' scene and helping Moj escape the Southern Slave Catcher through singing not only breaks with the Western conventions of the fourth wall, but gives the audience roles in the narrative much in the same way that a storyteller is the owner of the story and at the same time the story belongs to everyone.

Moj's lack of 'suffering' notwithstanding, the real chance of being sent back into slavery causes her to escape aboard a ship to England, still in the guise of a man. She meets other 'men' who have had to 'lie' about their sexuality in order to



survive. The bar Moj finds herself in could represent a gay or lesbian bar today and the visitors are using this space to celebrate their various untold stories. In particular, Moj's encounter with William Augusto Black, 'a true story' of a woman who also disguised herself as a man to serve 'as a seaman in the Royal Navy for upwards of eleven years'(Adebayo, 2008, p. 176) frames Moj's transition into London. Black reads Moj's true identity not only of her gender but goes beyond her appearance on the surface and roots her heritage:

'BLACK: You are an African, like me, correct?

MOJ: Yes, no. I mean I was, then I wasn't and now in London it seems I am an African again.'(Adebayo, 2008, p. 175)

Adebayo economically traces the history of Africans in the diaspora through their geographical locations and how those locations inform a sense of identity. A simple use of accents, such as moving from an African to an American then a British and back to an African accent helped to illustrate this in performance. It is significant that it is in London that Moj feels a strong sense of an African identity. In a period over the last decade of the new millennium which has seen an increase in the number of Africans in Britain overtake that of those from the Caribbean, Africans in Britain were beginning to make their presence felt. This is subtly noted in this scene.

Black sets Moj on the final part of her odyssey to the Antarctic, reuniting her with her lover, May, in the form of the ship, 'Lady May', thus fulfilling the earlier prediction in her love poem.

We are magnetic

It's scientific, we are a force

We can never be separate(Adebayo, 2008, p. 176)

It is in *Lady May* that Moj sails out of Europe as a sailor, thereby subverting the many superstitions associated with a life at sea. She is warned by a caricature cockney sailor 'It is unlucky, it is, to have a woman on the ship- the ship is Neptune's fiancée, we don't want to rile her envy.'(Newland *et al.*, 2008;179)

Moj conspires with the audience once again as she reveals her secret desires of

travelling in *Lady May*.

'The sea swells like labia.

Neptune would be jealous

Should he find me in my guise,

For I have stolen his lover.'(Adebayo, 2008, p. 181)

The subtleties of their – Moj and May's - lesbian relationship is revisited in this tender moment as she takes the opportunity to inscribe her personal story amongst the historic events and narratives. The ship transports Moj past the Continent of Africa, where she is a stranger.

Past Africa we sailed

Weeks ago

But there me they did not know

Oibo Oibo 2 bob 2bob Queen Victoriaaaaah!!!

There I was a foreigner,

Foreigner more so than in my master's house

Or in a London street,

Yet in this wilderness

I feel so very close

To home.(Adebayo, 2008, p. 184)

Here Adebayo articulates the tensions of diasporic identities whose sense of belonging to specific geographical spaces and cultures are in continuous flux. The Africa Moj/Ellen are yearning for do not even recognise her as one of their own, showing how deep the fracture is. Yet it is in the white 'wilderness' of the Antarctic that Moj actually feels a sense of home.

Adebayo reverses the master narrative again and distorts the history of whites going into Africa like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to make a discovery with Adebayo personally making the reverse trip into the whiteness of the Antarctic to discover her blackness/her self. She explores whiteness in the same way that Lemn Sissay does. They both interact with whiteness in different ways but both encounter uncomfortable situations. This shows how far whiteness is entrenched as the norm and standard by which everything else is measured.

Inspired by the autobiography of Matthew Henson's (1912) - *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, Adebayo pushes the boundaries of gender even further, by making Moj/Ellen the first woman to set foot on the continent of Antarctic, however the victory is bitter-sweet as the humiliation hinted at earlier by the sailor of colonial festivities involves Moj having to put on Blackface, a most complicated act for one who has been defined by her appearance, to perform for the crew.

*Moj strips to briefs and vest' [...]*

MOJ: So with whale blubber smoke smeared on my face

I played the tune

We all wanted to hear...(Adebayo, 2008, p. 188)

Again Adebayo shifts the stereotypes and instead of a traditional minstrel performance, Moj reprises the Yoruba love song she sang to her lover, May, back on the slave plantation, and by this act, disrupting the continuation of the colonial representation of African identity. She challenges the dominant culture in the mimicry of the performance of minstrelsy by combining it with gender and race and the notion of passing in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. This is a highly subversive performance of identity on multiple levels.

The Ancient returns for the 'Epilogue', explicitly entreating the audience to consider the implications of Europe's decisions on the African continent and its diaspora. The performance is a complete fusion of traditional West African and contemporary Western forms and styles. The use of mixed media, in the form of film footage and photographs taken by Del LaGrace Volcano when Adebayo went to Antarctica as part of her development and research for the play, the physicality of Sheron Wray's, the direction and choreography, the song and poetry resulted in a highly sophisticated medium of communication. The projections of film and photographs that was used to underscore poignant moments in the piece are captured perfectly in the introduction to the play.

A photograph of Mojisola disguised as an archetypal colonial man in whiteface, wearing a top hat, tails and a cravat is contrasted with an image of her in the same costume with her face blacked-up, a reminder of how colonial traditions such as blackface minstrelsy have informed representations of black people. An image of her stooping naked in the snow symbolises the vulnerability of a black woman's body out in the cold while also

underlining how clothes become important symbols of identity.(Goddard, 2008, pp. 13–14)

The powerful images and film footage were filtered forms of the performer, Adebayo, actually experiencing the Antarctic as herself, then performing the identities by dressing up as a white colonial man and a 'passing' slave woman while narrating her unique African Odyssey.

Ric Allsopp's foreword to *Sensualities/Textualities and Technologies*, describes a new form of theatre/performance that engages more than the eye and ear and moves more towards a sensorial experience is evidenced in varying degrees in *Why I Don't Hate White People*, *Moj of the Antartic: An African Odyssey*, explicitly, and Inua Ellams' *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* (2009).

The classical (dramatic) view of theatre as a *theatron*, a seeing place', a prosthesis of eye and ear that privileged the 'objective' senses of sight and hearing through which it structured the vision of the audience, has increasingly given way to the more recent possibilities, driven by technological innovation, of performance as a site of immersive (as opposed to quasi-objective) sensual/sensory experience which is always produced and constructed through an inseparable relationship between bodies, texts and technologies.(Furse, 2011)

The need to use what is available to them to tell their particular narratives creates the conditions for these three African diasporic artists to move beyond the norm to create unique theatrical practices that reflect their complex existence.

Hall's question, which comes from his reference to Fanon's observation of colonization's distortion of a people's history, is: In the attempt to rediscover a more glorious history pre-slavery and colonization,

Is it only a matter of unearthing that which the colonial experience buried and overlaid, bringing to light the hidden continuities it suppressed? Or is a quite different practice entailed – not the rediscovery but the production of identity. Not an identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the re-telling of the past?(Hall, 1990, p. 393)

Adebayo seems to have cultivated a theatrical practice of merging the past with the present and in doing so constructing an identity that is embedded in the past, of the present but one that through the journey from the past to the present can reimagine the future, and begin to heal. The same notion can be said to represent the personal history of Sissay discussed above. He heals himself and in the process creates a new identity which is made up of his past experiences, which he contextualises to enable him move forward in the future. Ellams, who follows below, is also projecting into the future by reaching back into his personal history in his first monodrama, *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*, and the collective historical, cultural and traditional heritage of Nigeria in his second piece, *Untitled*. Wright's assertion that 'Blacks in the New World'(Wright, 2000, p. 275) are claiming a space for themselves reflects the work of the three monodramatists. She states,

Much of this process draws on a fecund creative intellect, for in many ways, from the era of slavery to the present Blacks in the diaspora have had to invent or reinvent themselves, their

identity. The same indigenous stratagems and cunning intellect slaves employed to outwit the oppressor and to affirm a sense of self bear a strong legacy for the young Black Londoners, say, to negotiate and claim a resting place in their geographical landscape(Wright, 2000, p. 275)

Adebayo plays all the numerous roles that populate this odyssey, an impressive feat which sets her apart from Sissay and Ellams in the level of characterisation she is able to bring to each of her many characters, highlighting, according to Goddard, 'how identities are performances enacted daily.'(Goddard, 2011:142) She is very specific in her stage directions, which suggest not only a documentation and creation of an archive, but also a kind of template for someone else to perform the piece. This is very different to Sissay's monodramas that distinctly name Sissay in the character role. Only Lemn Sissay can play 'Lemn Sissay.' Adebayo only implies herself, in keeping with the constant play on word and imagery inherent in her style of work/presentation, but the footage and photographs return the audience to Adebayo. Adebayo is very particular to credit the authors she has 'collaborated' with in the text, showing a respect for the authors' words that make up her drama. The text of *Moj of the Antarctic* therefore reads like an academic literature review.

In a personal interview with Adebayo (2010) I had asked her whom she writes for. Her reply was that she writes for herself, and is trying to educate herself and unpack her own stereotypes about her community. Her interview with Goddard provides us with an insight into how she uses theory and her personal experience in her practice.

In the same way that I'm queering black history, in a sense, I'm Africanising the European literary voice.(Goddard, 2008, p. 145)

Adebayo's work manipulates texts and blurs borders and incorporates new technologies into her work, showing the potential to stretch all those mediums. Adebayo confronts the classics by disturbing how one interacts with them. She is not scared to use them in her work, and removes the reverence that one can attach to 'classics' often considered untouchable. What she does is also to make it more accessible to a modern time. She says she is preserving history, in the way that she inserts lost or unknown history into better-known history. They confront each other and become preserved through her work.

### **Inua Ellams – Seeking Freedom in Control**

Inua Ellams describes himself as 'a poet, a performer, a graphic artist, a geek!!' (Ellams, 2010a) This self-description on his twitter account page represents the prolific force that is highly visible not only within the spoken word circuit and the geeky world of graphic design, and publishing; Ellams' eclectic mix of performance poetry and technology has also led to a compelling representation of his identity through theatre.

I examine Ellams' two 'plays', *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* (2009) and *Untitled* (2010) and explore how the 'borrowing' and 'interactions' across culturally specific worlds and performance genres in his work represent a complex negotiation of his identity, which, as an African born on the continent, but now living in the diaspora, is multi-layered. He says,



I love being a Nigerian in the UK, I love what it means. I love the battles that come with that, and my voice specifically makes sense here more than in any other part of the world.(Mundy, 2009)

This statement is particularly significant in a postmodern and postcolonial line of thinking. Ellams is in the different hybrid position discussed by Paul Zeleza's article on African migration, which looks at the status of Britain's new African migrants like Ellams. His article categorized them as,

neither aliens nor full citizens, but something in between which we might call 'denizens'. Still foreign, citizens they now possess considerable rights also in the countries where they are domiciled. The rise of the denizens raised fundamental questions about the interface of nation state and citizenship and fostered demands for plural identifications based on multiple residencies rather than symbolic allegiance to a monolithic national identity.(Zeleza, 2002)

Ellams' work projects a universal diasporic experience, unbounded or confined by past historical or geographical conditions, evidenced in the way that he interacts with his numerous influences and his Nigerian cultural heritage. His cultural and national origins are always mentioned or signalled in interviews, pointing to his 'otherness', but his relevance in Britain is evident in his work, which transcends the boundaries and barriers of race and nation. The tensions and contradictions inherent in citizenship and identity, cultural and current lived experiences within the context of Britain are interrogated within his work without the burden of

colonialism, which is always present, totally defining the work. His voice resonates from and with a different perspective with the shift in the politics of representation identified by Hall.

Born in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria in 1984, Inua Ellams left Nigeria at the age of 11 with his parents and twin sister for Dublin in the Republic of Ireland; he then moved to London where his professional life as a graphic and visual artist began. He explains in an interview with Miriam Zendle how so many moves in his young life affected his outlook and invariably, his work:

Moving around so much taught me about identity and the way that impacts on the voice of an individual. Destination and displacement are also strong themes throughout my work, as are discussions about the fundamental similarities and differences between people and cultures.(Zendle, 2012)

At the age of nineteen, Ellams could boast a first publication, *Thirteen Fairy Negro Tales (2005)*, a pamphlet of, as the title suggests, thirteen poems that officially announced his arrival onto the British poetry scene. Ellams showed at this early stage a natural ability to access a wide vocabulary of experiences that allowed for a very complex expression of his ideas without being confined to a homogenous prescriptive notion of a young black man. In the same vein as the two monodramatists discussed above, Ellams too has a vast and varied field from which he draws. His disparate cultural markers range from the romantic poems of John Keats to the Hip hop rhymings of Mos Def, with a host of other influences in-between. The cross-fertilisation from different sources of influences has

contributed towards a unique performance style that is still deeply rooted in his Nigerian cultural heritage.

Coming from a generation that is less willing to be pigeon-holed, it quickly becomes clear from reading or hearing Ellams' poetry that his identity is not bound by geography. Perhaps the medium of poetry lends itself more readily to a kaleidoscope of reference points that transcend boundaries, or as a form, certainly in its contemporary arena, is open to the crisscrossing of intersections.

Ellams received a positive reaction to his distinctive brand of highly performative poems on the poetry circuit in London. At a time when performance poetry was moving from the margins and taking a more central position in prominent performance spaces, Ellams found himself being asked to perform in numerous spaces, ranging from poetry slams, music festivals like Glastonbury and even on the BBC's *Politics Show*. This was indicative of the positive impact his unique voice was making on the British cultural field. It was also an experience that confirmed for Ellams his dislike for poetry slams and festivals, where he felt the audience's response to the work of the artist was undervalued in the numerous noisy environments that hosted performance poetry. The heightened performance levels that distinguish Ellams' poetry made the transition from poetry to theatre a natural one. He explains in an interview,

I write with a lot of musicality, so I write with drama and theatricality, and it becomes a strong poetic performance because it lends itself quite constantly to the stage. (Gouk, 2012)

He continues, 'I realised that writing this on a piece of paper with one voice would not tell enough of a truth. It was better served by two or three different voices –

then I moved into theatre.(2012)

The move into theatre involved not only lifting the poems off the page, which he was already doing in his reading/performance of them, he had to employ a three dimensional approach to both his writing and his performance. He merged the immediacy of poetry with the same quality that is found in Hip hop, a discovery he made in London, with traditional West African orality, resulting in what Ellams describes in his interview with Okumu as:

a musicality to my work which stems from Hip-hop, which stems from African philosophy and mentality and ancient way of life. All of which, feed back into my process of creation. (Okumu, 2010)

His graphic art, another medium through which Ellams expresses his identity, is subtly incorporated into *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* by way of a monochrome mural depicting a collage of salient moments within the tale. It functioned as a device through which the audience could read another aspect of his identity not necessarily addressed within the scope of the piece, because they are presented with a graphic image of his past visually while he narrates/enacts them in the present. The accompanying play text also carries the same graphic art designed by Ellams as its cover image.

The fundamental collaborative language of the stage, through lighting, sound and movement presided over by the director, Thierry Lawson, aided in transforming Ellams from a performance poet to an 'actor', whilst he remained true to projecting the essence of Inua Ellams, through his visually and emotionally impactful language. He recounts fondly the rehearsal process:

Any design elements used brashly can hide or divert attention from, say, a perfect metaphor, and it's a fine art, knowing where and when; one known by Thierry who strove for the bare essentials. Prop-wise, he chose a chair and torch light, nothing else. Besides from my wavings and jumpings, he trusted what is central to performance poetry: the ability to construct entire worlds with words, the musicality of language, and just one voice.(Ellams, 2010b)

The audience, therefore, through the spoken word, the poetry, his movement and his graphic art experience the different elements of his fractured and multiple identity that are coming together and merging in the same space on different levels. Ellams brings all of himself to this work, showing that he is made up of the sum of his experiences.

A taster of *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* was premiered at the Battersea Arts Centre and based on the positive feedback, and an interest shown by a theatre production company, Fuel, who were willing to support him in developing the work, resulted in a full length production at the Arcola Theatre in March, 2009. Further interest and funding from the Arts Council took the production to the Edinburgh Fringe Theatre Festival where Ellams won an Edinburgh Festival First award for *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*. On the back of that success, Ellams became the first Black solo artist to have a production put on at the Cottesloe in the National Theatre, where all ten shows were completely sold out.

*The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*, subtitled a poetic drama, traces Ellams' journey from Nigeria through Ireland to Britain, following as he says, 'a long line of trouble makers'(Ellams, 2009, p. 7) in his paternal lineage. Starting from his grandfather, through to his father and proudly taking his place in this long line of men who have 'contempt for authority'(2009, p. 8), Ellams guides us chronologically through the mischief this 'line of ash skinned Africans'(2009, p. 7) inflict on their numerous victims in the trials and tribulations that mark the transition from boyhood to manhood. Using a simple mechanism of a series of montages, moving forwards and backwards through time, Ellams unravels his history which begins in Nigeria, as a mischievous child, through to his adolescent years in school in Ireland, negotiating the identity of being the only African in the school, to the final move to the capital city of London, where he encounters love in all its numerous guises and pain, and a realisation that as his father always said. 'There is a vague order to things, things happen when they are meant to, don't worry, your time will come.'(2009, p. 10)

In an almost simplistic structure, born of the courses in short story writing and playwriting at the Soho theatre, Ellams has divided the play into five chapters, reminiscent of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Chapter 1 opens in a hospital, all implied in the speech of 'the performer' as he breaks up the narrative flow with jerky pauses, represented by slashes in the text, illustrative of the anxiety the character was under within the present moment. This location with its corresponding narrative frames the piece as the uniting tale or inciting incident that is returned to over the course of the 55-minutes production. It represents his biggest challenge, that of writing about himself, an admission he made to the poet and playwright, Roger Robinson, when asked what he was most afraid to write about. Ellams is

'encouraged' to write about himself, saying: 'He demanded I do so, and hair-pulling, dandruff littering like confetti; I extended a poem about my father called *Ash Skinned*.'(Ellams, 2010b) It was the beginning of the theme of his patrilineal spiritual inheritance of mischief, ending with the wondering on what his son will do when his time came.

The story proper begins when 'Inua Ellams' comes alive, literally, speaking in the first person as he takes us back in time to an era when his grandfather was a six-year-old 'tough, scatter-brained as all boys should be'(Ellams, 2009, p. 7) boy child. With nothing else on stage '*save for a chair on the far right corner,*' (2009, p. 7) Ellams proceeds to recreate the Nigerian surroundings of his grandfather's childhood with only his words and his body. Such is the brilliance of his vivid, highly descriptive storytelling that it is sufficient to draw the spectator in; speaking to the audience like childhood friends, a deal is immediately struck between audience and storyteller. They hang on his every word as he weaves, with heightened speech, the tale that quickly settles into his personal narrative. Through free verse and prose, Ellams tells his story in poetry; he narrates and enacts his childhood, marking the beginning of his mischief in the womb:

My first trick was hiding my twin sister for 8 months and 2 weeks  
till the shoddy equipment picked up her heartbeat: I climbed into  
the world already in trouble.(Ellams, 2009, p. 8)

It is possible to detect hints of that childhood devilry in Ellams' delivery as he jabs fun at the hospital equipment in Nigeria in a way that only someone coming from there could get away with. Ellams' mischief continues to his final example to

conclude chapter one involving Sunday school, his vivid imagination and having to escape a cane-beating by running up a tree.

Chapter Two represents school days in a Nigerian boarding school where friendships are created and tested as power relationships of fear passed down by senior boys to juniors are enforced through organised fights for the 'entertainment' of the seniors. 'Inua's fight with his best friend, 'Jebo', unleashes an elaborate retaliation prank on 'Johnny Bassey', the Head Boy who organised the fight. By his own admission, Ellams tells us 'I have never caused anyone such pain since.'(Ellams, 2009, p. 11) Here begins the rites of passage of his realisation that he too has inherited his father's contempt for authority and his grandfather's swift feet.

Chapter Three begins with the period when 'Inua' as a young teenager appears to come into his own and is able to have a level of control of boarding school life; primarily being able to strategize his tricks more effectively without being caught. He is confident in himself when he proclaims, 'Twelve years old, I've mastered the art of boarding school, I'm a Pro'(Ellams, 2009, p. 15) that is until everything he knows is whipped from under him when because of his father's promotion, the family have to move to the UK. The culture shock of leaving Nigeria and his best friend 'Jebo', arriving and dealing with the new environment and inhabitants of the UK, is managed only through the heritage of mischief from his father and grandfather. 'My grandfather's fleet feet and my father's contempt for authority catapult me across the swirling new world.' (Ellams, 2009, p. 16)

The new friendships and enemies are described in the same elaborate detail within this new environment, slowing only when he returns to the inciting incident at the hospital. Ellams drip-feeds the audience/reader, as the broken



texts of a one-sided conversation reveal, after a long time in the waiting room, a chance to see the patient- his father. An even shorter exchange reveals something to do with the brain. The chapter ends with 'They say he may never walk again.'(Ellams, 2009, p. 20)

Chapter Four covers the years spent in Dublin as a teenager, dealing with being 'the only Black boy in school.'(Ellams, 2009, p. 21) Try as he may to stay out of trouble, it seemed to be written in to his destiny.

I left the green of Ireland with the Celtic fire and a mishmashed accent: the straight speak of Africans, stiff lip cockney and the thrust of southern Dublin, arrived in London more scatter-brained than ever!(Ellams, 2009, p. 22)

The young adult moved into adult things and his 'trouble flared in feline form.'(Ellams, 2009, p. 22) It is intriguing that his string of girlfriends, all a kaleidoscope of whiteness, is described through an intricate reference to the archetypal British weather, through which he persevered to see his girls. Donna Lorde, however, 'stopped [him] frozen, dead in [his] tracks,'(Ellams, 2009, p. 22) so consumed was he with her.

I told her I would like to see her again and lip printed her left cheek, a week later sheltered from London's lazy rain, we first-kissed, our tongues like dancers, lips the dance floor heart beating the backing track to tongue tip tango, we kiss as though Shango flung small sweetened lightning bolts between us like firework-flavoured mangoes... In this fruit frenzy and lightning shift, she tells me she does not do relationships.(Ellams, 2009, p. 23)

The love-struck Ellams displays an amalgamation of the core structures of his cultural heritage with his references to Shango as he accesses him through the British weather, representative of his new location and his newfound medium of hip hop. The result is a unique impact of a poetry that paints very rich visual images that are cinematic in its aesthetic appeal. The audience/reader is invited to see the images in their mind's eye as he speaks them because he uses such rich metaphors.

The heartbreak caused by Donna's dislike of relationships, and the discovery that she has moved on to another lover sends Ellams into a blind rage of revenge. He retreats into his childhood prank phase and sneaks into Donna's bathroom and squeezes two tubes of red acrylic paint into her shower head. But the revenge prank goes terribly wrong when his phone rings, waking the sleeping Donna, with his sister on the other end telling him about his father's stroke. The red bloodlike stain on his tee shirt at the opening of the piece is finally revealed. The final chapter is a coming of age period for Ellams; a coming to terms with the mortality of his father and therefore of himself too.

Boys should never see their fathers fall. It upturns worlds and steals words. No longer thorn of authority, living legacy of troublemakers, overnight, dad becomes just a man. And I his son, mortal- unable to run.(Ellams, 2009, p. 27)

He finally is able to take stock of the saying he had often heard his father say, that 'there is a vague order to things'(Ellams, 2009:28) So, as his father makes a slow recovery, Ellams accepts his place in the order of life, faces his fear and ultimately, is able to tell his own story.

Through the vague order of 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.(Ellams, 2009, p. 29)

The unflinching confidence and bravado of Ellams' personal narrative speaks of an intimate connection and engagement with the notion of self. He has a very acute awareness of who he is which I think comes from his cultural heritage and what has been passed down to him. It is also a story of his migration from Nigeria to Britain; a story that seems to categorise the African diasporic narrative and is a common theme in the work of all three monodramatists. Even though Adebayo does not migrate in the same sense as the other two, the theme and its effects on identity features highly in her work.

Ellams is the youngest of the monodramatists. He possesses a different sense of purpose and perspective from Adebayo and Sissay whose experiences of being diasporic Africans in Britain are based on 'the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain' as defined by Hall. They have experienced relatively the same cultural landscape of Britain, and are at different levels in terms of how they relate and interact with Africa in their work. In contrast, Ellams has an intrinsically innate knowledge of his Nigerian culture, which is always present as he engages with it on a critical level in his work. He starts from a position of advantage because he has been brought up in the context of the origins of his cultural identification. He has a grounded sense of self and it is from this position that he critiques and celebrates his cultural heritage simultaneously throughout his work, unconfined by the burden of cultural nativism. I use this term in the light in which Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1956) is often

viewed, coming as it did as a response to the colonial enterprise. I argue that this stems from a fundamental sense of belonging and acceptance of the cultural and sociological framework of his country of origin, which forms the foundation of his identity. British-born Africans who do not have that innate relationship with the African continent, on the other hand, have to constantly negotiate this burden of representation within their work.

Ellams does not allow his relationship with his cultural heritage to inhibit his worldview or his writing. This is demonstrated more robustly in his second play, *Untitled*. The play is set in a Nigerian forest and is deeply rooted in Nigerian (Hausa) folklore. It may sound like a contradiction to my earlier statement of him not being confined by his culture, but what Ellams does particularly well in *Untitled* is to take a culture and its traditional practices that he is well versed in and challenge it by questioning some of its practices from a new position of knowledge.

Ellams opens the text of his 'One Man Play'(Ellams, 2010:15) with an introduction that lists seven 'ingredients'(Ellams, 2010c:18) that make up the total sum of themes and genres incorporated into the play. His YouTube interview in which he talks about integrating his graphic art into his writing is helpful in elucidating the thinking behind his writing process and illustrates the significance of the introduction to his play:

the way I began to construct images, do I construct poems, in that it begins with an object, an icon, something I would like to give. Then I would put two, maybe three icons together, two images, then freestyle and see what links I can draw up, then a poem, or

an idea or a loose narrative comes. And that feeds into my work.(Melville, 2009)

The seven ingredients listed in the introduction are all elaborations of ideas present in *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*. The notion of being a twin is explored from the angle of separation, extending a childhood incident when he and his twin sister were separated at the age of three when going to nursery. He blends that idea with traditional and historical attitudes to twins in Nigeria and other West African cultures where twins were seen as a bad omen and sometimes killed, to the practice of worshipping twins in other cultures. Ellams feeds his belief that 'Nigeria's identity [is] twinned; split between its indigenous population and its far reaching diasporic population'(Ellams, 2010c, p. 18) with his personal experience, especially his current location in Britain and how that relates to the African continent.

He reveals in an interview that his 'grandmother's people were Hausa nomads – those without homes – so wandering and setting up camp is in [his] blood'. (Shields, 2013) Ellams links his travels from Nigeria to his cultural heritage, identifying himself as 'a culture and a physical elemental nomad'(Melville, 2009) in reference to the different countries he has lived in and how this informs his outlook on the world. His fascination with names and how it is valued in West African cultures, in terms of carrying/embodying a person's destiny, is juxtaposed with what takes place in the hip hop community, where Ellams states 'the culture of taking powerful pseudonyms is common. The public is forced to address rappers on their own grounds, complimenting and elevating them at once.'(Ellams, 2010c, p. 19) The two contesting notions provide Ellams with a legitimate conflict on which to build his narrative, the hip-hop genre

...serving as one of the mediums through which he narrates the story. The continued influence of hip-hop on Ellams' work cannot be overstated, as he describes himself as the 'love child of Keats and Mos Def', (Melville, 2009) feeling a particular affinity with Mos Def 'for how happy he is, and how free he is, and his innate ability to sound in rhythm whilst in staccato, (Ellams/Melville, 2009); this is a skill Ellams has acquired and incorporated into his writing. The inspiration for the idea on names came from Saul Williams' rap/poem, which maintains that, you

Let your children name themselves and claim themselves as the  
new day for today we are determined to be the channelers of  
these changing frequencies into songs, paintings, writings, dance,  
drama, photography, carpentry, crafts, love, and love. (Saul  
Williams (Ft. DJ Krust) – Coded Language', 2010)

The notion of naming is important to African diasporic people, particularly this second generation who are taking control of their identities and representing it from their own perspective. There is power in naming something. From an African perspective names are significant as they can signify where you originate from and who you are named after, pointing to a heritage. This idea of naming one's self was a particular concern for Ellams in relation to the Nigerian state. He is of the strong opinion that the British naming of Nigeria during its colonial administration was within a British context and that the colonial legacy therefore underpins everything Nigeria does to date. Ellams contends that 'if a word isn't determined by its own inhabitants and its own language, then there is a problem

there, I think, which hasn't been addressed by linguists and poets.'(Ellams, 2010b)

It is from this line of thinking that the final ingredient in Ellams' introduction asks,

If Nigeria's [reins] were given to its youth, entirely without an imposed destination, direction or expectation. If on their birthday, they were then asked to decide on their own path, to sculpt their own future. If a child was asked to 'name' itself, what would happen.(Ellams, 2010c, p. 19)

What Ellams tries to do with the play is to dramatize the answers to the questions posed by making a comment on the question of nature versus nurture regarding Nigeria. At a fundamental level, the play can also be read as locating itself within/being informed by the key elements of Yoruba culture where an individual has the ability to request a destiny different from the one they were born with. The play is about twin brothers (who in essence represent the nation of Nigeria and the diaspora) who are separated at 7 months because of a marred naming ceremony in which one twin 'refused' to be named by screaming through the ceremony. The gravity of the incident and the idea is captured by the narrator of the tale when he says, 'It had never passed in the village that a child rejected its destiny, its name.'(Ellams, 2010:23) This inciting incident is the experiment for Ellams. The named twin was sent to London with his mother, representing nurture while the unnamed one (X), representing nature, is left to his own devices, growing up in Nigeria. The findings of Ellams' experiment are presented from the perspective of each twin on their 25<sup>th</sup> birthday on 1<sup>st</sup> October, a significant date as it coincides with Nigeria's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary since gaining independence in 1960.

The audience/reader first encounter *X*. He has been chased away from his village. The end of the first act reveals *X* was banished from his village because the spirits have cursed him,

You have been given one week, seven days in which to be named,  
otherwise you and your entire bloodline shall be wiped off the  
face of the earth.(Ellams, 2010c:36)

The first act consists of three parts in which *X* recounts his life story to the audience/reader. He describes vividly the moments of his 'un-naming' to the separation of the 7-month-old twins and their parents. The years growing up in a village left to his own devices because his father 'was deemed a failure'(Ellams, 2010c:24) are full of mischief, with no one to guide him. The elders, who are entrenched in a community where the legacy of a name is highly valued, are bewildered by what to do with him because they are unable to tell his destiny which should be tied to his name. Osalu 'the most famous medicine man, famed throughout the land, instructs: 'let him learn the trade of the drum.'(Ellams, 2010c:26) *X* joins what he describes as 'a rabble of boys who'd lift logs, beat songs, hunt for the finest skins'(Ellams, 2010c:27) and he excelled at the trade. His nameless state brought a new dynamic to the traditional form of the Spirit of the drums owning the drummer.

When the spirits came my way they were baffled I hadn't a name,  
and in their confusion, I stole their rhythm for my own personal  
gain-when they played a deep mountain song, I'd sprinkle out a  
stream, when the Sprits beat out earth and fire, I'd drum out the  
substance of dreams. Ha! This created a dynamic that only live



with us. News spread through villages that new music had come.(Ellams, 2010c:28)

The fusion is not welcomed by all. The words of caution of straying from tradition from 'Kika, one of the boys, are dismissed by X as 'BORING.'(Ellams, 2010c:28) The relationship between the two remains strained over the years as X continues to deliberately provoke the 'too pristine'(Ellams, 2010c:27) Kika, while the group gains popularity across the plains. The tension climaxes the day Kika called X a 'brotherless bastard'(Ellams, 2010c:30) resulting in a physical fight between the two, which unleashed an unexpected force from X. He reports:

I couldn't explain my anger, power, rage. I wasn't pleased with what I'd done, but it was known from that day on, the strength of the nameless one!(Ellams, 2010c:30)

X was brought before the elders once more as he was no longer welcomed in the circle of drums. His nameless state, yet again proving to be an obstacle, making him unpredictable and clouding his destiny. Again, it is Osalu who sees a future in/for him, after observing the beginnings of a gift in him. 'Osalu will train you. You will be the next medicine man.'(Ellams, 2010c:32) Years pass and X excels here too, mastering and honing his knowledge of plants and spirits from Osalu, and combining that with his skill 'to play the spirit of the drum!'(Ellams, 2010c:33) The two work together and soon the student surpasses his master. Arrogance and pride drive X's enterprise as his fame spreads. Osalu is angered by the stories he hears of his student, and puts X in his place by recounting the tragedy of his infancy to an outsider. He even repeats 'brotherless bastard' and

the story and name spread. It is upon hearing this name that X returns to his village, enraged. He declares, 'Osalu and the village would pay.'(Ellams, 2010c:35)

X retains a hold on the village through the power of his drum:

I returned and waited for the moon, climbed the hollow of the Silk-Cotton tree and each night played the drum, played the rhythm that wrenched souls apart and turned the women primal.(Ellams, 2010c:35)

This continued for one year until he is brought before Osalu, who pronounces the curse of the spirits. This returns to the opening of the narrative, providing a clear picture of how the unnamed twin functioned in an environment that was built and thrived on the naming of things and the claiming of the destiny of that name. The unnamed twin, for twenty-five years, created his own destiny disconnected from the history and legacy that binds the rest of the community. The curse and banishment at the end of Act One indicate he could no longer function within that environment without a name or his bloodline will be wiped out. The spirits, it seems, who live and operate side by side with the human world are intrinsically linked to the community.

Act Two takes place in London as X transforms into his twin brother identified in the script as Y. Y, who is ironically never named, is 'specialized in the naming of things,' (Ellams, 2010c:27) he works for a branding company. He is presented as a complete opposite to X; he is precise as X is haphazard. The leafy foliage that represented the forest in Nigeria is cleared to a stark minimalist concrete space. The language changes from the free flowing lyrical rhythm to a more abrupt, staccato rhythm.

Y takes over from where X is cut off, beginning from his birthday in a London office. Unknown to him, the effects of the curse were manifesting in him. He too was experiencing the presence of the spirits, even in London, showing the resilience of the link between the spirits and their human population, whether on the continent or in the diaspora. The next seven days are narrated in journal form, describing how nature invades his senses, slowly consuming him. Part Two begins with Y reaching his mother's house with just enough time for her to tell him to fulfil his destiny. As the named twin, his destiny is clearly mapped out. 'Do as Osalu says.... It is your destiny...you have to name him, the story is REAL'(Ellams, 2010c:43) With the sudden passing of his mother, marking the beginnings of the fulfilment of the curse, an envelope is thrust into his hands, containing a plane ticket to Nigeria, for him to leave the next day. He arrives in Nigeria and is whisked away to his village, all the while feeling strangely drawn to the forest:

The forest calls out to me; chest burns, head churns, I went for  
the trees, for the leaf-rooted undergrowth, the dark bark,  
decaying carpet of fungus, weeds, what poisons may flower,  
what fruits may feed!(Ellams, 2010c:46)

Unable to resist, Y goes in search of his twin, finding him close to death buried under leaves of the silk cotton tree.

The twins are once more reunited as a revived X concludes the tale. 'His hands found mine and what roots remained of the silk cotton tree tied our wrists together and his spirit became mine as I became his.'(Ellams, 2010c:48) The reunion of the twins comments on a hybridity between nature and nurture,

between Nigeria's indigenes and its diaspora, between traditional practices and modern ones. The conclusion to Lyn Gardner's review of the play sums it up,

There is a great deal to enjoy in a piece that feels both modern and ancient, touched by the otherworldly yet grounded in reality, as it explores the nature of twinness and the importance of knowing who you are if you are going to forge your own destiny.(Gardner, 2010)

The diasporic condition with its multiple layers and its ability to access multiple experiences is captured in the hybrid identity of the twins as they become one. This multiplicity is now recognisable to Gardner who is experiencing the many practices and forms that African diasporic artists engage with on the British stage.

The results of Ellams' exploration into what would happen if the youth, like himself, are given the reins of their nation and the opportunity to sculpt their own destinies suggest the need for a level of freedom personified in the character X. The play's comment on the level of freedom, however, shows how vital it is to also be grounded within a set of morals and values as a foundation from which the freedom could fly. X had neither such legacy of values, nor morals to guide him even though he lived amongst people in a society practicing those values. He only used aspects of the culture that suited his need. An example is what he takes from a traditional tale of greed. 'The moral is ok, you know, but the tortoise showed me that I could take names as I wished.'(Ellams, 2010c:24) Like the rappers Ellams draws inspiration from, X thrived on titles that elevated his status; a status that was easily truncated for its lack of destiny. It took his twin brother, who was severed from his indigenous community to 'name' X, thereby providing him with a future. The fact that Y was suddenly confronted with his cultural legacy and being

in a position to 'fulfil his destiny' shows the potency of that culture that manages to maintain links especially with its diasporic population.

Ellams has a more worldly outlook to where he draws his inspiration illustrated in his list of 'ingredients', which makes him unique. He is a typical contemporary African diasporic individual who is open to different influences and positively so. He makes no apologies about them, as he engages with them, crossing boundaries and borders to articulate his own complex existence and identity. This is the perfect representation of a character that can work within the context of Britain today.

As part of this research on the African diasporic identity, this study is trying to identify artists who have found a way to connect to their African roots through their work that also comment on contemporary issues in Britain today. The work of Sissay, Adebayo and Ellams show an engagement in varying degrees with/to the African continent. Paralleling the legacy of African history with current issues is very clear in Adebayo and Ellams' productions.

It is clear to see what all three of the monodramatists are trying to do in terms of the project of representation of their identities. They all have something unique to say or they have an image to correct or challenge, but they are doing it differently, and on their own terms. Ellams explains how his writing has evolved since emerging onto the theatrical landscape:

When I first began writing, I'd write poems so dense that only I understood what they meant. And a lot of the time I didn't care – it was just all about my self-expression. But since then I've grown wiser. It's about knowing and mastering oneself, so when you do have to show off, the blows are precise, and you're there

and in control of it.(Ellams/Mundy, 2009)

The central idea of control, not only of the material, which have been as diverse as the cultural trajectories of the dramatists, but control over the way it is performed has been unique and specific to each individual artist. The binary constructs of right and wrong, black and white etc., addressed by all three artists become 'dissolved' as the complexities of their African diasporic identities move beyond the limited confines of the constructs. Lauri Ramey's analysis of black British poetry acknowledges this. She writes,

The oral/performative and the literary are viewed as mutually reinforcing of, rather than in opposition to each other. A non-prescriptive way of poetic forms gains equal footing for the black British poet, whose art becomes a site for reclaiming the powers of identity and belonging that reinforce self and culture, past and present.(Ramey, 2004, p. 120)

This is significant as the influence of performance poetry on all three monodramatists underpins their work. Where the performances took place, from London venues to regional and international tours, indicate versatility and also a demand for their particular brand of theatre. This translates into a wider distribution of their work. This study is under no illusion that gatekeepers do exist who police the type of work that gets produced within the British cultural field, but having said that, the self-promoting practice of the monodramatists puts them in a more advantageous position. They create their own space, and can carry the production anywhere because they own it and oftentimes embody it.

This has found all three artists touring their various productions nationally and internationally. The element of control provides them with the opportunity to source out the venues and communities in which they want to showcase their work. They are less expensive to book and can do workshops which all three dramatists are constantly involved in. It is a way of promoting the self.

The presence of the monodramatists is important in the project of reclaiming African diasporic identities by their taking control over their material and creating the space for its placement within the British stage and cultural landscape.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Carving Out a Space in the 'Centre': Tiata Fahodzi**

Government funded theatre companies that cater for African Diasporic communities in London consist of Talawa Theatre Company and Nitro Black Music Theatre; they are the only two 'black run' companies still in existence since the decline of such companies as Black Mime Theatre, Umoja Theatre, Carib Theatre to name a few in the nineties. As discussed in Chapter One, their work is largely dominated by a Caribbean experience in Britain. Eclipse Theatre, the Arts Council of England's initiative was set up in 2003 as a direct result, of the groundbreaking Eclipse Conference in 2001, which took a critical look at how the theatre industry serves minority communities in Britain. The mandate of the initiative is encapsulated in their press release announcing the appointment of its new artistic Director Dawn Walton in 2008. It states

Through producing and touring high quality work on the middle scale, Eclipse Theatre aims to increase the diversity of work on offer to existing audiences whilst encouraging new audiences. By facilitating training and employment opportunities for Black and Asian British Theatre practitioners, Eclipse Theatre aims to be an active force for influencing and instigating change that will lead to a more equitable theatrical landscape. (Rabbitt, 2008)

They were set up to produce and tour productions, specifically within the regions, through an agreement of shared management with a consortium of three regional theatres who were then made up of West Yorkshire Playhouse- who hosted the



company, The New Wolsey, Ipswich and Birmingham Repertory Theatre. In 2009, Eclipse Theatre Ltd was created and is now housed permanently at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre.

In 1997, Femi Elufowoju Jr set up Tiata Fahodzi, (*tiata fahodzi* translates as theatre of the emancipated), as a response to a lack he felt of the representation particularly of West African experiences on the British stage. The name Tiata Fahodzi is a combination of a Nigerian Yoruba (Tiata) and Ghanaian Fante (Fahodzi) term, which incorporated the cultural heritages of Elufowoju Jr, the artistic director, and myself, who was a core member of the company at its inception, taking on the role of an associate director. The idea behind the company name was to announce the presence of unheard voices within the British cultural scene and to evoke the traditional African theatre practices that would inform the work of the company. The company essentially provided a platform for the stories of British West Africans to be told on the British stage, by adding their voices to the British cultural space. The introduction of the 'diasporic sensibility' addressed earlier is illustrated in the means by which the company has developed a syncretic form of theatre, which rejects the linear narrative in favour of a more fractured narrative. This form of narrative/theatre is one that draws on African indigenous practices, particularly the oral culture, which is used in a Western context to achieve an expression and meaning, which does not always assimilate into mainstream Western theatre.

The role played by Tiata Fahodzi, a theatre company that caters specifically for an African diasporic community and at the same time functions within the British theatrical establishment, is vital in the development of the work coming from within that community and its positioning within the British

theatrical landscape as a whole. Tiata Fahodzi has created a track record for itself on the stages of Britain since 1997, and it is possible to assess through an analysis of its various productions the kind of impact its presence has made on the British theatre scene in order to examine its constructions and expressions of African diasporic identities in Britain. The productions form the main focus of the chapter and contribute to the central theme of the performance of African diasporic identity on the British stage.

Through a critical examination of the historical trajectory of the company from its inception to the present, this chapter interrogates how this thesis is using the stage to construct a postcolonial re-reading and a re-arrangement of presenting theatre and African diasporic identity on the British stage. Using Balme's notion of 'decolonizing the stage' "which involves the combination and amalgamation of indigenous performance forms within the framework of the Western notion of theatre"(Balme, 1999, p. 8), the culturally specific work of Tiata Fahodzi caters for its diverse diasporic community and also recognizes the larger national community of Britain in its work. The company's intrepid use of African theatrical practices merging with Western forms and styles is claiming or creating a space within the theatre landscape for the representation of diasporic African identity in Britain. The company is taking ownership and control over representing the African diasporic self within the British context. The postcolonial dimension I intend to apply to the performance analysis of the work of the company through Christopher Balme's theory in *Decolonizing the Stage* (1999), is to anchor their practice within a historical context that has greatly impacted their work and show how the synchronicity has been complicated and moved forward by their location in Britain.

The presence of Tiata Fahodzi creates a more balanced view of African diasporic communities in Britain because the company brings an African perspective, previously absent within the 'Black British theatre' scene which arguably represented more of the Caribbean experience in Britain. The period within which the company came into existence and the distinct move away from a previous Black British aesthetic, concerns and experience that was fragmenting in the 90s, represents an important phase in Britain as a whole and in theatre in particular- discussed in Chapter Two.

However, New Labour came into government in 1997; and it was a time of hope for Britain, which was going through a major political, social and cultural fragmentation. Tony Blair's bid to unite the country is made clear in his manifesto speech:

And I want above all, to govern in a way that brings our country together, that unites our nation in facing the tough and dangerous challenges of the new economy and the changed society in which we must live. I want a Britain which we all feel part of, in whose future we all have a stake, in which what I want for my children I want for yours. (Blair, 1997)

The 'changed society' Blair speaks of is made up of 'British' people many of whom are inextricably linked to other nations and heritages. His way of making everyone 'feel part of' Britain, came in the form of reforms and new initiatives, particularly within the Arts Council of Britain that were favourable to previously side-lined minority communities. Alex Seirz explains:

New Labour's financial generosity meant that all cultural institutions, including theatres, had to deliver on social policies:

their mission was to create wider audience access, greater ethnic diversity and more innovative work. (Sierz, 2011, p. 2)

Diversity then became a key criterion that theatres had to acquire and include in their programming in order for them to receive the extra funding made available in the new government's inclusion programme.

The timely establishment of Tiata Fahodzi was in direct response to the lack of a representation of African narratives on the British stage.. *Tickets and Ties*,(1997) the company's maiden production, essentially was concerned with the historical representation of an African migratory presence in Britain. The embryonic period of the company began with a very specific agenda of making visible and audible this migratory presence, particularly of West Africans living in Britain. This was a bold political statement by a company that felt silenced because of the domination of the Caribbean experience in Britain, particularly where black British theatre was concerned. Tiata Fahodzi's arrival onto the British theatre landscape within the context of change and diversity saw them fit snugly into the gap of giving a voice to West Africans on the British stage.

## **Origins and History**

Even though Tiata Fahodzi started out as a devising company, it has arrived where it has today because of its founding artistic director, Femi Elufowoju . The voice being articulated by the company really belongs mainly to Elufowoju, and that is significant with regards to the trajectory of the company, its position within the theatrical landscape and the image it presents of itself. The period covered by this study examines the company under the leadership of

Elufowoju from 1997 to 2010 when he left the company.<sup>38</sup>

The setting up of Tiata Fahodzi was initially to address a lack that existed within a Caribbean dominated theatrical field in which the voice of African migration was missing. Culturally and linguistically, there was nothing 'authentically' West African in Britain on British stages. From the onset, the company noticed that there was a need and demand for such work. Elufowoju observed that 'having the opportunity of being around peers and colleagues and aspiring actors who were at the time, from a particular part of West Africa, in the mid Nineties when the company was formed' (2009 Personal Interview) would justify and realise the mission of the company, which was at its inception to promote their (West African) story by including it into the British cultural field. .

Tiata Fahodzi has produced eleven main house and touring productions, three youth projects, four play reading festivals and one African Concert in its 13-years under Elufowoju's leadership. Of the eleven productions, nine were new plays written for the company, the other two being *The Gods Are Not To Blame* (2005) by Ola Rotimi and their most recent and final production for its founder Elufowoju, Joe Penhall's *Blue Orange* (2010).

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<sup>38</sup> Elufowoju was succeeded by Lucian Msamati, who has recently announced his departure from the company following four years at its helm; Msamati brought a distinct Southern and Eastern African theatrical tradition to the company, reflecting his cultural heritage and marking a new phase in its development. The company is faced with yet another phase as it embarks on moving in a new direction following the announcement of the appointment of its new Artistic Director in the person of Natalie Ibu, who began work in December 2014. Tiata Fahodzi continues to make strong inroads socially, politically, culturally and linguistically into the social tapestry and strategy of British society, building on what has been developed since the company's inception.

Tiata Fahodzi is a limited company, with three administrative staff, supporting the artistic director, the latter answers to a board of seven trustees/directors. The board of trustees is made up of a diverse mix of British, British West Africans, and West Africans living in London. This constitutes the foundation upon which artistic and administrative decisions are taken. The diversity of Britain is reflected within the membership of the company. Actors are hired on a project-to-project basis but over the years a number of performers have returned to the company and are very supportive in its development. Commissioning and developing new plays has become a trademark of the company; it commissions two plays each year, a practice started in 2006 with Oladipo Agboluaje's *The Estate* – (see Chapter Two).

Tiata Fahodzi was set up after the successful experiment of its maiden production, *Tickets and Ties*, at Theatre Royal, Stratford East, proved to Elufowoju that 'there was room... there was demand... there was a presence, ... there was relevance, in putting together a collage of stories that reflected the lives of Africans' (Elufowoju, 2008 personal interview) in Britain. The production, which I took part in as a ensemble member, was partly devised by the company and scripted by Elufowoju and Sesan Ogunledun, telling the story of a typical West African family in London. Like many diasporic companies, this company told the story of their migration. The West African family setting was the foundation, representing their current diasporic location in Britain out of which came the sketches of the various elements that showed the spectrum of the lives of West Africans living in Britain.

The re-enactment of the Yoruba creation myth of Olódùmarè, the supreme deity, at the opening of the production made a firm and clear statement about the company's perception of itself. The creation myth situates the beginning of the world in Ife, Nigeria, Elufowoju's home town, considered the 'centre of the world' by the Yoruba, out of which came all the other nations of the world. For a company which felt that the voice of Africans in Britain had been muted, it took a bold step in redressing this absence by performing this myth, which places the presence of Africans (Yoruba) at the beginning of everything.

This political centralising of Africa and Nigeria, and more specifically Ife, at the beginning of everything subverts the Eurocentric worldview which positions that which comes from the rest of the world as 'other' or marginal in relation to it. This presentation resists and challenges the assumptions and perceptions of Africa within the context of Britain, as discussed in Chapter One, that were often exoticised on the British stage. The unfamiliar ritual of the creation myth, which draws on traditional Nigerian performance practices, that led into the more recognisable British location of Hadrian's Wall, where an African skull is discovered, placing an African amongst the ranks of the Roman army in Britain can be read as an act of rewriting and interrogating the often derogatory representation of the presence of Africans in British history.

The company's deliberate insertion of the habitually 'forgotten' history of an African presence in Europe pre-slavery is an act of dismantling the structures and patterns of representation of Africans in Britain. It momentarily offers an alternative perception that corrects long held derogatory assumptions of Africans. The encounter with Europe and the subsequent slave trade that follows in the historical trajectory of this production is only marked, deliberately, and not given

as much prominence as the representation of the more significant fight for independence taking place on the continent in the late 1950s to early 1960s. This represents an exceptional moment in the history of Africans, particularly West Africans who took control of their autonomy from their European colonizers, a process described by Quayson as an 'African agency attempting to carve out a space in history on its own terms. (2013, p. 644)

The driving force behind the production at this point was to situate the West African migratory presence in Britain within this omitted historical narrative. The actors taking on the roles of the legendary leaders such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Nigeria's Nnamdi Azikiwe, Guinea's Sekou Toure, and even the historical anachronism of the presence of Nana Yaa Asantewaa of the then Gold Coast and Nigeria's Mrs. Fumilayo Ransome Kuti, make a very strong gesture of moving down stage center, as one unit, looking out into the audience, demanding their independence! A medley of the national anthems of the various nations breaks the tension, signalling a victory in the struggle for independence.

This display of essentialist notions of origin and self-determination represent one side of Harry Garuba's argument of the binary discourse, taking place in 'Black diasporic scholarship' where one school of thought described as 'nativists' or Afrocentric,

locates Africa as origin by way of anthropological verification and corroboration and the other that tends to erase it in the name of an anti-essentialist articulation of hybridity, fluidity and creolisation. (Garuba, 2010, p. 240)

The relevance of this argument in relation to this production and the company as



a whole is the fact that it is positioned in both camps. Certainly for the first section of this production, there was a sense of celebrating and defining oneself within one's community but also demanding recognition by the larger community, which in this case is Britain.

Within this historical context is the naturalistic narrative of a young West African family that immigrates into London. They bring along with them a colonial and postcolonial influenced 'baggage' of their West African heritage and culture, located in Britain, which is evidenced literally in the set of this production by the numerous trunks, tea chests and suitcases that functioned as furniture within it. The notion of home being somewhere else was ever present. The first generation of West African immigrants to Britain, like their Caribbean counterparts, were attracted by the good prospects 'offered' by the 'mother country'. The intention was never to stay permanently, but as children were born and times changed the move became permanent. The trunks and suitcases that had always represented the eventual return home, as witnessed in Solanke's *Pandora's Box*, discussed earlier, became a place to,

carry valued belongings and memories from 'back home'... it became an archive of memories and dreams, souvenirs, photographs, clothing, documents and cherished things 'put down' for a better day. (McMillan, 2009, p. 5)

McMillan's book, *The Front Room*, explores how the space and objects within the front room of migrant families have evolved in terms of signifying a migrant identity. The cases were an articulation of the history of a generation of Africans' and the African Caribbeans' dual experience of being in Britain yet longing for a

home elsewhere. 'The front room was a contradictory space' (2009:139) as defined by McMillan but in the context of this study and this production, it housed the contradictions of a West African family in Britain.

The second half of this production is set around the domestic life of a family home. The father has just arrived in London after a long period in Nigeria. This storyline emphasizes the common practice in West African communities in Britain of father figures returning 'home' to help rebuild the nations after independence and leaving the women to take care of the home in its new location. The Britain the father comes back to experience after fifteen years is unrecognizable to him, as are the children he left behind. His first shock is the West African madman he encounters outside the airport, his contemporary, who in a moment of ironic sanity declares: "London is the leveller". The hardship of London life has taken its toll on the man, causing him to lose his mind. In his eyes, the father's teenage children do not 'respect' and have lost touch with their West African culture. He disapproves of their dress and language. The contamination of his family by Britain, which has seeped into his West African home, is too great an infiltration that causes him to lose control and die.

The other sketches that make up this production were a rather light-hearted look at West Africans in Britain on a day-to-day basis; the mini-cab office, the market, immigration officers and young West African professionals in a bar, present a variety of issues and challenges that are encountered. A convenient device used to link these scenes was the incorporation of real letters written by the eight actors to family or friends back home whilst in Britain. The letters were read out by the actors as ourselves, accompanied by our pictures on a large screen projected onto the two sidewalls of the set. This device was instrumental in

achieving the main goal of this production, which was to explore on a traditional British stage the voice of the West African in Britain. The merging of the real life stories of the West African performers with the fictional narrative created a unique platform for the fiction and fact to take place simultaneously. Its resonance with the autobiographical work of the monodramatists in the previous chapter is important here, particularly when seen through Heddon's observation of its political implications.

I would suggest that the majority of performers who play themselves display an astute self-consciousness; their representations of themselves are 'knowing'. They are also strategic, and often politically so, using them'selves' as vehicles through which to project particular social perspectives, inflected by positions of race, class, gender and/or sexuality. The 'self' is deliberately and perhaps paradoxically used in order to precisely go beyond the self, or the individual. But the 'self' in performance is no easy subject. (Heddon, 2002)

The letters contained truthful, private and personal accounts of our experiences in Britain, which were now projected onto the British stage, providing a glimpse into the lives of West Africans from a very personal perspective. The level of ownership is also heightened as the performers feel a greater connection with the work because it involves their personal lives.

The success of this production was based largely on the positive response received from its West African community in London, who came out in their numbers, to support the work. This community was a new demographic in terms

of audience for Theatre Royal Stratford East that has a long history of successfully producing work for minority communities. The presence of a community liaison officer who interacted with this community was a vital strategy in getting West Africans into the theatre. In its bid to cater more efficiently for the large minority communities in its Borough of Newham, Theatre Royal Stratford East at that time had initiated a Black and Asian director's course to redress the imbalance of the low number of directors coming from those communities. Their mission was actively recruiting theatre personnel and practitioners from culturally diverse backgrounds in an attempt to reflect the racial mix of the area. Elufowoju himself benefited under this initiative when Philip Headley, the artistic director at the time, appointed him as associate director at the theatre and committed himself to mentoring Elufowoju once he identified him as a promising practitioner.

The of success of their maiden production, largely gleaned from the response of audience to the work and a tour to Sweden resulted in Tiata Fahodzi Theatre Company officially coming into existence. As the company moved from Theatre Royal Stratford East to its new home, the Oval House, where it produced three shows, namely *Booked* (1999), *Bonded* (2000) and *Makinde* (2001) I also moved to Ghana and had to watch the development of the company from a distance. The Oval House Theatre at that time was not a producing house, like Theatre Royal Stratford East, but was rather in the role of supporting and developing new writing coming from Black and Asian communities. They supported Tiata Fahodzi through partnerships with other theatres in London, such as The Tabernacle in West London and funding from the then London Arts Board and the Arts Council of England that enabled the company to embark on a national tour of Britain in their three-year residency.

This period represents the embryonic stage for Tiata Fahodzi. The mandate they set for themselves was to 'magnify the voice of the West African on the British stage'. (Programme Notes 1997) *Booked* was very much in the same style as *Tickets and Ties*, devised by the assembled company of seven West African performers. Elufowoju took advantage of the football mania that surrounded the 1998 World Cup in which South Africa and Jamaica as first time qualifiers to the tournament joined Nigeria and Cameroon. The world media's attention was focused on the sport, and particularly how strong the African and African diasporic nations were performing. Elufowoju used the tournament as a starting point for his production *Booked* that explored

the hilarious and witty observations surrounding the day to day encounters of a young group of West African newcomers to the British Isles.(Elufowoju, 2009 Personal Interview)

There was a sense of arousing enthusiasm amongst West African communities in London by presenting them with a theatre they could identify with and at the same time alerting the theatrical community to their presence.

The second production, *Bonded*, was the first commissioned play for the company, and it was written by Sesan Ogunledun; it was an award-winning script and one that Elufowoju rates highly. This play charts the story of the relationship between two childhood friends, from opposite sides of the class barrier, battling against tradition, the impact of the Biafran war and mothers to retain their friendship. Having the longest run for the company thus far, and the first to embark on a national tour to 14 venues across Britain, this production marked the beginning of a change that was taking place in the thinking of how the company

presented itself. The company had taken the first step in trying to establish a foothold on the British theatre landscape by looking outside London to the regions.

Another strategy was in how the company was branding itself. In trying to broaden the appeal of the company's work to attract a British as well as a West African audience, the company found it necessary to alter the spelling of their name from 'Tiata' Fahodzi to 'Teata' Fahodzi, to make the pronunciation easier for those unfamiliar with the Nigerian spelling. The by-line also evolved from its West African origins to reflect the widening audience makeup attending the company's performances. Looking back now, with hindsight, Elufowoju explains the difficulty the company faced during this transition: 'It was something we waged war with, and we tried to compromise the ambition of the company by inserting the word 'British' West African' (Elufowoju, 2009 personal interview.) into its by-line. Unconsciously, its innocent attempt to be recognised and included within the British theatre landscape, resulted in the company relinquishing its control of its identity and in a typical 'colonial mentality', began to define itself through the master gaze. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o cautions, 'Eurocentrism is most dangerous to the self-confidence of Third World peoples, when it becomes internalised in their intellectual conception of the universe' (1993, p. 17). Tiata Fahodzi was viewing its place within British theatre as outsiders looking in, seeking acceptance from the centre, its vulnerability and low self-confidence evidenced in the fundamental areas of its name and by-line. At this point, what was important for the company was having a platform and getting as many people as possible to see the work, by any means necessary. The same formula was followed for *Makinde* (2000), the third and final production at the Oval House,

which was a modern adaptation of *Macbeth*, set in Nigeria, written by, directed by and starring the director, Femi Elufowoju Jr. in the leading role of Makinde.

Elufowoju, being familiar with the indigenous aesthetics of his native Yoruba theatre, relied on that model for the three productions at the Oval House. Drawing from the Yoruba traditional components of music art, dance art and mimetic art, usually classified as 'total theatre', Elufowoju experimented by combining this form of theatre with the kind of naturalist theatre he encountered in his training in Britain. The term 'total theatre' has had many definitions associated with it, but the one offered by Bode Sowande best exemplifies the form as used by Elufowoju Jr. Sowande classifies it as:

a more contemporary definition... a well integrated craft of dialogue, song, dance, narration and movement typical of Yoruba dramatic art. The same may be identified in other cultures but in the Nigerian stage, it constitutes an instance of syncretised aesthetics.(Sowande, Bode, 1996, p. 22)

The interesting thing about Sowande's article is the fact that he classifies this theatrical practice, which has largely been dominated by indigenous elements, as being syncretic, which of course it is. Total theatre was a contemporary theatre style that was inspired out of many Nigerian indigenous performance directions, which characterized the theatre tradition that emerged out of the colonial experience leading into the years of struggle for independence. The fusion of traditional performance elements such as storytelling, festivals, masquerade and rituals and the pre-requisite music, dance and mime/drama that feature in all of them was finding a new way of expression away from its original context. There

occurred a borrowing and recombining of different elements, which was not previously the case. The conflict and contact with the West resulted in a fusion of forms and styles that is still in evidence today, and not only through the theatre of the previously colonized. This contemporary form showed evidence of the contamination by the colonialist on/of the colonized, but debates however argue the two-way traffic of colonial contamination.<sup>39</sup> Brydon's argument is that both parties involved in the colonial process had a shared experience from opposite spectrums and so they mutually contaminated each other.

The duality in contamination is clearly evidenced in the syncretic theatre practices mentioned earlier. Balme's definition of syncretic theatre is situated within the historical context of the effects colonialism had on the theatre of indigenous cultures:

Theatrical syncretism is in most cases a conscious, programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theatre in light of colonial or postcolonial experience.... Syncretic theatre is one of the most effective means of decolonizing the stage, because it utilizes the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements without slavish adherence to one tradition or the other. (Balme, 1999, p. 2)

The notion of syncretism in the theatre then was not an alien concept for postcolonial practitioners, with genres such as Concert Party or Yoruba Opera in the popular theatre arena flourishing during colonization as well as after

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<sup>39</sup> See Brydon, (2006) in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* for further discussion on the issue of contamination.



independence. The literary theatre too that emerged was characterized by a total theatre aesthetic. This is clearly evidenced in the work of dramatists such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka and Wale Ogunyemi who employed this new form in their work not only as an aesthetic but also as a kind of resistance to the indoctrination of the colonizers by countering colonial discourses; these were great influences on Elufowoju Jr. His diasporic experience, however, has added a different dimension to the postcolonial heritage that has moved the syncretic form to function differently in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain.

To say that at this stage Elufowoju was consciously making strategic decisions with regards to his performance practice would not be completely true, as this period is best described more as an instinctive experimentation of hybridization of the cultural experiences this artistic director had gone through. The production of *Bonded* (1999) is perhaps the most successful, artistically, for the company and the production amongst the four so far that best exemplifies the essence of the company at that time and demonstrates how Elufowoju's diasporic experience influenced the production. Written by Ogunledun, a British-born Nigerian, the play was set in mid-Eighties Nigeria, looking at the bond between two inseparable friends, innocence, the tension between tradition and modernity and England.

The story is told through the eyes of the two young friends, Dolapo and Caramel, and is designed on a circular stage, divided by levels on platforms to designate the indigenous setting and the modern world; these represent the two worlds that the friends inhabit. The world of Dolapo shows signs of its tradition in the very literal representation of props such as authentic/realistic pots, a real

fire, a tree stump, juxtaposed against the clinically sparse world of Caramel where all character or suggestion of any kind of indigeneity or tradition has been removed.

The elements of total theatre all feature within this production that moves very quickly from a realistic style and then plunges into the surreal, ritualistic and then back to a naturalist style, all within its ninety-minute duration. The play was deeply rooted in a traditional storytelling form that also embraced Western styles in the telling of the story. In trying to describe this hybridity, Elufowoju in an interview puts it thus,

When I say stylized I mean movement, song and all the other features of moments like that, and then we would go back to a naturalistic scene where there was just all lights up and there was talking like natural human beings. With all of that, it was a huge melting pot of themes and theatre styles explored within this cauldron, which centrally needed to be of a strong African makeup, Nigeria specifically. It attracted an all-inclusive British audience, who understood the themes of the play. (Elufowoju, 2009, personal interview)

Elufowoju's description links directly with the popular theatre discussed in Chapter Two that he was nurtured on. The important element for Elufowoju at this point was showcasing Africa, in a way that he knew how. The unconscious resistance to the silence of the West African voice on the British theatre scene was evidenced in what Bhabha (1994) defines as a hybridity within their theatre practice. Hybridization, for Bhabha, introduces another space; neither colonized

nor colonizer, but a space defined by the speaker/voiceless; not merely a mixing of two cultures, but almost the creation of a new one. Tiata Fahodzi was at the beginning of a process of clearing out a space for itself on the British theatre landscape to tell its story the way it wanted to. It was coming to the realisation that its audience base was vital to its success and for also sustaining the work. Even though the work had a strong Nigerian content, the company had to adjust its marketing profile to attract not only Nigerian and West African communities, but a new British audience too. At this stage the company was now learning the workings of the theatre industry and resorting to tactics that would benefit them, such as

highlighting the fact that we had a major Nigerian Soap Opera artist in the cast, [Golda John] so that in itself shifted the tickets in a totally different way. People who wouldn't ordinarily leave their homes, our aunties and uncles, who are satisfied with just staying at home, receiving imported videos from home and just watching those. A whole new audience started coming through the doors, an older generation of audiences but also combined with that were Caribbean audiences, British Caribbean audiences and also I would say, middle England started to take note and come through the doors and acknowledge the fact that, even though this was being presented specifically as British West African, the themes were very universal and the whole aesthetic of the production was rooted in a very traditional form of story telling, embraces the whole Western hall marks of presenting theatre. (2009 Personal Interview)

This particular period, at the beginning of Tiata Fahodzi's journey, found Elufowoju establishing the beginnings of an aesthetic principle he will later develop at the peak of the company's success in 2007-2009.

At this stage, it is worth looking more critically at the early work thus far, which brings to mind Mercer's observation of minority communities and their relationship with representation:

If after many years of struggle, you arrive at the threshold of enunciation and are "given" the right to speak, is it not the case that there will be an overwhelming pressure to try and tell the whole story at once? If there is likely to be the only one opportunity to make your voice heard, is it not the case that there will be an intolerable imperative to try and say everything there is to be said, all in one mouthful?(Mercer, 1994, p. 234)

I believe the company at this early stage, tried to 'say everything' in the maiden production, which was clearly making a political statement about visibility and agency, but once the 'permission' was given to finally enunciate/speak, it stuttered, before finally finding its voice. So what were the conditions under which Tiata Fahodzi was trying to tell its story? Officially representing the voice of the West African on the British stage made the company go back to known experiences, which meant Nigeria. This enabled the company to fit very well into a niche British theatre market that made it settle into a comfort zone, dictated perhaps by the mandate the company members set themselves and being driven by the funding they were receiving from the Arts Council, an institution that

operated under very fixed designations in awarding funding. The company drew attention to its racial and cultural difference, which unfortunately such minority companies are made to do to highlight their disadvantage in order to secure funding.

As a new company, new to the workings of the theatrical establishment, new on the theatre landscape, trying to define their identity and also trying to remain relevant in the eyes of funding bodies in terms of their 'diversity', letting their ethnicity define their work rather than the other way around, marked the three productions with a definite bias towards essentializing Africa as the work made a grab for mainstream acceptability. As Elufowoju admitted in an interview,

It was important that the press about Nigeria, in terms of the cultural intellect and the capital intellect that we had, that we were putting out there was positive. And the only way is through the arts of one's culture that you can understand the mentality of the nation. And so by putting on these plays and putting on display, actors from a particular heritage was in a way illuminating the wealth of experience, of heightened experience within the theatrical form, that this country was holding onto; suppressing in a way, indirectly, because they were not breaking through the glass ceiling. And I would like to think that in that small way, we have made a difference, (the company.)

(Elufowoju, 2011)

The politics involved in the representation of minority communities is such that sometimes the reliance on funding bodies, particularly in the nineties, dictated the

nature of the work produced. The company belonged to and sourced its material from a marginalised minority community. This meant 'representing' West African communities in Britain. The company invariably got caught up in the politics and burden of that representation, and soon lost the sense of telling its own unique story until they came to the realisation that they could only tell the story from their specific perspective, not the whole of West or even Africa's perspective.

The critical representation of the company's work with regards to the media's response to them was rather limited at this early stage given that they are all representational sites. This is noteworthy with regards to how the company was viewed in its early stages. It had to prove itself in order to be recognized critically within the theatre establishment and show how integral the company's work was to the theatre landscape if it was to be taken further.

### **Taking on the World**

Moving to Southwark Playhouse through the support of the theatre's then outgoing artistic director, Erica Whyman (now Artistic Director of the Northern Stage Company), and her successor, Thea Sharrock, Tiata Fahodzi was boldly associating itself with influential individuals and buildings that were establishing themselves within the British theatre scene of the new millennium. As Elufowoju Jr. explains about the company's move from the Oval House,

[W]e saw ourselves as a travelling theatre troupe, trying to colonize theatre audiences across the capital, as well as nationally, we needed to move on. We moved to Southwark Playhouse,

which actually had a reputation for new writing. They were part of the bastion of new writing at the time. (Elufowoju, 2009)

It becomes clear why the focus of the company moved from a West African worldview to a broader Pan-African view, which Elufowoju defines as 'A Diasporic idea of what an African is.'(2009 Personal Interview)

*Abyssinia* (2001), by Adewale Ajadi, marked a definite move away from West Africa, not only in subject matter but also in style and form. Choosing a rather dark and sombre atmosphere to tell the story of the relationship between Queen Victoria and Prince Alemayehu of Ethiopia, Elufowoju seemed to be responding to critics who were beginning to take notice and seeing the company as just a Nigerian theatre company. Gone was the West African cast, as this was the first time the company hired white English actors and black British actors, from a Caribbean background. The only actor of direct African origin was the Kenyan actor, Frankie Mwangi, who played the lead role of the Ethiopian prince. Keeping the stage very sparse, Elufowoju used sound and lighting design to transport his audience to the Ethiopian palace and Queen Victoria's inner chambers. The pace of the production was slower and measured, compared to the previous productions. The emphasis moved from a visceral storytelling tradition to a more literary one that allowed the words to paint the pictures. The visual impact was one of relationships of solitude as opposed to the communal family orientated ones the audience had become accustomed to from *Tiata Fahodzi*. The images were often of two people in dialogue; rarely did more than three characters converge on stage at the same time.

Stepping out of his comfort zone of Nigeria, and the legacy of total theatre, Elufowoju tackled the new subject matter from a new perspective. He surrounded himself with a new crew to help him achieve his aesthetic experiment of 'accommodating theatre forms and production values from across the world' (2009, Personal interview). He was eager to prove he had more to offer the British theatre scene. This production was his opportunity to prove to the critics that he had more than the exotic bag of tricks, and he made a genuine attempt to keep the production simple and free of gimmicks and instead concentrated on factual historical events in a non-essentializing manner. As an audience member, however, one did not feel as engaged with this production compared to the previous ones. The soul of the production had been subjected to a great degree to what Patrice Pavis's (1992) refers to as the 'hourglass of cultures'. Pavis's model of the hourglass theorizes how cultures are transferred through a process of filtering where a source culture is passed through what he defines as 'a strange object, reminiscent of a funnel and a mill' (Pavis, 1992, p. 4) into a target culture, mediated by eleven separate filters which he has applied specifically to theatre. He groups the filters into different processes by which the source culture is modelled into a theatre text, the processes of theatrical production, whilst anticipating reception in the target culture; and finally, the processes of reception by the audiences of the target culture.

As a concept, the hourglass applies to the work of Tiata Fahodzi because the process of their African diasporic theatre had involved a taking from one culture, being the African culture and placing it within a British culture. The work can therefore be argued to be intercultural on that basis. The excessive use, however, of this concept came about because there appeared to be a conscious



filtering process, which took place. Each individual involved in the process brought to it their own cultural baggage, using it as a point of accessing the unknown and then filtered out the known depending on their varied closeness to the Ethiopian culture. Pavis, however, offers a cautionary note concerning this theory when he says,

The hourglass presents two risks. If it is only a mill, it will blend the source culture, destroy its every specificity and drop into the lower bowl an inert and deformed substance, which would have lost its original modelling without being moulded into that of the target culture. If it is only a funnel, it will indiscriminately absorb all the initial substance without reshaping it through the series of filters or leaving any trace of the original matter.(Pavis, 1992, p. 5)

In the case of this production, Tiata Fahodzi was guilty of the former. It is significant to point out that no member of the cast or crew in the production had any direct link to the Ethiopian culture. All involved were processing the Ethiopian material as 'other'. This was also the first time in his role as director that Elufowoju engaged with the idea of 'filtering'. Previous productions had come from his own Yoruba culture, so the process was rather one of interpreting and translating his culture for a Western audience without needing to filter. What this production lacked, however, which is fundamental to this intercultural engagement, was highlighting what makes this Ethiopian culture unique. In trying to answer the critics and detach the production and company from the specificity of Africa, the authority and integrity of the work was diminished in favour of a more 'palatable' experience.

The question then arises, does a theatre company catering to a specific target audience have to always satisfy the expectations of that group or can it be different? Yes it can be different but it has to acknowledge that it also functions within a specific context. Having participated in the Eclipse Report conference for instance and interacting with other small to medium scale companies from minority communities, the common frustration faced by all was the pressure to cater to the needs of the target community/audience, which in this case had evolved from a West African community in Britain to 'an all inclusive British audience'. The position Elufowoju found himself in at this stage of the company's journey was a difficult one. On the one hand, he set the company up to give a voice to West Africans in Britain, and yet, on the other hand, he was being criticized perhaps rightly, for being too specifically Nigerian. The desire to access what was immediate to him that came from a place of knowledge and authority, naturally took him to, as he puts it, "stories that came from my own back yard" (2009), but it appeared that was not enough within this environment of labelling and compartmentalization. Thus in the bid to remove the Nigerian stigma attached to the company, but still be seen and known as the British West African Company, this production was a signal that the company was thinking of the West African in a broader sense; one that could accommodate the stories of other African communities in Britain.

Despite the fact that the production developed a new audience from the Ethiopian community in Britain, who supported the development of the production, the pressure to respond and react to criticism changed the trajectory of the company in a direction that ultimately proved to be detrimental to its immediate development. The structure of the company at this stage was driven

by Elufowoju's vision, which he admitted to me went unchallenged. Without enough experience in how the industry functioned, this kind of individualistic autonomy did not work in the company's favour. With the continued view to broadening its mandate, Elufowoju chose to explore how Africa was impacting upon the lives of African Americans in its next production of *Sammy* (2002). I was involved in this production as an assistant to Elufowoju. The story of the legendary performer, Sammy Davis Jr., was Elufowoju's first attempt at directing a musical, a life-long ambition of his to fuse music in a heightened way into his work. The lack of experience in this specialized genre caused the company of actors to arrive at a vote of no confidence in their director, who they felt was guilty of allowing external forces to influence his artistic judgment in the development of the company. Handing the production over to Theatre Royal Stratford East, Tiata Fahodzi took a break to take stock of the work of the company thus far, and the direction in which it needed to be heading.

## **The Partnerships and Collaborations:**

### **The Tiata Delight Years**

The two-year gap away from the theatre production scene gave the company the opportunity to harness all the experience and interactions it had had over its seven years existence. The continued negotiations of various partnerships with the company appear to have contributed to the positioning of the company, making it move away from the previous direction the company was taking, from this period to date. These partnerships will be explored in more detail later in this chapter. The creation of "the first ever festival of play readings by Africans in

Britain”(2008 Program Notes), however, has proved to be the single most important decision the company has taken which has been instrumental in positioning Tiata Fahodzi where it is today.

Through the initial partnership between Tiata Fahodzi and the Arcola Theatre, and a suggestion by the company’s then new General Manager, Susan Marnel, *Tiata Delights*, ‘a festival of play readings by African writers in Britain’ (2004 Company Website) was born. Apart from the festival showcasing and also celebrating new writers from the African Diasporic community, it also provided a perfect opportunity for other companies and organizations within the industry to show an interest in the writers and Tiata Fahodzi itself. The successes that have emerged specifically from the festival include a continued partnership between Tiata Fahodzi and the Arcola Theatre, with the production of the African classic, *The Gods Are Not To Blame* by Ola Rotimi in 2005, an African adaptation of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, which was a major performance feature of the Africa 05 season coordinated by the British Museum, South Bank Centre and the Arts Council of England.

In the year that Africa took centre stage in world affairs, especially with the G8 summit held at the Gleneagles Hotel in Auchterarder in Scotland, tackling Global poverty, Africa 05, a season of cultural events celebrating African arts and culture from across the continent and the diaspora, acknowledged the presence of the company in the capital by including them in their programme. A shift had taken place in how the company was presenting itself; it had widened its remit from West Africa to Africa. It was being referred to as ‘Tiata Fahodzi (Theatre of the Emancipated), Britain’s leading African national touring theatre company,’ (Cripps, 2005 Independent Online) in all reviews from this point on. The

contradiction, however, is that since this shift, the concentration of the work has in fact been sourced from a West African heritage, and even more specifically, a Nigerian sensibility.

*The Gods Are Not To Blame* (2005) was a return for the company to its West African roots. This landmark production was, for Elufowoju, a return to his first theatrical experience as a child, and he went to great lengths to replicate that experience on a British stage. The production, performed in the round, with faces of the gods painted on the surrounding walls, drew the audience into the drama unfolding before them. The creation of the shrine of Ogun, god of metal, central to the production's ritual demands and the heightened proverb infused language, the movement and song all bore the hall-marks of what Brian Crow and Chris Banfield classify as 'inherited Western dramaturgical and performance models fused with ritual and popular theatres drawn from African people.'(Crow et al., 1996, p. 80)

In the context of Britain in 2005, John Thaxter's review for the *Stage Newspaper* captures it thus:

This revival by the Tiata Fahodzi Company ... stages the piece on a vast disc - making colourful use of the spicy flavour of Yoruba speech, musical rhythms, dance, jokes and colourful proverbs. But in Femi Elufowoju's exuberant production the stronger inflections render the English text harder to follow. (Thaxter, 2005)

In his bid to present an authentic re-presentation of the play, Elufowoju lost some of his audience who were not familiar with this style of theatre. The company

needed now to cultivate how to maintain its cultural nuance and at the same time know how to appeal to global spectators who may or may not have the cultural vocabulary of the theatre's emergence.

In returning to *Tiata Delights*, the African Playwriting Festival, one can see the evidence of the impact Tiata Fahodzi has made on the theatre landscape. In response to the demand being received by the company from unsolicited scripts from playwrights with an African heritage in the capital, *Tiata Delights* has provided a vital arena for these artists who write from an African cultural perspective. It is important at this point to illustrate this impact by providing a brief context of the field of writing festivals that currently exist for minority communities in Britain, and London in particular.

### **The Talawa Context**

Talawa's *Unzipped 05* is another play-reading festival launched a year after *Tiata Delights*, "which aims to develop and promote emerging Black, Asian and Chinese writers." (2005, Talawa Website) Falling within Talawa's strategic company remit of focusing mainly on the Black British Experience, Talawa caters for the full spectrum of the political term 'Black' and addresses all the minority communities implicated within it. Coming essentially from an African Caribbean perspective, by default, because of the African Caribbean cultural heritage of its five consecutive artistic directors, namely Yvonne Brewster, one of its co-founders, Paulette Randell her successor, Ben Johnson, the Acting Artistic Director, Pat Cumper and Michael Buffong, the current artistic director, the Caribbean influence on the company's work is not surprising. The company describes itself

as 'Britain's premier Black-led theatre company' (Talawa, 2012) while it embraces the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) constituency in Britain.

This political stance is corroborated by Kene Igweonu who states that

Talawa's broad-based appeal to blacks in general, due to the political space that it provides for them, is a result of a deliberate policy by the company not to be seen as representing a Caribbean or African aesthetic, but one that is black-led... Cumper argues that situating the company as black-British rather than Caribbean or African allows it to root back to both cultures, as well as to stake its presence in Britain in order to proclaim its Britishness and that of those it represents.

(Igweonu, 2013, p. 89)

The conscious and calculated mission of the company was to occupy a space within the mainstream by catering to a wider constituency, aiming to move away from the niche programming that other ethnic specific companies faced. The company saw highlighting its Britishness as a way of claiming that space and bringing the black British experience into the mainstream. The fact however that companies such as Tara Arts, Yellow Earth, Kali Theatre and Tamasha Theatre Company, specifically South and East Asian theatre companies in Britain exist in their own right, suggests that Talawa is not necessarily fulfilling the specificity required to adequately cater to such a broad and 'homogenous group'. It is for this same reason that companies like Tiata Fahodzi and Collective Artistes also exist, representing the African experience in Britain. The presence then of all the above-mentioned companies is still essential in striking a balance in representing

diverse communities in Britain.

The Alfred Fagon Award for playwrights is another platform for African and Caribbean dramatists. This award was established in 1996 to commemorate the life and work of the Jamaican-born playwright whose treatment by the police authorities following his untimely death prompted his family and friends to honour him. Marjorie H Morgan's blog on Fagon reports that:

Roland Rees, an English director who put on Fagon's first play in 1972, was part of a group who organised a memorial for Alfred Fagon. The proceeds raised were used to establish the Alfred Fagon Award that is supported by the Peggy Ramsay Foundation. The Foundation gives an annual award of £5,000 to playwrights of Caribbean descent living in Britain. (Morgan, 2011)

The award later broadened its outlook to include the African diaspora in its broader sense evidenced with its tag line "inspiring British playwrights with Caribbean and African descent." Roy Williams was the first recipient in 1997 with his play, *Starstruck* (published 1998) and a second award came in 2013 with *Sucker Punch*. Oladipo Agboluaje has also benefited from the award, winning in 2009 with his play *Iya Ile*.

With the specific setting up of *Tiata Delights*, the company quickly became aware that the festival was an effective way to bring the work of unknown writers with an African sensibility living in Britain to the notice of a wider audience, the theatre industry and potential employers. The company made the festival central to its activities by providing a platform, essentially for Africa in Britain, by



capitalising on the boom in new writing that was born with the new millennium, but from an African perspective. Instead of the company having to take on the 'impossible task' of representing the whole continent, the festival allowed the numerous African voices to speak and be heard on British stages. The criteria for participating in the festival was to be an African resident in Britain, in so doing the company opened its doors to those who defined themselves in that way. It discovers and showcases African talent resident in Britain.

The variety of 'Africanness' gradually became more and more diverse with each new festival. Writers have ranged from Africans born and bred on the continent and now residing in Britain to British born Africans, like Levi David Addai with his third play, *Oxford Street* (2008), which was taken up by the Royal Court, mentioned earlier. Michael Bhim, who 'connected' with his Zimbabwean roots/routes, entered into a co-production between Talawa and Soho Theatre with *Pure Gold* (2007). Bhim's second *Tiata Delights* submission, *The Golden Hour* (2010), received a performed reading of the entire play at the Almeida Theatre. Lucian Msamati, ironically destined to head the very same company for four years, had his play, *Zuva Crumbling* (2008) produced at Lyric Hammersmith, while Lizzy Dijeh's *High Life* (2010) was produced at the Oval House. Rex Obano's play, *Burned to Nothing* (2011), was produced by the BBC as a radio play, directed by Elufowoju, and Ade Solanke's *Pandora's Box* also from *Tiata Delights 08* received its full production at the Arcola Tent in May 2012. The African countries represented in the various festivals have ranged from Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leon, Mauritius, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Malawi, Ethiopia and the African diaspora (USA)

in the work of the Pulitzer Prize winning author, Suzan Lori-Parks.<sup>40</sup> The plays have been as far and wide reaching in theme and style and form, reflecting the multifarious identities that connect with the continent.

The company was never to produce any of the plays themselves with the exception of Oladipo Agboluaje's *The Estate (2006)*, which was tested in *Tiata Delights 06*. The concept behind the festival to provide a platform for the artists had been made possible through the company's strategic partnerships and collaborations. One such partnership was the company's move to the Soho Theatre; the latter is known for producing new writing and developing writers as part of its Writers Centre. Hosting Tiata Fahodzi's *Tiata Delights 06* and *07*, as well as joining forces with the New Wolsey Theatre Ipswich to produce one of Tiata Fahodzi's box office successes, *The Estate (2006)*, not only raised the company's profile substantially, but was also an indication that the company was making an impact on the mainstream. At a time when the Soho Theatre was referred to as 'the edge at the centre', (soho theatre flyer) this once voiceless company from the periphery was taking strides towards the centre and causing the 'centre' to take notice. This period proved that indeed as stated in their mission statement, "Tiata Fahodzi," was "producing theatre sourced from people living within British African communities, aimed at an all inclusive British audience". (2006, Tiata Fahodzi Program Notes)

The following year's commission and collaboration with one of Britain's most prolific and award-winning 'Black British writers', Roy Williams, resulted in a landmark production at the same venue of *Joe Guy* that marked the tenth

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<sup>40</sup> Lori-Parks' involvement in the company was through the performance of excerpts of six of her *365day/365plays* (Parks, 2007)

anniversary for Tiata Fahodzi. Being a production that tackles the taboo subject of the historical tension between Africans and people of the Caribbean, Tiata Fahodzi was now consciously using its theatre practice to make statements about social and cultural interactions within African diasporic communities in Britain. This particular production was addressing deep-rooted historical conflicts, the effects of which are still manifest in the diaspora today. In an interview Elufowoju gave *Africa Beyond*, he explains his reasons for the production:

There has been a notion of inferiority and superiority between the races. We, as people, have found different reasons to not get on and there has been an intellectual debate about who sold who out. When I was growing up in the UK I was told to go back to my own country and Caribbeans told me to go back to the jungle; Africa was a prehistoric place that stood still in time immemorial". (Otas, 2007)

The complex treatment of the subject by Williams, who was a writer in residence for Tiata Fahodzi at the time, placed the tensions within a very public domain; it centres on the world of celebrity and Williams' favourite sport, football. The issues of identity, nationality, the seduction of stardom and the antipathy between Africans and African Caribbeans in Britain were powerfully dissected and interwoven through the perspective of a youth culture that is running so far ahead of itself. The contradictions inherent in this African diasporic youth culture whose members are in a constant state of flux as to who they are is dramatised through wit and comedy in this production, that has resonances to Agbaje's debut play, *Gone Too Far!*(2007) discussed in Chapter Two. The discussion pertaining to

the tensions between Africans and African Caribbeans was revealing for Williams who discloses the following in an interview:

Actually writing this play I found very little difference. My personal experience is: we had African kids at school, and there was rivalry between Africans and West Indians. We used to mock African kids for having darker skin than us. "You're so black you're blue, bin bag." That still goes on. (Marks, 2007)

The ignorance of the unknown fuelled the discrimination and added to the tension. But the discovery that there really is no major difference comes from engaging with the subject matter, whether through a deep meaningful exploration or a more light-hearted medium. Aleks Sierz, however, criticized the speed and attitude of the generation reflected in the pace of the production.

But although the conflicts of the play are complex and sharply drawn, they are often played for easy laughs rather than for their emotional complexity. (Sierz, 2007)

This comment is perhaps an accurate one if one does not have the benefit of a historical journey of the company to put its practice into a context. But there appears to be some truth in Sierz's critique. Elufowoju Jr. at this point had not reached his peak in terms of completely owning his syncretic style to use it to effectively execute his 'message.' The handling of such sensitive issues of identity and the need to belong, particularly for young African males coming to terms with who they are in a Caribbean dominated African diasporic scene, addressed briefly in Williams' *Fallout* (2003) and Agbaje's *Gone too Far!* (2007) is an urgent one.

Perhaps, Elufowoju's enthusiasm for continuous fluid transitions in the cultivation of his performance structure took away the spaces needed to breathe in the poignant moments of the play. Having said this, the pattern that appeared to be forming at the time with regards to the performance practice of Tiata Fahodzi lay in Elufowoju's particular interpretation of traditional African theatre forms, specifically the oral cultural form. This form that allows for a mixing of styles in a collage or montage fashion that uses song and dance/movement as fundamental elements for the entertainment of its audience is at the core of Tiata Fahodzi's practice. Since *Tickets and Ties* (1997), Tiata Fahodzi has been adapting this indigenous form to function effectively on the British stage and it still resonates with both its culturally specific and all-inclusive British audience.

Bamidele's critical analysis of Femi Osofisan's plays and how he uses them as a social critique of his Yoruba community has comparative resonances for Tiata Fahodzi's practice, which might also go some way to explain the critical comments made about the company's performance style:

Osofisan's plays show that in Africa, storytelling, singing and poetizing are all playful acts through which experiences, images and memories of people can be dramatised. Drama is by extension also a playful act. Comments after the performance of Osofisan's plays sometimes raise doubts as to whether or not the audience understands the dramatic idioms. (Lanrele, 2001, p. 73)

The level of understanding being referred to in Osofisan's work has to do with his use of myth, but in the case of Tiata Fahodzi, there appears to be a fundamental

lack of understanding on the part of British critics of the indigenous storytelling genre that the company has adapted for the British stage. The underlying principle of African theatre essentially comes from its functionality within the community. Its purpose is for society to use it to look at itself, irrespective of its many genres. Tiata Fahodzi's seemingly light-hearted approach to critiquing its community in productions such as *Joe Guy*, *The Estate* and *Iya Ile* have been misread by critics who are unaware of the processes of these functions that are able to communicate on different levels to its audience. Elufowoju describes the production as "[a]n attack on both races and sensibilities due to the experiences permeating society."(2007,bbc.co.uk) He hoped that by highlighting this taboo subject of the tensions within the African and African Caribbean communities to rather empower both communities.

The rise of Tiata Fahodzi continued, this time with a new partnership with the Almeida Theatre in Islington. This proved to be a personal triumph for Elufowoju, who was a regular visitor to the Almeida Theatre, his local theatre. The company's offices were also situated within the same borough. Being a resident of Islington, Elufowoju was challenged by the fact that the audience at the theatre was largely white and middle class, a community described as 'Islington sophisticates' by Benedict Nightingale in his article about the theatre in the *Sunday Times Newspaper* (2010). Elufowoju wanted a situation where people from his cultural background could reverse the norm and be in the majority in the Almeida auditorium, because there was something on its stage that represented them. This representation came in the form of *Tiata Delights 08*, a festival that clearly marked a transition for the company. This was the year that the six chosen plays for the festival all came from African diasporic writers with

Ghanaian or Nigerian heritage resident in Britain.<sup>41</sup> The company's return to its West African roots was authenticating not only the commissions for the company but its writers' festival too.

More significant, however, is the change that took place in the company's by-line, which had been moved from the correctly spelt 'Tiata Fahodzi British West African', all capitalised, to the dropping of the 'British West African', to the stand-alone capitalised 'Tiata Fahodzi'. In its tenth year, the company name was changed to lower case, and it celebrated its decade by inserting 'tenth anniversary' into its by-line. In 2008, the company made a clear statement that represented its journey by contextualising its by-line and declaring itself as 'tiata fahodzi africans in british theatre' all in lower case.

The political implications of distinguishing itself from a Black British collective and trying to assert an identity that reflects its historical, cultural and geographical position within British society today has proved to be a complex task when reading the transitions through the company's changes of by-lines. The lower case spelling aligns itself with postmodern thinking and the social activist, bell hooks and playwright, debbie tucker green also come to mind, when the former is quoted as explaining the lower case spelling of her name. "It is the substance of the book, not who is writing them, that is important."(Cook, 2008) This is done in a bid to "get away from the ego attachment we have to a name."(Cook, 2008) Yet, in the case of Tiata Fahodzi, the name is important. As Elufowoju justifies, "I wanted a West African theatre, as opposed to strictly

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<sup>41</sup> The plays and dramatists were *In Time* by Bola Agbaje, *Burned to Nothing* by Rex Obano and *Pandora's Box* by Ade Solanke – they made up the Nigerian constituency and *The Burial* by Francis Aidoo, *Liquid Gold* by Yvonne Doodoo and *Walking Waterfall* by Nii Ayikwei Parks represented the Ghanaian heritage.

Nigerian. Our ancestors are being thought of on a daily basis when anyone says our name.” (2009) It also shows the needy move away from placating the funding bodies by playing the race card, so in a sense, its alignment with hooks’ idea that ‘it is the substance’ of the work that matters still stands. The creators of the work just happen to be African diasporic artists. The deliberate unfamiliarity of the company name to a largely British society sets the company apart and positions it as ‘other’ within the British theatre landscape. In the same way that the playwright Bola Agbaje inserts West African names into her plays because as she says in an interview “ I wanted to create the roles I felt didn’t exist.” (Allison-Forbes, 2011) The ‘different’ names of her upbringing are now made visible and accessible through her plays. British West African characters with West African names are beginning to permeate the vocabulary of British subsidised theatre, in the same way that it grapples with the name ‘Tiata Fahodzi’. Perhaps there is a level of acceptance and engagement within the theatre scene over the company’s ten-year existence that allows the ‘substance’ of the company’s work to take precedence over the name.

The festival, by its fourth year, had evolved to a high performance level, with the incorporation of live music linking the plays and culminating in an ‘African Music Concert’ signing off *Tiata Delights 08* and the grand finale of the first *Almeida Theatre Summer Festival*. The success of *Tiata Delights 08* resulted in a tour and another new partnership with Eastern Angles, which formed part of Eastern Angles Black History Month. That the following year saw Tiata Fahodzi return to the Almeida and on this occasion, headlining the publicity campaign of the theatre’s Summer Festival is testament to the success of this partnership. The full-length performance reading of Michael Bhim’s *The Golden Hour*, co-presented



by Tiata Fahodzi and the Almeida Theatre, portrayed a British–Zimbabwean experience projected through the institution of the NHS. The *Concert of African Music* was Tiata Fahodzi’s ‘extravaganza’ finale with featured artists from Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Uganda. Tiata Fahodzi had managed to present itself successfully and boldly enough to infiltrate this mainstream subsidised theatre.

### **[De]Colonising the British Stage**

The company’s return to the Soho Theatre in 2009 with *Iyà Ilé*, the critically acclaimed and sold-out show and the prequel to the equally successful *The Estate* (2006), by Agboluaje, best exemplifies how Tiata Fahodzi is using theatre to ‘decolonize the British stage’. These plays have been discussed in Chapter Two from the perspective of the playwright and will now be analysed from the perspective of the production and the company.

A political satire set in 1989 Lagos, Nigeria, and the Adeyemi Family, in a Chekhovian style, represent in their domestic setting a microcosm of Nigeria. Agboluaje provides a ruthless look at the roots of Nigeria’s current dysfunctional state by critiquing the corruption, class struggle and immoral behaviour that plague the nation:

Chief Adeyemi's wife, Toyin, is turning 40 and, behind the mansion walls, the household is preparing for her party. But there are other distractions. Their troublesome sons, returning from college, are more interested in seduction and starting revolutions than their parents' disintegrating marriage. Meanwhile, Helen,

the ambitious house girl, is waiting for her chance... (Programme Note, 2009)

The 'decolonization' with this production begins at the point of writing with Agboluaje given free rein to write, without a Soho Theatre dramaturg, 'guiding' the writing to appeal to the typical Soho Theatre audience. Following the success of *The Estate* (2006) and the audience development the production brought about, Soho Theatre was confident in taking the risk of another culturally specific production by supporting Tiata Fahodzi and Agboluaje to produce *Iyà Ilé*.

Elufowoju explains the idea behind the prequel in an interview with Andrea Enisuh:

Half-way through the run of *The Estate* we realised that we wanted to create a full state of the nation type trilogy. We wanted to show the way Nigeria, or any other African nation, can be. We wanted to explore different parts of our lives: the challenges, the tribulations. It was only after I sat down with Oladipo and discussed it that we realised just what we wanted to chart. We knew the stories for part one and part two. Part three is now under commission. (Elufowoju, 2009 Personal Interview)

In the same way that Kwame Kwei-Armah, a contemporary of Agboluaje, advocates a moving away from chronicling the dysfunction within the community, a trend that seems to be plaguing new young writers coming from minority communities in Britain, he proposes writers use the principles of art to celebrate the community and critique it. Highly influenced by August Wilson's chronicling of the African American experience in the twentieth century, this trilogy, although

perhaps not with the same depth and resonance as Wilson's works, provides a keenly observed satirical commentary on Nigeria, written primarily for Nigerians in Britain, but by default attracting an 'all inclusive British audience'.

My involvement in the rehearsal process revealed an organic rehearsal process particularly seen in how Elufowoju interacted with the cast and his technical team. The level of familiarity with the cast was a significant difference which was supported by the creation of what Agboluaje has described as 'a mini Nigeria' (Agboluaje 2010) in the rehearsal space. I observed Nigerian music being played, pictures of the time on tables and specific Nigerian food allowed in the space. During the actual rehearsal, actors were free to make contributions and they all had direct access to Agboluaje to clarify areas in the script for them. What was clear was that Elufowoju was aiming for a level of excellence and clarity in this production evidenced in his attention to detail in the spoken language of this production. Given that almost all the cast were of Nigerian heritage and spoke Yoruba, with the exception of Javone Prince, Elufowoju was careful not to make the production indulgent. He was always conscious of serving an inclusive British audience, which was something he kept reminding the cast in the rehearsal process.

The manifestation of a mutation discussed in Chapter Two of the popular travelling/storytelling genre is evident in the writing of this production and in the staging of it. Agboluaje was very much involved in the audition, casting, rehearsal and production of the play, re-writing sections to make them work better in production. As I suggested and explained in Chapter Two, a mutation had occurred in this production by the insertion of the Nigerian video film popular culture as a mechanism to frame the production.

Nollywood, the nick name of the Nigerian film industry as a play on Hollywood, evolved primarily as a business and marketing economic venture that targeted the home video market in Nigeria. This industry has grown to be the third largest in the world after Hollywood and Bollywood in terms of the number of films produced per year. The Nigerian, African and even the African diaspora market are saturated with Nollywood films. The opportunity to use this highly popular medium to comment on and critique society is sadly missed within the industry as a whole, a gap that the union of Tiata Fahodzi and Agboluaje have been extremely successful at filling. By subverting the familiar vocabulary of Nollywood films and challenging essentialist, stereotypical models of Nigerian identity, this production broke away from the norm. The unexpected yet realistic plotline, the three-dimensional characters that are written and portrayed in all their complexities and contradictions, leaving no one blameless, is a courageous attempt at critically viewing the Nigerian nation through the gaze of the insider/outsider. The initial target audience of Nigerians in Britain, who were in the majority, will be most familiar with the subject matter of the play, but will now view the familiar with different eyes because of their various contaminations with and as a result of this location of Britain. Non-Nigerians too were presented with a more challenging view of Nigeria and Nigerians from a Nigerian perspective.

The action of the play was not confined to the small Soho Theatre stage, but engulfed the whole auditorium, with action spilling over and in true storytelling fashion placing the audience as participants within the production. This is where the diasporic sensibilities of Richards' mentioned in the previous chapter of self-created African diasporic work become manifest. There was now

clarity in the cultural product the company was making, which was being cultivated through its productions since its inception. The company at this stage had constructed a recognisable diasporic aesthetic that often broke with traditional Western theatre practice and its use of the proscenium stage and auditorium. The heightened dramatic moments were very far removed from naturalism, but perfectly in sync with traditional African storytelling genres. Examples included the function of music and movement and their insertion into the production. The sudden shift from a naturalistic scene into a choreographed dance with music and singing, to mark the celebration of Toyin's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday for instance, illustrated the transitions that have become Elufowoju Jr's aesthetic signature, showing how indigenous dramatic forms have influenced the creation of his particular theatre in a western context.

The sense of 'play' and storytelling in this production was set up by how the audience was positioned and invited into the production. Action took place on stage and then spilled over into the audience and around it drew them in, acknowledging how integral they were to the theatrical experience. Agboluaje's plays and Elufowoju Jr's production demanded that conceptually there should not be a separation between audience and actors, the to and fro being an important element in African performance, reinforcing the breaking of the fourth wall and the illusion of creating a make-believe world. 'This world functions on the principle of inclusion and mediation. Its expansiveness thus demands an equally expansive mode of representation'. (Okagbue, 2007, p. 149) This created a situation in the Soho Theatre auditorium where the audience responded in an instinctive manner, talking to the characters when they saw fit, and the actors too had to make allowances for the unexpected interruptions. The audience was

allowed a process of cathartic release as a convention that is not common on the British stage. Pantomime is probably the closest theatrical genre that encourages audience participation at that level. There was also a sense of conscious theatricality that is very much aware of itself which is an essence of African performance. There is no attempt to pretend that this is real life, you are constantly reminded that it is a play seen in its use of multiple styles, swinging from the realistic to the melodramatic. This comes from the social relevance of African performance that at its fundamental level is imparting some knowledge to its audience whilst it entertains. There is no doubt that Agboluaje's plays are imparting knowledge to his Nigerian audience, who he has said categorically that he writes for. His critique of the nation for a diasporic and all-inclusive British audience provides a more challenging view of Nigeria and Nigerians.

The company's conception of the stage, is not limited to the proscenium. Elufowoju Jr.'s unique style and form finds him using conventional stages in a more expansive way by viewing not only the stage but also the auditorium as his working space, colonising the whole space so to speak.

The company managed to accommodate the challenges posed by the limitations of the proscenium stage, which was what they faced in most theatre houses and looked for ways to explode the proscenium stage, to make it do more than it was originally designed to do. This approach to creating and performing its work indeed does echo Richards notion of the construction of a diasporic theory evidenced in the particular way the company produces its work. 'In their rehearsal, production and performance, they possibly enact a diaspora consciousness for the actors, production teams and spectators. (Richards, 2010,p.200)

This kind of fractured performance style is important because they speak of not only a postcolonial but a diasporic condition operating within a British context.

The company's chairperson, Archie Graham, captures a sense of the theatrical experience that Elufowoju Jr. and Tiata Fahodzi bring to the theatre houses they present their work in.

Tiata Fahodzi's proudly declared mission is to produce African theatre for an all-inclusive British audience. From its earliest days the company has resisted being shunted off exclusively into the margins of niche programming. Whether deploying guerilla tactics or brazenly walking in through the front door, the company has fought to bring its unique aesthetic to the widest possible audience. Often this involves planting ourselves in a 'mainstream' venue and allowing our work and our wonderful, enthusiastic followers to refresh the venue's artistic and audience profiles. (Graham, 2009)

This suggests and confirms the impact the company was making in how it executed its specific aesthetic and using it to move from the margins to claim a prominent space within the mainstream and also alongside it.

Tiata Fahodzi's production of Agboluaje's plays engaged the audience from a position of familiarity, meaning the narrative was set in Nigeria, the target audience was primarily Nigerian and no attempt was made to overly explain elements specific to the Nigerian culture for the benefit of the non-Nigerians in the audience. As the Goddard, rightly observed in a seminar

I was positioned by that play in the same way as a white audience member. I was not the addressee of the work. (Goddard, 2009)

This crucial statement speaks volumes with regards to how Tiata Fahodzi was taking control over how it told its story and presented aspects of its identity. No apology was made with regards to the level of authenticity necessary for achieving the specifics of the production, since *The Estate* proved that specificity could have a universal appeal too. It proved also that it was relevant because it resonated beyond its specific Nigerian situation. This is where the strength or significance of the play lay. This play was set in Nigeria but produced in London, for a target audience that has links back to the Continent.

The company was projecting a confidence in presenting its African material without the need for excessive filtering. The production had a very specific engagement with 'home' that was immediately tangible in the atmosphere. The vicinity in and around the Soho Theatre was transformed, visually, to reflect the West African community who came out in their numbers to support the production. An anecdote given by the playwright, Agboluaje, captures this feeling.

I remember someone was asking for the directions for the Soho Theatre, and was told if you come out of the station and you stand there long enough, you will see someone with a head tie, follow them! (2010).



The company had succeeded in creating a new audience who responded partly because they saw *The Estate*, but largely because it was being presented in a form they were familiar with. The kind of audience who came to see this production was a mix, but a large proportion was not the usual second-generation theatregoer. The observation was made that a new group - those who are used to watching video films in their homes when in Nigeria or in London- attended. In this instance, Agboluaje informed me that word of mouth was a vital publicity tool; "it is just like a Nigerian movie".(2010) This development of a new audience for the company's work had been instigated during the production of *Bonded*. For the productions with Agboluaje, the deliberate association with the Nigerian film genre was consciously done, the dramatist having gained a better understanding of the workings of the industry. The acknowledgement of the far-reaching impact of the film genre and its amalgamation into the fabric of the play informed the decision to highlight it as a publicity tool. This tactic worked to the company's favour by securing full houses for the run of both productions.

Because the shows were sold out, and the unreserved seating policy of the intimate Soho Theatre, members of the audience found themselves in close proximity to each other, and were unconsciously drawn into a West African theatrical experience, whether coming from that heritage or not. There was a sense of a collective that was created, where members of the audience who were not Nigerians still felt part of the experience, because of my experience of the open and highly vocal nature of the largely West African audience. There was an atmosphere in which it was permissible and even encouraged to ask questions at moments when certain knowledge of the culture was required or of specific political situations, or when Yoruba was spoken, in order to fully appreciate some

of the jokes. But within that there was a common ground of understanding in gesture, facial expressions, and some cultural nuances that are shared; visual humour being one of them.

I agree with Sierz's statement that,

Experiences such as this suggest that the audience is a vital element in the creation of meaning. It is even tempting to say that the meaning of a play lies in the experience of the audience.(2011, p. 6),

This captures the essence of Tiata Fahodzi presenting its identity on the British stage through an experiential process for the 'all inclusive British' audience who form a fundamental element in the performance of that diasporic identity. The mixed nature of the audience also allowed room for this gathering to express its individual complexities, some of which were vocalised during the performance by the bolder, West African members, whilst the less bold restrained themselves and 'reported' their impression of this display of Nigerian culture within the British theatre landscape. Keeping in mind the fact that audiences can change the meaning of a play, in this instance, reviews of the play showed clearly the critics' understanding of the form, which also reflects their own cultural baggage that they bring to the performance.

On the whole, the critics rated the production a success but some comments about the form kept creeping in; for example, Dominic Maxwell's comment,

Femi Elufowoju Jr's production for the Tiata Fahodzi theatre

company is acted well, in a slightly heightened style that takes in comedy and tragedy. There are some messy touches — there's too much tramping up and down the aisles, while directorial flourishes such as the dancing to Fela Kuti between scenes, superb though it is, seem to belong to a more freewheeling show. (Dominic Maxwell, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2009 *Times Online*)

and Lyn Gardner, though she had a 'fun' time describes her experience:

A prequel to his previous hit, *The Estate*, Oladipo Agboluaje's Nigerian comedy requires no previous knowledge, just a willingness to go with the flow. Is *Iyà-Ilé* a great play? Probably not - it's too cursory in its characterisations and crammed like an overfilled pie, but it provides an exuberant, warts-and-all account of Nigerian life. As an experience it rates highly, not least because of the engagement of the black members of the audience, who treat each character as if they know them personally. By the end I felt as if I did too, although the first 15 minutes are bewildering for anyone unversed in Nigerian life. It is, I imagine, the theatrical equivalent of stepping off a plane in Lagos: slightly overwhelming and culturally dislocating, but fascinating. It's a soap opera on an operatic scale, doing for unhappy Nigerian families what *August: Osage County* did for unhappy Americans. Femi Elufowoju's production has real verve, and the cast give it everything they've got. It's neither subtle nor deep, but terrific fun. (Gardner, 2009 *Guardian Online*)

Other reviews, such as the one from Fiona Mountford in *The Evening Standard* appeared to have missed the point of the satirical critiquing of the Nigerian culture by Agboluaje executed by Tiata Fahodzi in her review titled *Nigerian Nastiness in 'Iya Ile'*. Her stereotypical 'fixing' of her perception of Nigerian culture, tainted her review. There was a clear case of dismissing the 'other' to fit fossilized notions of that 'other', highlighting it rather than seeing the social or domestic issues being addressed. She contended that,

The play never recovers from a bewildering, fractured, often linguistically challenging start, in which English is interspersed with liberal doses of both Pidgin and Yoruba. It's tough to get a grip on exactly who all the minor characters are and, by the time we do, we have long since stopped caring. (Mountford , 2009)

She ends her review with an ironic recommendation:

I suggest sitting this one out, and waiting for the film of *The Estate*, currently in development. (26<sup>th</sup> May, 2009)

Audience members responding to this more dismissive review on the internet, counter this critic who did not make the attempt to situate the form, and the production within its context. In direct response to Mountford, David Duchin had this to say:

I feel like I've seen a different play to the one written about in the above review. I don't speak Yoruba, or [Pidgeon], but I found being thrust into the inner workings of a foreign culture from the outset of the play an intellectual challenge, rather than bewildering. The director could easily have 'translated' the text

to make it easier for us to understand, but instead chose to hammer home the point that in Nigeria, language is a class defining weapon. I would heartily recommend this play to audiences interested in intricate, physical storytelling - the dynamism of the production was astounding, especially when compared to the conventional, rather staid drama we tend to see on the London stage. (30<sup>th</sup> May, 09)

Another rebuff came from Titilola Bello, also expressing her disappointment with Mountford's review:

This play shone a light on the shortcomings of the Nigerian society, in a humorous and graphic way and I am glad for it! In fact am tempted to say that the critic simply has no appreciation of art, or art that is slightly outside the box or dare I say not western or one with a western overtone. This was not toned down for the western community and I am glad! I have suffered too many of those! (30<sup>th</sup> May, 09)

The critical acclaim the company has received from the theatre establishment has given it a sense of legitimacy, which has proved an important step in its search for cultural longevity. As the company continues to establish itself, it hopes for a better understanding with regards to how the establishment, the critics in particular, differentiate Tiata Fahodzi's cultural product from other 'Black British' led companies. Most reviews mention the company's by-line but within the

article revert back to a homogenous 'Black' when describing other aspects such as its themes or the company's audience reactions.

This was particularly the case with *Iyà Ilé*, because the subject matter was so specific, the perceived alienation for a white audience member was expected to be greater than for black non-Nigerian members. All black audience members, irrespective of their cultural background, were perceived to have a similar experience as compared to white members in the same audience. But interestingly, as stated earlier, Goddard felt herself, for the first time in the same position 'as a white audience member', which is a very poignant statement when one considers that Goddard has been on the 'Black' theatre scene since the eighties as a practitioner until the late nineties when she joined the ranks of academics, analysing Black British theatre. The fact that this was the first time Goddard felt a sense of exclusion in the sense that she was not 'the addressee' of a piece of work coming from the African diasporic community says something about the specific identity that Tiata Fahodzi is presenting. It also opens up the debate on terminology with regards to what is to be classified as Black British. By Goddard's own admission, as a second generation Black Briton with a Caribbean heritage watching this play, she came to a realisation:

The reviews of the plays said that the Black audience members laughed at the jokes that we didn't laugh at, and they just said the 'Black' audience members ... I didn't laugh until I got the explanation. And it really reminded me that the term Black British, that we really have to start acknowledging diversity here, and that when we are talking about Black plays we should be speaking specifically of Nigerian, and when we start to offer a

racial analysis of theatre we need to deepen that with the specificity of culture. (Goddard, 2009)

The positive response to the production was a sign that the company and Agboluaje have filled a void or vacuum with regards to the presentation/presence of the African diasporic identity on the British stage.

Tiata Fahodzi is therefore through its productions making a statement of identity which is saying, 'this is who we are; we want to represent ourselves; we want to do it for ourselves, provide work for our actors, writers, directors by taking control over how that identity is represented'. *Iyà Ilé* did not pander to any whims or dictates in terms of trying to adapt the production for its 'all inclusive' audience. What it actually did was to stay true to the form the playwright had chosen to work in; a form that allowed the nuances of its traditional culture and its contemporary existence to coexist. The bravery Tiata Fahodzi has shown in telling its specific story the way it wanted to tell it has come full circle, from where the company started back in 1997. The successes of the company were largely in productions depicting a Nigerian context or sensibility like *The Estate* and *Iyà Ilé*. The company had by this time mastered the art of making their culturally specific work accessible to a broader British audience by reconstructing and amalgamating the traditional African storytelling genre, which has come to define Elufowoju's working method with Western conventions. The company also understands the workings of the theatre industry and will not allow the industry to limit the kind of work it produces. There is an air of confidence surrounding the company now that comes from a feeling of being accepted by the mainstream,

which acknowledges its presence and engages with it. Based on how Tiata Fahodzi has over the years presented itself, there is perhaps an unconscious recognition that if one says who they are others will engage with them at the level they are asking them to engage with them. Tiata Fahodzi, it seems, is now in a position to not be apologetic about its presence but boldly declaring that presence so that the theatre establishment can either take it or leave it. Belinda Otas' interview confirms this position.

Belinda: Do you think black British theatre still has a lot to do in order to compete on the same stage as other major theatre companies?

Elufowoju Jr's response is in direct relation to the work the company had done under his leadership than the collective 'Black British scene. He answers

Femi: No, we have done it all now. They have got to now work to connect with what we are doing because we are doing it. The mainstream now needs to wake up and pick up their eyes and come to us. We are at world-class stage and we are doing our stuff. We could be at the National Theatre everyday.

(Elufowoju/Otas, 2010)

Tiata Fahodzi, in a sense, is claiming its own space and position, making sure it retains its own identity as it has a shared/public space alongside other British theatres. 'Tiata Fahodzi: Africans in British Theatre' makes a bold statement about taking a community that was usually relegated to the margins into the centre. A body of work coming from a community that is perceived as 'other' is now visible;



it is creating and asserting its own centre, and by claiming both its Africanness and its Britishness, it is negotiating that hybrid identity of the African in the diaspora.

Agboluaje's appraisal of the company's work under Elufowoju speaks for itself; it is, in a sense, a fitting vote of thanks.

Femi is leaving Tiata Fahodzi in a very strong position. Tiata Fahodzi is one of those companies that show you why diversity is such an important aspect of society today. And it shows you that it is something that should not be just a tick box. It shows you that excellence can come from anywhere, given the right demand and funding. You go in the office and it is Femi and Thomas Kell, and yet what they have been able to achieve is phenomenal.

(Agboluaje, 2010)

Moving through the process of syncretic forms, where the two forms of Africa and Europe met, Tiata Fahodzi evolved over the years to create the foundation that became the basis of something new, 'a third space' as defined by Bhabha. He talks about hybridity in a more political sense as a postcolonial condition, which reflects the way in which Tiata Fahodzi was now presenting itself. Acknowledging the location of Britain, Tiata Fahodzi's work showed an acceptance of who it was in relation to cultural heritages. The work of the company also demonstrates the fact that home is where you are. It is not a geographical space. You carry your ancestors with/in you- Tiata Fahodzi are evoking their ancestors anytime they say the name. In the latter years before leaving the company, Elufowoju Jr's diasporic aesthetic acknowledged its

contaminations, freeing it to embrace all its dimensions as Africans in British theatre indeed.

The company has moved in a different direction with its outgoing artistic director, Lucian Msamati. He fully acknowledges the uncharted waters that the company has trod but is still concerned about the company representing a wider spectrum of the African continent. Msamati's interview with Andrew Girvan recognizes that, 'Femi Elufowoju's work over the years has been by turns legendary and inspirational. It is my sincerest wish to honour that legacy and to rise to the challenge of taking Tiata Fahodzi to the next level.' (Msamati/Girvan, 2010)

The next level was envisioned by the company's Chair, Archie Graham, as vital that a British African company was led by someone deeply rooted in that culture, saying:

Tiata Fahodzi seeks to represent the whole continent of Africa and Lucian's appointment brings the energy and outstanding theatre traditions of southern Africa, and Zimbabwe in particular, into the heart of the company. It is also a landmark moment for British theatre as a national company is led for the second time by an Artistic Director of African heritage. (Graham/Girvan, 2010)

The leadership is vital in the project of constructing an African diasporic identity on British stages because it is apparent to African diasporic artists that decision makers are usually only comfortable with a certain type of interpretation particularly of the African narrative. The search then for the new artistic director

of Tiata Fahodzi is crucial at this stage in its growth. Natalie Ibu's appointment is certainly an exciting development and one waits to see how her youth and female stance, as well as her diverse producing and directing background will interpret the company's mission. She appears to be keenly aware of her diasporic condition which is illustrated in the newly reorganized company from its staffing, structuring and its focus on how it engages with artists and audience. The company is making further strides in terms of its positioning within the British cultural field by gaining a residency partnership with Watford Palace Theatre, the first for the company since its inception. With the presence of companies like Tiata Fahodzi, and Collective Artistes discussed in the final chapter, issues like perception and representation are challenged on the British stage. The shift away from the Nigerian perspective, even though Elufowoju created a successful cultural product, is a necessary one to allow the space for other African diasporic voices with equally rich theatre traditions that are living in London to also be validated and given a chance to express themselves. 'Sibusiso Mamba, an actor and playwright from South Africa now residing in London had his play showcased at the *Tiata Delights 11*. His impression of the company's work is expressed in his interview with Belinda Otas that,

Tiata Fahodzi is charting a path that has never been walked before. And I believe this will change the landscape dramatically. It is time to do so. I am grateful for the interest in West Africa because it has inspired an interest into the rest of the continent. (Mamba/Otas, 2011)

The company's *Tiata Delights* writer's festival has already proved the demand and evidence of the presence of the rest of the continent's unheard voices. Making new writing central to its existence by capitalizing on the trend that has redefined British theatre over the last 15 years has secured a much-needed platform for Africa's diaspora to be represented on the British cultural landscape. A Southern African perspective with Zimbabwean sensibilities flavours the productions which, like Elufowoju before him, find the artistic director returning to his cultural heritage of Southern Africa for source material to broaden the diversity of the kind of African stories that the company tells. The introduction of *Tiata Tamba Tamba*, for instance, a specific improvisational theatre, which formed part of the writer's festival by introducing it to Britain's diasporic actors and the British scene, is inspired by Msamati's Zimbabwean theatre history. This has now been added to the Tiata Fahodzi artistic philosophy of making theatre and developing new writing. The celebration of African cultural heritage is at the core of the company's work, and that is governed by and within the context of where the artists are and their relationship to the continent.

The first full production since Elufowoju Jr's departure from the company directed by its then new artistic director is Denton Chikura's *The Epic Adventure of Nhamo the Manyika Warrior and His Sexy Wife Chipo*.(2013) Msamati, again like his predecessor, is unapologetic about his style and form in this production which combines storytelling, myth making and the uniquely different ingredient of showbiz, to tell this 'African fable'. The program blurb describes this unique tale best.

Nhamo, you are a legend of African Folklore! Hollywood awaits!"

With just 24 hours to create the ultimate African fable, the

superstar cast is missing a hero. Suddenly, a dashing goatherd appears on the horizon... Nhamo. Is he The One? Storytelling is turned on its head in this Zimbabwean comedy of epic...epicness!

(Tiata Fahodzi website, 2013)

The production has a particular open physical and rugged improvisational style and humor that is rooted in Southern African, but particularly Zimbabwean theatre. The sketches and exercises displayed and explored in the improvisational *Tiata Tamba Tamba* have coalesced into a spectacular production representing another dynamic and spectrum of an African theatre tradition resident in Britain. The humour and wit, which cuts sharply through this production is what sets it apart from other non-Tiata Fahodzi productions within this new millennium that have been addressing African issues on the British stage. Its ability to use its humour which Msamati says 'it wears lightly' (Afro Buzz, 2013) to laugh at itself and also to subvert at the same time is what is so unique. It does not take itself too seriously, which marks most of the productions I have referred to above, but is acutely aware of the challenges the continent and its diasporas face. It just chooses humour to address them.

There is perhaps something to be said for telling and owning your own story, which allows for a greater freedom in interpretation. There is also the thinking that through comedy one can more easily access the issues. This is echoed in Ogungbe's interview in which he questions the use of humour and African diasporic work/artists. The actor replied, "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.[...] The key is to find humour which puzzles,

highlighting paradoxes. We have to work hard. It's not laid out on a plate for us. (Ogunde, 1995) Underneath the humour and wit, the production still manages to be controversial, which provokes thought and debate in its presentation. This is refreshing to see, hear and celebrate in a different African diasporic voice. The small cast of three actors, described by Msamati as 'slightly anarchic, slightly rebellious, great performers with a great sense of comedy' (Afro Buzz, 2013) also, like the production, do not take themselves too seriously. Like the artistic director, they are accomplished performers who are not precious about Africa; the aim is to show and tell their story like no one else can.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Collective Artistes: The Journey from the Stage to the Community**

The work of Collective Artistes (CA) in the UK represents one narrative of performing African diasporic identity on the British stage; it centres on redefining the identity's image and linking the work on the stage to the communities it draws the work from. Grounded essentially on the principle of using theatre to effect change, Chuck Mike, the company's Artistic Director, left his Brooklyn home in 1976 and headed to Nigeria on a year's Fulbright scholarship. He informs me in an interview that his proposal on his application form made reference to a search for alternative methods of making theatre and seeking broader perspectives, images and experiences of not just Black American culture, but African culture. Having grown up during the Civil Rights and Black Panther movements and the quest for recognition, Mike, it seems, was driven by Taylor's argument that '[d]ue recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need. (in Gutmann *et al.*, 1994:26) Taylor advances the notion of reciprocal recognition and how it is bound up with identity and ultimately what happens if someone is denied recognition. He states how fundamental recognition or its absence in the case of the oppressed is in the shaping of one's identity. The damage caused by misrecognition, for Taylor, is far-reaching particularly within the context of majority and minority societies; the majority society are in a position to 'mirror

back ... a demeaning or contemptible picture' of the minority community, resulting in them being confined within 'a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being'. (1994, p. 25)

Mike was clearly not satisfied with the limiting image America was reflecting back of black culture. Looking to counter the paradox of the complex *blaxploitation* image of black culture prevalent in 1960s and 1970s America, and which came to represent a token of black empowerment whilst glorifying stereotypical criminal behaviour, Mike states:

I felt that if other races knew the reality of our lives as a people they would have more respect for us and that we as a people would be better placed to achieve our actual potential. So my quest to Nigeria was in search of creative tools for my craft and I intended to use these tools as a means for cultural emancipation. (Mike, 2010)

The world of theatre that Mike encountered in Nigeria in the 1970s consisted of a wide variety of theatrical and performance practices that had at their heart the functionality of the medium to the community.<sup>42</sup> Esiaba Irobi's passionate review of John Conteh-Morgan's *African Drama and Performance* (2004) supplies an accurate image of theatre and performance currently in Africa whilst commending the work of those who have contributed to the book. He says:

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<sup>42</sup> See Martin Banham, Errol Hill, George Woodyard's *Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre*. (1994 :72-91) The chapter on Nigeria provides a useful context to the diversity of dramatic and performative practices that existed between the 1960s- 1990s, and the impact of political and socioeconomic dynamics on the practices.



The essayists articulate why theatre in Africa is an act of community and such an explosive cultural and political force that it actually threatens governments. They explain why, whereas good Western dramatists are often given prizes and awards, enterprising African dramatists are imprisoned, sent into exile or simply killed by their governments’.

(Irobi, Dec., 2005)

From the elitist but culturally and politically active university community where Mike was situated to pursue his postgraduate studies, to meeting and interviewing Wole Soyinka who then invited Mike to join him in his newly formed theatre group and later becoming an assistant director; Mike experienced at first hand the extremes and fundamentals of making and using theatre to effect change as well as traditional performance practices and contemporary forms and styles too. Biodun Jeyifo bullet-points the first of many theatre companies Mike worked with Soyinka on:

[Soyinka] forms a group called Guerrilla Theatre Unit out of the professional company of the University of Ife Theatre. Writes short, biting and highly popular skits, attacking government hypocrisy, corruption and sadistic policies. These skits are performed by the new group in open-air markets, streets, community centres and school fields.

(Soyinka and Jeyifo, 2001)

Banham *et al* add that ‘[t]he unit operated on a hit and run basis...’, explaining that ‘Soyinka had always seen this type of theatre as a necessary activity, parallel to the metaphysical explorations of plays such as *The Road* and *Death and the King’s*

*Horseman'* (Banham *et al.*, 1994).<sup>43</sup> This period marked the beginning of a long and life-changing relationship between Soyinka and Mike, who describes himself as a 'disciple of Soyinka' and the formulation of not only a theatrical aesthetic and ideology that has become the foundation of Mike's cultural practice, but also a holistic approach to life in general. Mike explicates this notion further:

The cardinal technical lesson I learned as a director under Soyinka was that anything could work in the space we call theatre. The theatre is an open space, a blank canvas on which the viewer is predisposed and willing to participate – one only needs an imagination and a propensity for solving problems to make any illusion work. His capacity for articulating the meaning of the play, its language and what that suggests for the actor I think was another valuable tool I inherited. Ethically, however, he reinforced the notion of courage towards speaking one's mind in and out of the theatrical arena. Most of all, however, I think my growth as a humanist/activist above being a nationalist/activist was nurtured in his presence.

(Mike, 2010)

This holistic approach to his theatre practice and his life in general translates positively onto the African diasporic space in Britain because of its openness and ability to accommodate the many disparate identities that exist within this constituency. The case studies addressed in this study thus far for example, show

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<sup>43</sup> See also Mike's article in *African Theatre: Soyinka, Blackout, Blowout and Beyond. Satirical Review Sketches* – edited with Martin Banham and Judith Greenwood for more details on this experience.

just how diverse African diasporic identities can be and the need for flexibility in expressing and representing those identities.

Setting out to seek a method of working on a year's Fulbright grant, Mike found himself living and working in Nigeria for over thirty years, ultimately calling it home, having found a life-long mentor in Soyinka.

After his years of training, both formal and informal, Mike subsequently joined the then Ife University, now Obafemi Awolowo University staff teaching in the Department of Theatre and Dance, and continued assisting Soyinka in various projects, and meeting other influential playwrights, practitioners and artists. Jeyifo recounts Mike's early career journey as he writes a tribute to celebrate Mike's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday: 'He met Dapo Adelugba; he met Femi Osofisan; he met the late Ola Rotimi; and he met countless other scholars, actors and directors. He fell in, body and soul, with this extraordinarily vibrant community that was the Nigerian theatre fraternity and sorority of artistes and practitioners and he became one of them'. (Jeyifo, 2012) Putting into practice the wealth of knowledge acquired from this 'community', Mike branched out on his own, compelled to provide opportunities for his students to put into practice what they had learned at the university. In his desire to address the lack of actual theatres and professional companies for students to engage with or be employed by on completing their studies, Mike set up Performance Studio Workshop (PSW) and Collective Artistes (CA) simultaneously in 1988. He explains:

Collective Artistes was born for the presentation of main stage or more formally acknowledged theatrical work in lieu of generating mutual understanding between cultures and the Performance Studio Workshop was designed for training and to tackle social

issues dominantly within the community. It was dubbed as “a laboratory for alternative communication...”.PSW also served as a feeder to CA in terms of talent development. While it may have participated in scripted productions it only presented original work most of which was originated from devising. Both forums hold excellence in production as a hallmark. (Mike, 2010)

Over the following decade, Mike was able to harness the skills of using improvisation as a tool for developing full scripts; an indispensable element in his work and he combines it with the forum of theatre for development, a popular dramatic genre used across many nations in Africa such as Kenya, Ghana South Africa and Tanzania around the 1980s/90s to engage in community development. Mike was able to hone the skills, tools and training necessary over this period for sustaining the practice of effectively using theatre for development, to the long-term development of communities. The aim of theatre for development, according to Okagbue, is ‘that of providing the communities with a forum or a context/platform within which they can, on their own but with some help from catalysts, address issues about themselves and to find solutions and without this coming to them in what is basically a centre-to-periphery/top to bottom model of development.’(Okagbue, 2002:85 ) Mike’s work in this arena, largely through PWS, altered the structure to focus much more on the process rather than the finished production. A detailed report in Martin Banham et al’s *African Theatre in Development* (1999: 61-78) provides an in-depth stage by stage account of the company’s residency within a community; the report comments candidly on failures as well as successes within the community.

## CA in Britain

This background is essential in situating the foundations of Mike's principle to theatre making which underpins the work of CA UK. The idea of setting up CA in the UK was planted after the successful run of Chinua Achebe's 1958 iconic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, adapted for the stage in 1997 by Biyi Bandele Thomas and directed by Mike which prompted Mike's maiden experience in Britain and creating what he calls his 'tri-continental journey.' (2010) Mike's unique position of a diasporic African, twice removed- taken from the continent, through the Caribbean to the USA and returning to the continent makes him have a more complicated cultural multiplicity that goes beyond Kwei Armah's 'triculturalism'. Mike can be seen as a quad-cultural, particularly in the British space. This extra cultural diversity perhaps provides Mike with the necessary experience to facilitate the telling of the African diasporic narrative in Britain. This therefore justifies his inclusion into this study.

Forming part of the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT), this production with its level of cultural exchange and collaboration was a new dynamic of 'community' theatre that Mike was inserted into. Invited by Bandele-Thomas to join this unique production that brought 'Black' British and Nigerian artists together, to retell an indigenous tale, Mike's track record of working with a wide range of performers and practitioners in Nigeria, and the role he had played in the development of community theatre there, offered him the requisite artistic infrastructure for *Things Fall Apart*. Mike's collaboration with the prolific Bandele-Thomas, a Nigerian then based in London, was a seamless union, as both artists were known to each other in Nigeria and their works were equally

concerned with the state of the Nigerian nation. They both understood the specific amalgamation of styles that categorised Nigerian theatre of the time, as observed by Banham *et al* who say,

If there is an underlying aesthetic in contemporary Nigerian theatre, it is the way in which quite disparate styles are effortlessly combined in performance. Life is presented on stage, directly; but it is mediated by symbolic representations of a further or other reality.

(Banham et al., 1994)

Unlike his numerous productions in Nigeria, this venture had no producing or administrative responsibilities for Mike, thus enabling him to focus all his energies on solely directing, thereby nestling his potential for the craft. Given the number of new experiences, including encountering a different strand of African diasporic community, that consisted of 'Black' British identities with African ancestry and Caribbean cultural roots, Mike was able to expand further his initial quest of using theatre to tell African and African diasporic stories. Mike recalls that '[t]he production represents an amalgamation of my experiences both in terms of aesthetic and artistic ambitions as well as ideologically closing the gap of cultural comprehension between cultures.' (2010).

My personal encounter with this production in terms of its impact was felt largely in its 'authentic' representation of an African theatrical expression within a British context. This notion of 'authenticity' was measured against my personal intuitive response that then as a theatre arts student had not experienced anything similar on the British cultural/theatre landscape. The emotional and

physical recognition of style and form used in this production resonated with and amplified my connection with an 'other' space. This production arrived at a time when 'Black British theatre, then, dominated by a Caribbean experience in Britain was in a state of decline and apathy following major funding cuts to Black British Theatre companies. The production was able to inject a much-needed boost onto the British cultural scene and thus marking the beginnings of a shift on the British theatre landscape, as discussed in the previous chapter. *Things Fall Apart* highlighted the presence of talented African diasporic artists who were desirous of alternative expressions of their cultural heritage on British stages.

Being new to the British theatrical experience, Mike studied early on the differences between the British theatrical environments, steeped in literary traditions as compared to the total theatricality in Nigeria. He observed that,

In Britain particularly the "words" are the "thing". They must be "clever" and packaged in a certain way that speaks to the English sensibility for gab. With these criteria there is little crossover. I require more. Dance, song and music and social relevance are central to my needs for producing theatre. And when I speak of these extra textural activities I am not experiencing them in the western musical format. I need them as a vehicle for driving the play and as an anchor for the robustness that my sensibilities require of a theatrical outing. (2010, Personal Interview)

Clearly undaunted by the limitations of the traditions of British theatre, Mike embarked on this production, which was set up with the aim and hope to explore a contemporary mode of expression for African theatre, drawing on the creative

talents of indigenous Nigerians living in Britain and African diasporic artists. The level of collaboration involved in this production, that crossed and blurred geographical, cultural and ethnic boundaries, because of the make-up of the cast and crew, was a unique opportunity and an essential element that seems to govern Mike's theatre practice.

Mike drew on the African performance practice of storytelling, which was successfully transported to function in this collaborative context. Technical requirements called for a minimalist set. Three flats, positioned round the back of the stage, representing a cyclorama were painted with symbolic images framing the open space filled with real sand. Using song, dance and music as a vehicle, the narrative of *Things Fall Apart* was divided amongst the ensemble cast who took it in turns to re-enact the classic tale of Okonkwo and the fate of his Igbo clan.

The ensemble of African diasporic artists Mike worked with on this production ignited a yearning in him to understand what the 'Black' British experience meant, which led to the idea of CA being incorporated in Britain. He explains that '[t]he bond between myself and participants of the production on the British side has been unshakeable till today and whatever successes CA has in the UK is largely owed to that experience'. (Mike, 2010)

Following the success of the LIFT season, Mike and Bandele-Thomas collaborated again, this time transposing Federico Garcia Lorca's 1934 tragedy, *Yerma* that looks at the universal theme of infertility into a Northern Nigerian setting. The strict cultural morals and beliefs of this community mean an anguished and purposeless life for a young woman in a childless marriage. Returning to the mission of using theatre for social change, this scripted



production was approached in the same manner that Mike works with his two companies back 'home' in Nigeria. His approach to directing or what Mike calls 'collective creations', takes into account every facet needed to realize the production from 'the time for creating the product, the varied and unique attitudes and mores of those involved, the space and its relationship to what defines it, the budget, the intent, and how these factors are balanced towards an apparent end result if only peripheral' (Mike, 1996) attest to the participatory nature of his theatre practice, defined by the company manager as 'the collective process of theatre making'. (Shaskan, 2012) Rooted in a theatre for development ethos, which acknowledges its utility for transformation, Mike's theatre strives to maintain an artistic value, using music, song, dance and movement as its primary resource, to create a hybrid form, which combines the essence of two distinct styles. In keeping with this unique practice, his auditions and rehearsals always take the form of workshops. The notion behind this was to search for and cast a 'company member' as opposed to casting a role, initially. The cast of *Yerma* was put through an exploratory stage of reading the script with different cast members reading different roles, even crossing genders in a bid to explore all possibilities to a role, and then through a collective process, the roles are assigned. With the emphasis of the work placed on creating a 'collective', the cast and crew are often referred to as 'the family'. Continually referencing TFD, where the community is at the heart of the work, Mike's recreation of a community in his rehearsal room aligns with Oga Steve Abah's notion of adjusting method and context in TFD work.

The manner and structure of popular communication for change must therefore respond to the context in which the work is taking

place: for it is determined by the nature of the society, community and target groups in which one is working. (Abah, 2004:45)

Mike's rehearsal room transformed into a community and operated in the same manner as he would in a TFD production. The service to the community, or actors in this case, is a strong element in the creative process. The company manager explains that they work on the premise 'and the idea that we should be giving back to our artistes and that it should be an experience that feeds them. It shouldn't be just another job, it should be an experience that feeds them artistically and spiritually'. (Shaskan, 2012, Personal Interview) As a result, the powerful ensemble performance that came out of this process toured to regional venues in Britain as well as the International Edinburgh Festival, and in the process winning a Theatrical Management Association Award (TMA).

The next production, *Sense of Belonging (Tale of Ikpiko)* -2002/2003 - created by Mike and PWS in Nigeria, marked the beginning of a shift in the trajectory of Mike's theatre in Britain. Remaining firm in its mission, the needs of the 'community' in Britain were the elements that had changed. No longer able to access whole communities in the traditional sense of the word, like he did in Nigeria where the emphasis on the foundation of domestic well-being lay with the community, Mike has had to think creatively to find the unorthodox communities that clearly exist in all societies. As he says:

In terms of our TFD work I find that there are not villages in which we can meet with the entire community under the village tree like back home. Rather we look for "kept" communities such as schools, youth centres or prisons and such to have a communal

base for implementing projects for sustainable social change.

(2010)

Mike's mission then, in his early years in Britain, was shifting in consonance with and because of the needs of the communities he was working in.

*Sense of Belonging* continued the successful formula of collective theatre making, this time incorporating the broader element of working in partnership with identified support groups with specific communities. The charities Sisterhelp and Womankind, who are women rights and development non- governmental organisations (NGOs) based in Britain, supported this production in creating awareness about Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Britain. This production had originally been a ground-breaking production for PSW in Nigeria, in 1996 because of its role in campaigning for the anti-FGM bill to be passed in the Yoruba village of Oluwole in Nigeria following the impact of their production and interaction in that community. Buoyed by this successful experience, in Nigeria, Mike and the company wanted to transfer the same success to the British context. Given that FGM is identified as a cultural practice involving over 92 million girls on the African continent, (World Health Organisation, 2010), its ideological hold is embedded within religious, moral and social codes within the communities which makes it a complex practice to engage with. As stated earlier, Mike and PSW were successful after extensive research and interaction with communities to eventually use their theatre to effect the necessary social change within that community. The company now established in Britain wanted their work to engage at that fundamental level with communities here in Britain too. The ability to draw on the past experiences of the company's work has proved invaluable in projects that the company have undertaken since its establishment

in Britain. Shaskan, for example, reveals in a personal interview a particularly poignant event from PSW's archives, of a circumciser of high status in one of the communities in Nigeria. She had known nothing else and was held in high regard in her community, where she learnt the skill of circumcision from her mother and her mother's mother. She strongly believed that an uncircumcised woman was 'dirty,' 'a dog'. She watched PSW's production, which involved a scene where a pregnant woman was circumcised. For the first time the circumciser was put in the position of empathising with a woman being circumcised as she screamed in pain. Interviewed immediately after the play, she said: 'in that theatre, she changed. She said I have to stop. I cannot do this anymore.' (2012). Proving that drama is a powerful tool, Abah further encapsulates its potential.

Performance art is an especially effective tool for carrying out research that aims to raise consciousness, foster local knowledge and spark social action because it opens a space for dialogue that practically anyone, regardless of background, can enter. Drama does not discriminate against the illiterate, and allows people to express their views in their own unique language and manner.(Abah and Okwori, 18th December, 2009)

The impact that PSW had on this community, by succeeding in changing fundamental beliefs of significant individuals within the community, who although in the process lost substantial income- circumcision proved to have been a lucrative trade/culture, were helped by the company to acquire or learn new trades to replace the lost income, thereby sustaining the change within the community.

One can see the effectiveness and relevance of such an interaction within the context of rural Nigeria, but I must confess, upon, watching the production at the Arcola Theatre, I did question its relevance to a largely 'Black' British audience. The practice seemed far removed from the context of Britain, but over and above that it allows its audience who are new to this worldview an opportunity to see and appreciate other communities. This notion has cut across all the work in this study.

Further research, for instance has proved the prevalence of the practice of FGM right here in Britain, within minority communities. The government's refugee programme in 2003 introduced a new African community into British society. Refugees from Somalia, for example, practice FGM regularly, and do not stop the practice simply because they are now in Britain. It was known to the company that young girls were being circumcised on the NHS in the local Homerton Hospital, close to the Arcola Theatre where the production ran. Laws had been passed to prevent this.<sup>44</sup> Also known to the company was the fact that parents were sending their young girls home to be circumcised. I was clearly unaware of this phenomenon taking place under the radar, making the relevance and urgency of the production to suddenly become starkly clear. The Nigerian setting perhaps is what limits relating the production to Britain, but keeping in mind the level of conspiracy and collusion surrounding this taboo practice, certainly in Britain, a more direct approach might not have been successful. The

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<sup>44</sup> FGM has been a criminal offence in Britain since 1985, carrying a 5 year jail sentence. It was since increased to the maximum sentence of 14 years in 2003 when the Act was repealed.

The first conviction in Britain has been announced by the Crown Prosecution Service who are due to convict Dr Dhanuson Dharmasena and Hasan Mohamed for committing the crime in Whittington Hospital in London in April 2014. Dr Dharmasena was subsequently acquitted in February 2015.

target community, through the NGO partners, was involved in workshops with CA up and down the country, interacting with them. This production illustrates how essential and fundamental the notion of moving from the stage to the community really is for the company. Mike finds that notably removed from most Western theatrical practices.

As discussed earlier, Mike makes it clear that the process is sometimes more important than the final production which can be viewed as a peripheral by-product of the company's work as against the impact the production will have within that community. This does not however imply that aesthetic and artistic values are neglected. On the contrary, Mike's unique hybrid aesthetic sensibility allows him the opportunity to incorporate the flexibilities that African traditional theatre practices afford as well as achieving the Western notions of cathartic release in his productions. This is demonstrated even more so in *Sense of Belonging* because it is the production, which had related more closely to its original creation. Adaptations had to be made to cater for its British context and audience. The minimalist motif remained in this production too, with regard to set and props. This comes from the requisite of needing to change locations and character quickly within the TFD setting, something which has now evolved into a functional aesthetic that represents a signature of Mike's theatre.

The theatre he creates in Britain consciously reaches back to the influences that have made the most impact on him; namely, the idea of using theatre to create change. The issue based propaganda skits that one associates with theatre for development have taken on a subtler approach, which has been necessitated primarily by the new 'communities' and wide-ranging audience that Mike has come to meet here in Britain. The critical response to this production, particularly

Fiona Mountford's review, reveals an emotional engagement with the piece but also a sense of frustration born from her lack of understanding of the traditions Mike is drawing from as source material. She states:

It is always difficult to argue with heartfelt theatre and few pieces tend, as Chuck Mike's *Sense of Belonging* does, to leave the majority of their cast members in tears... The passion and the cause in this Collective Artistes production are therefore indisputable, but the theatrical execution is far more problematic. Seven unnamed women are, for no adequately explained reason, present at an inquiry into FGM. During a recess in proceedings, the group talk, dance, sing and argue, sharing their own stories or those of loved ones.

Mike's production is certainly strikingly staged, with the almost bare set enlivened by the kaleidoscope of colours in Atlanta Duffy's beautiful costumes made from traditional African cloth. This is no help, however, with the wild lurches in tone or indeed the difficulty of comprehending large sections of the text. What is conveyed clearly, though, is the atmosphere of complicity and collusion, often from the victims themselves, in the societies in which this practice flourishes. (Fiona Mountford, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2003 *The Evening Standard.co.uk*)

The review exemplifies the earlier point made of the need for the production to make an impact within the community it is targeted at. Mike's need to incorporate what he has described earlier as 'extra textural activities' (2010) such as the

dance, movement and music, do not only satisfy his artistic sensibilities in using them to drive the play, they are another level of universal as well as specific vocabulary for the audience to engage with the production. In some instances, they become familiar modes of language. Mountford's conclusion, despite moments of opacity during the product, was able to arrive at the message of the play and leave with a better sense of the complexities of a community and a practice she knows little about. This fulfils Mike's objective for his theatrical events, explaining that: 'Surrounding each piece of work I put on stage here, there's always a socio-political-economical context.'(2010) Because of that multi-functional context that he brings to his productions, Mike hopes the performance stays with audience members after they leave.

CA's most recent production, which I was able to watch only in its development stage and through a recording at Soho theatre, *Zhe: [noun] Undefined* (2012) is similar to *Sense of Belonging* in its potential for outcomes. Created by Mike and two company members, Antonia Kemi Coker and Tonderai Munyevu, this autobiographical play, deals with the sensitive issues of gender, sexual orientation and identity in the lives of two young British Africans in the diaspora. The word *Zhe* refers to the idea of gender-neutrality and references the androgyny that unites both performers of the different sexes. Mike felt this was a human story that was vital for creating awareness about gender and sexual orientation. *Zhe* had its genesis some fifteen years prior to the production, through a series of explorations involving primarily Coker, whose life story had fascinated Mike since their encounter in *Things Fall Apart*. Speaking at a post-show discussion at a preview of this performance, Coker confirms her reluctance



and Mike's encouragement in telling her unique personal narrative surrounding her gender, sexuality and her identity. Whilst working with Mike and the company on other productions, including *Yerma*, *Sense of Belonging* and *The African Company Presents Richard III*, Mike was steadily building the trust and foundations upon which Coker could safely explore her identity. This highlights Mike's working ethos, particularly when it involves original productions he has created where the process is given the time it needs to allow the work to develop in its own time without getting caught up in the constraints of deadlines and budgets. He told me,

I have grown a basic philosophy while working in the theatre that for some seems almost esoteric. This is that the piece, idea – has a life of its own and will emerge of its own free will if we as participants just submit to it and allow it to do so in its own course, it will emerge truthfully. What this means is that we cannot force it beyond its own time and that we need to trust that it will happen and the outcome will be what it needs to be. We need only trust in this for a truthful creative experience.

(2010, Personal Interview)

In 2009 a catalyst presented itself in the person of Tonderai Munyevu, a Zimbabwean-born male performer who had come to a Collective Artistes' audition and was mistaken/misread as female, intriguingly, by Coker. This provoked a friendship built primarily on the complexities and experiences of androgyny that the pair had in common, and which also proved to be a useful starting point for a creative exploration of their personal narratives. Through a

series of individual interviews given to Mike by Coker and Munyevu, the bare bones of *Zhe* came together, using their own words.

The 'mistake' opens the performance, and is treated delicately and with simplicity, a feature that runs through this production that addresses such personal material: 'He is not a she, he is a he' (*Zhe*, 2013) reveals Munyevu at the opening of the production. Coker's apology, we are told, 'glanced the ear and bypassed the heart' (Jerue, 2013) as it explains that she too 'had had a lifetime of people thinking I am who I am not'.(2013) The pair under the direction of Mike proceeded to unpick the ambiguities inherent in gender, sexual orientation and identity told through their personal life stories.

The chosen storytelling form was a particularly useful genre for this production, as it allowed for the direct address to the audience, which was essential in creating the much-needed intimacy. Mike adapts the form to function more effectively for the purposes of this production by striving for a level of exactness, particularly in speech, that conveyed far more than what was actually said. The piece used repetition in particular to highlight the difficult or painful moments in the play where it spoke from a place beyond language, engaging with a theatrical collage of poetry, music and movement. This feature was also aided by the specifics of the physicality of the performers, which created images that were quickly dissolved, an element that heightened the pace of the piece. The flexibility usually associated with storytelling is conveyed in the fluid transitions from one narrative to the other, with each performer claiming ownership of their narrative whilst the other supports them, as they create a whole.

The androgyny of the two performers, encapsulated in their costume of matching black trousers and zip-through hooded jackets and coloured scarfs, was

unpacked further in the crossing of roles and gender in the intricate weaving and telling of their two narratives. Their similarity was sometimes demonstrated in the simultaneous narrated speeches, or the finishing off of each other's sentences, whilst still managing to maintain their individual and very distinctive identities.

Munyevu's story begins in Harare, Zimbabwe and through him we encounter the flamboyant figure of his mother who modeled herself on Dina Carroll and Joan Collins, actresses in the 1980's cult soap programme, *Dynasty*. His father's sense of dress was equally loud: 'He wore pink shirts way before anybody wore pick shirts'. (Jerue, 2013 Recording at Soho Theatre) Munyevu interestingly reveals a very tolerant and accepting Zimbabwe, the land of his birth, in his recounting of his childhood and the journey of his sexual identity. This is particularly interesting against the backdrop of hate and homophobia that is currently associated with many nations on the African Continent. There exists, it seems, in Zimbabwe, a space for androgyny and questions about sexual identity to be considered, based on Munyevu's experiences. He explains, for instance, the acceptance of his testosterone deficiency as a young boy by his peers who called him 'Choza, it means a boy who is really a girl. An affectionate nickname, a celebration of me, somehow a name that fit'. (Jerue, 2013) Munyevu's deficiency gave him the physical appearance of a female. The beginning of his awareness that he 'had a way with men that wasn't just masculine' (2013) was during his time at an all-boys boarding school when he became enamored of his class teacher, an experience that wasn't sexual. Anonymous individuals who appeared and disappeared from his bed at school thrust his sexual awareness upon him and the practice became a habit that he too visited on other boys.

Coker, by contrast, was born and bred in Britain with parents from Nigeria. Her father brought her up after her mother left to Nigeria following an abusive marriage, with the promise that her daughter, Antonia, would be sent on to her. She is still waiting. We learn of the racism Coker faced in her neighbourhood of Plaistow in East London, the confusion of being told to 'go back to your own country' when Plaistow and Britain was the only country she knew. She shares her sexual abuse with us, from a family friend, her moving into care and later a hostel. We learn of her love for theatre and discovering her sexual orientation, which sent her scurrying under a table.

The gender crisis for both parties is treated simply as another event in their narrative of growing up as Mike's cultivated technique of making the strange familiar was used efficiently, without making the crisis the reason for the production. What makes this production a success is its ability to free the actors from the burden of race, to move beyond the obvious clichés that its broad themes throw up, such as discrimination, and minority communities and their engagement with different sexual orientations to finding an economically telling the essence of each story. Ideally, the colour or culture of the actors should be incidental and not the cause, as much as it might be the inspiration for what the actors do. This is shown in the skill with which the collaboration between the performers and Mike was so carefully crafted. The luxury of privacy that actors have to be able to transform into other characters whilst keeping their personal lives protected, is denied this pair as they courageously lay bare very personal and revealing experiences of their lives. "The battle between the two contradictory notions: the actor's "internal belief in her role" and her "external performance technique"(Cohen, 2013, p. 3) finds a marriage. As actors they

perform themselves, even more so than the ‘monodramatists’ in Chapter Three do. They perform and testify through their narratives and it is clear to see how the process of reliving their lives, the time it has taken to develop the production has paid off. The ownership of their narrative and the claiming of the space to tell it on a stage in front of strangers shows their resolve and self-acceptance of who they are, regardless of how others see or choose to define them.

Their reason for sharing such personal stories was primarily to help other people who might be going through what they have experienced. This returns us to the mission of the company to use its theatre to tell diverse stories about Africans in the diaspora and to help and effect change. This play gives permission to another group of people who feel neglected to feel like they have a space to be themselves. The play is essentially about human rights, the fluidity of sexuality and identity and the complications of gender in a society where gender is something that is taken for granted and assigned to people based on how they are expected to behave based on their assigned gender. Part of the play’s purpose is to pose the question of what happens when what an individual feels goes against the norms of that gender? This is the experience of the actors in *Zhe* who reveal the often difficult, but also varied social experiences growing up, as well as their sense of solidarity in accepting and owning their identities.

In order to create vital awareness about Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, (LGTB) issues, CA partnered with refugee and asylum groups, using the personal experiences of the two actors to explore the complexities of culture, gender, sexuality and identity. Through a process of questionnaires, post-show discussions, and even the use of social media, CA collects information, reactions to and comments on their production. Furthering the outreach strategy to take in

current technology, a blog has been set up, inviting individuals to post their stories on the company's page; workshops are also being offered to enable people to interact in a supporting environment.

## **The Partnerships**

Since his involvement in the LIFT season, which had introduced him to the different dynamics of British culture, and Africa's diaspora in Britain, Mike has managed to build a number of local partnerships aimed at helping him fulfil his mission to use theatre for social change. Other partnerships have also come along, such as the relationship between Mike and Fifth Amendment and The Theatre Chipping Norton, who housed and co-produced *Yerma* during its regional tour. The theatre's director at the time expresses the positive response from that production which led on to the commissioning of *Trojan Women-Women of Owu*. (2004)

The clamour for the director Chuck Mike and his performers to tackle a classic Greek play started immediately after the premier in 2001 of the production of *Yerma* at The Theatre Chipping Norton. It was the members of the audience throughout the tour ... who repeatedly asked the question how it is this British African company can enact a poetic chorus for women with such perfect clarity and drama. ((Malcolm, 2004)

The evidence that his work is specific but speaks to universal themes and possesses a high level of art is present in this quote. Working together with Mike,

Malcolm made contact with Femi Osofisan, well-known to Mike, to commission the play, which was produced in partnership with the theatre. The following year, CA, under the Decibel Arts Council funded Bite 05, a Young Vic initiative, under the festival title *Young Genius*, invited the company to put on Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963). The initiative was celebrating early works of established writers; *The Lion and the Jewel*, was written by Soyinka at the age of only 23.

The opportunity to tour productions to national and international theatre houses, provided CA and Mike with the occasion to showcase African work, presented by a collective of African and African diasporic artists, to a wider spectrum of peoples proving that they exist in other ways than usually typified. This registers a new sense of awareness that Africans do have immense value and importance as a people as any other and that their theatre can project this reality. As is common practice, all the productions had workshops alongside them, another medium through which Mike could change perceptions of African culture and present universal themes.

In the four years between *The Lion and the Jewel* and CA's next production, the company focused its attentions on connecting their work more directly with the youth in their communities. Mike explains the links with his foundation companies in Nigeria:

The mission of PSW is also embroiled in CA/UK thinking through our Theatre for Development programming and work with youth. There is the notion that theatre can impact change. There is also the concern that youth in our theatre can progress into the main stage work and unlike most other companies this has been evident in our activity. (2010)

CA's work with young people sets it apart from other African diasporic companies because of the structures that it has put in place to engage with the youth in its communities. The Social Change Projects is an example of one of the structures, set up in the form of workshops specifically for young people to identify contentious issues and see how they can use theatre to solve them. It has a mentoring scheme known as *Drama Works*, which provides training in the arts for directors, writers and performers. The young people are given the opportunity to work with professional actors who are brought in and directed in plays written by the young people. These young people sometimes become involved in CA's major productions either backstage or even on stage. An example was seen in the company's production of *African Company Presents Richard III* in which one of the young people appeared on stage with the professional company, thus giving them the opportunity to experience the professional world not only from back stage where they are involved, but in the live event too. This experience is intended to give the young people a sense of ownership in the contribution they make to the production.

CA's work in this regard of using the theatre, not only as a way of articulating identity by introducing the young people to African performance techniques, they are also using TFD which underpins their work to engage their time in more productively and in a creative way. This way of making theatre and asserting of identity is transferred to the community through these valuable outreach programmes, which is a very significant development in the theatre coming from the African diasporic community. CA's main stage programmes present the most public face of a largely holistic approach to theatre making, that



of fully integrating education, training and community work into its practice. CA has been more successful with the youth programme in terms of funding and it is what sustains the company since 2011 when it lost its major funding from the Arts Council of Britain.

### **International CA**

Looking at CA's last three productions, there is a distinct shift in the manner in which it now tells its stories. The company has expanded its outlook by harnessing all the cultural experiences that have become available to it. This has largely been through its artistic director. The shift has been from telling African cultural narratives from an African perspective for a universal audience to recognising the diversity of 'Africanness' and the internationalism and international connections that the company has. *The African Company Presents Richard III* (2009) by Carlyle Brown, Jeff Stetson's *The Meeting* (2010) and *Zhe* all look at blackness/Africaness across international boundaries and contexts, and how internationalism shapes contemporary African and African diasporic identity. With *The African Company*, it was about African Americans, before there was such a concept, a time when people were still from the islands, from England, from Africa and they were all, as the playwright Brown describes them, trying "To create a unified culture, create a culture in a place where culture is denied them. Creating a common social framework to live together' (Brown, 2009, company website).

This play is based on the predominantly overlooked history of America's first black theatre company established in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the

actor, William Brown. It depicts the discrimination and racism faced by members of the company as they strived to define themselves in antebellum America. Despite the shortcomings of Carlyle Brown's script in terms of character development and plausibility of some events, Mike's interpretation manages to create strong links with the African continent, which resonates with Okagbue's assessment of how African slaves survived the cruelty of the New World. He states that: "A majority clung on to their African cultures, using these as a basis for negotiating their positions in the new social and cultural order in which they found themselves." (Okagbue, 2004:431) This notion is written in to the script, but Mike's personal experience and engagement at a fundamental level with Nigerian culture enabled him to centralise this feature in his production.<sup>45</sup> It is through Mike's choice of style and form of storytelling and its effect on the content of the play that we can see the crossing of not only geographical boundaries, but also conventional technicalities, particularly in the use of space in this play. This is achieved chiefly through the use of music, the talking drum in particular, played by the Caribbean character, Papa Shakespeare, to connect and weave its way through and around the scenes in the play, and functioning as a strong feature that seamlessly joined the fractured identities in this production and rooting them to the African continent.

With regards to *The Meeting*, that chronicled the fictitious encounter between the Civil Rights leader, Rev. Martin Luther King and the radical Nation of Islam activist, Malcolm X<sup>46</sup>, the play explored the divergent paths that these two

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<sup>45</sup> This feature is discussed in more detail in my Review article in *African Performance Review* (2009 Vol. 3 No. 1 p 113-117)

<sup>46</sup> Malcolm renounced the Nation of Islam when he became disillusioned with Elijah Mohammed's conduct in seducing women and fathering children

men walked in the fight for freedom for African Americans in the United States. Both were fully aware, that either path would cost them their lives. A real effort was made by CA to make the distinct connection between how these two leaders influenced not only America but also Britain and the wider continent of Africa. The political scope of the production was broadened; using what an interviewer has called 'tactics beyond the stage to garner interest for shows'. (Richmond University website) Mike set up an interactive exhibition; a feature he also used in *The African Company Presents Richard III*; the exhibition displayed selected images and relevant information about the Civil Rights period as well as parallels of similar activities in Britain and how they resonated in African nations at the time. This practice of representation was applying the production of meaning to the exhibition of not only the carefully selected artefacts and pictures but Mike went further to add a performance element to this experience. Before the audience was 'allowed' to enter the auditoria, for instance, armed guards barked orders at them to march into the theatre space, recreating for the audience the historical realities of segregation within the play. In so doing, this device became part of the storytelling- the audience was transformed into participants, heightening their intuitive response to the production, which enabled them to engage in discussions at the end of the performance. The interaction was extended to the creation of a forum where local Members of Parliament were invited to participate in workshops set up by the company after the productions. These significant additions planted a more expansive outlook in the minds of the audience who were able to assess the power relations at stake and make

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within the faith. See (X et al., 1968) Malcolm set up his own religious organisation, the Muslim Mosque Inc.

connections with/between the play and their location of Britain. In this way, Mike can be said to have structured and challenged the way the audience looked at African diasporic identities in the way that Hall discusses it. He states that 'we are guided to look at a person/ people/ community in a particular way, governed by those in power'.(Hall, 1997, p 20)

The most recent production of *Zhe* discussed above illustrates the dynamism of African diasporic identities as narrated by the two actors. Their rites of passage of growing up, be it in a Zimbabwean boarding school or on the racist streets of East London in the 1970s whilst navigating a mediated Nigerian cultural experience in Britain, demonstrates the resilience of African diasporic identities. What Mike's production does is to dispel the notion of victimhood that is often visible in interactions between minority communities living amongst more dominant cultures. The minority community usually dwells on the fact of their difference as an obstacle to being seen as equal or the same. This production normalises their different cultural heritages by its choice of presentation. The two actors' autobiographical narration seemed to remove the element of exoticism usually associated with African diasporic work. Inua Ellams' observation below on touring his work internationally highlights what a lot of African diasporic artists hope to achieve with their work, especially within the context of Britain.

I think the European, Indian and Australian audiences who have seen and loved the play, bought their tickets with a cultural curiosity and with questions about contemporary Nigerian manhood and what that means in a British context. I think they left realising that the supposed differences do not really exist, and

this unraveling, this sense of having glimpsed a new way in which we are all the same, is enough to justify and enjoy the spectacle of a black Nigerian man telling his own creation myth.' (in Shields, 2013)

Herein then is the encapsulation of the paradox of the universality of the specifics that unites the African diasporic dramatists in this study. Erik Knudsen's Keynote Address recognizes this too, when he says 'I happen to believe that the more personal one gets the more universal one gets'. (Knudsen, 2014)

The issue of identity implied especially in the three plays takes into account CA's new shift in its own identity politics that is driven by Mike's personal experience of crossing continents and cultures. The synergy of those two worlds is the creation of a space in which Mike can explore the telling of stories that originate from specific cultures and ethnicities but at root have a universal appeal.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion then, Okagbue states 'thus we see that Africa managed to survive in the souls of its enslaved and dispersed children to provide them, not only with mechanisms for survival, but also with tools for fashioning a new identity for a new environment'. (Okagbue, 2004: 430) The African diasporic artists under study in this thesis have demonstrated in their multifarious ways the shifting and evolving ways in which they negotiate and represent African diasporic characters and identities in their work on the stages of Britain. The most exciting productions and characters and identities are the ones in which there exists an interrogation and a challenge to the interpretation of traditional western

approaches to theatre making and performance. By deploying African performance theories/principles combined with Western concepts, African diasporic theatre ultimately creates a hybridised cultural product that highlights the transitional and shifting modes of Africa's diaspora. Gilroy's analysis of Africa's diaspora in Britain notes that '[t]he history of the Black Atlantic yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being made'. (Gilroy, 1993:39) This transitional nature is evidenced in the developmental trajectories of all the dramatists studied, all of whom showed a resistance to being forced into creating expected modes of theatre practice. This is clearly seen in all the work of the featured dramatists either through style, form or subject matter, which falls in line with the notion of speaking for themselves and speaking their own truths. There is a sense that some dramatists did not want to follow the expected forebears of African diaspora theatre in Britain, mainly because they did not consider them their forebears. Those dramatists continue to carve out a niche for themselves. The work of Debbie Tucker Green, Mojisola Adebayo, Inua Ellams, Lemn Sissay, Collective Artistes, in particular come to mind.

The realisation that no one will say what one wants to say and how one wants to say it is the fact and the inspiration that instigated this research. There is a collective realisation that silence adds to the misrepresentation and neglect of African diasporic identity within the British cultural field, hence the proliferation of African diasporic work currently on the British landscape. The putting on of the plays by the African diasporic companies, writing them by the playwrights and performing them by the monodramatists and actors are all acts of self-empowerment. An act of taking control of their artistic practice and particularly

for the monodramatists and the two companies who have a greater control of the artistic product from conception to delivery, of course whilst working with other collaborators, is vital to sustaining the practice. This notion of ownership has grown out of resistance from the so-called mainstream and a protest at the hegemonic power structures of British society, theatre and the arts. Hall rightly foresaw and pointed to the phenomenon that has come to its fruition over the period covered by this research that 'Young black cultural practitioners and critics in Britain are increasingly coming to acknowledge and explore in their work this 'diasporic aesthetic' and its formation in the post-colonial experience'.(Hall, 1994:393)

Collectively, the work of the African diasporic dramatists, through the multiplicity of themes, subject matter and identities, has variously been able to include those marginalised from the British cultural centre. They have made history by rejecting their invisibility and making African diasporic identity, its representation, presentation and performance visible and accessible on British stages. They have placed this activity from the periphery in the centre and on their own terms.

## PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

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Agbaje, Bola. Greenwich, London, February 2010

Elufowoju Jnr, Femi. Islington London, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2009

Elufowoju Jnr, Femi. Soho Theatre, London, 2008

Elufowoju Jnr, Femi. Oval Theatre, London 2011

Mike, Chuck. (email) July 2010

Shaskan, Victoria. Pleasance Theatre, London, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012

## PRODUCTIONS VIEWED

*Belong* by Bola Agbaje ( 2010 ) Directed by Indhu Rubasingham [Royal Court. 30<sup>th</sup> April]

*Detaining Justice* by Bola Agbaje (2009) Directed by Indhu Rubasingham [The Tricycle Theatre. 29<sup>th</sup> November]

*Iya Ile* by Oladipo Agboluaje (2009) Directed by Femi Elufowoju Jnr.  
[Soho Theatre. 24<sup>th</sup> May]

*The Hounding of David Oluwale* by Oladipo Agboluaje. (2009) Directed by Dawn Walton [Hackney Empire. 2<sup>nd</sup> February]

*The African Company Presents Richard III* by Carlyle Brown (2009) Directed by Chuck Mike. [Greenwich Theatre. 18<sup>th</sup> February]



*The epic adventure of NHAMO the Manyika warrior and his sexy wife Chipo* by Denton Chikura (2013) Directed by Lucian Msamati [Tricycle Theatre 7<sup>th</sup> August 2013]

*The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale* by Inua Ellams (2010) Directed by Thierry Lawson  
[The Cottesloe at the National Theatre 11<sup>th</sup> February ]

*Untitled* by Inua Ellams (2010) Directed by Thierry Lawson [Soho Theatre. 5<sup>th</sup> October]

*Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* by Errol John (2012) Directed by Michael Buffong [The Cottesloe The National Theatre 13<sup>th</sup> March.]

*Eastate Walls* by Arinze Kene (2010) Directed by Ché Walker [The Oval House 28<sup>th</sup> September]

*Seize the Day* by Kwame Kwei-Armah (2009) Directed by Kwame Kwei Armah  
[Tricycle Theatre. 22<sup>nd</sup> October]

*Zhe: [noun] Undefined* by Chuck Mike (2012) Directed by Chuck Mike  
[Canada Water 2012]

*Egusi Soup* by Janice Okoh (2012) Directed by Paul Bourne  
[Soho Theatre 8<sup>th</sup> June]

*The Gods Are Not To Blame* by Ola Rotimi (2005) Directed by Femi Elufowoju Jnr.  
[Arcola Theatre 2005.]

*Why I Don't Hate White People* by Lemn Sissay (2009) Directed by John E McGrath  
[Lyric Studio Hammersmith]

*Wedlock of the Gods* by ZuluSofola written in 1972 Directed by Wale Ojo  
[performed at the Cochrane Theatre in 2010.]

*Pandora's Box* by Ade Solanke(2012) Directed by Ola Animashawun

[ Arcola Tent. 9<sup>th</sup> May]

*The Meeting* by Jeff Stetson (2010) Directed by Chuck Mike

[The Pleasance Theatre.]

*Death of a King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka (2010) Directed by Rufus Norris The

[Olivier at The National Theatre. 13<sup>th</sup> April ]

*The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka (2005) Directed by Chuck Mike

[The Pit at The Barbican 2005]

*Fela!* The Olivier at The National Theatre. Directed by Bill T Jones

*Random* by debbie tucker green. (2010) Directed by Sacha Wares [The Royal Court Theatre Local -Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre 27<sup>th</sup> March ]

*truth and reconciliation* by debbie tucker green (2011) Directed by debbie tucker green. [The Royal Court Theatre 11<sup>th</sup> September ]

*Category B.* by Roy Williams (2009) Directed by Paulette Randall [Tricycle Theatre 14<sup>TH</sup> October]

*Sucker Punch* by Roy Williams June (2010) Directed by Sacha Wares

[The Royal Court. 12th June]

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