

## SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES ON MALE BLACK MASCULINITY AND BRITISHNESS

### A MUDANÇA DE PERSPETIVAS ACERCA DA MASCULINIDADE NEGRA E DA IDENTIDADE BRITÂNICA

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# SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES ON MALE BLACK MASCULINITY AND BRITISHNESS

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**Abstract:** This article intends to discuss issues related to what it means to be a black male in Britain, as well as the stereotypes related to black masculinity and sexuality. This theme will be broached through the analysis of three theatre plays by the acclaimed playwright Roy Williams – *Lift Off* (1999), *Clubland* (2001) and *Joe Guy* (2007). Roy Williams deals with the insecurities and frustrations of young men and the importance sex has in their lives. The plays raise many questions about cultural identity, not about what it means to be British but what it means to be a black male in Britain. The plays question the media-influenced stereotypes created by society on the relationships that young black people maintain.

**Keywords:** black masculinity; identity; stereotype; Britishness.

## A MUDANÇA DE PERSPETIVAS ACERCA DA MASCULINIDADE NEGRA E DA IDENTIDADE BRITÂNICA

**Resumo:** Este artigo pretende discutir questões relacionadas com o sentido de se ser um homem negro na Grã-Bretanha, assim como os estereótipos relacionados com a masculinidade e com a sexualidade negras. Este tema será abordado através da análise de três peças de teatro escritas pelo aclamado dramaturgo Roy Williams – *Lift Off* (1999), *Clubland* (2001) e *Joe Guy* (2007). Roy Williams debate as inseguranças e frustrações dos homens jovens e a importância que o sexo tem nas suas vidas. As peças levantam muitas questões acerca da identidade cultural, não acerca do que é ser-se britânico, mas acerca do que é ser-se um homem negro na Grã-Bretanha. As peças questionam os estereótipos influenciados pelos meios de comunicação social e criados pela sociedade acerca dos relacionamentos dos jovens negros.

**Palavras-chave:** masculinidade negra; identidade; estereótipo; identidade britânica.

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We intend to discuss male black masculinity and Britishness on some plays written by Roy Williams<sup>1</sup>. In his plays, Williams takes as his starting point contemporary social problems and reworks them into vigorous drama. Although his plays are concerned with politics, it is the everyday issues that occupy the plays: racism, poverty, unwanted pregnancy, and mindless violence, suggesting the need to redefine notions of the 'political'. Initially, his work focused on the lives of Jamaican people like his parents and first generation immigrants to Britain. However, in 2002, he turned his attention to modern Britain to explore racism and gang culture, focusing, within these themes, issues of gender and sexuality, specially in a male black perspective.

Black masculinity and sexuality are often described as inherently aggressive, hypersexual, and violent, therefore being impossible to broach this theme without referring to the stereotypes that are attributed to the portrayal of black men. According to Gina Castle Bell:

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Samuel Williams was born in the United Kingdom to an Afro-Caribbean family in 1968. He was brought up in Notting Hill, London, in a single parent home, after his father left when he was two. When he was twelve, he was in danger of failure at school and his mother made him have a Saturday tutor, Don Kinch. Kinch was a writer and directed a black theatre company. Williams accompanied him to rehearsals and that was what made him fall in love with theatre. After leaving school at eighteen, several jobs later, he took a theatre-writing degree at Rose Bruford College and has worked ever since in writing drama. This career started with the staging of his first play, *The No Boys Cricket Club*, at the smaller but racially-diverse Theatre Royal Stratford East in London. It was quickly followed by productions at the well-known writers theatre, the Royal Court and other leading theatres, which established him as one of the most acclaimed authors of his generation with twenty staged plays. By alphabetic order, he has written *Angel House* (2008), New Wolsey Theatre; *Absolute Beginners* (2008), Lyric Hammersmith; *Baby Girl* (2008), Cottesloe Theatre, National Theatre; *Clubland* (2001), Royal Court Theatre; *Category B* (2009), The Tricycle Theatre; *Days Of Significance* (2007) Swan Theatre; *The Gift* (2000), Birmingham Repertory Theatre; *Fallout* (2003), Royal Court Theatre; *Local Boy* (2000), Hampstead Theatre; *Joe Guy* (2007), New Wolsey Theatre; *Josie's Boys* (1996); *Little Sweet Thing* (2005), New Wolsey Theatre; *Lift Off* (1999), Royal Court Theatre; *No Boys Cricket Club* (1996), Theatre Royal, Stratford East; *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (2002), Loft, National Theatre; *Starstruck* (1998), The Tricycle Theatre; *Slow Time* (2006); *Souls* (2001), Oval House Theatre; *Sucker Punch* (2010), Royal Court Theatre; *There's Only One Wayne Matthews* (2007), Polka Theatre. He has, for example, been a commissioned playwright for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Williams was the first recipient of the Alfred Fagan Award and winner of both the John Whiting Award 1997 and the EMMA Award 1999 for *Starstruck* (Tricycle Theatre).

Hyper-stereotypical images of Black folks have historically been depicted as violent, involved in criminal activity, deadbeat drunks or drug-addicts, unable to control themselves sexually, financially, or physically, Mungos or ‘buffoonish characters’, working-class poor, and/or generally uneducated Sambos who are ‘inadequate, non-intellectual, and incompetent’. These images render the Black middle class invisible and reduce Blackness merely to pejorative categories. (Bell, 2016, p. 136).

Considering the generalized ideas on the topic, Williams’ work can be seen within a context of an open-ended social realism, as he tries to portray British society and its dilemmas. By presenting England and Britain as he perceives them, Roy Williams intends to show the reality around him and around the members of the audience without judgement, leading to reflection but not giving, however, any solution to the issues he presents on stage.

In this context, black masculinity and black Britishness will be discussed through the analysis of three theatre plays: *Lift Off* (1999), *Clubland* (2001) and *Joe Guy* (2007).

## LIFT OFF

The play *Lift Off* (1999), which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, on 19 February 1999, was inspired by London teenagers, as Williams explains that “now, before the likes of Ali G came along, I used to see white Kids all around Ladbroke Grove, talking and acting like black kids. They were not being rude or offensive, they were absolutely genuine, reacting and responding to the world they were living in” (Williams, 2002, xii).

From this observation of the environment around him in Notting Hill, Roy Williams created the two main characters in the play: Mal and Tone, black and white friends, respectively.

*Lift Off* traces the friendship between these two young men in West London. Mal is a ‘cool’ young black man and all the girls desire him. Tone desperately wants to be like him. Therefore, he speaks ‘black’ and dresses ‘black’, emulating his black friend. Hannah, Tone’s girlfriend, constantly urges Tone to separate from Mal, as they do not share the same cultural character-

ristics, one being a black person and the other a white one, and Tone seems to have created an identity in the image of his friend, not being a sustainable character apart from Mal.

The play is set in the past, when Mal and Tone were eleven-year-old teenagers starting secondary school, and in the present, when the same characters are in their early twenties. In Act I, we see Mal and Tone meeting Rich, a young black teenager, in the playground. Rich is a lonely boy, who makes paper planes and does not act ‘black enough’, according to Mal, who thinks that being black is having attitude and being ‘hard’. Therefore, he tries to shape Rich to the image he thinks a black boy should have. According to Mal, black identity is constructed through behaviour and attitude towards life and the other. Therefore, a black teenager must act aggressively, verbally or physically, as well as being daring towards the opposite sex. Any attitude contrary to the one previously described is considered contrary to the stereotyped and generalised assumption of what a black man should be and act. This concept of being black is not exclusive to Mal in the play, because Tone’s attitude is presented as an emulation of Mal, which shows that Mal’s arguments are somehow generalised, not only to the black community but also to white people. Mal’s pressure on Rich to change his conduct is the sign that there is peer pressure on one’s behaviour. In fact, “the play shows how little space there is in urban London to genuinely define and explore your identity without coming up against the constraints of racial stereotypes” (Rubasingham, 2002, xxii). However, Rich can’t ever be up to the image Mal defends as well as the peer pressure and ends up committing suicide. This event haunts Mal throughout his life. Here it is created a triangle of friends that display that the meaning of ‘blackness’ shifts from the positive to the negative and back again.

This friendship is betrayed by Mal with Tone’s underage sister, Carol, who gets pregnant. Mal seems not to care, and worse, is defamatory about her. Tone is outraged and calls him “black bastard...nigger” (Williams, 2002, p. 232) in the heat of a confrontation. On his side, Mal is also angry with the world because he has leukaemia and there aren’t enough black people donating bone marrow for him to have the hope of a cure. This finale for Mal is very ironic, considering that, during all his life, he fought to fit into his conception

of what it means to be a black person and to feel part of the black community. The fact that there isn't a donor of Mal's race gives the impression that he was abandoned by those who he had always desired to accept him and the group that should unite to help a member to survive forsakes him, leaving Mal to his own luck. However, this is hardly the fault of the black community, but a problem of unequal access to health care.

This play shows that the issue of race is an important one even among close friends. Tone, despite his wishes and efforts to be black, only has one perspective. It is not that Tone wants to be a member of the black community, what he seeks is a certain media-inspired glamour that is attached to being black.

At the end of the play, Mal raises these issues asking Tone to stop following him, to stop trying to be like him. Tone, for a moment, looks at Mal leaving and follows him. The dialogue begins with Tone:

Wass so funny? Wat if I saved yer life, yu won't be laughin' then.  
// It ain't gonna happen dough. // How d'yu know? Ca' yu ain't  
black. Yu don't know nottin man. // Dumb white Tone, thass me  
ennit? / Wat, yu gonna grovel now? // [...] Go on take a punch.  
I won't do nuttin. I'll juss stand and let yer. Call me a nigger. //  
No. // It's wat I am. // Yer not. // A cocky coon who got his dues.  
// Yer mad. // [...] Hate me Tone. Wass the matter wid yu? //  
Don't follow me no more. (Williams, 2002, pp. 239-240)<sup>2</sup>.

This play discusses what it means to be black and the implications inherent to this concept – machismo, language, strength, verbal and physical aggressiveness, and sexual potency – as well as the meaning of friendship and identity, among other motifs. As Osborne points out:

Typical Williams motifs converge in this play: urban inter-racial relationships between young people, racism and its effects upon them; the fluidity of possible cultural affinities relational to socio-racial identities; young people's traumatizing by peers; adult inadequacy to sustain emotionally, support or encourage youth into maturity, and the intense compensatory (but insufficient) bonds they form with each other. (Osborne, 2011, p. 491).

The ethnicity of the characters is never specified except with Rich who is detailed as "a young black schoolboy" (Williams, 2002, p. 163). However, the reader can infer the other characters' (Mal and Tone) ethnic background

<sup>2</sup> Here and hereafter, the // represents the chance of speech of the characters.

throughout the play, “opening to scrutiny just what informs these socio-cultural categories of blackness and whiteness” (Osborne, 2011, p. 491). Williams was not clear about the racial background of the other characters so that the audience may infer from the recognition of the attitudes displayed on stage. This recognition may lead to the questioning among spectators of the preconceived ideas of what it means to be black or white nowadays. The racial background is shown in the play through the characters’ characteristics – behaviour, language, psychological characteristics as well as arguments and points of view that they defend. These aspects lead the audience to infer what it means to be a black or a white person. Therefore, it is through Mal, Tone and Rich and the relationship they maintain that Roy Williams explores what it means to be black and issues related to black identity. Mal is the “cool black guy on the estate” (Rubasingham, 2002, xx) and Tone wishes to be like him, copying Mal’s characteristics to make him the most popular boy in the neighbourhood. He talks and dresses ‘black’. The authors Barry and Williams explain this phenomenon: “White boys, in particular, are starting to emulate their black peers, responding to a cultural formation wherein machismo, strength, and sexual potency are all being aligned to the signifier ‘black’” (Barry & Boles, 2006, p. 299).

The emulation expressed above shows the desperation of Tone to be like Mal in order to cover his own absence of identity as a young white man. Here, identity definition is intimately connected to cultural stereotypes related to racialized masculine characteristics. Tone ventriloquizes black street talk and engages in cultural cross-dressing in order to reproduce Mal’s hypersexualized version of black masculinity. Tone and Hannah, his girlfriend, have a conversation, where she accuses him of his lack of identity as a white man. Hannah begins the conversation:

They ain’t all that Tone, no matter what they say and think. Blacks Tone. That’s ehat I’m talking about. // Yu a racist. // No. // [...] Yu best fuck off then. Go get yer cab, move. Co’ if yu don’t like Mal, yu don’t like me right. // You’re not black though. // I might as well be right. // Looked in the mirror lately? // Don’t chat like yu know me. // You really want to like Mal? ‘Don’t fuck wid a bwai and him chicken.’ There must be something seriously missing in your life if you think acting like them is going to fill it for you. (Williams, 2002, p. 209).

The emulation that Tone enacts and the need that Mal has to be seen as black raise several questions about the attitude of the white as well as the black teenagers. The first issue is related with the reasons why white teenagers emulate black teenagers, better still, why do white teenagers wish to be like the black teenagers. On the other hand, the fact that a black teenager has the need to be seen as a member of the black community is very important. These two aspects are based on the notion of British Empire, which has already disintegrated, but is still alive in the minds of the colonizers and the colonized, thus influencing the attitude of both white and black people towards themselves and the others.

White teenagers emulate the members of the black community because they are deeply influenced by black culture in music, films, theatre and literature. This emulation provides white teenagers with the possibility to live in the margins and defy social standards. Moreover, due to the influence that the migrant communities perform upon the host communities, white identity is no longer a clear identity. Therefore, white teenagers can move between cultures and, at the same time, not have doubts about their own identities because the privileges inherent to the white community will continue to exist. This happens because white identities are rooted in a sense of superiority derived from the power exercised over racialised others. Even emulating members of the black community, white teenagers will continue to be members of the white community and will never suffer the prejudice and the downturns of being a member of the black community, which makes such emulation a comfortable position to occupy. However, for black teenagers, these choices of whether to be white or black do not exist in the same way because the racism inherent to skin colour will always condition their ability to make such transfers.

This explains Tone's final attitude at the end of the play. During all his life, Tone has acted as a reflection of Mal and, even when he is betrayed by him, he is unable to cut the bonds that tie him to Mal.

This play continues to lead the audience to question the issue of identity through the character Rich and the way Mal decides to transform him into a 'blacker' person as he starts secondary school. They meet in the playground and, according to Mal, Rich does not act 'black' enough because he is not 'cool' and is not 'hard'. Mal forces this idea of blackness onto Rich who refuses to follow the stereotype:



Rich! // No, I don't wanna be like him, I don't wanna be like any of them right. And yu can't make me. // Shut up. Why yu love to take things seriously? Yer so heavy. All I want to do is show that yer hard for fuck's sake. // Why? // It's the only way to be man. Show yer temper a bit more, prove yer hard. Yu hear wat I said? (Williams, 2002, p. 192).

This concept of being black imposed by Mal is a set of hardened attitudes of defence against racism and prejudice. Prejudice and the actions it provoked had a long-term impact on discriminatory treatment of West Indians in Britain. Blumer defines four dimensions of race prejudice, one of them is “a feeling of proprietary claim to certain areas of privilege and advantages” (Blumer, 2003, p. 112) which then leads to housing and job discrimination as well as segregation, crucial practices to the West Indian experience of Britain. It is through the attitudes defended by Mal that the members of the black community establish their position and defend themselves from racist and prejudiced behaviour.

However, Rich couldn't be up to Mal's preconceived ideas of a hard, 'tough', bad-tempered man, rejecting the generalized category of violence attributed to black men, and ended up committing suicide because he could not conform to this stereotype. While Tone strives to pass as a young black man, Rich desires to maintain his own identity apart from the stereotype of what it means to be a black man. Therefore, Rich is not able to show the machismo and the verbal and physical aggressiveness that is usually related to the preconceived idea of being a black man and that he had seen his father portray. As Rich was a victim of abuse through his father, his wish was to be the opposite of him. In Rich's case, through the experience of being a victim of the stereotype, the male role model transformed itself into the portrait of what not to grow into. Consequently, the fact that everyone forced on Rich a behaviour that he did not want and his subsequent inability to cope with that pressure and the fact that Mal abandoned him, choosing Tone over him, leads to Rich's suicide. This suicide haunts Mal because he only chose Tone because he was 'blacker' than Rich and he wanted to regain his racial identity. It is quite ironic that it is a white teenager that acts more like a black young man than the young black man himself. As such, the establishing of identity “has detached itself from skin/colour and became a set of attitudes connected to physical strength and pugnacity” (Barry & Boles, 2006, p. 302).

Through Tone and Rich's behaviour, as well as Mal's, it is possible to conclude that the concept of being black is not a matter of skin colour or pigmentation but a set of attitudes. This explains Mal's attitude in abandoning Rich, a friend that he thought did not reunite all the characteristics that would minimise his unease about his own 'blackness' and identity. By choosing Tone, Mal reinforces his own idea of 'blackness' thus continuing to build the stereotype emulated by Tone and reinforcing his identity associated with physical and verbal strength and pugnaciousness.

Black identity is also identified with a certain related attitude to sexual behaviour as well as sexuality, as if sex was the only possible thing that can establish their position among their peers, especially through racialised remarks on sexuality, cultural credibility and social expectations, a quite frequent issue in Mal and Tone's dialogues, as is shown with Mal's observation:

Wat do yu want me to say Tone? Yer dick is the same as mine. // Yeah, go on then. [...] // Wat do yu expect me to say? 'Breden, check out Tone's piece, shame us all! I was jealous. So, how's it feel? // Awright. // Wear tighter jeans, show it off more, get nuff pussy. Wat? // Did yu fuck Linsey? [...] // Ferget her, she was a lousy fuck anyway. You got a third leg man, be happy. // Yu have got a bigger dick. Nuff gals fancy yu. Even my little sister's up for it now. (Williams, 2002, pp. 196-197).

Mal's desire to be seen as sufficiently black leads him to sleep with Tone's younger sister, Carol, and then deny paternity when she gets pregnant. He also abuses an employee and the customers in a fast food restaurant due to his frustration at having been rejected by a white female in a club. In fact, Mal only sees women in terms of their sexual availability, as he tries to explain the reason that led him to sleep with his best friend's sister: "When pussy's on offer yu tek it! Fuck wat matters thass it!?" (Williams, 2002, p. 231). This remark shows that his concepts of black identity is also informed by sexism. Despite his recognition, Mal cannot resist these stereotypes of male machismo so that he can feel himself identified as part of those who he believes are the real black men.

Making things harder for Mal to cope with his racial position, Mal is diagnosed with leukaemia but cannot find a donor within his own race, which leads him to question all his choices during his life. The disease may

be considered as an illustration that being black or white is not a matter of style but has concrete effects in a racialized world. In a dialogue with Carol, Mal shows his desire to not be black, to not have to choose all the time to feel part of a group because, for him, being white is easier than being black, as shown in the following dialogue started by Tone. “So wat do yu wan’? // I wanna be white. // White? // Yer so lucky. // Lucky? // Can’t yu see that?” (Williams, 2002, p. 218).

Mal’s remark on wanting to be a white man reinforces the idea of power as well as privileges and advantages associated to being white, including the access to health treatment and to a donor’s bank, which would save his life.

As a black man, Mal felt, all his life, the need to take actions and make choices in conformity with the stereotypes of his racial group, so that he felt he had an identity. However, at the end of the play, Mal seems to recognize that all his machismo and sexual aggression are not a good model to follow, when he tells Tone “Hate me!” (Williams, 2002, p. 240.). Through this statement, Mal is saying that his behaviour was not probably the best and that he does not expect to be understood or forgiven. In fact, he shows that the model of a black man that he followed was not the right one “but where his own models should have come from remains an open question at the end of the play” (Barry & Boles, 2006, p. 303). This open ending shows that the playwright does not wish to present judgements towards the issues presented on stage but rather lead the audience to reflect upon the questions raised throughout the play.

In order to show Mal’s interior struggle with his own identity and the silent fight between all the male characters in the definition of their own identity, the play was performed on a raised concrete stage “that resembled a boxing-ring, as several reviewers pointed out, providing a fitting space for the dissection of the aggression and competitiveness of the male community that Williams presents” (Barry & Boles, 2006, p. 301). Indhu Rubasingham, the director of the play, used the stage to illustrate the issues raised by the play and the interaction between those characters. Once again, the staging works as a fundamental part in the creation of meaning and in the formation of the audience’s mind towards the issues broached in the play. It is rather meaningful that the stage resembled a boxing-ring because the different characters do

fight each other in the construction of their identity, and in its preservation, as well as in the pressure they put on the other to fulfil the image of identity they mentally conceived for them.

In the play, there is an interesting triangle (Mal, Tone, Rich) which explores the ways in which both black and white have become detached from skin colour and coded as forms of behaviour which permit cross-racial affiliations. Yet it also explores the ways in which while it may be possible for white young men to ‘pass’ as black men, it is less possible for a black man to “pass” as a white man because of institutionalized racism. Therefore, the possibilities of cross-cultural affiliations are conditioned by the material practices of racism.

## CLUBLAND

*Clubland* (Royal Court Theatre, London, 2001) follows the story of some young men and their experiences clubbing. We are introduced to Kenny and Ben and the people they relate to, mainly in Palais nightclub.

Ben, the only white man in the group, is racist and unpleasant. He is married but despises and hates his wife. He has only married her under pressure and due to her money. Therefore, to escape from home, he goes out clubbing every night with Kenny. Kenny is a sweet young black man who only tries to find a girl he can have a steady relationship with, unlike Ben, who only wants a night of sex. Due to his behaviour, Kenny is constantly criticized by Ben about his non-existent sex life, deconstructing the view of the black man as the sexual predator and the white man as less promiscuous. Ben begins the following dialogue:

So wat happened? // Didn't fancy it. I had a feeling she was a kid. // Shut up, man, I saw yer, yer tongue was on the floor dread, nuttin happened cosy u were boring the arse off her about yer job. Who gives a fuck about pensions? Yu think she wants to hear that? She was waiting for the jump, man. (Williams, 2004, p. 77).

Later in the play, Kenny begins a relationship with Sandra but it is not a secure one, as he seems unable to leave behind Ben's influence and his vision

on relationships. Kenny is greatly influenced by Ben but secretly tries to relate to Nathan, an ex-member of the group who married the woman he loved, had a child and abandoned the life of clubbing. In fact, Nathan invites Kenny to be the godfather of his little daughter. Nevertheless, Kenny has difficulty accepting because of Ben's disapproval.

While this plot unfolds on stage, important questions are raised about this lifestyle. Roy Williams deals with the insecurities and frustrations of these young men and the way they face sex and the importance it has in their lives. The play raises many questions about cultural identity, not about what it means to be British but what it means to be black in Britain. The play questions the media-influenced stereotypes created by society on the relationships that young black people maintain.

The play joins the several other plays that discuss the issues of being a man, black or white, in Britain, establishing a connection between Williams' work and in-*yer*-face drama and its investigation of masculinity:

*Clubland* overlaps with the lad plays of the mid-1990s, which were written by Nick Grosso, Patrick Marber, Jez Butterworth, Simon Bent and others and presented male characters who, in a show of post-feminist misogyny live in a world wilfully blind to the progress in gender relations in the last twenty years. Ben's vitriol prompted Charles Spencer in his review to write that the male characters in *Clubland* possess 'attitudes that make Jimmy Porter seem like a passionate feminist'. (Barry & Boles, 2006, pp. 303-304).

Like Mal in *Lift Off*, Kenny is questioning the decision he made in school, when he decided to take sides with his white friends and not protest when they beat up and racially insulted Ade, a young African immigrant that had just joined their class. A number of situations lead Kenny to reconsider his friendship with Ben, including his encounter with Ade in a club where many white female show their interest in him, the offer to be the godfather of Nathan's daughter, a white friend, who, unlike Ben, is happily married as well as Sandra's challenge, who is tired of his one night stands with white women. Under the pressure of his friends, who each want him to live up to the idea of what each wants for him, Kenny struggles with his identity as a black man. As Barry & Boles argue:

Kenny struggles with his identity as a black man under the pressure he feels from Ben, Nathan, Ade and Sandra, all of whom want him to be or represent something different from what he currently is, ranging from a tough 'bwoi' (Ben) to a respectable family man (Nathan) to a strong-willed, self-confident sexually successfully black man (Ade). He must answer the question Williams tries to pose in all his drama: 'Where do I fit in?' (Barry & Boles, 2006, p. 304).

It is important to note that Kenny is pressured by his friends to make his choices. However, he navigates between the worlds that each of them represent and, as situations take place, he chooses individually, never cutting relations with any of his friends but keeping them in a position where they are not able to pressure him into choices he does not wish to make. It is by not succumbing to any of the pressures that he is able to keep all his friends and, at the same time, build his individual identity.

Again, similarly to the themes explored in *Lift Off* with Mal and Tone, Kenny also deals with the issue of what it means to be black and the stereotypes that are inherent to this concept: a way of talking and dressing, the behaviour, the people he should be surrounded by, the attitude towards women and sex. Kenny is in-between the binary that is created by the parallel existence of the black and the white worlds. It is one world but it is divided due to the fact that different communities see it and behave as if it was made of incompatible parts. It is because he travels between these two worlds that he ends up belonging to neither of them at the beginning of the play.

However, Kenny starts making choices when he opts to be Nathan's daughter godfather, asks Sandra to marry him after a night together and he still opts to remain friends with Ben, despite Ade's accusation that he is betraying his own racial identity and Nathan's attempts to keep him away from Ben's misogyny and aggressiveness. By the end of the play, there are not many revelations in Kenny's personality but, throughout the play, it is possible to see that it is in his negotiation with the other characters of the roles they provide for him that Kenny builds finds his own identity. Basically, Kenny tries to construct an identity of his own out of the separate pieces of his life, in something of a success story.

In the discussion of the issue of identity in this play, Ade becomes an important character because his masculine and racial identity is challenged by Sandra, who questions his need to have sex with white women from the club. She even suggests that Ade's behaviour has its origins in his failure to overcome the white boys' choice of Kenny over him at school. Therefore, according to Sandra, this behaviour is his way to enhance his once diminished masculinity and pride. So, night after night, Ade inflicts his anger on women in the clubs and, at the same time, is the target of hate of the white men who see him with 'their' women.

Contrary to Ade and Ben, the idea of a balanced identity, in this play, is only achieved by Kenny, who, in the end, seems able to navigate safely between the white and the black worlds. Kenny shows that it is possible to have an identity that is neither totally 'black' nor totally 'white' and feel comfortable with it. By not belonging to a specific community, Kenny is able to live in both the white and the black worlds, which enables him to build his own identity detached from the views of the other characters and their pressures. Kenny's position is important in relation to what happens with the characters in *Lift Off*, who cannot navigate between the worlds around them because they are not able to disconnect themselves from the stereotypes, which makes overcoming racism an individual question rather than a social one. Through Kenny, Williams illustrates that one's position in society and in the different worlds around is only possible through the construction of an individual identity and not the following of stereotyped identities.

The end of the play shows the male characters' position towards themselves and the others around them: Ben is unable to leave his position of white male, despite a sort of redemption after his wife left him and after he lost his job. Ade seems unable to cope with the white faces around him. Kenny is the only one that identifies with aspects of both white and black cultures.

As Roy Williams points out, the play is not about the who people should be with but, "all I'm saying for Kenny is love who you want but make sure you're with them because you want to be, not because you're trying to play up to some stupid stereotype that's been handed down to you"<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Sierz, Aleks "Playwright Roy Williams" (2009). [online]. Available at <http://www.theartsdesk.com>. Last accessed: 09 April 2018.

## JOE GUY

*Joe Guy* (New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich, 2007) follows the story of Joseph, a Ghanaian youngster taunted by the British-Caribbean for his accent and his humility. Abandoning his Ghanaian heritage in Act I, Scene Five, Joseph becomes Joe, an icon of urban black identity and a famous football player, after a football match where he scored an extraordinary goal, overcoming the star football player in the team. After that football game, he joins some of his colleagues and some girls in a hotel, where, as they put it, “things get out of control”. After that night, he is accused of rape and is detained for running down a couple of older people. After this incident, Joe tries to make amends with Naomi, the mother of the daughter he has never met, and become the father he has never been.

This Williams’ play invokes stories over the recent years of cash-fuelled debauchery in the Premiership that implicate players in drugs, drunk driving and after-match rape scenarios in luxurious hotels. This issue is quite important because sports play quite an important role within the black community. For black people, Jesse Owens’ 1936 Olympic victory in Germany was not just about a gold medal but was also a statement about racial equality. The same social status is applied to Jackie Robinson, Bill Russell, Venus and Serena Williams or OJ Simpson and countless other black athletes, because, willingly or unwillingly, they were made advocates for the black communities. In many cases, sports mean a way out of poverty. And many athletes have accepted the responsibility and have become social activists for their community. For many, athletics is about wins and losses but often, in the black community, it is also about a right to be respected and championed. Therefore, black athletes from every sport are regarded as role models and have taken on that role. The fact is that, in 2007, headlines showed that some of these athletes did not live up to their status as role models, being implicated in cases of drugs, alcohol, drunk-driving and after-game sex and rapes, which, in some cases, put an end to their sports career. Despite the same things happened to many white footballers, these cases also show that these role models were unable to live up to their position of power.



All these issues are evoked by Joe, a man who was not able to cope with all the things that are inherent in sports stardom. Joe's decline is, mainly, the result of the fact that he is not able to cope with the power he gained through fame.

Joe's identity-shifting (Joe exchanges his genuine Ghanaian heritage for a supposedly cool Caribbean style and patois) was aroused by his uneasiness as a Ghanaian and the fact that he wanted to feel accepted by those who taunted him due to his skin colour. Through this issue, Williams "dramatizes the complex tension of race and colour, revealing the ambiguous perception of the notion of 'shadism' or 'pigmentation' obtaining in Britain but rooted in the legacy of the slave trade" (Kasule, 2006, p. 317).

The play presents differences between the two black cultures, the African and the West Indian, and people's attitudes towards the colour of their own skin. Joe's father Jude defends the argument that the black people with darker skin consider themselves the chosen ones because they stayed in Africa while the others were enslaved. Jude speaks his mind at the end of the play in a dialogue with Joe, where he starts declaring that having brought Joe to England was his biggest mistake:

I should have never bought you to England. They have you all mixed up over here. All of them with their bling bling. // It's the way it is. // Not for me. You let them cloud your head. // Dad! // They hate us. They hate us because we are pure. Because we were not stupid enough to get caught, taken away in chains. // Oh, man! // Look at them, look at their skins. // No, Dad, no. // Listen to me. // Not the bit about the skins, please! // They have everything in them, white, Indian, Chinese, no wonder they are so confused. Never mind being like them, they should be more like us. They are the ones who do not hold their culture in high esteem. They are the ones passing on their so-called Christian values that were given to them by their slave masters. // Are you done? // Why do think so many of those idiots now are growing locks, changing their names, wanting to take the first plane back to their 'spiritual home'. A Jamo pretending to be black is still a Jamo, Joseph. (Williams, 2007, pp. 84-85).

Even though, in the previous excerpt, Joe dismisses his father's opinion, throughout the play, he states, in various situations, that he sees himself as a more important and a better member of the black community because his skin is darker than that of the West Indians. As he states in a conversation with Helen, Joe's agent: "I'm better than him. I'm pure" (Williams, 2007, p. 67).

Through the previous statements, it is possible to understand the importance of colour and the relation it has with the concept of purity of the race. The less the physical characteristics approach the members of the black community to the members of the white community, the nearest these people are seen to be to the original black people thus turning them in racially uncorrupted people. This concept demonstrates the complex tension between race and colour rooted in the concept of 'shadism' and 'pigmentation' that is primarily rooted in the legacy of the slave trade. Therefore, those who were taken out of Africa were separated from their native black culture and, with time, became closer to the white community, not only through their daily habits, but also through the colour of their skin, that became lighter through the mixing of people of different origins and races. Consequently, it is not possible to talk about 'pure' races because, ultimately, "some families have been mixed race for generations" (Kasule, 2006, p. 317).

Kwame Kwei-Armah explores this phenomenon, declaring that black people still feel the weight of slavery and submission and that this type of behaviour in teenagers today is the reflection of several generations having been enslaved: "I think part of the reasons why we find ourselves as black people re-enacting what we are re-enacting [...] is because we have not rid ourselves of the self-hate of being enslaved" (Davis, 2006, p. 245).

In fact, it is important to take into consideration that there are differences between the different black groups and that there are multiple cultural backgrounds in these ethnic groups. The contemporary dilemma of black British people has been deeply influenced by a history of slavery and migration. Therefore, all the people that have this historical background, either in the far away past or more recent history, ended up mixing. Hence, "all social situations – and, hence, all populations, states and groupings – are in fact mixed. Thus, there cannot be any such thing as a pure race, a pure nation, or a pure collectivity, regardless of patriotic, ideological, or religious argument" (Said, 1985, pp. 38-58).

On the other hand, it is important to note that, despite Joe's manifestations of belonging to the purest race and being better than the West Indians, the fact is that he rejects his own origins and emulates the West Indians, not only in their behaviour, but also in their patois. The abandoning of his origins and the resembling of the West Indians shows Joe's attempt to belong to the

racial group he considers to detain power within the black community. Once again, skin colour and pigmentation is important as it is possible to consider that the lighter the skin the nearest it is to the colour of the powerful dominant race in Britain – the white community.

However, in the end, Joe is unable to belong to the group of West Indians and as we see him making all the efforts to distance himself from his origins, he loses himself and is without the power he thought he would achieve by emulating the West Indians. The main character of the play finally realizes that being either Ghanaian or West Indian, the reality remains. In the eyes of the white people he is only a black person.

According to Gabriele Griffin (2003), independently of their origin and their cultural background, immigrants, in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's, were called black by the white population in the United Kingdom. This homogenization led to a politics of coalition-building so that, together, they would achieve greater visibility and more political impact. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the term has its limits because it carries within multiple meanings and multiple cultural shapes. "The homogenizing term 'Black' can no longer easily be used" (Griffin, 2003, p. 10), because it is important to notice that there are several cultures within what is generally referred to as black culture, as it is the case of the West Indian or the African. Therefore, the term 'black' can enact different cultural manifestations.

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