

BONDS AND BONDAGE: AN EXAMINATION OF FAMILY DYNAMICS IN
THE PLAYS OF KWAME KWEI-ARMAH

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BONDS AND BONDAGE: AN EXAMINATION OF FAMILY DYNAMICS IN
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*This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Michael and Nancy Zeitler,
for their constant support, love, encouragement and guidance.*

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Kwame Kwei-Armah (1967-) is a black British actor, director and playwright. Born Ian Roberts, he is the son of West Indian immigrants who early in his life instilled in him the importance of education and hard work. As a first generation British citizen he faced discrimination and adversity. His parents worked multiple jobs to send him and his siblings to private school. It was this dedication to education and social responsibility that spurred Kwei-Armah toward playwriting. In the introduction to his collected works Kwei-Armah writes: “It had been ingrained in me as a child by my brilliant mother that whatever occupation I found myself in, serving the greater community through that occupation had to be a goal, an aim. Anything less was selfishness” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays: I, X*). During the first decade of the 2000s, his political triptych—*Elmina’s Kitchen* (2003), *Fix Up* (2004), and *Statement of Regret* (2007)—explored controversial topics like race relations and black-on-black crime. But far from “ripped from the headlines” type dramas, his plays focus on human relationships that portray many sides of the issue, in order to help create and foster a debate. Kwei-Armah has said that he wants “theatre to be a palace for thought” (Kwei-Armah, “I am theatre” video), a place where ideas can be exchanged in an open and supportive environment. This thesis uses interviews, critical reviews, production notes and Kwei-Armah’s own writings to examine the role theatre plays in rapidly changing society.

This thesis focuses on the conflicts between fathers and children in Kwame Kwei-Armah's political triptych plays, and how the influences of race, social class, and education can affect and, sometimes destroy, these filial bonds. Kwei-Armah's plays also showcase how the past, history and heritage effect the present. Often in his plays, the tragic heroes are black fathers who failed their children and families because they are suffering from the long-term effects of institutionalized racism, the bondage of slavery and discrimination. The goal of this research is to better understand how Kwei-Armah uses theatre as a means to explore political issues, foster discussion, and encourage black communities to rise above trauma and move on.

The first chapter focuses on the play *Elmina's Kitchen*. In 2003 Kwame Kwei-Armah's first full-length play, *Elmina's Kitchen*, was a critical success and launched his career as a major playwright. *Elmina's Kitchen* tells the story of Deli, a black man in his mid thirties, the son of immigrants, who owns Elmina's Kitchen, a West Indian take-out restaurant in Hackney, London. Most of the play's conflicts stems from Deli's relationship with his son, Ashley, who at nineteen, admires the glamour and money surrounding gang culture. Ashley is embarrassed by his father, who works too hard for too little money. Ashley longs to be taken under the wing of Digger, a man from Grenada in his mid thirties who has spent time in and out of prison, and who uses threats and violence to protect the take-away shop in exchange for payment and a place to do business. Digger respects Deli enough to leave Ashley alone, until Deli, in an attempt to make the restaurant more respectful, demands Digger leave. Digger, then begins to recruit Ashley. Deli becomes upset and in an attempt to get Ashley out and give him a

better life, Deli goes to the police and informs on Digger. In the climax of the play, Digger demands Ashley shoot his father for ratting on them; Ashley has the gun pointed at Deli, when Digger shoots Ashley. The play ends with Ashley's body on the floor, and Deli leaving Elmina's Kitchen for the last time. There is no denouement, no resolution; the audience is left stranded and in shock as if they have just witnessed a crime.

Elmina's Kitchen was produced at the National Theatre in London, which was followed with a US premiere in 2004 at Centerstage in Baltimore. The chapter on *Elmina's Kitchen*, centers on the discord between three generations of Black British males: the immigrant Clifton (who is Deli's father), first generation Deli, and his son Ashley. Of the three triptych plays, the setting of *Elmina's Kitchen* is unique because it is set in the world of London's most violent neighborhood at the time, Hackney, also known as "murder mile." Kwei-Armah is showing that for lower-income families, gangs have come to replace the family model, especially in the case of many second and third-generation immigrants who have lost their cultural roots. In a foreign land, with limited ties to the past, gangs come to represent power and stability for many youths. The struggle of the play then is not simply father versus son, or Ashley versus Deli, or Deli versus Digger. The larger issue becomes how can society and community save today's youth from a culture of gangs and violence, when the alternative—a life like Deli's-- offers none of the glamour, money or power that gangs do. The abrupt and tragic ending of Ashley's life, the playwright hopes, will become a catalyst for debate and discussion.

With the critical success of *Elmina's Kitchen*, Kwame Kwei-Armah was conscious of trying to avoid being stereotyped as the playwright of the struggling black British youth. Kwei-Armah writes: "I was determined not to be the chronicler of the

underclass, to not be the one who writes about young black males in the pejorative until my day in the sun was gone. I decided to write a triptych of plays chronicling the black British experience as I saw it at the beginning of the ‘noughties’” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays: I, xi*). His next play in the triptych, and the focus of chapter two, is *Fix Up*, a play steeped in history and filled with the voices of black political artists, thinkers and writers of the past, who do not seem to impact or move the younger generation the way they influenced those before. This world is physically represented in the setting of a small independent black bookstore, Fix Up, which is financially failing. The owner of the shop is Brother Kiyi, who lends out more books than he sells and who mentors the young blacks in the neighborhood. The quiet of the bookshop is continually being broken up by the comings and goings of a small group of neighbors and friends, never more so than with the appearance of Alice. Alice is a young female of mixed racial background. She is described in the character list as “a beautiful but troubled visitor to the store” (100). It is clear from her first arrival that Alice is an outsider, who does not belong there. Alice was given up for adoption and raised by whites; she wants to learn more about her black culture, and so she spends time getting to know Brother Kiyi and the books he recommends. *Fix Up* is unique in that Kwei-Armah uses it to explore the discrimination faced by people of dual heritage. They do not belong to either group and are alienated from both sides of their cultural heritage.

The bookstore’s gradual financial collapse is mirrored in Kiyi’s emotional collapse. The play comes to a peak when Alice demands to be recognized as Kiyi’s daughter, whom he abandoned. The audience learns that before he was Brother Kiyi, he was Peter Allyn and he fathered a child with a white woman. The woman soon died and

Peter gave Alice up for adoption. While *Elmina's Kitchen* looks at the relationships of fathers and sons, *Fix Up* examines a father/ daughter relationship, as well as the generational changes and challenges that face society. While Brother Kiyi is not a father to his mixed daughter, he serves the role of father to his local community. He is teaching Carl, a care in the community boy, to read. *Fix Up* illustrates a difficult subject. While Alice has been abandoned by a father she never knew, she is learning the history of slavery, of how families were torn apart. She sees herself in the children born to black slaves by their white masters and recognizes what it is to be an outsider accepted by neither group. Many characters in *Fix Up*, each in their own way, are too attached to something in the past that will not allow them to move on. This bond unites Alice and Kiyi and until they resolve it, they cannot move forward.

The most innovative part of the show is that before the lights come up there are recordings of famous black writers and thinkers, like Marcus Garvey, James Baldwin and Claude McKay. Kwei-Armah refers to these as “non-present characters” (100). The Slave narrative should be added to list of “non-present characters.” These are fictional accounts of slaves in the Caribbean that Alice reads aloud during the play. The audio clips and stories foreshadow the events in the coming scenes. *Fix Up* looks at the long-term effects slavery has on the development of black society and how where people come from affects who they become. Throughout Kwame Kwei-Armah’s works, the reader notices the subtle differences in how characters are defined based on whether they are Afro-Caribbean, African or black British.

The final play in the political triptych is *Statement of Regret*, and unlike the other two plays, *Statement of Regret* makes a conscious effort to examine race relationships in

an academic and affluent environment. The action of the play is set in a political think tank, the fictional, Institute of Black Policy Research. The play establishes a hierarchy of Black life in Britain, that immigrants from Africa are often more successful professionally than the African Caribbeans, because according to Kwei-Armah, native Africans do not suffer from Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. Kwei-Armah writes:

I wanted to explore the themes of reparation for the slave trade, not slavery itself, but for the deculturalisation of the African Caribbean, the process to paraphrase s speech in the play, whereby the African has his language, religion and culture taken from him/her to make them beasts of burden. A process that would lead to generations of Africans—no—African Caribbeans—not knowing where they originated from or what their original language might have been. For centuries a people had been made almost cultureless. (Kwei-Armah *Plays:1* xiii)

The play tells the story of Kwaku McKenzie. He is a black British man of West Indian descent in his fifties, who is married to a Nigerian woman. He started the political think tank, IBPR, with his wife and friends. Their son, Junior has been a disappointment to Kwaku. Kwaku becomes increasingly unstable during the course of the play, drinking too much, running the office poorly and making suspect decisions, including hiring Adrian, his son by another woman. Adrian's presence in the office brings disorder and discord, between Kwaku and his wife and Junior. Kwaku begins to spiral out of control and lose touch with reality, as a result of the death of his father, Soby. The central conflict of the play deals with the transfer of power from a father to a son. It is a play about grief and moving on from a loss. Each character serves as a representation of different ideals, and

when they debate, they present an even-sided claim to the audience. Kwei-Armah also uses the characters to voice concerns about contemporary political issues regarding race, economics and higher education.

Statement of Regret has many dualities. On one hand the dialogue is hard-hitting and argumentative. The characters debate and discuss the political realities of contemporary Britain. However, the mystical presence of the character Soby, who exists only in Kwaku's mind, and spiritual guide Val, leaves the play's setting somewhere between reality and illusion. What is so delicate about the play is Kwei-Armah's ability to use Kwaku's loss of his father as a metaphor for the black people's loss of their cultural heritage. Because Kwaku cannot be at peace with his father's ghost, he cannot move forward and be healed.

The conclusion compares characters and masculine identity in each of Kwame Kwei-Armah's triptych plays as well as looking at his most recent works and potential long-term influence on contemporary theatre. His triptych plays look at the failings of black fathers as a metaphor for a society that has failed them, as well as the family dynamic of multi-generational families. Kwei-Armah uses members of the same family from different generations to present the audience with different views on issues like racism, violence, politics and progress. Throughout his works, Kwei-Armah stresses the importance of moving on from the past traumas of slavery, colonization, discrimination and racism. One of Kwame Kwei-Armah's most recent play *Let There Be Love* is an excellent example of this. A very clear theme of *Let There Be Love* (2008) is that in order to move forward one (as a society, as a people) must be healed, and in order to be healed one must forgive. Black Britons cannot undo what has been done to them by outside

forces, by the British Empire, by the American slave trade. But they must not let that hold them back anymore. Kwei-Armah's newer plays, *Seize the Day* (2009) and *Beneath's Place* (2013) still bring up issues of race and identity, but move away from the triptych ideas of past trauma's influencing black male psychology and instead focus on creating a discussion about the future. Discussion and debate can be used as a means to create positive change. Kwame Kwei-Armah believes it is his social responsibility to use his voice, to tell the stories of the experience of being black and British during the first decade of the new millennium, in the hope that these plays will foster an environment for change and progress. This thesis strives to shed light on the work of a bright new playwright and the communities he serves by demonstrating how theatre can be a tool for providing insight and provoking discussion.

CHAPTER II

ELMINA'S KITCHEN

The global diaspora of suffering, our youths are dying, and their blood is consecrating the earth. —Kwame Kwei-Armah

Elmina's Kitchen, Kwame Kwei-Armah's first major produced play, deals in dualities: past and present, right and wrong, struggle and survival. While on the surface, it could be read like the script for a television drama like *The Wire* or *Law and Order* with gangs, and gun shots, the complexities surrounding identity, responsibility and the cycle of violence move this play beyond that realm to one where the playwright is demanding the audience put a human face on these stories of violence. Kwei-Armah wants the audience to recognize that these countless deaths from city streets are real people and that as a society we must ask ourselves why. In his introduction to his *Plays: I*, Kwei-Armah explains the inspiration behind *Elmina's Kitchen* “ the idea of writing, of seeming to look beyond the headlines to ask fundamental questions of our young men, was born: why were they not trying hard enough to overcome their circumstances, and why was society not trying hard enough to remove the circumstances they had to transcend? (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* x). This topic raises numerous questions. What does it mean to be a man— is it power, money or control?

What makes someone's identity—where they come from, who their parents are? What defines a man's character—his place in society, the choices he makes for himself and for his family? What type of person does it take to end the cycle of violence? In *Elmina's Kitchen*, the characters are defined by the decisions they make and how they justify them. When the final curtain falls, the play forces the audience to ask hard questions: Why did this happen? Was this tragedy avoidable? And how can we as a society prevent the continuing killings of urban youth? By focusing on the contrasts and levels of detail that go into making his characters' psychology, language and heritage, Kwame Kwei-Armah is discussing universal ideas through intimate and layered gestures. Through in-depth analysis of the characters, plot and symbols in Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen*, this chapter examines how the playwright develops and raises awareness for the issue at hand; then extractions from the reviews of three major productions of the play, in London in 2003 at the National Theatre, at Baltimore's Centerstage in 2005, and most recently in Los Angeles in 2012 by the Lower Depths Theatre Studio will give insight into how the play has been received over the last decade and how successful the playwright has been at achieving his goal of generating debate and discussion.

The play focuses on three generations of black men in the London neighborhood of Hackney known as "murder-mile," and Deli's attempt to save his son, Ashley, from a life of violence as a gang member or "yardie." Deli, a former boxer who spent time in prison and is now divorced, runs a West-Indian takeaway restaurant. Despite his best efforts to raise his son, Ashley is ashamed of his father for having no street respect. This stems from an altercation Deli had with a neighbor, where Deli refused to fight back. This is the worst form of shame in Ashley's opinion. Ashley says "How am I supposed to

walk the street and look my bredrens in the eye when mans all grip up my dad by his throat and you didn't deal wid it?"(Kwei-Armah, *Plays: I* 12). The character of Deli is not the typical hero character. He tries to set an example for Ashley, by not being involved in a fight; however this choice pushes Ashley farther away from him. Deli is seen as a coward in the eyes of his community.

Ashley glamorizes gang life and sees the money and power that come from hustling. How can Deli compete with thug culture when the example he sets is full of hard work and no respect? Life as a yardie offers Ashley power, money and a surrogate father in the character of Digger. In her paper titled "Gangs as Alternatives Transitional Structures: Adaptions to Racial and Social Marginality in Los Angeles and London," Jewelle Taylor Gibbs describes Ashley's anger at his father as a typical family pattern among immigrant families in London. She writes:

In London, several of the respondents had joined their immigrant parents as adolescents and often felt excluded from the family unit and estranged from an unfamiliar culture. Their involvement in anti-social activities and their casual acceptance of violence might reflect the displacement of their anger at their parents onto more acceptable social targets. (Gibbs 89)

For Ashley, this anger stems from his belief that his father is a less than a man, someone who will not stand up for himself. This is evident in the following dialogue from Act II, scene ii, after Ashley has moved up in the gang, enough to purchase a BMW and wants his father to be proud of his success.

DELI: Do you honestly expect me to come out in your car and sanction your nastiness?

ASHLEY: (*angry*) No, I expect you to be happy for me, happy at my progress. What I don't expect, want or need, is you fronting your jealous with petty excuses!

DELI: (*even angrier*) Jeaslousy? I'm a hard working man who's survived because I don't watch other people's tings. What makes you think I'd be envious of your stupid car, I haven't even seen it?

{...}

ASHLEY: (*laughs*) You're a punk, Dad. I was giving you a chance. A chance to let the whole area know that ooooooh you're Ashley's father and so we roll! But no, you want to stay small insignificant, weak. You, you disgust me.

(Kwei-Armah, *Plays:1*, 75)

Kwei-Armah's dialogue is angry and hard-hitting. The fast paced back and forth suggest a poker match with each player upping the ante and neither player backing down.

Ashley's new sense of bravado eggs him on. The word "punk" in Britain seems to have stronger negative connotations than what it means in America. In Britain it is more derogatory, pertaining to someone with no self-respect. For Ashley to call his father a punk is disrespectful.

Ashley's identity is warped by the glamour of gang culture. The tension builds until the tragic twist of an ending, in which Deli, in a final attempt at saving Ashley from that world, snitches to the police on Ashley's mentor, Digger; he does not realize that in Ashley's eyes, ratting to the police is the most cowardly act a man can commit. This leads to the play's climax where Digger shoots Ashley in front of Deli. Kwei-Armah is

trying to illustrate that while many people may view Deli's decision to report on fellow members of his community as cowardly, it was the only responsible choice. Being a man is not about who carries a bigger gun; it is about making tough choices and doing what is best for your children. But the question is, was snitching the right thing to do? Because while it may seem like Deli's actions were justified, the result is Ashley's death.

Deli is trying to stand up and be a father to his son, unlike his own father, Clifton, who abandoned Deli and his brother. Kwei-Armah illustrates the difficult position fathers are in, especially when they have no examples from which to learn. What kind of role model will Deli be, when his own father was not there to teach him? The character of Clifton is an immigrant from the eastern Caribbean. Soon after he and his family moved to London, he left his wife and two sons for a young Irish woman. Deli cannot forgive this betrayal, and it demonstrates one of the only references to black/white relations in the play. While there are no white characters in the show, "the white man" is the elephant in the room. While not directly stated in dialogue form, Kwei-Armah clearly holds "the white man"—i.e. colonization, economics, the education system and white people in power, partially responsible for the situation that Ashley and young men like him, find themselves in. The only direct reference to the white man comes in act one, scene three.

Clifton: The most witchcraft is practice by the white man. How do the arse you think he managed to take Africa away from we. The white man---

Deli: (*Explodes, 0-60*)... Don't bring none of your white this and dat in here Clifton. I don't want to hear that (Kwei-Armah, *Plays:1* 40)

Deli's anger at his father's joke is understandable. Deli may agree with his father that white society is to blame for many things, but he will not allow Clifton the right to speak

like that. In Deli's eyes, Clifton's choice of a white woman over his mother negates Clifton's authority. In a review for the *New African Journal*, Kissy Agyemang describes the racial tensions beneath the surface of the play: "Indeed the play is riddled with references to race and at times the comments about the white man being different creates a sense of 'them and us.' The suggestion that the white man has a lot to answer for the black man's ills is strong ... Armah flirts with the controversial in this play and he makes no apologies for it either" (Agyemang 63). Kwei-Armah does not want the play to focus on race relations, but he recognizes the effect that it has had on his character's lives. As Agyemang notes, Kwei-Armah does not back away from the controversy of black versus white: however he realizes that to make the play solely about race, will force critics to delegate his works to a certain category. Kwei-Armah will explore this dichotomy more fully in his next play, *Fix Up*.

Without Clifton present as a father figure, both of his sons spent time in prison, and while Dougie (a non-present character in the play) dies in jail, Deli seems to have survived the drug and violent phases of his youth. Taylor Gibbs points out why many first generation Black British men are drawn to the gang culture. She writes "In London, where many Afro-Caribbean youth are first generation born and reared in England, the gang may function as a bridge between the West Indian culture of their parents from which they are alienated, and the British culture of their host country, from which they are excluded" (Gibbs 93). When they are excluded from mainstream society, immigrants make their own communities.

While Deli seems to have out-grown the brutality of his youth, the character of Digger represents the other extreme. Digger is proud of not assimilating to black British

culture. When Deli alleges Digger is as “British” as he is, Digger is outraged and responds: “Never! I was born in Grenada, and I’ve lived in jailhouses all over the world. I know who the fuck I am, don’t you ever include me in all your stupidity” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays:1* 17). Digger has risen through the ranks of the Afro-Caribbean gangs to a position of respect in the community. He represents the pinnacle to which someone like Ashley aspires. Digger has money, power, and respect in the community. Critics have argued that because *Elmina’s Kitchen* is one of Kwei-Armah’s earliest plays, it is easy to tell his inexperience in that many of the characters seem broadly drawn, especially in regards to the villainous Digger, who seems to have no motivation for his corruption of Ashley, other than a mild displeasure with Deli. Kissy Agyemann describes the characters as “caricatures” and goes on to say “the scent of stereotyping is strong, and at times over-bearing (Agyemann 63). Although it can be said that Digger is slightly one dimensional, in Kwei-Armah’s defense, we do not see him in vastly different circumstances. His alpha-male persona and stoic façade presents a realistic depiction.

While the characterization may be general, one specificity all the characters share is the uniqueness of their accents. All the characters speak in varying degrees of West Indian and native black British accents, and the character Digger uses his accent consciously. His accent reveals his cultural ties. In the stage directions it is described as: “Digger’s accent swings from his native Grenadian to hard-core Jamaican to authentic black London” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays:1* 6). Digger uses his accent to his advantage depending on to whom is talking. For example, early in the play Digger threatens Ashley in a very Black British way, when Ashley uses a “Viking expletive” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays:1* 32), in order to sound superior and smarter than native Briton Ashley. However,

toward the end of Act I when Digger is frustrated with the influx of Jamaican gang members fresh off the boat, he speaks in a thicker West Indian accent to demonstrate his street credit: “*(convincing himself)* Me have fe talk it. Me just have talk it. I’m not vex, you nah. I’m vex na pussyclat” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays: I*, 48). Kwei-Armah describes Digger as “convincing himself” meaning that Digger needs to reassure himself of both his power and authenticity. Kwei-Armah’s language is so dense and full of cultural significance, that for the American premiere production, a glossary of terms was included in the program. The character of Digger uses language to create and reinforce his chosen identity as a figure of authority and power.

Although the four main male characters dominate the play with images of anger, the two female characters in *Elmina’s Kitchen* represent hope: an unachievable dream and an escape from the violent world that the men create. The first is the character of Anastasia and the second is the absent but ever-present figure of Elmina, Deli’s mother. Anastasia is also a mother, but with the added trait of sex appeal. In the stage directions she is described in the following manner:

Although dressed soberly, 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 breast. There is something incredibly sexual about her presence. Beneath the very applied ‘make-up’ we can see that she must once have been a real beauty. There is an insecurity, a soft sadness about her even though she attempts to hide this with a veneer of coarse West Indian confidence. Although black British, she too swings into authentic full attitude Jamaican at the drop of a hat (Kwei-Armah, *Plays: I* 17).

As the only female character who speaks in the play, at first it is curious as to why Kwei-Armah would delegate her to the role of sex symbol. But with Anastasia the audience quickly learns she is an independent woman who can hold her own against all the male characters. Anastasia is a complex juxtaposition of female sexuality and nurturing mother figure. She encourages Deli to clean up the shop and make a better life for himself, as is evident in this line from act one, scene three: “Why are my men too weak to raise their head above the fucking water. I don’t want to be around another loser, Deli! I lose too much in my life already” (Kwei-Armah *Plays: I* 45). She is the catalyst for the improvements Deli tries to make in his life. Anastasia represents another level of the dualities of the play. While it is easy to delegate her to role of mother or sex symbol, she is in fact the play’s only positive force for change. In a review of the play for *American Theatre*, N. Graham Nesmith, describes Anastasia as, “a grieving mother who might provide the love to save a family” (Nesmith, 12). Both Anastasia and Elmina are figures of hope, but neither can save the men in their lives from destruction.

Although not actually seen, the second female character is Deli’s mother and the restaurant’s namesake, Elmina. Deli holds his mother’s memory on a pedestal, and even physically in the stage directions, a “huge picture”(Kwei-Armah *Plays: I, 5*) of her is hanging above the doors to the kitchen. She is the image of a dedicated single mother, working hard, raising her kids so that they can have a better life. However, for this model woman, Kwei-Armah, gave her the name Elmina, the same name of a fortress on the coast of Ghana. Elmina Castle was used as a holding pen for slaves before they crossed the Middle Passage. The character Anastasia describes it in the following lines: “You know what I mailed my son last night? I tell him that me walk into a restaurant named

after a slave castle but couldn't see the castle" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays:1*, 20). The decision to name the lead character's mother and thus the play after a slave castle ties the play and its action to the past. This past is not just Ghana, but the entire journey the characters and their ancestors have taken from Africa to the Caribbean and then back to England. It gives the play a sense of the past, that the characters are the results of where they come from. In a review of the play for *Theatre Journal*, James Bunzil reflects on the dichotomy of both a personal and public history of slavery. He writes:

The restaurant's very title references both family and slave history, alludes to these themes of displacement. Named for Deli's late mother, who opened and ran the restaurant for some twenty years, 'Elmina' also refers to the name of an old slave fortress on the west coast of Africa. The chief action driving the play fittingly complements these tensions. (Bunzil 726)

Elmina, the mother, represents both the hope and future all immigrants share when coming to a new country to find a better life, but she is also the past, the countries they come from and the subjugation that colony powers inflicted. Kwei-Armah uses the imagery of slave history to show the bondage contemporary Britain and the post-colonial world has created for blacks. In an interview with Geoffrey Davis in 2005 Kwei-Armah explains his choice in title: "I think the part of the reason why we find ourselves as black people re-enacting what we are re-enacting in the play is because we have not rid ourselves of the self hate of being enslaved, being in the slave castle ... We don't understand our own Holocaust" (Davis 245). The characters in the play are alienated from their past and their cultural heritage. Kwei-Armah holds slavery, colonialism and

racism responsible for the character's situation in life. That the play's action is contained in a shabby rundown restaurant is symbolic of the bondage of self-hate. In a review of the play for the *New African Journal*, Kissy Agyeman expands on the associations Kwei-Armah creates by using the name Elmina: "Elmina Castle, at one time an overflowing dungeon for Ghanaian slaves, has now been traded in for a kitchen, some of whose clientele have now become slaves of a different kind; slaves to gun and drug crime" (Agyeman, 62). A shared cultural background link all the characters in the play; they are all either immigrants of second generation British, but none of them have been to their ancestral homeland. If the name Elmina represents Africa, where the journey away from home began in chains, then like the picture hanging on the wall, Elmina is a constant presence that influences all the characters' past and their future.

This juxtaposition of past and present are blended in a mystical sense in the musical prologue that introduces act one. The opening prologue, which takes place outside the world of the play, roots the play's action in some place between reality and illusion. It ties the play and its characters culturally to the past. Below is the prologue in its entirety.

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. His head moves sharply as if smelling something distasteful. 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. The music ends.

(Kwei-Armah, *Plays:1* 5)

The prologue serves several functions. It sets a ritualistic tone for the piece. The scattering of powder is reminiscent of the purification ritual performed in Japanese Shinto ceremonies, where performers scatter salt around a sacred space. The music from the gurkel blends the cultural anthem of persecution and subjugation, the blues, with the sounds of native African music. In a Brechtian style, the prologue serves to remind the audience that they are watching a play. The man playing the gurkel is preparing the space for the presentation of the play, reminding the audience that the people playing these characters are merely players. Kwei-Armah expounds upon the meaning behind the prologue in an interview with Deirdre Osborne, he says:

The instrument I specify that should open the play, the gherkel, is famed in West Africa for bringing out the spirits from the mountains. It was that invocation which should bring us to the conclusion that when the boy— Ashley, the teenage would-be ‘gangsta’, dies--it is the spirit of Africa saying you need to over come the shackles that started here (Osborne, 256-257).

The prologue beautifully represents the dichotomy of the playwright himself. In one tableau the playwright says this play respects its theatrical past, both western and African, sacred and profane. It will blend genres of comedy and tragedy. It will be multicultural. It will ask you to think as well as feel. It will pay homage to playwrights like August Wilson and others who have come before, but ultimately it is uniquely Black and British and entirely Kwame Kwei-Armah.

Kwei-Armah has been very vocal about his goal for “theatre to be a palace for

thought” (Kwei-Armah I Am Theatre Video), that plays should invite their audiences to think critically and discuss the issues in the play. Criticism and reviews of the three major productions provide insight into how the play influenced three different communities. They also demonstrate how responses to the play have developed over the last decade. In 2005 when the production at the National Theatre moved to the Garrick theatre on the West End, it was a major milestone in British theatre history: Kwei-Armah was the first native black Briton to premiere a play on the West End. In a review of the first production at England’s National Theatre, Maddy Costa wrote:

This is an angry, provocative, vital play, one that demands change in society while recognizing that there are no easy solutions, and is passionately political while understanding that the best way to communicate with people is to keep them entertained. It is thrilling to see it at the National - and will be even more thrilling if it inspires other black playwrights to follow its lead. (Costa)

Costa points out the Brechtian elements within the play and its ability to balance entertainment with a purpose. She is optimistic about Kwei-Armah’s influence on the British theatre scene. In another review, for the *New Statesman*, critic Aleks Sierz seems frustrated at the play for not doing more. Writing about *Elmina’s Kitchen* and another play, he says that *Elmina’s Kitchen* “tackled the subject of violence in the black community with wit and insight, but depressingly neither suggested any way of changing this reality. However powerful, both plays were more a cry of anger than a call for change” (Sierz 40-41). While the play might not offer any solutions, the production itself drew attention to the issue of gang violence in contemporary London. Kwei-Armah might

not have the solution; instead he leaves it up to the audience to debate and argue and think and ask themselves: “Why do we allow these killings to occur?”

The play had its American premiere in 2005 in Baltimore, at the regional theatre Centerstage. Baltimore, a city with a history of violence and drug abuse, could relate to many of play’s major themes. Michael Olesker, longtime critic for the *Baltimore Sun*, wrote of the connections he shared with the play as a Baltimorean.

In a city where hundreds lose their lives to violence each year, the words resonate. *Elmina's Kitchen* takes us behind numbing police statistics. It reminds us that, between gunshots, these are human beings looking for a better place. They crack wise, make romance, search for comfortable rhythms, deal with their minor disturbances in ways both caustic and comic. The most powerful theater connects to real life. *Elmina's Kitchen* comes out of Britain, but theatergoers will notice its clear reflection as they make their way home through Baltimore's bleakest streets (Olesker).

Olesker hints that *Elmina's Kitchen* is the “most powerful theater” because it creates connections to peoples’ real lives, and that despite taking place in London, *Elmina's Kitchen* could take place in any city, especially one like Baltimore. Olesker believes a play like *Elmina's Kitchen*, will stay with audience members. While he does not say it created an out right debate, he notes that it should cause the audience a moment to pause and reflect on the similarities of the two cultures, that despite being geographically distant, are much more alike than different.

The final production examined is ten years removed from the original and halfway across the world. In 2012 The Lower Depths Ensemble produced the play. While

the cultural of the world of the play seemed to resonate with the audiences in Baltimore, in Los Angeles, one critic found the specificity of the play disconcerting. In a review for *Backstage*, Eric Marchese writes:

Kwei-Armah's examination of West Indies-born blacks who emigrated to England, as well as their British-born progeny, is close in spirit to August Wilson's famed "Pittsburgh Cycle" ... Kwei-Armah paints a detailed picture of an almost insular community: its people, their cultural and ethnic heritage, and their specific argot. (Marchese)

Kwei-Armah's play deals with a specific environment and circumstance, this seem to alienate Marchese. The critic denies the universal appeal in Kwei-Armah's work by focusing on how foreign the characters are. Marchese does not acknowledge how his multicultural community of Los Angeles relates to the community in the play. Instead he concentrates on how representative *Elmina's Kitchen* is of a singular time and place, a place to which he cannot relate.

These four critics represent only a small number of opinions regarding the three major productions of the play. However, they do provide a glimpse into how three very different communities responded to a play, which is predominately about racial conflicts in a specific cultural environment. There are a few options on how reviews can be viewed. On one hand, it could be stated that the farther removed (both by time and location, as was the 2012 production) audiences are from London, circa 2003 and the violent events that inspired the play, then perhaps the less likely they are to be affected or to understand the play. However, reviews from the Baltimore production would suggest that audiences from any city that has struggled would be forced to recognize themselves

in one or more of the characters. Baltimore critic Michael Olesker describes the audience leaving the show: “They seemed slightly shell-shocked, in the way art is supposed to shock us out of our complacencies and make us look anew at the world we only think we know” (Olesker). Either way, it seems that the conversation Kwei-Armah wants has been achieved through all of these productions.

Elmina's Kitchen marks just the beginning of Kwei-Armah's career. Very easily, critics could have designated Kwei-Armah to writings about thug culture. However, his skill at layering references and rituals, mixing humor with hope, of blending the musicality of Caribbean accents with rash and hard-hitting language, in ultimately heart-wrenching tragedy shows that *Elmina's Kitchen* is just the beginning, the first in what would later be called his political triptych. Overall, *Elmina's Kitchen* offers no solution to the problems of gang life or murder: rather Kwei-Armah's play is a battle cry for hope and change.

CHAPTER III

FIX UP

*My job is to be a chronicler of the present and an archivist of the past.
The present becomes the past. —Kwame Kwei-Armah*

Fix Up (2004) the second play in Kwame Kwei-Armah's political triptych, examines relationships, specifically a father/daughter relationship. Kwei-Armah uses this relationship dynamic, figuratively, to explore younger black generations and their relationship or lack of with their cultural past. *Fix Up* also deals with issues of identity, particularly mixed racial identity. The play raises such questions as: In this multicultural world, how does our ancestry affect us? And if we forget the past, are we doomed to repeat it? It also explores how people of mixed cultural backgrounds can be alienated from both sides of their heritage, not fitting in on either side. The play has many unique features, including the use of "non-present characters," who are voice recordings of famous Africans and African-Americans, such as James Baldwin and Marcus Garvey; these recordings are played throughout the piece, usually foreshadowing the coming action while reinforcing a connection to the past. Kwei-Armah uses this device to focus on black youths who are increasingly alienated from their culture and the struggle of their ancestors, and to ask questions about what will happen to this generation if they do not claim their cultural identity

This chapter examines key characters, themes, relationships, symbols, and ideas about identity in Kwei-Armah's *Fix Up* to further understand how the playwright creates a discussion about today's youths' increasing isolation from their heritage and how this will affect black society as a whole. The play takes place in the political and fictional Fix Up bookstore during Black History Month (which in the UK is the month of October). Brother Kiyi, an older black Brit who runs the bookshop and is eager to share the voices of past generations. It is his interactions with the other four characters that set the play's action into motion. These characters include Brother Kiyi's neighbor, Norma, who is a pillar of the local community and an old friend of Kiyi's, who has known him since he spent time in prison with her husband. Carl, a local care-in-the-community youth who has had trouble with drugs and the law, but who idolizes Brother Kiyi as a father figure. Kwesi is a young black man who rents the space above the shop for his militant activist causes. Finally, Alice, who is described as "a beautiful, but troubled visitor to the store" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 100), is mixed race and this marks her as different from the rest of the characters. Because she was adopted and raised by white parents, Alice comes to the shop in search of more information about her black cultural background. She explains: "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, *Plays* 128). Alice's quest for knowledge about her heritage begins the play's main action.

The Fix Up bookstore serves as a focal point of community, but it has very few actual paying customers, and the shop is going out of business, soon to be replaced by a

shop that sells black hair care products, symbolic of a society where people are more concerned with appearances than with education. This will be a major theme explored throughout the play. While the Brother Kiyi's daily interactions with Norma, Carl and Kwesi serve as exposition about the shop's failing finances, Alice's sudden appearance at the shop sets a course of personal tragedies into action. Brother Kiyi learns that not only is he losing the shop, but the person taking over the lease is not a Turkish immigrant as he believed, but Kwesi, a betrayal that unhinges him. Carl falls in love with Alice and cannot handle the rejection. Events further break down as Alice demands to be recognized as the daughter Kiyi, or as he was then known Peter Allan, abandoned more than thirty years ago. She wants to know why she was "dumped into some children's home to fend for herself" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 162) and "Why I don't have a mother that's here" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 163). Alice and the audience learn that Brother Kiyi killed Alice's mother, and Alice was taken by children's services while Kiyi was in prison. The audience realizes that more than a pulpit of the black community, the Fix Up bookshop was a place to hide, and Brother Kiyi, is a man trying to forget. The play ends with the Fix Up bookstore being closed and the books being packed up, and Peter Allan cutting off his long dreadlocks in a symbolic attempt to remove the mask of Brother Kiyi that he has worn for so long so that he can try to move on

The over-arching sentiment of the play, that a shop for hair products is replacing the bookstore, suggests that the younger black generations are more concerned with physical appearances, than with their history and education. Kwesi argues as much in the following lines: "People—don't—want books. They wanna party and look good, have the latest hairstyles, and nails and tattoos" (Kwei-Armah *Plays* 160-161). Kwei-Armah

supports the claim that the play is urging the youth of today to study the past. In an interview with Aleks Sierz in *The New Statesman*, Kwei-Armah says, “If there is one shout in the play, it is: read your history. Not just to search for heroes, but also to find the grotesque, because sometimes in the grotesque—such as the complicity of African chiefs in the slave trade—We find the truth” (Sierz 41). While urging people to study history, Kwei-Armah also understands rapidly changing economic times. In a society where the battles for civil rights were their parents’ fights, the new generation recognizes that power comes from success and money, and in the character Kwesi, Kwei-Armah presents the intriguing dilemma of changing economics. Even though Kwesi believes in Brother Kiyi’s politics, Kwesi sees the economic benefit of a black person owning the shop rather than a person of another ethnicity or an immigrant from another country. Kwesi says: “Why should the other man take our money? That’s why we powerless, cos we ain’t where the money at” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 161). The practicality of Kwesi’s argument is hard to ignore. In his review of *Fix Up* for *Theatre Journal*, William C. Boles argues:

[The play] addresses a number of concerns facing black culture in Britain including ... the hypocrisy of a black political movement not invested in economic struggles of the black individual but instead in the capitalist values of the surrounding white English society; and the absence of an intellectual black voice amidst a black society more interested in current pop culture crazes than its unacknowledged past. (Boles 724)

Kwei-Armah mourns the loss of shops like Brother Kiyi’s, but acknowledges the importance of black entrepreneurs to developing financial independence from white institutions. Because young people are fixated on looking good, Kwesi reasons his shop

for beauty and hair products will be more profitable than the bookshop ever was, thus offering economic opportunities for the black community.

While the play's theme seems to be an urging for black youth to know their heritage and history, a subsection of that mandate is a discussion of the role of mixed race people in black society and which part of their heritage defines them. Instead of being alienated from one side or the other, Kwei-Armah seems to suggest that society should embrace people of dual heritage and their shared cultural background. In an interview about *Fix Up* with British theatre critic Aleks Sierz, Kwei-Armah says:

I believe that mixed race issues have been a sleeping issue, ... But in the next five to ten years, it will be huge within the black community ... We talked about people of dual heritage being half one and half of another—white society sees them as black, and blacks see them as close to white. ... But they can't just be half and half. (Sierz 40)

Kwei-Armah addresses this issue in the character of Alice, a young woman with a black father and white mother, who was raised by adopted white parents. She is completely isolated from her black culture and heritage, but unlike many black members of her generation, she seems to have a genuine interest in learning about her past. Despite her desires to learn more, she is met with varying degrees of hostility, indifference, curiosity or sexual objectification from the male characters in the play. Critic Michael Portillo expounds on the difficulties Alice faces: "The play deals interestingly with racism among black people based on skin tone (shade-ism)" (Portillo 82). Shade-ism becomes a prevalent issue to the plot's development and the character's history. Carl is curious and interested in Alice. When he first meets her in scene two, he is excited that she is not a

“reparation-marching, hard faced, straight talking” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 122) sister. He goes on to say “I could see you were different from your hair!” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 122). Carl views Alice as an object of desire because she is whiter than other girls in the neighborhood. When Brother Kiyi does not support Carl’s feelings toward Alice, Carl assumes it because he is “too dark” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 148) for her.

On the other extreme, Kwesi is hostile and angry toward Alice. Later in the same scene, Kwesi says: “It affects you, you know? Being around too much white folk. I seen the bluest of blackest men get too much exposure, bam, they lose their rhythm. Put on a James Brown tune and they start doing the Charleston to ras!” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays*, 133). Kwesi holds Alice responsible for her dual heritage as if she was given a choice, and that she chose to align herself with her white half over her black half. This does not stop him from objectifying her. Kwesi admits to finding half of Alice attractive, as the following dialogue shows:

Kwesi: If you were ‘fuller’, I could quite like you.

Alice: Is that of body or of race?

Kwesi: Both. (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 134)

The sexual overtones between the male characters and Alice are layered with racist objectification; Carl wants her because she is light, and Kwesi desires her despite it. Neither Kwesi’s rage nor Carl’s fascination seems to hurt Alice as much as Brother Kiyi’s ignorance. Brother Kiyi’s denial that people of mixed heritage could even be partially black is hurtful to her, as is his outdated treatment of the subject. Her disappointment is evident in their discussion from act one, scene two.

Brother Kiyi: You were the first person in an age to buy, well, to buy a

book of substance. In fact ...*(He checks the sales book.)* Yes, here it is! December of last year. One copy of *The Isis Papers* by Dr. Cress Welsing, And that customer wasn't even black!

Alice: She was white?

Brother Kiyi: No, she was mixed.

Alice: I believe the term is now 'person of dual heritage'.

Brother Kiyi: I'm sure it is.

Alice: Shouldn't you be more up-to-date on that sort of stuff? Being a leader in the community an' all!

Kiyi: I suppose I should, if in fact I were a leader. (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 130-131)

Brother Kiyi's idea that people of dual heritage are not "even black" is upsetting to Alice not only because she is mixed, but because she perceives Brother Kiyi to be in a position to influence others, and as such, he has the responsibility to be more socially conscious. As Alice says earlier in the play: "I tend to get passionate about what goes into the minds of those we are responsible for" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 125). While not intending to be malicious like Kwesi, Brother Kiyi's accidental racism and outdated notions are as upsetting as his unwillingness to change because Alice knows of his past and therefore holds him to a higher level of morality. Brother Kiyi's treatment of Alice is suspect, given that, even though the audience does not know it yet, Kiyi was once involved with a white woman, so one would think that his ideas would be more progressive. Kwei-Armah deals with this issue delicately, by simply not going into details about Brother Kiyi's past. Kwei-Armah indicates that it was the strain from living in an inter-racial relationship, that

it “makes you strike at ones you love?”(Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 163), that lead to the death of Alice’s mother.

These character interactions show the varying levels of racism that people of dual heritage are faced with from the black community. In the introduction to *The Methuen Drama Book of Plays by Black British Writers* Lynette Goddard writes: “Kwei-Armah challenges simplistic notions of contemporary black identity by placing diverse characters into conflict with each other about pertinent issues of race, culture and heritage and allowing a range of complex and contradictory perspectives to surface” (Goddard xix). Kwei-Armah is forcing the audience to face its own, possibly outdated, ideas about race in contemporary Britain. This is highlighted by his choice to set the play during Black History Month, which one would think would draw large crowds to bookstores like Fix Up as a place to search one’s personal history. As Alice says: “Must be a good time for business eh? Bet everyone like me comes in looking for something that will broaden our understanding of, well, black history” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 113). However, the shop’s lack of customers and general financial failing would indicate that, despite it being Black History Month, not many people are interested in history or broadening their understandings.

In an effort to honor great black historical figures and highlight the character’s alienation from their shared culture, *Fix Up* is full of references to iconic black leaders from past generations. Their voices are heard on tapes played in Brother Kiyi’s shop or being read a loud by various characters. These are referred to as “non-present characters” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 100) by the author and include recordings of Marcus Garvey and James Baldwin, readings of poems by Claude McKay and fictional slave narratives.

These words from the past often foreshadow the play's coming action and set the tone. The play opens with a recording of Marcus Garvey from the 1920s "*playing a little too loudly*" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 100). His speech clearly sets up the coming action. Before any dialogue or the appearance of any characters, the speech insists "There is no future for a people that deny their past" (Kwei-Armah, *Fix Up* 3), informing the audience of the not so subtle argument of the play. Scene one ends with Alice leaving and when Brother Kiyi "*turns Marcus back up*" (Kwei-Armah, *Fix Up* 21), the audience hears Garvey conclude: "If black people knew their glorious past then they'd be more inclined to respect themselves" (Kwei-Armah, *Fix Up*, 21). Kwei-Armah uses the Marcus Garvey recording to portray the play's theme but also to foreshadow the coming action. Quite literally, the first quote could refer to Brother Kiyi—in that his future is ruined because he denied his past as Peter Allan. Or that his actions and the destructive events that lead to him losing Alice could have been prevented if Peter Allan had had a better sense of his black identity. He loses his role in the community. The painful irony that the man who urged his community to "know their past" was in fact hiding his true identity never gets directly dealt with by the characters. However Kwei-Armah contrasts the irony with sentiment. The quote that ends the scene hints that Alice is on a journey to learn her "glorious past" (Kwei-Armah, *Fix Up* 21), and that this journey will help her heal.

The voices from the slave narrative that Alice reads aloud are the other major "non-present character". Of the two stories Alice reads, one is about mixed race children whose father is the white master and their mother is described as "that yella gal" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 133). The lesson the speaker recounts is that "No sir, it don't pay to be pretty and yella" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 133). The other story is about a mother losing her

child who is about to be sold away. Alice reads the story aloud:

When me mudder see that Mr. Reynolds had come to collect me to sell with the other ten or so pickney, she fell to her knees and begged him to spare me. When she seed that it weren't no good, she simply stood up and asked Him to ask whoever it was dat buyed me, to raise me for God. ... I never seed my modder again in all my living days. (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 150-151)

Both stories relate to Alice personally: the differential treatment of lighter slaves reflects the difficulties she feels being of mixed ancestry; and the above story about children being separated from parents moves her because she feels abandoned by her birth parents. She feels she was given away, and this child is being taken away by force. Alice says: "I tried to imagine the pain of this mother, what this mother felt, this parent felt, but I simply couldn't" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 151). Alice's feelings are clear to the audience, but the quote also foreshadows, Kwesi admitting that Alice was taken by child protective services, not given away.

Theses stories are from the fictional "Slave Narratives: a Collection of her Majesty's Colonial Voices" which Kwei-Armah wrote based on a collection of African American slave memoirs. It was important to Kwei-Armah that the stories in the play be Afro-Caribbean, enough so that he wrote fictional stories rather than include African American voices. In an interview with Deirdre Osborne, Kwei-Armah explains:

Angus and I had a debate about whether or not it was right for me to re-create these narratives as African-Caribbean narratives. For me it was absolutely right. We have a wonderful oral tradition, but wouldn't it be

wonderful and what would it mean for an African-Caribbean person to have such narratives—in the words of someone from Trinidad or Grenada? That was the route to *Fix Up*. (Osborne 261)

It is not coincidental that the master, in both accounts, has the last name Reynolds, which is similar to Roberts, the name with which Kwei-Armah was born. In an earlier draft of the play, the slave narratives were fiction, written by Brother Kiyi. Much like Kwei-Armah, Brother Kiyi translates and adapts the “American originals.” Brother Kiyi explains: “They’re not West Indians at all. But they could be! Alice for years people come in here and ask for their slave stories, their histories and what do I have give them? Bloody American history. Why should the British, the biggest slavers, get away with it?” (Kwei-Armah, *Fix Up* 61). However the decision to have Brother Kiyi be the author of the narratives does not work well dramatically, as it misleads Alice. While it could be construed that writing these stories was Kiyi’s attempt at healing after losing his wife and daughter, it ultimately makes him seem untrustworthy, simultaneously lessening the meaning and value of the experience Alice had reading them, as if they had been somehow manufactured by Kiyi in order to achieve some agenda. Later versions of the play have the narratives as recordings of 19th century social anthropologists, which legitimizes them as historical fact, not fiction and thus reinforcing the effect the readings had on both the characters in the play and the audience.

It is also important to note that Kwei-Armah includes these stories because slavery is part of a black collective culture. Lynnette Goddard writes that Kwei-Armah “is especially mindful of the impact of the past on the present, how legacies of slavery affect contemporary black lives as each generation inherits from their predecessors, and

the fundamental question about the need to understand history and heal past traumas in order to secure better futures” (Goddard xix-xx). It is as if the trauma of slavery, of having a child forcefully taken from its parents is replayed when Peter Allan has his daughter taken from him by the authorities. Kwei-Armah confirms this with Kiyi’s final lines of the play when he tells Alice, “You weren’t abandoned, you were taken ... I built this to shut out the cries. Of you” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 166). This time, perhaps Brother Kiyi can break the cycle and move on.

Kwei-Armah’s play is full of cultural and historical references, but hair also becomes an important symbol used throughout the play. Not only do we encounter the over-arching theme of a beauty shop taking over the bookshop, but also hair is a marker of cultural identity. Brother Kiyi’s “greying unkempt locks” (Kwei-Armah *Plays* 100) mark him as one in touch with his heritage. Kwei-Armah presents a contrast to this in Norma, who wears wigs. Norma says the following about Kiyi’s dreadlocks: “Boy, don’t shake that ting at me. One sum’ting I don’t like, that Rasta ting you have on your head ... I don’t care about your symbol of rebellion stupidity. You should have dropped that jail nonsense years ago. You wash it?” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 108). Norma associates Kiyi’s locks with negative black stigmas, like prison time, rebellion, drug use and uncleanness. However, Kiyi believes Norma’s fake hair is just as bad. Brother Kiyi says “A next-animal ting you have on you head. Is it still alive?” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 136). Brother Kiyi associates Norma’s wigs with a desire to separate herself from her native culture and to fit in to a more socially dominant western style of beauty. Norma presents a unique dilemma, for while her preoccupation with her physical appearance would suggest she is trying to attract men, perhaps Brother Kiyi, her banter and interactions with him are

decidedly male. Carl describes their relationship: “Norma’s like a man to Kiyi! They like blokes, buddies and shit, stuff”(Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 142). Brother Kiyi and Norma’s relationship is strictly platonic because Kwei-Armah does not write Norma as female, and therefore her sexuality does not upset their bond. They trade insults about each other’s hair in a light-hearted and humorous manner.

Hair is also dealt with more seriously in the play with Alice, whose hair marks her as “different”. She reveals how little she knew about her own hair in the following lines: “Actually, you know what? There is a book over there that I wish was out when I was a kid. Caring for black hair. I didn’t know you could wear your hair other than in two bunches until I was seventeen” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 151). Alice’s ignorance of her cultural identity separates her from the other characters in the play, especially Brother Kiyi. Norma may have a different wig for every scene, but Norma associates her issues with hair as part of the black experience. Alice’s dissatisfaction with her hair makes her feel as if she does not belong to any group.

Similar importance must be placed on the last image of hair in the play and that is Brother Kiyi cutting his long dreadlocks. The stage directions read: “*Slowly, he starts to chop off his locks. When all are gone he runs his hands through what remains of his hair. His hands eventually fall on his face. He screams*” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 165). The image brings to mind a defeated Samson, but more than defeat, also relief. Lynnette Goddard points out that this final act “symbolizes a final break with the past, the end of an era for his radical black-centered politics and the beginnings of new possibilities that reflect current times” (Goddard xxi). Goddard shows that the end of the play is actually quite optimistic and that now that the truth is no longer hidden, Brother Kiyi or Peter Allan can

start a new beginning. Throughout the play, hair is used as a symbol of cultural ties that bind people together or mark them as different, and so cutting his hair shows his symbolic break with his community identity.

Critics and reviews of the 2004 production of *Fix Up* at the National Theatre are fairly mixed. While most critics applauded Kwei-Armah's choice of theme and subject matter, the play itself did not reach the levels of acclaim that *Elmina's Kitchen* did just a year before, mostly it seems because of issues with the play's development and structure. In a review for *Variety* Matt Wolf wrote: "This latest effort leaves little doubt that the actor-turned-writer is not lacking in ideas. What he needs now is structural finesse that might showcase to best advantage a thematically rich melodrama" (Wolf 29). Critic Michael Portillo explains the structure issues as a "stark contrast between the first and second acts. Establishing the bookshop as a paradise of calm is achieved during an almost soporific first half, followed by a second of high melodrama" (Portillo 82). The tension does accelerate in the second act, in which events unravel quickly, with an unsatisfying denouement.

The other major critique of the play is that unlike *Elmina's Kitchen* where the dialogue flows easily in the familiar and casual West Indian flair, the dialogue in *Fix Up* can be stilted and awkward and is confined to back and forth between two characters at a time. As critic William Boles writes: "While this strategy succeeds as characters are introduced, the technique draws attention to itself when all five characters are on stage at once, which happens near the play's end when the dramatic conflict explodes" (Boles 725). This type of interaction can limit the dramatic tension, which could cause the type of problems described by the critics Portillo and Wolf. While these issues are true, the

play's real success lay in its ability to draw in younger and more diverse audience members. William Boles commented that The National's "commitment of ethnic diversity" (Boles 724) was evident in the audience make up when he attended *Fix Up*. This illustrates the ability of Kwei-Armah's play to reach across age and race lines to reach a broader community. While *Fix Up* is a play about challenging the youth of today to know more about the past, it makes up for what it lacks in dramaturgy by bringing important issues to the foreground of contemporary theatre.

Overall, Kwei-Armah's *Fix Up* deals with some fundamental issues about what it means to be black British today, and each character represents a different struggle. In Carl, the audience sees a person trying to overcome the difficult hand he has been dealt, the life of a young black man filled with drugs and violence. In Kwesi, they see a strong black man trying to become a source of financial support to a community in need, but who is also filled with anger that is aimed at everyone but himself. Norma, with a different wig in each scene, represents society's emphasis on physical appearance and her desire to conform to more traditional, western styles of beauty in order to fit in. With Alice, the audience discovers the difficulties facing many people of dual heritage, being marked as different from other members of their communities. These emotions are mirrored in the readings from the slave narratives that echo Alice's feelings of inferiority, loneliness and abandonment. The final character and the play's tragic hero is that of Brother Kiyi, whose alienation from his cultural past led him to commit murder and lose his child; and his subsequent attempts to hide behind a mask of community leader and political thinker in a bookshop also fails. The audience pities his fall, but by the end of the play the familiar words of Marcus Garvey remind everyone "that there is no future for

a people that deny their past” (Kwei-Armah, *Fix Up* 21). Kwei-Armah uses these characters to raise awareness and create a discussion about the changing face of black Britain. The play becomes a warning to the younger black generations to learn where they come from, study their history and embrace their cultural heritage, whatever it may be, or risk ending up like one of the flawed and hurt characters in *Fix Up*. By using a dynamic cast of characters—including a character of dual heritage, a strong theme, symbols and the voices of past generations, Kwei-Armah uses *Fix Up* to further his agenda of creating a debate about racial identity and exposing his audience to new ideas.

CHAPTER IV

STATEMENT OF REGRET

Let's not mince words here, my work is political work –Kwame Kwei-Armah

Statement of Regret is the third and final play in Kwame Kwei-Armah's triptych cycle plays chronically the black British experience in the new millennium. Inspired by the British government's 2006 issuing of a "statement of regret" on Britain's involvement in the slave trade on the upcoming bicentennial of abolition, *Statement of Regret* is a play about loss and grief and trying to move on. Unlike his previous plays, *Statement of Regret* unfolds in a distinctly upper-middle class and academic environment in which debate is a central idea. Set in the world of a black political think tank, the fictional Institute of Black Policy Research, the play focuses on interactions and disagreements between Britons of African-Caribbean descent and those of African descent and the clashes that result from these differences in race, class, and ancestry. In the introduction to his collected works, Kwei-Armah explains, "I didn't want it to be blacks shouting at whites, 'Look what you've done to me!' That's boring. So to highlight the deculturalization I placed the argument between two 'black peoples': one of direct African descent, the other Afro-Caribbean" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* xiii). The play examines the long-term effects of slavery and bondage, such as the loss of culture and history, and the effects of this loss on the psychology of today's black British males.

Kwei-Armah looks at these societal effects through the lens of personal loss, especially the loss of a parent. In an interview with Deirdre Osborne, Kwei-Armah said: “I’m phenomenally interested in the effect that institutionalized slavery and institutionalized racism has had in emasculating the black male” (Osborne 258). *Statement of Regret* examines a man’s relationship to his father and his two sons (by two different women) to raise a discussion about race, reparations, politics and discrimination in contemporary Britain. This chapter focuses on how Kwei-Armah uses a strong theme, characterization, symbols, language and mystic elements in *Statement of Regret* as an urging for the black community to let go of the past traumas of slavery and loss, in order to progress and move on.

Statement of Regret follows the story of Kwaku Mackenzie, a black Briton of Caribbean descent, and founder of the Institute for Black Policy Research, or IBPR. Like the two other plays in his triptych, Kwei-Armah limits the action to a single location, in this case the offices of the IBPR, where all the characters work. Kwaku and his wife Lola, who was born in Nigeria, have a son together, Junior. Also working at the think tank are Michael Akinbola, Kwaku’s life-long friend and the deputy director of IBPR; Idrissa, a black British gay man of West African ancestry, educated at “Oxbridge”—a slang combination of Oxford and Cambridge; and Issi Banjoko, also of West African ancestry and educated at “Oxbridge” who is having an affair with Kwaku. Val, an older man who was born in Trinidad, acts as sort of spiritual guide for the group, offering blessings before and after meetings and events.

As the play opens, Kwaku is returning from a trip to the Caribbean, a break to help him recover from the death of his father, almost two years ago. It soon becomes clear that the trip did not offer the needed relief for Kwaku; he is unstable and drinking often. Some of the younger members think his ideas are old-fashioned and not relevant to current political events. While Kwaku wants to continue the urging for reparations for slavery, Idrissa wants to move on to more current issues like exploring black-on-black crime or homophobia in black culture, and Issi wants to explore why black women face domestic violence at such a high rate. Debates about which policies the think tank should support or research are discussed with vigor. As Kwei-Armah writes in the stage directions, *“Ideas and arguments are second nature to all of the characters. Thus related dialogue should almost fall out of their mouths with ease”* (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 172).

When Kwaku is alone he looks to Soby, an older, working-class Caribbean immigrant, for advice. Soby urges Kwaku to remain true to himself and his Caribbean roots. However the real difficulties begin when Kwaku hires his own son, Adrian, from his Caribbean mistress, Gloria, to intern at the IBPR. While Michael warned him against it, the decision forces Lola to leave for Nigeria. The other characters are unaware of Adrian’s true identity, but have difficulty accepting him because his area of expertise is Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, an area of study created in 2005 by psychologist Dr. Joy DeGruy (formerly Leary) that examines the residual effects of generations of slavery on the psychology of black people today, a theory in which the characters of African descent put little stock.

Events start to unravel in Act II, when Kwaku decides that they are no longer going to demand reparations for slavery. Rather they will argue for reparations only for

the black British of Caribbean descent, which Kwaku defends in a drunken rant on television. This divisive choice leads some members to quit, while others to refuse to resign. Junior feels like he is being passed over for Adrian. Michael urges Lola to come back and to get Kwaku the help he needs. Junior also asks Adrian to get their father to seek treatment, and that despite their feelings of anger and rivalry, they must try to move on. Junior says, “If we get caught up in our shit—no one wins” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 249). Adrian finally understands the depths of his father’s grief and madness, when he walks in on Kwaku talking out loud to Soby, his dead father, as if he were in the room. The original production ended there with a distraught Kwaku calling out for his father, but Kwei-Armah later adapted the play for radio and wrote an alternate ending in which Lola comes to a very broken Kwaku and takes him to get healed. The alternate ending may be seen as more optimistic because Lola’s last lines “Maybe it’s time we let the young ones make their mistakes” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 255) indicate a passing of the torch to the next generation and that the debates will continue.

Grief becomes a central motif for the play, and Kwei-Armah juxtaposes the slave’s loss of culture with the grief of losing a father. After his father’s death, for example, Kwaku loses his sense of identity; he feels he betrayed his father by marrying a Nigerian woman and changing his name. This is clear in the following scene from act one:

Soby (*Leans back*) I understand what you do here, but the truth of the matter is--well, I have a problem.

Beat

Kwaku Carry on.

Soby This name-changing thing you did, I know is a long time ago, but I didn't like it—it still today don't sit right with me, you know.

Kwaku I see. Well, thank you for your honesty.

Soby It embarrasses me—in fact, it embarrasses all of us when West Indians go and change your name to some African something. You're not African—they use to tell us that much when we first came to this country. We're the slave children. The ones dem throw away. And what do our children do? Throw demmselves at them. (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 208)

This scene directly leads to Kwaku's decision to fight for reparations for the descendants of Caribbean people. Kwaku is not just upset over the death of his father, he feels guilt over how he treated his father when he was alive, centered on the decision to change his name, the only legacy his father left him.

The importance of the name is clear because the audience knows that Kwaku gave his son his own name. Soby also expresses his anger at Kwaku (and West Indians like him) that “throw demmselves” at native Africans the way Kwaku assumingly did. Kwaku is angry with himself over the death of his father as well as the events that led up to his father's death. Junior explains Kwaku's behavior in the following lines:

What do you know, Adrian? That he screamed like an animal being skinned alive when he found his father had been laying dead for three days at the bottom of his stairs? That his father left everything he had to his thirty-year old girlfriend of two years and the rest of us nothing? That he didn't say a word to us but went to the grave everyday for eighteen months crying, asking for forgiveness? (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 248)

While never directly explained in the play, it seems clear that Kwaku disassociated himself from his father and his father's West Indian culture in order to prosper and be taken seriously in the political world. This false mask is something he now is trying to undo. To compensate for what he can never give back to his father, Kwaku tries to remove himself from his African friends and family, and align himself with his West Indian mistress and their child, Adrian. Kwaku tries to find himself after his father's death, but ultimately just alienates himself from everyone. It becomes quite obvious that grief is to be blamed for Kwaku's issues when toward the end of the play Michael buys a book for Kwaku entitled *Grief and the Mind* which more or less details Kwaku's madness and anger; but rather than help, the book and Michael's insinuations, just further upset him. Kwaku is the play's clear tragic hero, but his dysfunction and anger toward everyone make him hard to sympathize with.

Kwaku struggles to move on from his father's death, just as Kwei-Armah is arguing, the black British of Caribbean descent struggle to move past the traumas of slavery. Kwei-Armah is demonstrating the theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome in the African-Caribbean context through the character Kwaku's journey. Dr. DeGruy, a professor at Portland State University, developed the theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. Her website describes Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome as:

a theory that explains the etiology of many of the adaptive survival behaviors in African American communities throughout the United States and the Diaspora. It is a condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery. A form of slavery which was predicated

on the belief that African Americans were inherently/genetically inferior to whites. This was then followed by institutionalized racism which continues to perpetuate injury.

The effects of a collective loss of a cultural identity that slavery imposed on them is reflected in the search for identity that Kwaku is attempting in *Statement of Regret*.

Although Kwaku's abandonment of his father and his Caribbean identity was voluntary, it was the slave trade that forced the deculturalization onto slaves. What is unique about Kwei-Armah's play is that it takes Dr. DeGruy's theories about African American psychology, and puts them into context within British society, where the history of slavery and colonization is different than the United States. The collective loss of cultural identity that slavery imposed on them, leads to the same search for identity that Kwaku is attempting. Kwaku's fight for the lost cause of reparations becomes a symbol for this struggle. In the introduction to his *Plays: I* Kwei-Armah discusses this loss of collective heritage that he wanted to shed light on with *Statement of Regret*:

I wanted to explore the themes of reparation for the slave trade—not for slavery itself, but for the deculturalisation of the African Caribbean, the process, to paraphrase a speech in the play, whereby the African had his language, religion, and culture taken from him/her to make them beasts of burden. A process that would lead to generations of Africans—no African Caribbeans—not knowing where they originated from or what their original language might have been. For centuries a people had been made almost cultureless. (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* xiii)

Statement of Regret even asks the question—can reparations even begin to repair the damage of the terrible actions committed against them? Kwei-Armah seems to like the idea of the discussion of reparations more than the practicality of it. While the play puts the idea out there, it ultimately argues that the only way to be repaired is through healing and joining together. The black community cannot prosper while divided, and so Kwaku’s inability to give up the fight for reparations represents the fight of past generations.

Racism and anger within the black community are at the forefront of the play, as seen through the tense friendship of Kwaku and Michael and highlighted through the sibling rivalry of Adrian and Junior. This deep division between West Indians and African immigrants goes back generations, and the play deals with this hatred’s evolution. At the beginning of the play, all the characters are united around causes for black Britons; only after Adrian’s appearance does the audience start to see cracks of sedition. In act one, scene two there is a discussion of education, and why black Britons are failing in schools. Kwaku blames racist white teachers. Idrissa counters that idea by saying: “If these white teachers are so racist, why are African boys doing well?” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 194). This is the first time there is an explicit difference made between blacks of African-Caribbean descent and blacks of African descent. Despite being new and an intern, Adrian offers a possible answer. He replies, “Maybe it’s because the African boys did not have to go through the trauma of slavery” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 195). While Kwaku and Adrian certainly take it very seriously, Idrissa and other characters scoff at the idea of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. Anger at the native Africans comes to a head in act two, scene three when Kwaku demands an explanation from Michael and

all other Africans on the role their ancestors played in the slave trade. Kwaku's monologue is as follows:

If you were so great why didn't you come and get us? Why didn't you come and reclaim us when we were dying in the fields, raped in the huts, being brutalized and made half fucking human...

.....

We beat you and called you jungle bunny because it was the first time in four hundred years that we could tell you: you—hurt—me. The first time that we could show you our pain. And I'll be damned if right here and now, when our old folk are dying and half our fucking men are with bloody white women, and the other half are in jail and you guys are multiplying and multiplying that I'm gonna have anyone, anyone stand in the way of my defending my people. (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 239).

Kwaku has anger and blame for everyone but himself, and while on the surface his feelings are aimed at Michael and Africans, there is a subtext here that is about Kwaku and his father. For example, "Why didn't you come and get us?" is full of subtext.

Kwaku is projecting his father's last moments and anger at his son; as the audience later learns from Junior, Kwaku's father fell and was at the bottom of the stairs for three days before being found. The word "reclaim" also rings heavy with meaning, that Kwaku, faced with his own mortality, wants to reclaim his own West Indian identity. Kwaku might be externally aiming his anger at Michael, Lola and junior, but also himself.

"You—hurt—me" is a powerful attack at himself for abandoning his roots, at his family

for being Nigerian for making him feel unworthy as a West Indian, at his father for dying and a projection of his father's anger at him.

While revealing many personal thoughts of the character, the monologue exposes many universal feelings about what it means to be of African Caribbean descent. In an interview with Bernadine Evaristo in *Wasafiri*, Kwei-Armah discusses the accusations Kwaku makes in the above monologue as “an articulation of what goes on subliminally in the African Caribbean psyche” (Evaristo 57). The monologue is a clear expression of Kwei-Armah's thoughts on Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome from the African-Caribbean point of view. In addition to the character Kwaku, the tense relationship between his two sons, Adrian and Junior, allows Kwei-Armah the opportunity to explore the differences in social class that arise from being born of either West Indian or African descent.

However, while the hostility within the black British community may be at the center of the play's conflict, critic Quentin Letts argues that academic theories do not necessarily make for engaging theatre. He writes: “*Statement Of Regret* may touch on a live issue of black-on-black racism but it forgets a basic theatrical question: is the audience going to be interested? Race-relations may be of lasting wonder to sociologists but there the fascination may end” (Letts). By the end of the play, the audience can hope for a reconciliation between Adrian and Junior, a symbolic union of a divided black culture.

Statement of Regret explores discrimination and division within the black community along race lines, but beyond personal heritage, it also delves into ideas of identity and classification through means of gender, sexual orientation, class and education. As in *Elmina's Kitchen*, female characters in *Statement of Regret* are represented in a very simplistic and idealized way. Issi is predominantly a figure of

sexual objectification. Despite being described in the stage directions as “*very bright*” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 172), her role is limited to being one of Kwaku’s mistresses, an affair that is never fully developed dramatically, nor is its purpose fully exposed. It seems unnecessary; it makes her character appear less educated and professional, and it puts into question her place in the office. The affair seems widely known throughout the office, but other than she met him on *illicitaffairs.com*, her attraction to an older, unstable, married man is never justified. At least with Alice in *Fix Up*, her attraction to older men is at least partially explained by her issues with her absent father, but with Issi, the audience only gets a weak one line explanation: “‘One should jettison themselves away from love as far as possible till the right one appears...’ Can’t remember who said that, but I read it at college and it makes sense, right?” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 226). Throughout the play Issi argues and debates ideas with the boys, but by the end she and their affair is just used to showcase Kwaku’s anger and paranoia, as evident in his rant: “Is me crown your after, Michael? Is war you really want? I long know it is me pussy you want—well, watch her there na—(*Points to Issi.*) Tek it!” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays*, 241). Issi, in Kwaku’s eyes is nothing more than a sexual object and Kwei-Armah’s script does little to make her more than that.

Lola, like the absent figure of Elmina in *Elmina’s Kitchen*, represents a nurturing and healing earth mother whose role is to serve and save the men in her life, her son and her husband. At the end of the play, it is only her presence that can convince Kwaku to get help; not his sons, nor his mistress nor his lifelong friend Michael, only Lola can offer him salvation. However despite Lola’s ability to take care of everyone, she is offered little else to do dramatically. She does have a strong moment in scene three where she

says “I warn you, K, bring that boy into our sanctum and my heart will turn to ice...”(Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 205), but while she speaks powerfully, she just leaves midway through the play only to return at the very end. Kwei-Armah discussed the female characters he creates with Deirdre Osborne, and how their development is often secondary to that of his male lead characters. He says: “My job is to create good female characters if I can. But ultimately it’s to serve what I want to talk about, the attack on black masculinity and how it has bastardized its perception of manhood”(Osborne, 258). As result of this choice, Kwei-Armah’s female characters are often one dimensional and stereotypical representations of women, and Lola and Issi are no exceptions.

The inclusion of the first gay character, Idrissa, is an interesting addition that marks *Statement of Regret* as different from his earlier works. Idrissa is one of the voices of reason and progressivism in the office. In fact, Kwei-Armah entrusts this character with a line very close to his own motto. In the very first scene in act one Idrissa says, “It says debate people, --debate. Debate, ideas are everything” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 184). Nevertheless, although the character’s comments seem closely held in Kwei-Armah’s esteem, his sexual orientation is dismissed. Idrissa’s sexuality is known in the office, but it is treated with varying levels of mockery and hostility. He is referred to as a “girl” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 180), and his sexual orientation is called “batty-man business” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 184). It is as if in an attempt to be realistic, Kwei-Armah portrays every stereotype about how homosexuality is treated in the black community. In an interview with Deirdre Osborne for the *New Theatre Quarterly*, Osborne asks Kwei-Armah about dealing with issues surrounding homophobia in the black community on stage. Kwei-Armah responds, “That’s not my gig. However, I would support and

encourage that as an agenda. It must be written from the truth; it's not my truth" (Osborne, 254). It seems clear that while Kwei-Armah's intentions in creating a gay character are noble, his ignorance of a gay "truth" weaken the character's development. While Idrissa's sexuality is discussed and talked about by the other characters in the play, he never directly addresses, nor does his character really get fully developed beyond the policies he cares for and his desires for publicity for the IBPR. In a review for BBC'S *Africa Beyond*, Madvhi Ramani explains:

However, these characters and their relationships are not given enough room to breathe because their personal motives are outweighed by their political ones. As a result, they feel underdeveloped. For example, we are never able to understand the affair between Kwaku and researcher Issimama (Angel Coulby), or grasp the issues behind Idrissa's homosexuality. (Ramani)

Kwei-Armah is to be commended for showcasing a strong black homosexual male character, but the stereotypical way with which this character's homosexual identity is mocked and mistreated by the members of his community, reveal the playwright's weakness for under-developed supporting characters.

Of all the characters that work at the IBPR, most are of African descent, except Kwaku, Adrian and Val. Adrian is an intern and Val, despite his position of respect, is described as a "glorified postman" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 172). Kwei-Armah has not outnumbered the West Indians, but he has placed them in lower roles than their African counter-parts. By act two, scene three, Kwaku points out to Michael, "You think I haven't noticed over the years how you and Lola only employ people that are fucking

African?” (Kwei-Armah, 237). At this point in the play, Kwei-Armah has divided all the characters up along race lines to such an extent that it feels like he is forcing the audience to pick sides. In act two, scene three, Junior asks to which side he belongs, given that his mother is Nigerian and Kwaku is West Indian; Junior is crushed when his father responds: “You were always your mother’s child!”(Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 240). After that, the stage directions have the characters divided onstage according to their ancestry.

Language becomes another way of differentiating characters from one another, by their distinct accents and generational tones. In a review of the play for *Variety*, Karen Fricker writes: “One of the play’s real treasures is its characters various linguistic registers, from Idrissa’s cut-glass Queen’s English to Lola’s Nigerian accent to Kwaku’s slightly patois-flavored diction (which he turns up for street credit). This underlines Kwei-Armah’s point about the diversity of the black British experience (Fricker 54). Despite beginning the play as a unified force, Kwei-Armah breaks up characters along race, gender, class and age lines in order to create a heightened sense of tension similar to the ones faced by people of color in contemporary Britain. It also suggests that in order to progress as a society, people must overcome their differences and discriminations. On the other hand, when Kwei-Armah stretches beyond what he knows directly, the characters he creates tend to be one-dimensional and bordering on stereotypical.

Symbols and eccentric mysticism add a level of tradition and history to *Statement of Regret*. The character Val offers many links to the spiritual culture of the West Indians, a combination of tradition slaves brought over from Africa centuries ago and Christianity. In the stage directions it is said that “*he has been with Kwaku from the beginning*” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 172). He offers prayers before meetings, and describes himself as

the “spiritual officer” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 191). Superficially, it seems as if Val is largely present for comic relief, as in one scene where he is dressed as a Native American to show solidarity for “Black Indian Power” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 191) or to present a humorous contrast to the more liberal lifestyles of Issi, Junior and Idrissa. However, throughout the play he offers lines that foreshadow Kwaku’s journey to be healed. For example, in the beginning of the play, Val is fasting. Val explains: “You forget, Thelma Burgess child dead last week? Tonight is the nine night. Man has to be clean for when the spirit leaves the earth for the last time” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 180). Val’s dedication to funeral rites roots the play in West Indian tradition. Also his statement about a “man has to be clean” suggests the overall theme, that one must be healed in order to move forward. The line also brings to mind the West Indian and African idea that spirits do not always depart from the living world immediately after death, which makes Kwaku’s hallucination of his father Soby all the more real for him. Val treats the spirit world with a reverence and respect that the younger characters do not share. It represents a generational shift, younger characters like Issi and Idrissa who were born in Britain, appear more westernized and professional than immigrants of past generations, like Val. The character Val creates a link to the spiritual world and because he treats this tradition with such a respect and seriousness, it makes it all the more realistic for the audience.

The character Soby is both a physical and metaphysical presence in the world of the play. Kwaku cannot move past his father’s death and therefore his father’s spirit cannot move on. The audience learns that Kwaku’s father ran a funeral home, an apt choice for a play about letting go of the past. Symbolically, Kwaku has yet to place a gravestone on his father’s grave, a sign he is not ready to let go of his father. Soby warns

Kwaku: “The ground is ready and waiting. You shaming yourself and your fadder—most time a gravestone is the only monument, only proof that you pass through this place—fix it up, you hear me?” (Kwei-Armah, *Plays* 207). Soby’s spirit lingers in the play and in the mind of Kwaku as a representation of the play’s theme, that in order to move on, one must make peace with the traumas of the past.

Statement of Regret is a play dense with dialogue and ideas, a play that follows a man’s painful political and professional fall and his search for identity in the wake of his father’s death. The play’s over-arching theme, that clinging to the past can hurt a person, is the inverse of ideas urged in *Fix Up*. *Fix Up* wanted the youth to learn their past and study their history, so as not to repeat it, but *Statement of Regret* cautions that letting the past haunt a person can prevent a community from growing, and that grief is a part of the growing process. The characters serve as representations of different elements of social hierarchy in Britain. Their races, genders, sexual orientation, heritage and economic class showcase the diversity of the black British experience; however in his desire to be inclusive, Kwei-Armah struggles with stereotypes in his characters. Kwei-Armah uses these symbolic characters to demonstrate the diversity of the black British community, and by having them debate sensitive issues about race, like Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, Kwei-Armah is raising awareness of new and important ideas.

The first and only production of the play at the National Theatre in 2007 received mixed criticism. While most critics applauded the playwright’s attempt at discussing a sensitive subject matter, it was often at the expense of development of the plot and dramatic structure. As critic Michael Billington observed, “There is no denying that the play is full of dramatic power. But the big question is how one reconciles the need to

understand the past without being submerged by it. Kwei-Armah seems to have no very clear answer” (Billington 8). That the play has received no major productions since the original production speaks to what Billington hints at above, that the play’s heavy themes can often overwhelm the action leaving the audience questioning whether there is a solution to the complex issues raised by the play. Kwei-Armah objective with *Statement of Regret* is to create debate about issues like the history of slavery and reparations, grief and personal loss and racism within the black community. Kwaku McKenzie, an everyman for the African Caribbeans of Britain, must release the shackles of the past, otherwise, it will drag him down. Ultimately, *Statement of Regret* becomes a plea as well as a warning: do not let the past hold people back from their future.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF KWAME KWEI-ARMAH'S POLITICAL TRIPTYCH PLAYS

Kwame Kwei-Armah has made it clear that his objective in writing his political triptych plays was two-fold. The first (similar to August Wilson's aim in writing his century-cycle plays) is to document the black British experience in the first decade of the new millennium. In the introduction to his *Plays: I* Kwei-Armah writes: "Whether they were critically successful or not would be secondary to the achievement of having something that my great-grandchildren could read and say, 'That was my ancestor's view of the Britain he found at the turn of the century'" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays: I* xi). Beyond his desire to create a chronology for future generations, Kwei-Armah wanted to raise a discussion about the long-term effects that slavery, institutionalized racism, colonization and discrimination have had on black male British identity. In an interview with Deirdre Osborne, Kwei-Armah said:

I'm fundamentally concerned about black masculinity, and so I find myself wanting to speak about that, and –this is where it can seem like arrogance—I want to find a way of articulating it so that it can truly represent what I feel. I'm phenomenally interested in the effect that institutionalized slavery and institutionalized racism has had in emasculating the black male, forcing him to create a false personality.

That personality creates mental shackles; a void of pain, confusion, and
perpetuation of the very hellhole he was cast into. (Osborne, 258)

All of the central male characters in Kwei-Armah's triptych plays represent his ideas on black male identity and how the legacy of racism, oppression, and colonialism partially determined their circumstances. In the introduction to *Twenty-first Century* critic Alek Seirz notes: "Kwei-Armah is an ideas man who also delights in human singularity. His exploration of the issues of black British identity pulsates with provocative insights—often expressed through punch and hilarious one-liners—and glows with a warm humanity" (Seirz ix). Kwei-Armah uses these identifiable black males to raise awareness of certain societal issues or concerns. However in his new works, Kwei-Armah moves away from how the past influences the present and instead examines the future of racial identity in both Britain and the United States. His most recent works include: *Let There Be Love* (2008), *Seize the Day* (2009) and *Beneath's Place* (2013). These plays offer a more optimistic outlook for what it means to be black in the new millennium while still creating a discussion of new ideas. This conclusion examines the central male characters from all three plays in the triptych—*Elmina's Kitchen*, *Fix Up*, and *Statement of Regret*—because their characters serve as symbols for the themes of his plays. This conclusion also examines his newer works in relation to the triptych, in an attempt to understand what Kwei-Armah's potential legacy is in international theatre and how he raises discussions about racial identity.

Deli, the father from *Elmina's Kitchen*, is a victim of his circumstance and environment. As the son of an immigrant, he was afforded few educational opportunities, and the only example of manhood he had was the father who abandoned him. Thus

Ashley's untimely death at the hands of a drug lord, is a consequence of the lot he was given by being born a second-generation black West Indian. Kwei-Armah uses *Deli* to put a human face to the thousands of parents who lose children to gang violence. In discussing the play, Kwei-Armah said, "We don't understand our own Holocaust" (Davis 245). *Elmina's Kitchen* catapulted Kwei-Armah onto the world's stage as a new voice calling for something to be done about murders of young black men in ghettos from London to similar cities around the world.

Brother Kiyi, the father figure in *Fix Up*, suffers from an internalized self-hate. The audience never learns what attracted him to Alice's white mother, but the audience does learn that the relationship was destructive. Thirty years before the action of the play, Brother Kiyi wanted to break away from his black identity; it resulted in Kiyi going to prison for his wife's murder and his daughter being taken by children's services. Since his time in prison, Brother Kiyi is trying to embrace, study, and educate people about their black heritage so that they do not suffer his same fate. As the character Carl says: "I used to want to be white till I met Kiyi. Now I'm blue black brother. You couldn't make me white if you tried" (Kwei-Armah, *Plays: I* 141). While Alice searches for her past, Brother Kiyi is hiding from it. The young characters in the play are unaware or alienated from their shared glorious history, something Kwei-Armah is trying encourage them (and his audience) to change.

Kwei-Armah uses the family dynamic of Kwaku McKenzie's two families in *Statement of Regret* to explore the issues of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. Kwaku is perhaps the most dysfunctional of all three fathers because he is suffering a mental breakdown. His suffering is a very literal loss of a father and the spiritual loss of a

culture, and the grief is overwhelming. While it seems Kwaku had advantages afforded him that none of the other fathers had, he cannot move past his anger at himself. All three of these father characters fail their children in one way or another, and they serve as symbols for a society that has failed its black male population. Kwei-Armah uses the characters in his plays as a platform for debate.

Sometimes Kwei-Armah's ideas can overwhelm the action of the play. In the introduction to *The Methuen Drama Book of Plays By Black British Writers*, Lynette Goddard writes about *Fix Up*: "Some of the more critical reviews suggest that the weight of the ideas undermined the dramatic potential of the play, leading to contrived characterization, melodramatic plotting and unbelievable twists" (Goddard, xxii). This type of criticism seems common for both *Fix Up* and *Statement of Regret*. It would seem a better balance of plot, character, and thought must be struck for his plays to stand the test of time.

Since the last of the triptych plays premiered in 2007, Kwei-Armah has had three plays staged in both London and the United States. These three plays, *Let There be Love* (2008), *Seize the Day* (2009) and *Beneath a's Place* (2013) mark a shift away from Kwei-Armah's intentions with the triptych plays. Although Kwei-Armah's aim to create debate and foster discussion remain the same, the tone of the newer works transition from a focus on how the past influences the future, and instead centers on the commonalities people share and the opportunities for the future.

Let There be Love and *Seize the Day* premiered at the Tricycle Theatre in London, and the playwright directed both. *Let There be Love* examines the commonalities in the immigrant experience between young immigrants from Eastern Europe and the

West Indian immigrants that came to London in the early 1950s. *Seize the Day* looks at the possibility of a black mayor of London, at a time when minorities make up almost fifty percent of the city's population. *Let There be Love* also received a production stateside in 2010 at Centerstage in Baltimore and both shows raised awareness about contemporary race issues. Kwei-Armah's newest work, *Beneatha's Place*, has generated the most press of any of his works since *Elmina's Kitchen*. It is his first play to receive its premiere in the United States, opening in May of 2013 at Baltimore's Centerstage, where it played in rep with *Clybourne Park* as part of the "Raisin Cycle." *Beneatha's Place* deals with issues of racism and colonialism and ask the questions "who owns African studies?" With the continued success of these plays, it seems clear that Kwei-Armah is achieving his goal of using his plays to create and foster discussions.

The word "trptych" means three-fold and it usually refers to a single work of art that is divided into three sections. If Kwei-Armah's political triptych were viewed collectively as a three-panel work of visual art, it would create a vivid image of contemporary black British identity in the early 2000s. *Elmina's Kitchen*, with the most critical acclaim and more productions around the world than the other two, would be at the center of the triptych, and represents the present and most current pressing needs of black West Indians, and that is to stop the destruction of our youths. On the left side of *Elmina's Kitchen*, representing the past, would be *Fix Up*. *Fix Up* represents the dangers of not knowing or understanding one's personal past, but also one's heritage and history. Brother Kiyi's destruction serves as a symbol for what happens when someone tries to hide from his or her past. Finally, on the right side would be *Statement of Regret*, which represents the future of black identity in Britain. *Statement of Regret* serves as a warning

against clinging to the past and argues that through joining together, and not fighting each other, the possibilities are endless, and the future is open.

If viewed from left to right, the triptych would be *Fix Up*, *Elmina's Kitchen*, and *Statement of Regret*: a unity of past, present, and future representing ideas and discussions on black male identity in contemporary Britain. *Elmina's Kitchen* demands audiences question why black youths are dying in the streets and why no one is stopping it. *Fix Up* creates a discussion about the treatment and acceptance of people of dual heritage, and *Statement of Regret* raises awareness for the polarizing idea of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. Kwei-Armah's plays generate discussion and debates for every audience that encounters them, and while it might be too soon to grasp the long-term legacy of this young playwright, Kwame Kwei-Armah is here and making his voice heard.

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