

African Signs as Tools of Resistance used by the African British in Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Fix Up*

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to examine African signs as tools of resistance used by the African British in Kwame Kwei-Armah's play *Fix Up*. Dramatic signs (visual, verbal, and acoustic) are invaluable tools that are employed in the play to convey its message and achieve the desired communication. African Kentes, for example, are employed in *Fix Up* as significant visual signs in the expression of African identity on different levels of iconicity, indexicality and symbolicity. *Fix Up*, premiered at the National Theatre in December 2004, records the African experience in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The African British, like other black

communities in Britain today, suffer from racism as a social and historical practice. Concepts and methods of semiotics are used in this paper to explore signs of racism against characters of African descent as well as signs of ethnic African identity such as African language, songs and dances, costume, hairstyle, and icons of the Black culture as dramatic tools of resistance. The play is meant to assert the importance of African history and ethnic pride to the African British in their resistance against white racism.

Keywords

Semiotics, Iconicity, Indexicality, Symbolicity, Signs of Identity, Resistance, Racism, African-British Drama, Kwame Kwei-Armah

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الملخص

يقدم هذا البحث تحليلاً للعلامات المسرحية اللغوية والعلامات غير اللغوية الأفريقية كأدوات للمقاومة لدى الإنجليز السود من أصول أفريقية وذلك في مسرحية «فيكس أب» لكوامي كواي-أرما، وهو أحد كتاب المسرح الإنجليز السود من أصل غاني. والعلامات المسرحية (المرئية واللفظية والسمعية) هي أدوات مهمة في تقديم مضمون المسرحية وتحقيق التواصل المطلوب مع القارئ أو المشاهد. فالملابس الأفريقية في مسرحية كوامي كواي-أرما، على سبيل المثال، تم توظيفها سيميوطيقياً في المستويات المختلفة للعلامات المسرحية (الأيقونة والمؤشر والرمز) للتعبير عن الهوية الأفريقية. ولقد عرضت المسرحية لأول مرة في بريطانيا في ٢٠٠٤ حيث تسجل تجربة الإنجليز السود من أصول أفريقية في بريطانيا في مطلع القرن الحادي والعشرين وما يتعرضون له كغيرهم من الأقليات العرقية من ممارسات عنصرية. ويعتمد هذا البحث على بعض المفاهيم والنظريات من السيميوطيقا أو علم العلامات

كمنهجاً في تحليل مظاهر العنصرية ضد الإنجليز السود من أصل أفريقي وكذلك علامات الهوية العرقية الأفريقية كاللغة والأغاني والرقص والملابس وقصات الشعر وأيقونات ثقافة السود كأدوات لمقاومة مظاهر العنصرية التي يتعرضون لها. ويخلص البحث إلى أن المسرحية تهدف إلى التأكيد على أهمية التاريخ والهوية العرقية الأفريقية كوسيلة لمقاومة العنصرية التي تمارسها الأغلبية المهيمنة في المجتمع.

الكلمات الدالة:

السيميوطيقا، الأيقونة، المؤشر، الرمز، علامات الهوية، المقاومة، العنصرية، المسرح الإنجليزى - الأفريقى، كوامي كواي - أرما

The main aim of this paper is to examine African signs as tools of resistance used by the African British characters in Kwame Kwei-Armah's play Fix Up. The play, premiered at the National Theatre in December 2004, records the African experience in Britain at the beginning of the

twenty-first century. According to Michel Foucault, “there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are ... formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised” (“Body/Power” 142). *In an exchange with Gilles Deleuze*, Foucault argues that there is “a discourse against power, the counter-discourse” (209) that challenges its legitimacy. With Foucault's ideas about resistance and counter-discourse in mind, I contend that African signs in the play are not mere representatives of African identity and history, as most of the critical views argue, but symbols of black resistance employed dramatically to give a cultural voice to the African British and present a dramatic counter-discourse different from mainstream British drama.

In 2004, Aleks Sierz argued that “*Fix Up* is a passionate plea

for the study of history” (40). Truly, the play is a plea for the study of history but not just for the sake of studying Black history as much as for constructing Black identity in the struggle against racism. Similarly, Michael Billington hinted at “specific racial resonances” in *Fix Up*, “For what is striking about his [Kwei-Armah's] richly eloquent new play is that it deals with a subject that has specific racial resonances but a wider application: the sacrifice of historical identity to the insatiable demands of brute commerce” (18). According to William C. Boles, “The play mainly mourns the fate of these unappreciated representatives of black culture and history, it also addresses a number of other concerns facing black culture in Britain” (724, emphasis added). Among the “other concerns” emphasised by Boles as “powerful topics rarely discussed on the

British stage” (724), it is noted that the issue of race has no place. In 2007, Valerie K. Lucas wrote that “*Fix Up* discusses the search for historical roots and Black identity in an era where these longed-for certainties have become destabilised and contested” (242), an argument which puts emphasis on “the search for historical roots and Black identity” without elaborating what has made these “longed-for certainties” challenged at a time when Britain is thought of as a multicultural society.

As most critics of *Fix Up* limit the message of the play to the study of African history or the search for historical roots ignoring racism and the sore history of the African experience in Britain, they seem to isolate the play from its social and cultural context. Such arguments by Sierz, Billington, Boles and Lucas could be valid if

the play were set in a context other than contemporary Britain where white racism against the Blacks is manifested indeed, in spite of all official claims of being democratic and fair-minded, as Charles Wilson asserts, “On the surface, the system looks as though it operates on fair principles, but in actuality it functions as prejudicially as it might have under an overtly racist regime” (xiii). The Black/African characters in *Fix Up* are neither Africans in their motherland, Africa, nor African tourists in Britain; they are British citizens who should be equal to the white British by virtue of citizenship. The fact that the main character in the play, Brother Kiyi, embraces signs of his African identity as a direct result of being exposed to white racism supports the main argument of this paper that African signs in the play are meant

to have a symbolic meaning that goes beyond their function as signifiers of the African culture.

The African British, as well as other non-white communities in Britain, used to suffer from racism as a social and historical practice since post-World War II period. The term *African British* is used here to denote, as Nigerian British journalist Toyin Agbetu argues, “all British nationals with antecedents originating directly from Africa or indirectly via African diasporic communities, such as those in the Caribbean and South America” (qtd. in Arana ix). African diasporic communities were the result of the “trans-Atlantic slave trade” between Britain, West Africa, and the Caribbean: “This movement lasted for many centuries and led to the establishment of African communities of varying sizes not

only in Europe but also in the Middle East and the Americas” (Knight 305). Since the nineteen eighties, as David Killingray points out, “More recently a steadily growing number of Africans have arrived in Britain” (3). The majority of these black immigrants to Britain have come directly from West Africa, in particular Nigeria and Ghana.

The Ghanaian British playwright, Kwame Kwei-Armah is one of those Black British dramatists who have chronicled the African experience in Britain “with plays of superb vitality, complexity and often highly critical insights” (Spencer 29). Although born in Britain, Kwei-Armah says that he suffered from racism because of his African roots early in his life:

When I walked out on the

streets in London, they'd say "Go back home, you black bastard." When I went to the West Indies they'd say, "You're English." When I go to Africa, they say "Go home. Look at you, Bob Marley." I'd never had a home until I discovered that I was an African and that actually I was a diasporic African. ("This is a Cultural Renaissance" 247)

In an Interview with BBC, "The House I Grew Up In," Kwei-Armah states that at the age of nineteen, he changed his name from *Ian Roberts* to *Kwame Kwei-Armah* after tracing his ancestral African roots in Ghana which displays his desire to reclaim his African identity. In the introduction to his *Plays One*, Kwei-Armah conveys that he grew

up in the seventies at a time in which black families in Britain suffered from racist practices and oppression:

I had grown up in a Britain where it was white youths that attacked my community; when I saw another black youth I would nod a kind of acknowledgement, I would feel safer in the knowledge that if I were to be attacked there was someone close by to help me. (x)

In *Fix Up*, Brother Kiyi, a descendant of the African diaspora, experiences racism everywhere. After he got married to a white Englishwoman, he became more vulnerable to discrimination, with white people spitting at him in the street and smearing excrement on his windows. Brother Kiyi represents

a generation of the African British whom Kwei-Armah terms as a “voiceless” generation that suffers from discrimination on all levels:

It was my attempt to give voice to the generation that was almost voiceless ... the generation of those now in their fifties who came over to Britain as children with their parents from the Caribbean; the generation that walked the streets of London when it was cold; the ones who existed before we discovered the disgracefully high level of discrimination in the police force and schools and everyday life. How they survived, mentally and spiritually, was a story I wanted to tell, that I continually want to tell.
(*Plays One* xii)

Brother Kiyi represents this generation and expresses their misery and bitterness in the following outburst in which he accuses the young African British of being ignorant of discrimination as much as they are of their African roots:

Brother Kiyi. ... What do you know about your mother? You don't know nothin'! You don't know what she took to be with me, what shit I took just walking down the street, just being with her. What do you know? What do you know? What does your blasted generation know? Do you have people spitting at you in the street? Do you have shit smeared on your windows? Do you have the pressure that makes you strike at the ones you love? (379)

Semiotics will be made use of for the present discussion to

achieve its aim, namely, to prove that African signs in Kwei-Armah's play *Fix Up* are meant to be symbols of black resistance against white racism. Semiotics is defined by Charles S. Peirce as the “quasi-necessary, or formal doctrine of signs,” which abstracts “what must be the characters of all signs used by ... an intelligence capable of learning by experience” (“Logic” 98). Peirce argues that *signs* include “every picture, diagram, natural cry, pointing finger, wink, knot in one's handkerchief, memory, dream, fancy, concept, indication, token, symptom, letter, numeral, word, sentence ... be it in the physical universe, be it in the world of thought” (“Ideas” 326) that compels the intelligence towards something else. Peirce also distinguishes between three types of sign functions, namely, icon, index and symbol:

An *icon* is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own and which it possesses, just the same, whether any such Object actually exists or not.... An *index* is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object, it necessarily has some quality in common with the Object A *symbol* is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object. (“Nomenclature” 291)

According to Peirce, signs are thus classified as first, *icons* that are similar to their objects, second, *indexes* that are physically

connected with their objects, and third, *symbols* that are linked with their objects by conventional or logical laws. Therefore, I argue that African signs in *Fix Up* (such as African language, songs, dances, costume, hairstyles, heroes, rituals, etc.) can be perceived as having a symbolic significance that goes beyond their iconic value as mimic representations of their real referents in Africa and beyond their indexical function as signifiers of identification with the African culture and difference from the dominant White culture. African signs in the play are used as symbols of resistance by asserting African identity. This symbolic value, however, depends on the social and historical context in which these signs are used.

Black History Month

In the opening scene of *Fix Up*, the playwright makes it clear that

“It's Thursday, late afternoon in early October – Black History Month” (315). The reference to “Black History Month” raises important questions about this ethnic cultural event: What is Black History Month? Why should a Black History Month exist in Britain? And does it serve its purpose or not? As implied in the play, Black History Month is supposed to be a cultural event that provides learning opportunities for Black people, mainly young African British, interested in African history as an attempt to preserve African identity and overcome assimilation into white British culture. This cultural event, as Kalbir Shukra states, promotes knowledge of African history and experience with information on positive black contributions to British society:

In the 1990s ... ‘black history

month' and similar occasions are regularly organised by local authorities in major urban cities. In this sense 'black' does not include Asians and might be more accurately described as 'African' history. It is one of the black power initiatives which schools, universities and local councils have embraced as an important mechanism for raising the self-esteem of young African-Caribbeans. (33)

Shukra's words reveal that the main aim of such an event is to raise the "self-esteem" of the young Black British. Similarly, Brother Kiyi, the owner of a Black bookstore in *Fix Up*, believes that the aim of the Black History Month is to heighten the awareness and pride of black people in their cultural heritage

rooted in Africa which Western education refuses to acknowledge. This attitude is partly why Alice who ironically teaches "English and – and History" (343) comes to Fix Up bookshop to "broaden" her understanding of "black history" that is not incorporated into the mainstream curriculum of *National History* she is teaching:

Alice. It's Black History Month, isn't it?

Brother Kiyi. Indeed it is.

Alice. Must be a good time for business eh? Bet everyone like me comes in looking for something that will broaden their understanding of, well, black history. (328)

Alice's words reveal that the Black British are meant to come to bookshops like Fix Up during this cultural event. It is an opportunity, as Brother Kiyi argues, to present a

different version of history: "No my friend, *his story* is the fables of his winnings. (*Points to slave narrative books.*) This is history" (332).

Pride in the greatness of African heritage as meant in the play includes knowledge of the history of African diaspora worldwide. As Geoffrey V. Davis and Anne Fuchs argue, "Kwame Kwei-Armah goes a step further, broadening the context to which he feels he belongs to include the writers and thinkers of the African diaspora" (25). With that in mind, it is normal to find the works and writings of the writers and thinkers of the African diaspora on the shelves of *Fix Up* bookstore. These are works that present, as their titles reflect, an alternative view of British history in which the achievements of the Black civilisation and the injustices done to the blacks of Africa by their white enslavers are recorded:

Brother Kiyi

I have on these shelves Van Sertima's *Africa, Cradle of Civilisation!* Chancellor Williams's *Destruction of Black Civilisation*, Peterson's *The Middle Passage*, Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery*. I've books on the Dogons, the Ashantis, the, the pyramids of ancient Zimbabwe, and what do they buy? Nonsensical nonsense. (345)

What Brother Kiyi laments here is that the young African British neglect their African history. To him, they are close to being, or are already assimilated into the white culture. He asks Kwesi, "What you gonna build if you don't know where you're coming from?" Brother Kiyi believes that the principal problem with his community is "the collective lack of knowledge of ourselves and our constant desire to imitate,

impersonate and duplicate everything Caucasian” (343). Brother Kiyi uses the word *Caucasian* to refer to the whites. The significance of this word lies in that “‘Caucasian’ was the name chosen by the West's narcissistic delusion of superiority” (Mercer 119) in discourses of scientific racism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which developed in Europe alongside the slave trade. Brother Kiyi believes that the solution is to educate the African British youth in Black history, articulating his wish that “more of the youth could hear, see where they've come from” (321). This is exactly what Brother Kiyi is trying to do when he lends books more than he sells, to attract young blacks to their African heritage as much as they are drawn to straightening their hair, a symbol of their wish to be assimilated on the external

physical level. As Kwei-Armah makes it clear, “If there is one shout in the play, it is: read your history” (qtd. in Sierz 40).

As given in the play, it seems that the Black History Month does not serve its original purpose. Indeed, in the early twenty first century, it has merely become, as Yasmin Alibhai-Brown argues, the mainstream cultural way to satisfy the need for diversity: “In Mr. Blair's inclusive Britain, Black History Month has been mainstreamed Black History Month has become too safe perhaps. Worse, it has had little impact on the popular consciousness” (qtd. in Burrell and Panayi 22). Also, Vanessa Walters states that it is as if Black history is not part of the British history in school curriculums, and not worth white people's time:

The fact that [Black History Month] takes place only one month of the year undermines the positive benefits. The school curriculum should aim to give pupils a year-round, broad view of British history – a view that does not confine itself to a Eurocentric perspective. *Black history month cannot do this, not only because it is time-restricted but also because it ghettoises black experience.* (18, emphasis added).

Thus, Black History Month in Britain is allotted one month, but what about the rest of the year? And if Black people are part and parcel of the history of Britain, then why should there be a Black History Month at all? African history, celebrated in an ethnic event, is presented as isolated from British history. Instead of being a

means of cultural empowerment and resistance against the marginalisation of the Black/African experience in white-washed history and education, the Black History Month has become an excuse to separate the Black/African experience from British history and to minimise the contributions of the Black British by relegating them to one month of the year.

Black Bookstores

Fix Up is set in a North London black bookstore that has only one customer, Alice, who willingly comes seeking knowledge about her ethnic African past. The significance of *Fix Up* bookstore lies in that it is a “‘*Black conscious’ bookstore*” (315). That is to say, the bookshop offers knowledge for the Black British about Black/African literature,

culture, and politics, which the surrounding community does not seem to appreciate:

We are in 'Fix Up', a small, old-school, 'Black conscious' bookstore. The place is much too small to hold the many shelves and bookcases that jam and squeeze up next to each other.... Sitting nobly on each and every bookshelf, almost as closely stacked together as the books, are African statues and carvings of giraffes, busts of great leaders, perfectly formed couples entwined, Ashanti stools, sculptured walking sticks, etc. (315)

The set or décor of *Fix Up* bookstore seems to be iconic. Full of “African statues,” “carvings of giraffes,” “busts of great leaders,” “Ashanti stools,” “sculptured

walking sticks,” the place itself is an incarnation of tribal life in Africa. Brother Kiyi's bookshop in London thus presents a shift in time and place, indeed, even a shift in history. African signs such as “Ashanti stools” and “sculptured walking sticks” are perceived in their original African environment as symbols of nationhood and power: “The Ashanti stools have become well recognized and valued samples of Ashanti art and have also become a symbol of nationhood” (Lifshitz 54). On a symbolic rather than iconic level, the presence of these objects provides Brother Kiyi with strength because they act as a constant reminder to him as well as to his customers of the rich African heritage.

The name, *Fix Up*, is a doubly significant verbal sign symbolic of

both its owner's attempt to *fix up*, amend and correct young black people's ignorance of their history as well as his generation's lost history. Indeed, he assertively states, "I built this for my community" (379). As Valerie K. Lucas argues:

For Brother Kiyi it is not only attempting to 'fix up' his own community by offering them a vision of past heroic struggles against oppression (to serve as the foundation for a brighter future), but he is also trying to 'fix up' himself by scripting a yearned-for version of West Indians' lost history. (246)

Moreover, there is a third dimension to the significance of the bookstore name which represents Kiyi's desire to correct or set right the wrong choice he

made early in his life when he thought that by giving up his African identity for the sake of the white culture he would become English. Accordingly, Kiyi's insistence on educating the youth in Black history is his way to make up for his past mistake.

Fix Up makes it clear that in the struggle against racism past history is a key factor that needs to be taken into consideration. Throughout the play, the characters, especially Brother Kiyi, make references to books, reading and learning about Africa:

Brother Kiyi. Ignorant? How many times do I have to tell you, I am not ignorant! Ignorant is when you are not aware, I, on the contrary *am* aware –

Carl. – of the rightful place I hold in hi, hi, history –

Brother Kiyi. – because
unlike the overwhelming
majority of my people –

Carl. – I read –

Brother Kiyi. – digest and
make manifest –

Carl. – the greatness of our
heritage. (316)

The fact that both the black bookstore and its owner are the target of white racism is emphasised from the very first scene when Brother Kiyi is told about how badly the surrounding white community thinks of *Fix Up* bookstore:

Carl. (*using cockney accent*)

No I was definitely told the
Fix Up bookstore sold a
whole load of rat-poison ...

Brother Kiyi. What? ...

Carl. Filling de yout' dem
hea, hea, head, wid rubbish!
(316)

According to Carl, who puts it in the same “*cockney accent*” of those racists who despise Brother Kiyi and his African culture, the white community disdainfully reduces books on African history and literature to “a whole load of rat-poison” and Brother Kiyi's lessons on African traditions to “rubbish.” On this point, William C. Boles comments that “While Brother Kiyi's shop has been a neighbourhood staple for years, both he and the shop have been under-appreciated and under-utilized by the surrounding community” (724). Indeed, the fact that Brother Kiyi is trying to increase awareness of the African heritage and the achievements of the Black people will certainly be seen by the surrounding white community as a declaration of defiance against a vision of nationalism that was narrowly English.

As a tool of asserting African identity against assimilation into the white British culture, Brother Kiyi describes the shop as “a place of learning, Kwesi! Not a come-one come-all supermarket, but a sanctuary, a place away from the madness. Away from the pain” (361). In this sense, the bookstore becomes, in Michael Portillo's words, “a hermitage for Kiyi himself . . . The former convict keeps the world at bay, sheltering behind his book stacks from reality and his personal history” (82). However, that this black bookstore is meant by its owner to be a place of learning makes it iconic of the dying black bookstores in England in the third millennium as Kwei-Armah notes:

Now these tremendous community resources – the black bookstores – were dying out, and with them, I

believed, the knowledge and wisdom those stores were set up to impart. A community without knowledge of itself, its history, soon self-destructs because the present isn't big, strong or robust enough to sustain the needs of fully rounded human beings.

(*Plays: One xi*)

Black bookstores, according to Kwei-Armah, provide a wider knowledge of African history beyond the white version of history and culture taught in schools and presented in the media. In this sense, the symbolic value of *Fix Up* bookstore goes beyond its indexical function as an expression of African history and identity to be a sign of resistance against the dominant White culture. That *Fix Up* bookstore is dying out or being turned into a hair salon is seen by Michael Billington as “the sacrifice of

historical identity to the insatiable demands of brute commerce” (18). However, this argument is refuted by the sign above its door which indicates, “*Help keep us open – Any donation welcome*” (315). In fact this visual sign is part of Brother Kiyi's attempt to resist the white racist culture by keeping the black bookstore open at any price. In this sense, the main argument of the play becomes even more complex than Billington's simple explanation in which the issue of roots and Black identity is limited to Kiyi's economic need to survive in a capitalist society rather than to struggle against the cultural values of a racist society.

For Kwesi, the young African British who lives in *Fix Up* upstairs, book-learning holds little appeal for the African British as a tool of social, political and cultural change: “Can you forgive slavery?

Can the European repent for that? Only thing this world understands, Kiyi, power. Till we have that, no matter what's up there (*pointing to head*), we're all just joking it” (335). While Brother Kiyi protests that “You can't replace history with hair gel” (332), Kwesi suggests that in a racist capitalist society that has rendered black people poor and powerless, the black community wants “nails and tattoos,” not books, which raises questions about the issue of black identity for the young blacks and whether they are more interested in their hair than their history:

Kwesi. ... People don't – want – books. They wanna party, and look good, have the latest hairstyles, and nails and tattoos. That's where *niggers* be at, Kiyi. They ain't spending shit in here. Why should the other man take our

money? That's why we powerless, cos we ain't where the money at. (377, emphasis added)

It would thus be argued that Kwesi becomes a symbol of what William C. Boles calls “the hypocrisy of a black political movement not invested in the economic struggle of the black individual but instead in the capitalistic values of the surrounding white English society” (724). It should be noted that the word *niggers* used by Kwesi is not meant to be an ethnic insult but a verbal sign of solidarity because the term is likely to “vary from extreme offensiveness when used of blacks by whites, to affectionate expressions of solidarity when used in black English” (Hughes 326). It seems that he is using the word to trigger the anger inside

them because of their powerless position in the English society. Accordingly, the use of the word as a term of abuse depends on who says it and in what context.

As Valerie Lucas argues, “Brother Kiyi's unworldliness is countered by Kwesi” (246). This is clear when Brother Kiyi objects to his shop being turned into a hair salon while Kwesi points out that the Black community can only advance through financial security: “It's gonna get me into the position that when you want to renew your lease you come to me! Five years from now Afro Sheen gonna buy us a next store and a next store and a next. Before you know it we got all of this place!” (377). Lucas further suggests that “Kwesi looks to the regeneration of his community through building a business empire where Black people will no longer have to rent

their shops from Whites or Asians” (246). In other words, Kwesi is seeking to establish a black financial power to counter that of the white British or to be equal to other ethnic minorities in Britain that have managed to achieve some sort of economic independence such as the Asians.

In search of her Black identity, Alice comes to the place where she thinks that she will find answers to her enquiries: “I came to find out why I look the way I do” (379). The use of stage lighting is a substantial sign-system that gives force to the overall mood of the set asserting the African identity and emphasising truths about slavery and colonialism especially in the scene where Alice is involved in reading slave narratives:

Alice walks around the shop

looking at things more freely now that she is by herself. She sees the slave narratives... She decides to read. The lights reduce to a spotlight on her. We are in her head. She takes on the voice of the story-teller. (347)

According to drama semiotician Keir Elam, “lighting changes may serve to indicate or define the object of discourse in an indexical manner”(23). In this scene, lighting works as a foregrounding device focusing the audience's attention on Alice. Symbolically, the use of a spotlight on Alice who already “*takes on the voice of the story-teller*” serves to transfer black women from the position of subjugation and invisibility in the colonial situation to a position of centrality and empowerment as emphasised by such stage directions as “*looking at things*

more freely,” “she is by herself” and *“She decides to read”* which are all indicative of confidence and determination of the modern black woman. By reestablishing history of slavery and colonialism as a vital element for all Blacks, the play gives voice to members of the Blacks that were denied an opportunity to speak like Black women: “Revisioning history also enables the reinstatement of interest groups who have been left out of the official records because they were victims of prejudice or punishment” (Gilbert and Tompkins 118). That Alice's story-telling interrupts the dialogue of the play is an important sign of how the past interrupts the present which challenges the notion of history as irreversible as well as recognising black women's roles, as story-tellers, in reconstructing history.

African Language: Kwaswahili

Language is a key verbal sign of ethnic identity “as different ethnic groups speak different native languages. Language can be a symbol of ethnic identity for individuals in assimilated groups who now speak a language different from the native” (Levinson 75). The use of an ethnic language on stage also “localises and attracts value away from a British ‘norm’ eventually displacing the hegemonic centrality of the idea of ‘norm’ itself” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 37). When asked in an interview with Geoffrey Davis about how he defines Black British identity in part through language at the risk of a white audience not understanding everything, Kwei-Armah replied, “If you go to see a Seán O’Casey you struggle with language. And if

you go to see Shakespeare you struggle with language. And so in many respects what I did” (248). In *Fix Up*, Brother Kiyi abandons his Christian personal name “Peter Allan,” a significant linguistic sign, to another which sounds more African after being exposed to white racism, “Brother is not my Christian name” (317). Ironically, Brother Kiyi makes use of the ancient African language Kwaswahili not only as an attempt to affirm his African identity as much as to resist English as the language of the dominant White group:

Brother Kiyi *Tende Mwari*,
Brother Kwesi.

Kwesi *Tende Mwari*. (319)

Brother Kiyi *Tende Mwari*.

Alice. What does that mean?

Brother Kiyi Well, in the ancient language of Kwaswahili, it is the greeting that one villager would give to the other. (327)

In the previous extracts, the phrase “*Tende Mwari*,” meaning “‘Hello’ in Kwaswahili” (Lucas 244), has been employed as a verbal icon of the African language “spoken along the northern Kenya and Somali coast” (Nurse and Spear 5) and indexical of the culture to which it belongs because “Core spiritual concepts framed in the heritage language of the group can be difficult or impossible to express with equal clarity or depth of meaning in another tongue” (Dorian 32). Symbolically, Kwaswahili in the play marks a distinction between Brother Kiyi and Kwesi who have pride in their African identity and Alice who is struggling to come to terms with

her ethnic identity. Brother Kiyi uses Kwaswahili words indexical of the African culture to address his customers, answer the phone and greet other black characters in the play. His insistence on using an African language that may or may not be understood by other characters, an insistence shared only by Kwesi who seems as keen as Brother Kiyi on using African words is meant to resist or decentralise the language of the racist white British.

It is apparent that being a mixed-race woman is a problem to Alice who sees herself as torn between two identities, her national identity as British and her ethnic identity as Black: "Cos I'm brown, everybody expects me to somehow know everything black. And I'm like, 'Hey, how am I supposed to know what ... *raasclaat* means. I'm from

Somerset" (343). The identity conflict which Alice expresses in these words in terms of language becomes intense as she is being equally rejected by the Black British and the white British. To Carl, however, being a mixed-race person is a blessing rather than a curse: "It must be great being you ... Yeah, you like must have the best of two worlds innit?" (356). Based on his little education, Carl can only see the upsides of being mixed race believing that Alice enjoys a kind of cultural bilateralism that can be beneficial to her in her life. However, this is not the case for Alice who represents Homi Bhabha's notion of *hybrid* identity or identity in "the in-between space" (41) of culture which cannot be identified with understandable terminology because it is, in a world supposedly divided into English and native, "neither the One nor

the Other but *something else besides*” (41). Accordingly, a hybrid position is formed between the two cultures that is not only the sum of the two but something more. Therefore, Alice stands between the two cultures, in Bhabha's “third space” (53), trying to have pride in her black heritage, but not knowing how because she was not raised in this culture.

African Slave Songs And Dances

Songs and dances in a non-musical drama like *Fix Up* are noteworthy aural and visual signs with regard to the fact that they are performed without music in the same manner as traditional African songs and dances. On the stage, “Traditional African songs and dances, not only bring to life the beauty, colour, energy, vitality and capacity of African culture and theatre, but also reveal to the audience the African life, customs

and traditions ... and confirm African originality and consciousness” (Losambe and Sarinjeive 68). Accordingly, African slave singing in *Fix Up* is employed as a dramatic ethnic signifier to revive the history of the African slavery and diaspora and to remind the white British of the part played by their ancestors and the terrible harm done by the Empire in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the failure of the British nation today to address this history:

Brother Kiyi *is in joyous mood. He runs over to the cassette recorder and throws in another tape. It gives out a very percussive rhythm made up of hand-claps and foot-stomps. He starts to sing an old slave work-chant. It's a call and response. Brother Kiyi is calling, the recording responding. The lead line*

sounds like a blues refrain. He begins to dance with it. The dance is as if he is picking cotton from the ground and then cutting cane with two cutlasses. (351)

In this scene, verbal and non-verbal sign systems (sounds, singing and dancing) are woven together as “an organic whole, in which the different signs and sign systems constantly inter-act, reinforce each other” (Esslin 106). Different sign systems referring to the African identity blended together stimulate the audience to use more than one sense to perceive the action and serve to dramatically change the mood and atmosphere of the scene from this bookstore in London in the present to the experience of the African diaspora in the past. Gary Hartman notes that a common feature of African slave songs was the “call-

and-response” format which he defines as “an old African tradition in which a lead singer calls out verses, while other members of the group respond in unison. The call-and-response format allowed the slaves to engage in a back-and-forth ‘dialogue’ through their songs” (60).

Brother Kiyi sings “*an old slave work-chant*” which has a rhythm that is made up of “*hand-claps*” and “*foot-stomps*.” Alexander A. Agordoh notes that in Africa, “more than elsewhere music is associated with dance Hand-clapping is used as an idiophonic device in making music” (25). The song and its rhythm provide stimulus to Brother Kiyi to dance with it “*as if he is picking cotton from the ground.*” Beyond its gestural function as an immediate iconic representation of the same body

movements performed in a non-theatrical situation and its aesthetic function as indexical of the African art, Brother Kiyi's dancing acquires a symbolic value when interpreted in the historical context of western imperialism and African diaspora. In this sense, the semiotic value of dance as a culturally coded symbol could be clarified by the following fact:

Dance's patterned movement ... offers the opportunity to establish cultural context, particularly when the dance executed challenges the norms of the coloniser. *In this way, dance recuperates postcolonial subjectivity by centralizing traditional, non-verbal forms of self-representation.* (Gilbert and Tompkins 239, emphasis added)

By encoding ethnic identity through gestures and body

movements, dance in this scene functions as a mode of empowerment for Brother Kiyi who appears as a free, moving body by contrast to his enslaved ancestors. Moreover, Brother Kiyi's dance can be seen as an alienating device in the Brechtian sense: "Situated within a dramatic text, dance often denaturalises theatre's signifying practices by disrupting narrative sequence and/or genre" (Gilbert and Tompkins 239). In this sense, dance in this scene becomes a significant sign that makes the audience feel thematically detached from the narrative sequence of the play in the present and encourages them to understand intellectually the dilemma of the African diaspora as exposed in Kiyi's dancing movements. Symbolically, traditional African song and dance in this scene, together with other modes of nonverbal behaviour

(such as costume and hairstyle), are a celebration of Black history and African diaspora. At the end of the play, Brother Kiyi sings another slave song:

He begins to sing the blues slave chant 'Adam' to himself. Very slowly, void of emotion.

Brother Kiyi. Ohhhhhh Eve, where is Adam. Ohhhhhh Eve, Adam's in the garden picking up leaves. (381)

Unlike the first slave song which he sings "*in joyous mood*," this song is sung "*Very slowly, void of emotion*." At a moment when he has lost everything he has worked for and when "*All his energy has suddenly gone as well*" (380), he starts to sing a slave song. Samuel Kasule argues that in such "moments of emotional excitement, Brother Kiyi reconnects with his

past through singing and dancing to slave songs thus exhibiting his 'madness'" (323). By contrast, the blues slave chant is employed as an expression of the hidden thoughts and emotions of Brother Kiyi that must be sung or else he will lose his sanity. Much of his pain and agony can be felt in the repetition of long "Ohhhhhh" (381). Thus, the song is like a soliloquy revealing the inner moods of Brother Kiyi, thus putting in effect the view that "A character will speak in prose in the script of the play, but speaks more poetically in the text of the song, and likely reveals the true self through the lyrics of the song. Songs reveal the inner moods of characters" (Ron 362).

African Costume: Kente

African costume, like Kente, plays an important role in the expression of African identity in

Fix Up. Kente is a special kind of fabric that “was developed in the 1600s by the Ashanti people, who are from Ghana” (Pittaluga 2). African Kente in the play is iconic of the traditional costume worn by people in Ivory Coast and many other West African countries. Beyond their function as representational visual signs of the real objects they stand for, costumes can be employed in drama to “index the dramatis personae in terms of character, self-image and self-presentation, and social and economic status. It may be used to denote similarity or difference” (Aston and Savona 134). Accordingly, African costume in the play is an index sign that promotes ethnic identification with Africa and points visually to the cultural difference between the African and the British.

Symbolically, the constant existence of African Kentes on the walls of the black bookstore in *Fix Up* is an important visual sign that determines the cultural atmosphere of the scene, if not of the entire play: “*Various Kentes and African cloths are hung on what little wall space there is left. Hanging from the ceiling in a less ordered fashion are a few dusty looking male and female African outfits*” (315). When Brother Kiyi first appears on the stage, he is “*dressed in an African-shaped Kente shirt on top of a thick woolly polo-neck with jeans*” (316). The fact that Kente is “worn only in the southern half of Ghana and is generally reserved for prestigious events” (Bainbridge 68) affirms that Brother Kiyi's Kente shirt is not only a sign of his ethnic identification with Ghana as much as it is a symbol of African

pride and resistance to the clothing styles of the dominant White culture. In this sense, the symbolic value of Kente as worn by Brother Kiyi is not the same as of Kente as worn by, for example, Michael Jackson in his 1992 Coronation as a prince of an African tribe in Ivory Coast or the Clintons in their 1998 visit to Ghana. In both examples wearing Kente can be seen as lying with signs either for Jackson who was accused of bleaching his skin because he did not like being black or for the Clintons who wore Kente to gain respect from thousands of people in Ghana as well as from thousands of African Americans who have links with Ghana.

What is also significant about Brother Kiyi is that his location between the two cultures is signified by clothing. He is wearing Kente, the ethnic costume

which reveals his pride in African culture and vital links with tradition, and "*on top of a thick woolly polo-neck with jeans*" (316), a symbol of western clothing-style. Mixing these two different styles is symbolic of Brother Kiyi's ability to maintain his ethnic culture on one hand and adopting the English culture as well. Thus, costume, as a sign system in the play, becomes a loaded and problematic signifier:

Items of clothing have quite specific connotations but these can be easily changed, extended, or inverted with a change in the wearer and/ or the situation. Costume, then, occupies a complex position in the theatre's semiotic systems: while it acts as clothing for the actors and a means of setting the mood and/or period of the play, it also functions as a loaded and problematic signifier. (Gilbert and Tompkins 244)

Hence, Brother Kiyi's clothing style which blends the two cultures together becomes a symbol of his willingness to integrate, and not assimilate, into the British society which means that he is expected to remain part of the British culture and social life, without losing the right to retain his African heritage and identity.

African Hairstyles: Afro And Dreadlocks

African hairstyles, such as the Afro or Dreadlocks, have been extensively employed as an ethnic signifier in *Fix Up*. As Kobena Mercer points out:

When hairstyling is critically evaluated as an aesthetic practice inscribed in everyday life, all black hairstyles are political in that they each articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element

of the ethnic signifier with both symbolic meaning and significance. (121)

Throughout the play, Brother Kiyi, apart from the last scene, “*has very long, greying locks. They are not hanging but twirled on top of his head almost like a turban*” (316). His dreadlocks are symbolic of his African pride and resistance to white standards of beauty:

Brother Kiyi *undoes his locks and shakes them out.*
Norma *looks at Brother Kiyi's hair.*

Norma. Boy, don't shake that ting at me. One sum'ting I don't like, that Rasta ting you have on your head.

Brother Kiyi. And that alien hair you have on your head is better? It don't have nothing to do with no Rasta ...

Norma. I don't care about your symbol of rebellion stupidity. You should have dropped that goal nonsense years ago. (322)

However, Norma's sarcastic words about dreadlocks as a "symbol of rebellion" reveal that the black power and anti-racism movements of the nineteen seventies in Britain created a motivation for the African British to express their commitment to Africa by wearing dreadlocks. Accordingly, Brother Kiyi's hairstyle can be interpreted as an affirmation of African culture and pride that had been stripped of his generation and their ancestors and a rejection of Eurocentric standards of beauty as his words reveal, "And that alien hair you have on your head is better?" (322). To him, black hairstyle with its natural look is better than artificial hairstyles.

As Mercer suggests, "Dreadlocks ... implied a symbolic link between their naturalistic appearance and Africa" (124). Moreover, Dreadlocks imply empowerment as a symbol of religious faith through their association with Rastafarianism. The Rastafarian movement has been so influential in the popularity of dreadlocks during the African diaspora because it "de-centred the iconicity of a beauty which approximates whiteness or is white. Its anti-colonialist, anti-racist aesthetics focused on natural hair, praised darker Black skin, African features, Black self-love and promoted a return to Africa" (Tate 37).

Unlike Brother Kiyi, Norma represents a different tendency in the African British community with the wig she uses to hide her Afro hairstyle:

Brother Kiyi *suddenly catches sight of her hair. She is wearing a very long and glamorous wig. It stops just beneath her shoulders.*

Brother Kiyi. Hey, gal! A next-animal ting you have on you head. It still alive? (351)

According to semiotician Umberto Eco, if signs can be used to tell the truth, they can also be used to lie: "A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands for it" (7). The use of a wig in this scene by a Black British involves *lying* with signs. Overloaded with the suggestion that straight European hair is more acceptable than African kinky hair, Norma believes that straight hair is her

way to be more acceptable to Whites. The use of a wig reveals that Afro hairstyle was generally seen, by numerous Whites and Blacks, as something bad that needed to be fixed. It appears here that hair straightening practices arose among the African British out of a desire to conform to white standards of beauty. The fact that Norma has chosen to hide her Afro contradicts the underlying symbolic value of this black hairstyle as a symbol of ethnic pride: "The three-dimensionality of its shape formed the signifying link with its status as a sign of Black Pride. Its morphology suggested a certain dignified body posture, for to wear an Afro you have to hold your head up in pride" (Mercer 122).

When Brother Kiyi loses his shop at the end of the play, he becomes aware that he has already

lost his source of power and at this moment he chops off his dreadlocks:

Brother Kiyi *is sitting in the middle of the store. He is both physically and mentally in a world of his own. 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.* (381)

Brother Kiyi's state of agony and despair is emphasised semiotically in this scene by kinesics as a form of nonverbal communication wherein he reveals clues as to his unspoken feeling of grief through his physical behaviour as "*he starts to chop off his locks,*" then "*he runs his hands through what remains of his hair,*" and "*His hands eventually fall on*

his face" (381). Brother Kiyi's scream, "Ahhhhhhh" (381), reveals the amount of torture he feels. It is a loud non-verbal sign of someone in pain, deep pain. Commenting on this scene, Lynnette Goddard says that it "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" (xxi). Goddard's words suggest the possibility of a new beginning for Brother Kiyi in his diasporic home, but for this to happen he has to break with his African identity.

Heroic Icons Of The Black/African Culture

In *Fix Up*, important references are made to real historical persons of special ethnic significance in the Black/African culture such as Marcus Garvey, James Baldwin

and Claude McKay. References to the names and words of those known historical figures have a semiotic significance that goes beyond their denotational meanings as Umberto Eco argues, “There can be a very great variety of connotations attributed by different cultures to the cultural unit . . . but its denotations do not change” (87). This will be made clear in the discussion of the variety of connotations attributed to the icons of the Black culture in the play. All those famous historical figures, represented by their names and speeches in the play in a *heroic* light, can be analysed as symbols of the black resistance to white racism.

Fix Up opens with Brother Kiyi listening to a 1920s recording of Afro-Caribbean political leader, Marcus Garvey, in which he emphasises the importance of

black history for the future of the Blacks. The symbolic significance of Garvey lies in the fact that he was a steadfast proponent of Pan-Africanism: “The leading writers of the pan-African movement . . . had a strong influence on Garvey. More and more he came to believe that blacks throughout the world must unite and wrest Africa from its colonial occupiers” (Davenport and Lawler 17). Influenced by Garvey's views, Brother Kiyi, believes that knowing the past history is self-education in African heritage and diaspora:

He turns the Marcus Garvey tape back on. Marcus is in full-throttle mode. It is passionate oration, and we hear the wild audience response. Alice tries to break the silence.

Alice. Who is that speaking?

Brother Kiyi. (*turning it down a tad*) The Honourable Marcus Garvey. (328)

When Alice says that she perceives Marcus Garvey, Brother Kiyi's ethnic heroic icon, as a black racist, he refuses her accusations of racism and tries to convince her that all the Blacks are by no means racist because they are not economically and psychologically superior since they have not achieved ethnic consciousness:

Brother Kiyi. Racist, what does it say here in this *Oxford Dictionary*. 'Racism – a feeling of superiority from one race to another.' Now I would argue...that we are certainly not economically superior, and I would say, due to the collective lack of knowledge of ourselves and our constant

desire to imitate, impersonate and duplicate everything Caucasian, nor are we in a psychological position of superiority. Hence by that definition, we cannot be racist. (343)

What Brother Kiyi is trying to point out in these words is that *racism* as a word has become associated with the whites rather than the blacks due to the fact that it is the whites who possess money, knowledge and power. At the same time, by emphasising the lack of money and knowledge within the Black community, he is lamenting the inferior position of his community.

African American writer James Baldwin is another key Black/African icon referred to in *Fix Up*. Confronted by Norma of his deteriorating economic

situation, Brother Kiyi replies with a quote by James Baldwin in a 1963 television interview at a time of racial unrest: "I'm forced to believe that we can survive whatever we must survive. But the future of the Negro in this country is precisely as bright or as dark as the future of the country" (325). In this quote, Baldwin points out that Black people have to try harder to survive in America in spite of humiliation and racism at that time. Baldwin thought that white people had to try to respect Black people because they are all living in one country. At that moment, as Lisa Rosset points out, "few people were better qualified to comment on the crisis than Baldwin, who had devoted his life to writing about the powerful sense of alienation that blacks and other minority groups felt in American society" (12). As he

quotes Baldwin, Brother Kiyi is trying to show Norma that he is optimistic about his chances as a Black/African British regardless of his current situation.

The third Black/African icon referred to in *Fix Up* is Claude McKay, Jamaican American writer and poet during the Harlem Renaissance. In the play, McKay's poetry is the syllabus that Brother Kiyi teaches to Carl:

**Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us still be brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but-fighting back! (338)**

Reciting poetry creates a change in the style of the play and the way the audience perceive Carl's character: "Having set himself a lower and an upper limit within which the language of the play will move, the author can

vary the level inside that range, according to the way he wants us to look at the character or indeed the scene” (Esslin 39). In scene two, Carl recites the previous lines from McKay's poem “If We Must Die,” originally written about race riots in Harlem in 1919: “‘If We Must Die’ exploded out of McKay during the turbulent days of the ‘Red Summer,’ in which scores of African Americans were beaten and killed” (Tillery 33). The poem is a call to African American men to fight for their rights. To Brother Kiyi, McKay is “the father of the Harlem Renaissance, the poet quoted by Winston Churchill to the British soldiers before the Battle of Britain” (340). It seems really ironic that McKay's poem was quoted by Winston Churchill to the British soldiers in the Second World War to fight tyranny and spread democracy in

the world without providing justice for Blacks in Britain in the post-War period.

To conclude, African signs in *Fix Up* by Kwame Kwei-Armah are not meant to be a mere expression of African ethnic identity as much as they can be interpreted within the confines of iconicity, indexicality and symbolicity proposed by Peirce as tools used by the hero of the play as well as the playwright to resist racism and the cultural forms and codes of the mainstream white British culture. The fact that Kwei-Armah turns to his ethnic group's cultural and social codes, employing a set of African signifiers (such as African language, songs, dances, costume, hairstyles, heroes, rituals, etc.) should be perceived as his attempt to present a dramatic discourse counter to the dominant white

discourse. African signs, as they are used in the play, are all iconic of their real referents in Africa. At the same time, they are significant indexical signs of identification with the African ethnicity and difference from the dominant white British ethnicity. Moreover, the signs of African identity are interpreted as symbols of resistance to white culture and racism depending on how they are employed and in what context.

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