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# **Kwame Kwei-Armah's African American Inspired Triptych**

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## **Introduction**

Kwame Kwei-Armah, né Ian Roberts, was born in England in 1967 to Grenadian parents and grew up in Southall, London. He attended the Barbara Speake Stage School as a child and began his adult career as an actor. Kwei-Armah achieved a national profile playing the role of paramedic Finlay Newton in the BBC's television programme *Casualty* from 1999 to 2004. Kwei-Armah consolidated his presence in television through appearances in *Comic Relief Does Fame Academy* (BBC, 2003), as a regular on panellist shows such as *Newsnight Review* (BBC) and as a documentary presenter on the series *On Tour with the Queen* (Channel 4, 2009).

Kwei-Armah also diversified into writing and directing. He wrote his début play, *A Bitter Herb* (2001) in 1999, which was produced in 2001 at the Bristol Old Vic. Prior to that, his play *Big Nose* (2001), based on Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* and co-written with Chris Monks, opened at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry in 1999. That same year, his soul musical *Hold On* (2001), then entitled *Blues Brother, Soul Sister*, premiered at the Bristol Old Vic before touring nationally. In 2003, *Elmina's Kitchen* premiered at the National Theatre's Cottesloe theatre, before transferring to the Garrick Theatre in 2005, where it became the first drama by a black British-born writer to be staged in the commercial West End. *Elmina's Kitchen* (2009) was also performed in Baltimore and Chicago, making it one of a handful of plays written by British-born blacks to have crossed the Atlantic. Kwei-Armah followed *Elmina's Kitchen* with two new plays, both of which also premiered at the Cottesloe: *Fix Up* (2009) in 2004 and *Statement of Regret* (2009) in 2007. Together these three plays comprise what Kwei-Armah refers to as his 'triptych'.<sup>1</sup>

After *Statement of Regret* followed *Let There Be Love* (2009) in 2008 and *Seize the Day* (2009) in 2009, both of which premiered at London's Tricycle theatre and were directed by Kwei-Armah. In 2011, Kwei-Armah relocated to the USA where he became Artistic Director of Center Stage Theater in Baltimore. Despite

this shift in his career, Kwei-Armah continues to write. His latest play, *Beneatha's Place* (unpublished), opened at Centre Stage in 2013, playing in rep with Bruce Norris' *Clybourne Park* (2010). Like Norris' play, *Beneatha's Place* is also inspired by Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959); but, *Beneatha's Place* also responds to *Clybourne Park* in its structure and often shockingly open and humorous debate about race.

Prior to *Beneatha's Place*, Kwei-Armah's plays have largely been set in contemporary London, demonstrating his commitment to representing the contemporary metropolitan black British experience.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Kwei-Armah's relocation to the USA follows a long infatuation with African American politics and culture. Indeed, two African American writers played a decisive role in Kwei-Armah's life: Alex Haley, whose books *Roots* (1976) and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) re-configured Kwei-Armah's identity and honed his political consciousness, and August Wilson, whose work inspired Kwei-Armah to become a playwright and whose style has highly influenced his dramaturgy.

### **African America as cultural, political and symbolic resource**

Whilst growing up, Kwei-Armah felt disconnected from his parents' Caribbean culture and struggled to find his place in Britain. Looking back at his youth, Kwei-Armah expresses a profound sense of dislocation:

When I was young I never had a home. I used to call myself at sixteen famously a 'universal alien'.

When I walked out on the streets in London, they'd say 'Go back home, you black bastard.' When I went to the West Indies they'd say, 'You're English.' When I go to Africa, they say 'Go home. Look at you, Bob Marley.' I'd never had a home until I discovered that I was an African and that actually I was a diasporic African. (Qtd. in Davis, 2006, p. 247)

For a number of black people growing up in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, the paucity of black role models, lack of a mainstream black British cultural presence, no precedent of a critical mass of British-born blacks and a racist environment meant that youths had to look elsewhere for their cultural and political reference points. This, combined with widespread assumptions that blacks born in Britain were not really 'British', opened the door to African American identification, particularly among activists and artists, and coincided with the ascendancy of black American popular culture in the USA and its global dissemination.

The Black Power movement in the USA and its legacy had a fundamental impact on black British political organisation, cultural expression and identity (Gunning and Ward, 2009; Malchow, 2011; Wild, 2008). A key aspect of Black Power politics was an Afrocentric world-view. Afrocentrism has broad interpretations. Tunde Adeleke defines it as a racially essentialist ideology that uses Africa in order 'to advance a monolithic

and homogeneous history, culture, and identity for all blacks, regardless of geographical location' (2009, pp. 10–11). Stephen Howe, on the other hand, highlights its less extreme interpretations that place 'an emphasis on shared African origins among all "black" people, taking a pride in those origins and an interest in African history and culture – or those aspects of New World cultures seen as representing African "survivals" – and a belief that Eurocentric bias has blocked or distorted knowledge of Africans and their cultures' (1998, p. 1). Nevertheless, fundamental to both interpretations is the notion of the African diaspora.

The view of African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans as an African diaspora who share a common origin and cultural similarity with continental Africa emerged as an important ideological accompaniment to black political and cultural discourses that sought to highlight essential differences between blacks and whites in reaction to white racism. In the USA, Black Power's rhetoric of self-determination and solidarity had an equally important cultural dimension, which drew on Africa for inspiration and was applied at the very root of some people's identity. For instance, during the 1960s and 1970s, some individual artists such as Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) and Ntozake Shange (formerly Paulette Williams) rejected their family 'slave names' and adopted names that proclaimed their African ancestry. It was also at this time that a group of radical black artists emerged, who, identifying themselves as members of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), gave artistic representation to Black Power ideology. The principal aim of the playwrights of the BAM was to harness African American urban cultures to their aesthetic and dramaturgy. This was accompanied by a desire to establish continuity with Africa by utilising indigenous cultural forms or 'survivals', which were seen to have their roots in African practices. By the 1970s, these ideas and approaches were brought to popular attention and into the mainstream with the publication of Haley's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976).

It was through *Roots* that Kwei-Armah literally 'discovered' Africa and decided to change his name. When the television series of *Roots* was broadcast in the UK, it had a profound impact on the young Kwei-Armah (then Ian Roberts): 'It was on when I was 11 and I changed my path. It inspired me to start connecting myself with Africa and to find my true identity' (Qtd. in West, 2008). In his 20s, the then Ian Roberts went to Ghana where he traced his family genealogy and, on his return, changed his name to Kwame Kwei-Armah. His identification with Afrocentric ideology was the direct result of his experiences of racism and marginalisation growing up in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s; but crucially, his understanding of it was accessed through African American popular culture.

Kwei-Armah does not explicitly identify with African America. He sees himself as a ‘diasporic African’ occupying an interstitial position between three cultures that define his identity: ‘I call myself tri-cultural: I’m African, Caribbean and British. And each one of those has an equal part to play and I can be one or all at the same time depending on what it is’ (Qtd. in Davis, 2006, p. 240). Kwei-Armah’s plays certainly exhibit a deep awareness of Caribbean and British cultures. More interestingly, they stage the unique ways in which they have intersected and given rise to new cultural hybrids and histories. Arguably, however, Kwei-Armah’s sense of self- and political consciousness as a ‘diasporic African’ is not refracted through the third space of Africa but rather through black America. For instance, his Pan-African, Afrocentric politics stems in the main from African American cultural nationalist thinkers. On the political influences that have shaped his work, he states:

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

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

Similarly, black America has had an important influence on his creative output. In a number of his plays, the African American experience provides the starting point for Kwei-Armah’s engagement with the black situation in Britain: The title of his play *Let There Be Love* is taken from Nat King Cole’s version of the song and uses its message of harmony and compassion in a plea against prejudice and intolerance of minorities in Britain; *Seize the Day* revolves around a candidate in the running to become London’s first black mayor and was inspired by the election of Barack Obama in 2008 as the first African American President of the USA; *Fix Up* was inspired by a book of African American slave narratives that Kwei-Armah received as a gift from his agent on the opening night of *Elmina’s Kitchen*; and in *Statement of Regret*, Kwei-Armah bases the play’s central exploration of the continuing impact of slavery on the black psyche on African American social scientist Dr Joy DeGruy-Leary’s theory of ‘post traumatic slave syndrome’. In *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (2005), DeGruy-Leary argues that the trauma of slavery continues to impact upon the psychological development of black Americans.

The Caribbean experience of racial segregation under colonialism and the hostile and racist treatment of black people in Britain in the post-war period have had, in Kwei-Armah's opinion, a similarly damaging effect on black people in Britain as the USA's history of slavery and segregation/Jim Crow laws: 'My parents' generation, who came here from the Caribbean in the 50s, had what was literally a legal colour bar in the Caribbean before they came here and brought that with them. Even though a lot of people say it's not the same in this country as in America, technically with colonialism, we are running in direct parallel' (2007).

August Wilson, in particular, has been an inspiration. In 1990, Kwei-Armah attended his first August Wilson play. It was *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* at London's Tricycle Theatre where Kwei-Armah admits he became a devotee of Wilson: 'I really got turned on to August in a big, bad way. I was smitten by its spirituality, by its haunting refrain to Africa, its exploration of the pain of the diaspora' (Qtd. in Edwards, 2006). In Wilson, Kwei-Armah would find a powerful role model. In particular, Kwei-Armah's triptych reveals a debt to Wilson's plays in their style, thematic exploration and underlying political belief system. Indeed, it is through Wilson's influence that one can trace the fundamental impression black America has had on Kwei-Armah's dramaturgy.

## **The influence of August Wilson**

Kwei-Armah's inspiration for his triptych of plays was a production of Wilson's *King Hedley II* (2005), which he saw while in Washington, D.C. in 2001.<sup>3</sup> In an interview about *Elmina's Kitchen*, Kwei-Armah recounts: 'I was so touched by the magnitude of this man [August Wilson] and his commitment to talk of and chronicle the African-American experience through the art form [...] I went back to my hotel room that night and said, "O.K., I now know what I want to do; I want to chronicle the black British experience"' (Qtd. in Wolf, 2005). Kwei-Armah's triptych takes its lead from Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle. For the Cycle, Wilson wrote ten plays, each set in Pittsburgh and each representative of a decade in the twentieth century. Similarly, Kwei-Armah sets all three of his plays in London, and, although the plays occur within the first decade of the 2000s, they are divided according to class: *Elmina's Kitchen* – the underclass, *Fix Up* – the working class, and *Statement of Regret* – the middle class.

In *Elmina's Kitchen*, the action takes place in a fast-food takeaway called Elmina's Kitchen in Hackney's notorious 'murder mile'.<sup>4</sup> The play examines the failed attempts of restaurant owner Deli to keep his son Ashley from entering into a life of gangs and crime. Brother Kiyi's black-consciousness bookshop provides the setting for *Fix Up*. In the play, Brother Kiyi's struggle to keep his shop afloat is undermined by his lodger Kwesi, who plans to take over the premises and turn it into a black hair products shop. The conflict yields a

debate centred on whether black self-determination is best won through intellectual or economic means. When Brother Kiyi's mixed-race daughter arrives, looking for the father who gave her up for adoption and for an explanation as to the whereabouts of her mother, a concurrent theme emerges around identity and the importance of historical knowledge and truth if individual and collective freedom is to be achieved. *Statement of Regret* is set in a black political think-tank. The play explores the role of black politics in contemporary British society and the differing generational and ethnic approaches taken by the think-tank's black British, Caribbean and African employees. At the play's core lies an examination of the continued legacy of slavery and its impact upon the black psyche.

Themes of inter-generational conflict and the struggle against racial oppression and for racial identity are as central to Kwei-Armah's work as they are to Wilson's. This has led a number of reviewers to comment on echoes of Wilson's work in Kwei-Armah's plays. For instance, one reviewer wrote of *Statement of Regret*: 'For all that the suited black British characters exist an ocean apart – and an economic class or two above – the black milieu unforgettably chronicled in the US by the late August Wilson, *Statement of Regret* seems in numerous ways to want to answer many of Wilson's ongoing concerns, adapting them for a UK audience. The result makes for an intriguing theatrical case of call-and-response, whereby one feels very directly the cultural and thematic baton being passed from one important dramatist to another' (Wolf, n.d.).

A number of thematic and situational similarities exist between Kwei-Armah's triptych and Wilson's ten-play cycle. In *Elmina's Kitchen*, Deli, an ex-boxer and reformed criminal, is determined to reform his and his son's life. The relationship is reminiscent of Wilson's *Fences* (1986). In *Fences*, Troy, the play's protagonist, like Deli, is an ex-convict and ex-sportsman whose dreams never came true and who struggles in his job to provide enough money for his family. However, the relationship between father and son in *Fences* is reversed in *Elmina's*. In *Fences*, Troy's jealousy prevents his son going to college on a football scholarship. In *Elmina's*, Deli is desperate to remove his son from a world of gangs and violence and his motives are entirely altruistic. Nevertheless, the father-son relationship is destroyed in both plays. The similarity lies in both works' exploration of the themes of failed ambitions, the inability of the father to prevent history repeating itself and of death. When *Elmina's Kitchen* was produced by Center Stage in Baltimore, the reviewer for *The Washington Post* could not help draw a comparison between Kwei-Armah and Wilson: "Elmina's Kitchen" clearly owes a debt to, among other dramatists, Wilson; the play's setting – a funky diner in a marginal black neighbourhood is practically interchangeable with that of Wilson's "Two Trains Running" (Marks, 2005).

However, while the setting may be familiar, the themes of *Two Trains Running* (1992) more closely resemble the issues explored in *Fix Up*. The setting of *Two Trains Running* in the declining neighbourhood of the Hill District in the 1960s, which was once a politically and culturally vibrant black area, resembles Brother Kiyi's struggling black-consciousness bookshop. In both plays, the setting (the restaurant in *Two Trains Running* and Brother Kiyi's bookshop in *Fix Up*) provides the locus for the exploration of a generational and gendered debate on approaches to black political activism and the route to self-determination. *Fix Up*, like *Two Trains Running*, stages an ideological debate through the conflicting viewpoints of its central characters. In *Fix Up*, Brother Kiyi's political stance is based on the belief that historical knowledge should be sought to bring about emancipation from 'mental slavery', whereas Kwesi views economic power as the best means by which to achieve self-determination. Through the mixed-race character of Alice, Kwei-Armah brings a critical voice to the Black Nationalist debate. Alice's arguments, for example her summation of Claude McKay's poem, *If We Must Die*, as 'sexist' because in it 'he only talks about the race by imagining the aspirations of men' (2009a, p. 126), highlight the hypocrisy of black men who critique white oppression yet continue to oppress black women.

In *Two Trains Running*, it is the character of Risa who fulfils this similar function. However, Kwei-Armah complicates the debate by making Alice mixed-race. As a mixed-race, or, as she points out, woman of 'dual heritage' (Kwei-Armah, 2009b, p. 130), her presence in the play not only exposes the male-centricity of black intellectual and political leaders but also her exclusion from black discourses of belonging as a mixed-race woman. She is treated with contempt by Kwesi who accuses mixed-race people of choosing their allegiance to black people only when it suits them:

Kwesi: I don't trust you type of people. I see you coming in here trying be down, so when the white man thinks he's choosing one of us you're there shouting, 'Hey, I'm black.' But you ain't. (Kwei-Armah, 2009b, p. 134)

Alice's search to find her black father and learn the truth about her white birth mother's identity echoes broader political debates raised in the play around racial belonging and highlights how Britain's growing mixed-race population poses a challenge to assumptions of how blackness and whiteness are defined and experienced.<sup>5</sup>

In the same way that a triptych describes three individual yet correlated pieces of art intended to be appreciated together, *Elmina's Kitchen*, *Fix Up* and *Statement of Regret* are linked by a common thematic thread: despite differences in age, gender, birthplace, sexuality and ethnicity, Kwei-Armah asserts that black commonality may be found in a legacy of oppression which began with slavery and continues to manifest itself

in the present. The most striking echo between Kwei-Armah's triptych and Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle is the treatment of the impact of the past on the lives of the characters.<sup>6</sup> The interplay between past and present is a hallmark of Wilson's work and defining element of his dramaturgy. In plays such as *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), *The Piano Lesson* (1990) and *Gem of the Ocean* (2004), Wilson inserts moments which pull apart the unities of time and place and force the characters into a space in which they must confront not only their specific pasts but the collective past of African Americans. It is only by going through this terrifying process that past injustices can begin to heal.

Wilson encases his explorations of the relationship between the past and present within a dramaturgy that melds realism with ritual, and which allows for the collapsing of the time and space of the present with that of the past. This unique style is achieved through a combination of music, African American folk traditions and mythology and ritual re-enactment. In *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, Harry Elam writes: 'Wilson (w)rights history by invoking rites that connect the spiritual, the cultural, the social, and the political, not simply to correct the past but to interpret it in ways that powerfully impact the present. In a space and time outside of time, within the liminal dimensions of theater, Wilson (w)rights history' (2004, p. 4).

In the same way, Kwei-Armah's plays attempt to access a larger cosmos. Although the settings of a café (*Elmina's Kitchen*), a book shop (*Fix Up*) and a small, floundering think-tank (*Statement of Regret*) are parochial, Kwei-Armah inserts devices that link the ordinary people of his plays with the larger historical events of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. The plays' themes in common (inter-generational conflict, the struggle against racial oppression and the search for identity) are placed within a broader continuum of black experience. In *Elmina's Kitchen*, contemporary Hackney is firmly planted on the foundation of slavery. *Elmina's Kitchen*, named after Deli's mother, is also a reference to *Elmina Castle*, built in Ghana by the Portuguese in 1482, which later became a key slave trading post in the early seventeenth century. The reference to the Atlantic slave trade suggests, as Wilson does, that the origins of intra-racial violence lie in the violent historical treatment of blacks by whites. Although the references to slavery point to an underlying cause of the intra-racial violence in the play, Kwei-Armah is also at pains to highlight that it is through knowledge of the history of black suffering and a connection with one's cultural and spiritual roots in Africa that black people in the diaspora can find healing.

Kwei-Armah also adds a 'griot' figure into *Elmina's Kitchen* who appears as a man in the prologue to Act One, and as a woman at the start of Act Two. Such figures occupy the position of mystic and signify the performance's ritual element and link to Africa. In *Elmina's Kitchen*, the griots' appearances symbolise the



play's connection with an original homeland and anchor its aesthetic choices and performance modes in a notion of an 'authentic' Africa to which the diaspora are direct inheritors of its cultural and spiritual traditions. From the onset, the play's prologue situates the play in this historical and ritualised time/space:

The stage is in darkness. A single spotlight slowly reveals a costumed man, standing absolutely still with a gurkel (a one-string African guitar famed for possessing the power to draw out spirits) in his hands [...] The music starts. It is a slow lament-sounding concoction of American blues and traditional African music. The man then covers the length and breadth of the stage flicking handfuls of powder on to the playing area. (Kwei-Armah, 2009a, p. 5)

Traditionally, the West African gurkel is an instrument associated with exorcising malevolent spirits and the sprinkling of powder implies that the space is being consecrated and that a healing is about to take place.

Although there is no interaction between the African figure and the characters in the play, his appearance signifies the presence of the ancestral past in the present and suggests that the play is a ritual re-enactment that will bring about a healing by providing a bridge to the liberating space of the collective memory.

In *Fix Up*, the melding of past and present is more fully realised and embodied. The set, comprising towering bookshelves, encases the performance space. The towers of books draw attention to the substantial contribution of black intellectuals and artists, reinforcing the idea that the play's setting within a black-consciousness bookshop is a space that harbours the thoughts, dreams and creativity of the past contained within the tomes. The most vivid depiction of the melding of past and present occurs when Alice, alone in the shop, begins to read from a volume of slave narratives that Brother Kiyi has recently purchased. These slave narratives provide the catalyst for Alice's self-discovery. Alone in the shop, Alice begins to read aloud about a mixed-race slave from Grenada named Mary Gould. Gould recounts the difficulties facing the mixed-race 'yella' (Kwei-Armah, 2009a, p. 133) children who occupied a social positioning between the black slaves and the plantation owner's white children. Betrayed by her colouring, a visual reminder of the plantation owner's infidelity, Mary Gould was routinely whipped and then sold on by the owner's wife. The extract plunges Alice into the painful truth of her mixed-race ancestors. As she reads, she takes on the voice and persona of Mary Gould. The transformation is accompanied by a shift in the lighting state to a spotlight upon Alice and a physical transformation as Alice's voice changes and takes on a Grenadian accent. Possessed by the 'spirit' of Mary Gould, Alice is forced to confront an aspect of her history that had otherwise been unavailable to her growing up with white foster parents in Somerset. The event further provides Alice with an understanding of her

feeling of dislocation in the present. She is now able to begin the process of coming to terms with growing up without a father and her isolation from her black heritage.

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

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

Kwei-Armah does this deftly through his use of Caribbean and Black London vernacular, calypso and his representation of multiple generations with different cultural backgrounds. Kwei-Armah's self-described 'theatre of my front room' reveals a front room as a transnational hub through which diverse cultures move, meet and form anew. Through his plays' depiction of multiple generations and ethnicities, we are presented with the genealogical diversity of the black community, which encompasses different histories, cultures and geographies. The very specific stage directions, indicating the characters' accents, reveal his acute awareness of language as a primary marker of such complex identities. In *Elmina's Kitchen*, 'Digger's accent swings from his native Grenadian to hard-core Jamaican to authentic black London' (Kwei-Armah, 2009a, p. 6), Anastasia, who is black British, is able to use 'authentic, full-attitude Jamaican at the drop of a hat' (Kwei-Armah, 2009a, p. 17) and Clifton, who is from Trinidad, 'uses his eastern Caribbean accent to full effect when storytelling' (Kwei-Armah, 2009a, p. 34). Identity is further complicated in *Fix Up* through the character of Alice, who is mixed-race but was brought up in an all white environment, and whose physical appearance is in conflict with social assumptions. At one point, she remarks: 'Cos I'm brown, everybody expects me to somehow know everything black. And I'm like, 'Hey, how am I suppose to know what ... raaasclaat means, I'm from Somerset' (Kwei-Armah, 2009b, p. 128). The inclusion of multiple generations fulfils Kwei-Armah's aim to chronicle the black British experience by grounding it within its historical context, which takes into account the remembered history of colonisation, the Caribbean migration of the Windrush generation and the contemporary phenomenon of large-scale African migration to the UK.

## The influence of Black Power politics and the Black Arts Movement

Kwei-Armah's approach to aesthetics is one that combines an educational aspect, demonstrative of his commitment to using theatre as a means to raise the self-awareness of his audience. When asked by Osborne if he agreed with Linton Kwesi Johnson that 'no black writer working in England today can afford "art for art's sake"', Kwei-Armah responds: 'Correct, and I believe in that. Let's not mince words here, my work is political work' (Osborne, 2007a, p. 253). The impact of Wilson on Kwei-Armah's playwriting, alongside cited influences such as Baraka and James Baldwin, places Kwei-Armah as an inheritor of USA's 1960s Black Arts Movement (BAM).

Black Power cultural politics distinctly informs the aesthetic in Kwei-Armah's triptych. His plays are written with a black audience foremost in mind. The absence of white characters in all three plays signals Kwei-Armah's reluctance to enter into a discussion of racism or protest art that centres white people as the principal subjects by attacking them:

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

Following the precedent set by the African American BAM, Kwei-Armah's aesthetic aligns ideological didacticism with black cultural forms in order to provide a vehicle for black-consciousness and self-determination. Like Anastasia's collection of self-help books she passes on to Deli in *Elmina's Kitchen*, the principle of self-help informs the message of Kwei-Armah's plays, which explain their multiple references to black intellectual, political and cultural icons.

In *Fix Up*, the space of the bookshop offers such a resource for the play's characters. In the dramatis personae Kwei-Armah lists three 'non-present characters': Garvey, Baldwin and McKay. Their presence throughout the play is given voice. For instance, at the start of the play, Brother Kiyi is playing a tape of one of Garvey's speeches; Brother Kiyi cites Baldwin in his conversations and Carl reads McKay's poem, *If We Must Die*. Through references and quotations, the intellectual, political and cultural life of these seminal black icons imbues the piece with their legacy and provides intellectual and spiritual nourishment to the characters and audience. Norma comments that Brother Kiyi has taught her to love herself: 'you love Black. And all of my life I have been taught to fear it, hate it. That ain't right!' (Kwei-Armah, 2009b, p. 119).

Kwei-Armah's authorial voice is clearly of the opinion that black improvement lies in knowing one's racial history. For those that embrace it, such as Deli, there is hope; for those that do not, there is despair, plainly demonstrated with Ashley's death at the end of *Elmina's Kitchen*. The need to know yourself, your roots and your people rings throughout the three works. For Kwei-Armah, pride in one's history is as important as coming to terms with the painful experience of the collective past. His plays provide a wealth of examples of extraordinary black achievement. As he states in an interview: 'Art is there *solely* to reflect ourselves. And it is only in that reflection that we are able to be self-critical and able to improve and remove some of the subconscious inferiority that has been placed in us since slavery' (Qtd. in Davis, 2006, p. 243). Running in parallel with Kwei-Armah's depiction of characters struggling in life is a strong seam of positivity to bolster and nourish the audience and characters if they choose to see it. For instance, in *Fix Up*, which takes place during Black History month, the discussions between characters are peppered with historical information about Caribbean culture and how it was shaped by slavery, from people's names to the food they eat.

The didactic elements in Kwei-Armah's work operate on the level of character as well as dialogue. Kwei-Armah creates characters grounded in African mythology as a means to root his plays in an African cosmology, and, presumably therefore, to access a collective culture and memory shared between continental Africans and the diaspora. For example, in *Elmina's Kitchen*, Anastasia arrives unexpectedly carrying a home-made macaroni pie and looking for a job. Her superior cooking secures her the job, and she quickly becomes a major force of change in the play. She convinces Deli to clean up the image his restaurant is projecting by getting rid of patrons like Digger, whose presence Anastasia describes as giving off 'the stench of death' (Kwei-Armah, 2009a, p. 45). She also helps Deli to give the restaurant a fresh image, a new name, and exposes him to self-help books. Her positivity strengthens Deli's resolve to extricate Ashley from mixing with gangs. As a character, she is almost too good to be true. There is something artificial about her, leaving the impression that she is more archetype than a three-dimensional representation.

It is the macaroni pie, a traditional southern American 'soul food', that further hints at her more supernatural purpose. The power of food is not underestimated, as Digger comments before Deli takes a bite: 'Mind she obea you, boy!' (Kwei-Armah, 2009a, p. 18). Yet from his first taste of the food, Deli's life begins to change for the better and Anastasia secures a place in his life. As Harrison writes, 'Black Theatre is not merely the social inscription of victimization arrested in the lens of social realism' (2002, p. 5). Its critical engagement, he argues, requires an understanding of African diasporic cultural traditions: 'It is not uncommon to discover in the ritual forms of Black Theatre characters that are more representative archetypes than individuated, full-

dimensioned characters located in the conventions of realism. Characters configured as archetypes serve a universe that allows both the living and the dead to drive the actions of a dramatic event' (Harrison, 2002, p. 5).

The stage directions describe Anastasia in such a way that supports this idea: 'we can see that she has the kind of body that most men of colour fantasize about. Big hips and butt, slim waist and full, full breasts' (Kwei-Armah, 2009a, p. 17). The description that stresses her African physicality renders Anastasia as representative of an African 'Earth Mother Goddess' archetype. Anastasia has come to save Deli and his family. Yet for all the positive change she brings, her influence is destroyed by the jealous Clifton, who sees her as a threat to his ambitions for his son's attention and financial assistance. Clifton seduces her and then threatens to expose her unless she leaves Deli. Here, Kwei-Armah critiques a male-dominated culture that has lost respect for its women and any spiritual connection to their goddesses. Osborne criticises this particular stage direction as one among other examples of 'sexual denigration' of women within the play (2006b, p. 92). Kwei-Armah's intentions, however, seen through a non-Western value system, are in fact the reverse. Yet, as Osborne's critique reveals, the stage direction exposes the heterosexist and patriarchal values of a traditional African world-view and of the Black Power movement. The play, therefore, reflects a conservative world-view by dint of it being rooted in 1960s Black radical politics. An American reviewer noted that the play dealt with themes that may be new to a British audience, but to an American one, it trod upon familiar territory pioneered by the likes of Langston Hughes and Wilson (Marks, 2005).

Another archetypal figure emerges in *Statement of Regret* through the character of Soby. When Kwaku is desperate for money to keep the business afloat, it is Soby who offers to help him on the condition that he reject his African name and take on his Caribbean birth name, Derek, and that he stands up against the Africans and asserts Caribbean superiority. This separatist approach within the multicultural office ends up destroying the organisation and Kwaku loses everything. It is only at the end of the play that we discover Soby is the ghost of Kwaku's father. Soby's function is to demonstrate the dangers of a separatist approach. Had Kwaku not been tempted into following a path of ethnic particularism but instead embraced one of Black solidarity, and instilled these values in his organisation, then, Kwei-Armah suggests, the think-tank might have survived. Kwei-Armah provides two possible endings for the piece. In the first (the ending staged at the National Theatre), Kwaku is left alone and confused and unsure of what he has done. However, the alternate ending (used in his radio adaptation) provides redemption. Lola his wife comes back to him and they are reconciled:

Lola: ... The battle had changed, Kwaku. Maybe it's time we rest. Maybe it's time we let the young ones make their mistakes.

Kwaku: Maybe. Take me home, Lola. (Kwei-Armah, 2009c, p. 255)

In the first ending, Kwaku remains deceived and his life is in shreds. In the second ending, Soby brings about an eventual self-awareness. Although the latter ends on a note of hope, both versions convey Kwei-Armah's message to the black audience: united we stand, divided we fall.

The inclusion of archetypal characters is in line with Kwei-Armah's approach, which seeks to root his drama beyond the purely social and place it within a larger mythological cosmos of the African diaspora. However, Kwei-Armah's route to these African cultural practices is mediated through African America. This explains the almost romantic and non-specific employment of African forms. Although it is possible that Kwei-Armah sourced these archetypes from West African culture directly, as he never references African writers, it is plausible, as seen with his other depictions of Africa such as the gurkel player, that he has accessed such knowledge from African America. And it is this cultural and political resource, not Africa, which informs his aesthetic. This is particularly striking through the use of music in the plays.

The blues features prominently in *Elmina's Kitchen* and in *Fix Up*. In the prologue to *Elmina's Kitchen*, the African griot is accompanied by music described as 'a slow lament-sounding concoction of American blues and traditional African music' (Kwei-Armah, 2009a, p. 5). The mixture of American blues and African music traces in sound the movement of slaves from Africa to the USA. As the scene is meant to contextualise the action of the rest of the play, set in Hackney, the mélange of musical styles seems oddly placed. The music of the blues is used a second time at the opening of the second act during the funeral of Deli's brother, when the cast sing *You Gotta Move*. Kwei-Armah also uses the blues in *Fix Up*. At the end of the play, Brother Kiyi cuts off his dreadlocks and sings the blues slave chant *Adam in the Garden*. Tellingly, Kwei-Armah signifies slavery and its impact on contemporary black Britishness in such a way that does not yield identification with the African Caribbean experience but rather locates it in an African American context.

The blues permeates beyond providing a soundtrack to the plays to influence their tone. Kwei-Armah's plays tend to end on a melancholic note. *Elmina's Kitchen* ends with Deli covering the body of his dead son, in *Fix Up* Brother Kiyi is forced to leave his shop and has been exposed as a father who abandoned his daughter and in *Statement of Regret* the positive work of the think-tank hangs in the balance after Kwaku's nervous breakdown. Nevertheless, juxtaposed with these endings the plays balance moments of light heartedness, songs and comic relief. The result is a bittersweet tone that epitomises the blues. Although this tradition has nothing to do with Africa or the Caribbean, it seems Kwei-Armah uses the blues not to signify cultural specificity, but

rather as a means to evoke an atmosphere of shared history. In this way, its use can be seen as a ‘call and response’ with not only a musical form, but with African American dramatists such as Baldwin, Baraka and Wilson, who are renowned for infusing their work with the spirit of the blues.

Kwei-Armah is one of a number of black British playwrights, and artists more generally, influenced by the USA. This suggests that when analysing black Britishness in general and black British theatre in particular, a broader model than the nation is sometimes required if we are to account for the multiple strands of influences that impact on the work beyond the limitations of more obvious shaping factors such as birthplace and ancestry. Kwei-Armah’s plays may document the black British experience and its links to the Caribbean and Africa; however, thematically, dramaturgically and aesthetically, they demonstrate the important impact of African American artists, thinkers and popular culture on the black British experience. Thus, Kwei-Armah’s perspective that stretches beyond the confines of the nation problematises assumptions that practitioners ‘from a particular place by default situate their writing in an aesthetic tradition that derives foremost from their own or their parents’ or their grandparents’ birthplaces’ (Stein, 2004, p. 16). Furthermore, it should not be assumed that influences and tradition are necessarily inherited from previous generations. As John McLeod points out: if we only regard black *British* art within the space of the nation, then there is the danger of ‘falsifying the mechanics of black British creativity and tradition’; if analyses become ‘spatially constricted’, this will impact negatively upon the way an artist’s work is ‘mapped, remembered and read’ (2006, p. 98). Kwei-Armah’s works reveal the complex lines of influence and exchange that have developed over time between global black communities. They highlight how black British culture and politics is shaped by its specific local situation and yet, is part of a larger global tapestry encompassing the spaces of Africa, the Caribbean, the UK *and* the USA.

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<sup>1</sup> *Elmina’s Kitchen* was adapted for television and broadcast on BBC Four in 2005, and *Statement of Regret* was broadcast as a radio play on BBC Radio 4 in 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The only exception is *Big Nose*, which is a Caribbean take on Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The play is set between the Caribbean and the UK during the late 1950s.

<sup>3</sup> In 2002, *King Hedley II* premiered in Britain at London’s Tricycle theatre.

<sup>4</sup> The Upper and Lower Clapton Roads in Hackney earned the nickname at the start of the 2000s. For example, see the article in *The Independent*, ‘Eight men shot dead in two years. Welcome to Britain’s Murder Mile’ (Mendick and Johnson, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, by portraying Alice as ‘beautiful but troubled’ (Kwei-Armah, 2009a, p. 100) Kwei-Armah adheres to dominant representations of mixedness, stretching at least as far back as Charlotte Bronte’s depiction

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of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (1847), that is, dual heritage manifests in confusion, unbelonging and, at worst, psychosis.

<sup>6</sup> See Kasule (2006) and Goddard (2011b), who both highlight this key aspect of Kwei-Armah's dramaturgy.