

Cool pose: violence and the construction of masculinity in *Elmina's Kitchen*

Cool pose: violência e a construção da masculinidade em *Elmina's Kitchen*

Orozimbo Paolucci Neto*

**Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG)*

Abstract: The construction of masculinities for the African diaspora has been an issue from slavery times until today. In the play *Elmina's Kitchen*, by Kwame Kwei-Armah, the construction of masculinities for the black community in England is contested from the perspective of three different generations of black men, either Caribbean immigrants or British-born men. It is possible to use the obstacles they face and their responses to them to shape the common problems presented to black men to achieve their manhood as well as their usual responses to such obstacles. Moreover, this play emphasizes the role of violence in the construction of black masculinities in view of their symbolical castration by white society and by their own peers, as well as the importance of the black woman in the patching of black men's wounds and mending of black families.

Keywords: Literature in English. African diaspora. Kwame Kwei-Armah – *Elmina's Kitchen*. Masculinity.

Resumo: A construção das masculinidades na diáspora africana tem sido problemática desde os tempos da escravidão até o presente momento. Na peça *Elmina's Kitchen*, de Kwame Kwei-Armah, a construção das masculinidades dentro da comunidade negra britânica é contestada através da perspectiva de três gerações diferentes de homens negros tanto imigrantes do Caribe quanto cidadãos britânicos. É possível usar os obstáculos enfrentados por estes homens e suas reações a eles para estabelecer os problemas comuns enfrentados pelos homens negros para performatizar suas masculinidades, assim como suas respostas usuais à opressão vinda tanto dos brancos quanto de seus iguais. A peça também enfatiza o papel da violência na construção das masculinidades negras assim como o papel da mulher negra para curar as feridas do homem negro e remendar suas famílias.

Palavras-chave: Literatura em língua inglesa. Diáspora africana. Kwame Kwei-Armah – *Elmina's Kitchen*. Masculinidade.

Introduction

Africa and its population have played a fundamental role in the construction of contemporary Western society. The slave trade was responsible for entangling the triangle Africa, Europe and the Americas, and its people, from slavery up to modern days. On the one hand, the European legacy cannot be denied in either the Americas or Africa in view of its imposing politics during colonialism and neocolonialism. On the other, Africa has also influenced Western society, for its heritage can be seen in culture, cuisine, religious beliefs, people's physical traits, among other aspects. In English speaking America, African heritage has also served as a way to distinguish those who descend from former slaves, and their culture, from mainstream white society, as exemplified by the Jim Crow politics of the “one-drop” rule.

The issue of African American identity has played a key role in the history of the United States since plantation times. Even from within the oppressive system of that time, former slaves such as Booker T. Washington, William W. Brown, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass have fought to express themselves, especially by learning how to do it through writing. They are considered the pioneers of African-American literature, for they stood up to their masters and to the laws of their time to seek literacy within mainstream society under the risk of being punished. Literature was a powerful tool to fight white oppression, as it raised awareness about the real situation of slaves, as well as it spread political ideas and agendas to help improving their situation in the United States.

In spite of the growth of Africana sentiment in England's former colony, the United States, England has not given much space for her black population to make their concerns and obstacles visible to mainstream – white – population. To this matter, Ben Carrington (2010, p. 270) affirms that:

despite the demonstrable social, cultural, and even political achievements [...] the existence of a specific designation labeled the “black British intellectual” is still somewhat novel. Whereas discussions, books, symposia, and even, in some cases, academic careers have been built around framing the contours and delimitations of the “African American intellectual” [...] no similar space exists for the “black British intellectual.”

The answer to this issue probably lies in the same line of thought Ben Carrington (2010) expresses further on in this same work. While the initial black population in the U.S., as observed by Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson (1994), was mostly composed by the first wave of slaves from Yoruba Western Africa, related to the area of present day Ghana and Nigeria, the black population in Britain has not only come from African slaves, but also from Afro and Indo-Caribbean immigrants, especially after World War II. Therefore, the black British community is much more diverse than the black community in the U.S., providing more obstacles to establish a unified scholarly field similar to the existing one in the U.S.

As a matter of fact, still according to Carrington (2010), because of the delay in structuring a formal field of studies for the black diaspora in Britain, British scholars look up to African American intellectuals as basis for their African diasporic studies. Black British authors, such as Caryl Phillips, model themselves after African American authors and scholars because they lack role models among the black intellectuals in the U.K. Although black British intellectuals have a genealogy for their African diasporic studies similar to that of their American colleagues, that is not to say their agendas are exactly the same. In fact, they are driven by their own singular issues, and sometimes, their issues also contribute to African American studies. Therefore, much of the African American theory can, and is, strategically applied to analyze black British literature.

As explained above, Europe has indisputably held a strong influence over the African continent. To this matter, Elmina Castle can be considered one of the most important symbols of white subjugation over black people during slavery times. Formerly the last gate before the Middle Passage, Elmina Castle held captive those who were destined to serve as slaves in the Americas. It is not a surprise that this structure serves as a powerful metaphor for the African diaspora. One of the contemporary literary works that makes use of such symbol is *Elmina's Kitchen* by Kwame Kwei-Armah.

It is worthy noticing the connection held between the two terms and symbols. Similarly to Elmina's Castle, which was the last check point before African slaves headed to the Americas, Elmina's Kitchen serves as the last stop for Deli, and his relatives, to face reality in England. Elmina's Castle symbolizes the disruption and erasure of African traditions and heritage, and the beginning of a new, and challenging/oppressing, life in the Americas. Likewise, Elmina's Kitchen is Deli's last connection to his mother and roots, represented by the always attentive picture of late Elmina hanging on the wall, who observes and controls everything. This disruption is especially related to his Caribbean heritage and past, which prevents Deli, and his family, to fully experience life in England, and all the obstacles that come along with such experience. Both places, especially to black people passing through them, symbolize the changes to come in these black peoples' lives.

In a conversation with Deirdre Osborne, “Know Whence You Came: Dramatic Art and Black British Identity”, Kwame Kwei-Armah discusses the implication of his works for black British culture, as they are mostly concerned with his political agenda; he believes his works, more than addressing the fact of being black in Britain, deal with the issue of being a man there. Kwei-Armah (2007, p. 258) affirms in this interview: “I’m fundamentally concerned about black masculinity, and so I find myself wanting to speak about that, and – this is where it can seem like arrogance – I want to find a way of articulating it so that it can truly represent what *I*¹ feel.” Much of Kwei-Armah's interests regarding black masculinities lie in the fact that he is

phenomenally interested in the effect that institutionalized slavery and institutionalized racism has had in emasculating the black male, forcing him to create a false personality. That personality creates mental shackles; a void of pain, confusion, and perpetuation of the very hell hole he was cast into. (KWEI-ARMAH, 2007, p. 258).

Therefore, in *Elmina's Kitchen*, the male characters Kwei-Armah (2007) creates – especially Digger and Ashley – rely mostly on violence and on the embodiment of gangster culture to display manliness and success. It is to say that this male construction is rather a performance, and a *false* personality, in Kwei-Armah's words. Throughout his play, the author tries to prove that constructing one's masculinity upon values such as violence and criminality results mostly in failure, for Ashley ends up dead.

In this essay, I aim at the analysis of the construction of masculinities in Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen*. Being a play that deals with black British manhood, I want to examine what type of pressure each of the male characters undergoes, how they perform masculinity in response to such pressure, and the implications their performance generates. This research will help to understand the obstacles imposed on the African men in the diaspora to achieve their manhood, as well as the role performance, masking, violence and black women play in their construction of masculinity.

As stated previously, African American Studies hold a key role in the analysis of literature written by and for the African diaspora – for the purposes of this essay, the black diaspora in England, specifically. Therefore, to complete this research, I will rely mostly on scholars who deal with issues of African American manhood and masculinities such as bell hooks and Richard Majors. Indeed, their work deals with the influence of institutionalized

¹ In this paper, all the words in italic, when in quotations, will be faithful to the original if it is not specified otherwise.

slavery and prejudice on the emasculation of black men – one of Kwei-Armah's (2007) major concern in the play, as stated above. Moreover, they also deal with the implications of the gangster culture and violence in the performance of masculinities. In *Elmina's Kitchen*, in order to analyze the character Ashley, there is a necessity to comprehend further the role of both violence and gangster culture in black men's life, for they play a big part in Ashley's life and performance of masculinity.

Indeed, the very play displays the influence of African American culture to the black British young people when introducing Ashley to the audience:

Enter Ashley², Deli's son (nineteen), hooded street clothes, headphones. He has his hair in two bunches. Trousers falling off the arse. [...] Ashley kisses his teeth, grabs the TV remote off the counter, changes the channel to MTV base and attempts to sit down. (KWEI-ARMAH, 2009, p. 11).

The way Ashley dresses, wears his hair, as well as his choice of music and TV station are a strong statement of the American influence upon the British youth culture.

To proceed with the analysis, though, it should be kept in mind that there is not just one unidimensional, supreme, final, type of masculinity, but “masculinity is multidimensional, varied and malleable, and we accept the notion of masculinities and that men's violence is only one of many resources available to them in the construction of masculinity” (TREADWELL; GARLAND, 2011, p. 623). This idea of plurality in the conceptualization of masculinities is fundamental to base this entire research since each character displays his own way of dealing with and embodying manliness.

1 Masculinities, violence and the “cool pose”

The construction of masculinities and the achievement of manhood are much linked to the ideal of hegemonic masculinities in contemporary Western society. Hegemonic masculinity, according to Bob Connell (2002) and John McLeod (1998), encompasses the dominant view of masculinity and its characteristics, and this model is often seen as true manhood. Hegemony is the power that pressures society to affirm a

² In this paper, all the words in bold, when in quotations, will be faithful to the original if it is not specified otherwise.

certain imposed model.

James Treadwell and Jon Garland (2011) argue that the traditional view of masculinities is much connected to violence and crime. Indeed, in *Genders*, David Glover and Cora Kaplan (2000) present a historical view of masculinity connected to warfare; as a matter of fact, Emma Liggins, Antony Rowland and Eriks Uskalis (1998), as well as Emmanuel Reynaud (2002), state that being a “man” has been connected to both physical violence and war, for acting irrationally distances men from being emotional, a trait considered unmanly.

Being pressured by hegemonic forces, the African American male community, as well as the black British one, finds in violence a tool to release its anger, and to vent its frustration. Jewelle T. Gibbs in “Anger in Young Black Males: Victims or Victimizers?” states that “young Black males in America have been described as angry, alienated, aggressive and antisocial [...] They are often portrayed in the mass media as hostile, sullen, brutal, and violent” (1994, p. 128).

To begin with, in *Elmina's Kitchen*, the reader is presented with four generations of black men living in England. The first generation is represented by Clifton, the father, who emigrated from the Caribbean. The second generation is represented by both Clifton's sons, Deli and Dougie, who are the first generation to be born in the U.K. The third generation is represented by Ashley, the rebellious grandson. And finally, there is the fourth generation, Ashley's child, who, for Ashley's lack of fatherhood skills and care, is left on the outskirts of the family drama. Each generation shows its own struggles dealing with anger, criminality, cool pose and masculinity. They also perpetuate the same mistakes and positioning toward life, at least at a first glance. This can be exemplified by the characters' dysfunctional marriages (or connection with women) and troubled relationship with their children. Furthermore, outside the family, there is Digger, who is also a black Caribbean immigrant and stops by at Elmina's Kitchen on a regular basis. As a strong male presence, he also has his share of problems dealing with violence and gangster culture to the construction of his masculinity.

Richard Majors and Janet Mancine Billson (1994, p. 28) discuss the definition of being cool as:

a trademark of sophistication that proves that the black male can function well under pressure. Coolness is a stabilizer that minimizes threatening situations and earns respect from others. Cool pose may be linked with slickness, neat appearance, verbal manipulation, and the ability to stay out of trouble. Although the “cool cat” may appear indifferent to the problems around him or seem impervious to pain,

frustration, or death, he is unlikely to allow his deeper feelings to surface. If he lifts his protective shield, he risks appearing timid. Cool pose helps him achieve a stern, impersonal masculinity in the face of adversity.

The cool pose is thus a strategy, a performance of masculinity. It “is a carefully crafted persona based on power and control over what the black male says and does – how he ‘plays’ his role” (MAJORS; BILLSON, 1994, p. 28):

the cool pose gives the black male his greatest sense of pride and masculinity. The risk-taking and self-destructive aspects of the cool pose are often symbolically expressed as part of a compulsive masculinity—what some have called *macho* and what Oliver has called the ‘compulsive masculine alternative’ (MAJORS; BILLSON, 1994, p. 34).

The cool pose and *macho* style are not an exclusive performance of the black community; according to Octavio Paz (1984), the Mexican-American masses, as well as other non-white-heterosexual-working-class communities, have their own version of the concept/performance, in their case the *pachuco*. Similarly, the *pachuco* and the *bad-nigga* see in this masculine performance a way to get back at mainstream society for their denial of assimilation. Nonetheless, black men become so attached to this strategy that their masculinity often becomes synonymous with this performance. Majors and Billson (1994) state that those black men who hide under the cool pose fear to expose their real selves so that, eventually, the cool pose becomes part of them, and who they are, turning it into a problem rather than a solution. Therefore, if the cool pose does not work, the entire structure upon which black men founded their masculinity crushes altogether.

Although the cool pose is a multifaceted strategy, it is often connected to violence. Across history, the black man has been pressured by society for he is imposed with patriarchal values and denied the most common social benefits. Merlin R. Langley (1994) enumerates black man's ordeals as: occupying low working-class positions, lacking social status, having trouble providing for his family, and being subjugated in regard to his cultural upbringing and behavior. As a result, according to Majors and Billson (1994), the black man sees in violence a way of showing control over his life and imposing himself, as well as maintaining his pride.

Clifton, in *Elmina's Kitchen*, frustrated with all his under-achievements in life makes use of the cool pose to impress his grandson and his peers Digger and Baygee. In his

introductory discourse, he is telling violent stories to his junior audience:

So, I gently brush back me coat and show him my blade. One big arse heng man ting, and I said in a low Robert Mitcham drawl, 'If you is me fadder. Do it na! Le we see who is the man and who is child.' And I just leave that in the air hanging. Well, I see a flash in he eye as if he was going to rush me, *you see*, cos the eye betrays an untrained man. I go to grab me ting but something deep inside me, and I swear to this day it was the voice of my old mudder say, 'Wait till he mek he move.' Well, let me tell you it was that voice save me old mudder having heart attack when she hear Clifton come to England to get hang. Cos he look at me but the monkey must have realised that this would have been his last night on earth cos he just let out a little 'Ha' and walk off. Not another word. (KWEI-ARMAH, 2009, p. 38).

Clifton mentions that his opponent's eyes betray him for he is “untrained.” In fact, “untrained” works as a synonym for “natural,” a man who is not performing the cool pose. Even without naming it, Clifton is able to perceive who is performing the cool pose and who is not, defying those who, unlike him, do not act cool.

When telling his peers about his violent past, when he was “rough” and subjugated his enemies by violent means, Clifton is able to impress his grandson and charm him to follow in his steps. Indeed, it is inferred that both of his sons followed in his steps, and both of them ended up in prison. The difference between both men seems to be that Deli has learned from his past whereas his brother, Dougie, has not, dying during the play.

Interestingly enough, by placing himself in the position of the head of household, Deli moves outside of this violent cycle, sublimating his past as a boxer, at least for the time being. Ashley, however, unaware of the consequences violence and the cool pose can bring to himself and his beloved ones, is willing to take the same risks his father has taken, and to make the same mistakes. He sees in Digger, the bad guy in the neighborhood, his role model. At the same time, he sees his father as the farthest of his masculine model, for Deli steps out of brawls and violent/criminal situations: “How am I supposed to walk the street an look my bredrens in the eye when mans all grip up my dad by his throat and you didn't deal wid it” (KWEI-ARMAH, 2009, p. 11).

Once again, Digger, being this bad guy, fulfills the place of role model by whom Ashley is inspired. Digger is the living example of the “bad-nigga:”

The bad nigga was known for his physical strength, courage, pride, and ability to overcome hardships. He was also known as someone who was willing to confront white man at any time about his subservient position in society without fear or apprehension. In other words, the bad nigga refused to allow anyone to determine his place in society or to determine how he should live. (MAJORS et al., 1994, p. 250).

It is Digger who, by daily frequenting Elmina's Kitchen, and therefore serving as a male figure, guides Ashley to follow in the same steps of gangster culture he does.

Parallel to this gangster and violent life, alcohol and drug related abuse occurs. Clifton uses a metaphor for the importance of intoxication for the black community when talking to his “fellas” at Elmina's Kitchen. By comparing life to alcohol or drugs, he is saying that being under the influence of substances is the only worthy way to go through life, making it easier to bear with its obstacles; when sober, life is painful and hard to face. Clifton exemplifies the necessity of black British men to overdo drugs and alcohol to endure the obstacles imposed on them.

2 The consequences of the cool pose

It is clear that the obstacles the black man faces vary in great range. The problems are seen in: finding a good job, exemplified by Clifton and Ashley; making sufficient money, exemplified by Deli's lack of success to run Elmina's Kitchen; being exposed to violence and wrong role models, Ashley's dilemma; and seeing in hustling an easy way out of financial trouble, both Digger and Ashley's attitude toward life. As a matter of fact, Ashley also experiences the dilemma of pursuing further education. Although Deli emphasizes his willingness to provide Ashley with a college degree, education and schooling are not seen as major masculine traits. According to Majors and Billson (1994), and Richard Majors et al. (1994), both education and schooling are considered softening factors for those reaching out for their manhood under pressure. To this matter, Ashley, himself, tells his father: “Forget this. College does not fit into the plan I have for my life. You want to keep selling your little plantain burgers, good luck to you, may you always be happy. Me, I'm a *man*”³ (KWEI-ARMAH, 2009, p. 74).

When analyzing the relevance of violence to the pursuit of masculinity, bell hooks (2004, p. 60) points out that “[b]lack male violence is rarely, if ever rewarded.” Throughout

³ My emphasis.

the play, we can see that most of the characters' violent actions are paid with severe sanctions. The only exception seems to be Digger, who, nevertheless, does not see ahead of him any bright future after Deli "informs" him to the authorities.

The member of the first generation to arrive in England, Clifton has not achieved any success in life. On the very contrary, Clifton cannot achieve any success in either his homeland, in the Caribbean, nor in England. His only hope lies on his sons, who are expected to take care of him. When he loses his son Dougie, and Deli denies him any help in response to Clifton's selfish actions, he is led to an outburst of rage, resulting in his leaving Elmina's Kitchen with empty hands.

Members of the second generation, Deli and Dougie have a different fate, though it is dark for both of them. Dougie when pressured by society and venting through violence (though just implied in the play) ends up in jail, and later on, dead, when he finally almost comes clean from his social debts. Deli, despite also serving time in jail, pays for his crimes, buckles up and tries to make his living honestly. He runs his late mother's business, raises his son as a single parent – which, according to hooks (2004), is the opposite of the common story for the black family, single *mothers'* homes, – and keeps distance from the criminal life that surrounds his neighborhood the best way he can. Even opposing to Digger's presence at his business, who is a symbol of violence himself, is actually a strategy to keep violence away. His curse, however, presents itself in the form of his son who, willing to pursue the image and ideal of the black thug and the "bad nigga" as the real man, ends up killed by the role model he had, Digger, leaving his father to grieve.

Ashley is actually the one who faces the strongest struggle to achieve manhood and the strongest sanction. The third generation of his family in England, Ashley sees his father as a weak figure: an informer, a soft and sold man. Opposite to Ashley's image of his father, he sees Digger as a survivor: a successful and feared man. However, Ashley receives his punishment by the hands of the man he looks up to, who, to get back at Deli, kills his own follower/employee/"admirer." According to Majors and Billson (1994), it is indeed common among the black community that, among fellows, black men do not switch off the performance of the cool pose, but rather enforce such behavior even harder to prove themselves as real men. Therefore, Digger has no problem in taking Ashley's life to keep performing his own cool pose, and to maintain his status in their neighborhood and community.

Therefore, black men, as hooks theorizes, are not rewarded for using violence. The characters in *Elmina's Kitchen* provide us with different examples for retaliation to violence; each one representing his own sanctions and punishments.

3 Healing and the female figure

Africana literature dealing with black women and men's issues presents many ways black people from both sexes should work together to heal their wounds and avoid social pressure and subjugation. According to Linda La Rue (1995), to achieve plenitude, both should free themselves from white patriarchal values and seek parameters that encompass and satisfy their needs and social possibilities.

bell hooks (2004) observes that especially the black woman is able to help black men to heal their wounds and find their manhood. In American society, she has an "economic, social, biological, and historic outlook' better than men for freeing black men's problems" (HADEN; MIDDLETON; ROBINSON, 1995, p. 177). The theory of Africana Womanism points out a series of solutions for the construction of womanhood and manhood.

First of all, race does not stand alone when it comes to oppression and subjugation. Joy E. Cranshaw (2007, p. 59) makes an imperial point to the issue by saying that "race, class and gender are hopelessly intertwined in our society, and points of both convergence and conflict have found their way into African American literary representations throughout the history of the United States." Therefore, akin to William J. Wilson (1980), class problems have become racial problems; whereas, previously, prejudice and social barriers were focused mainly on the racial level, in contemporaneity, they are based mostly in the lower-classes level.

Secondly, according to Hudson-Weems (2004), race transcends sex. To white women, the enemy is considered to be the white man who denies them power and voice. On the other hand, to the black community, though black women are oppressed by black men, the subjugation which comes from white society as a whole – from both white men and *women* – is a most important sanction and problem. Hudson-Weems (2004, p. 38) argues that:

within the Africana culture, there is an intrinsic, organic equality that has always been necessary for the survival of the Africana culture, in spite of the individual personal problems of female subjugation that penetrated the Africana family structure as a result of the White male cultural system. [...] the White male's privilege is not the Africana men's or women's personal problem but rather a political problem of unchallenged gender chauvinism in the world.

It is understood that *most* of the struggle both black men and women undergo is the same, and the changes at which both aim must be achieved by union.

Discussing Africana Womanism is especially important to this research because of the strong female characters present in *Elmina's Kitchen*. It is not at random that among an almost entirely male-based cast there are such strong female characters, Elmina and Anastasia.

First of all, the importance of Elmina cannot be denied, and it is seen in different levels: in the title of the play, in the restaurant she owned, and in her psychological presence in spite of her being dead. The picture which is hung on the wall is a symbolic reminder that her presence is still lingering in the restaurant, and that especially Deli, as the new owner, cannot get rid of her influence. Because, as hooks (2004) states, black families are normally single-parented mother-oriented, the matriarchal figure functions as a role model to her children throughout life, and for Deli it is not different. At first, he tried to make a living by boxing, and therefore, by being violent; but he could only successfully find his way in life by following his late mother's steps, by running her restaurant.

Clifton's introductory discourse, quoted in the previous section, provides us with another example of the influence mothers have over black families in the play. It is not for extra details that Clifton mentions his mother's voice while he was brawling on the street. According to him, it was his mother's voice, during his fight, which prevented him from getting into further trouble. It can be inferred, though, that it was not her voice that alerted him, but actually his conscience, which was shaped by the way she raised him. Although Elmina and, apparently, her mother-in-law are these strong female presences in the play, in this essay I intend to focus on the role of Anastasia.

This female character is the thread of hope for the salvation of Deli's family. She is, in the same line hooks (2004) theorizes, the missing figure in it, supposed to bring home both bonding and reconciliation. When Anastasia first arrives at Elmina's Kitchen, she does not seem to master the job she is supposed to perform, and she also looks insecure. However, toward the end of the play, Anastasia, in partnership with Deli, is able to reinvent Elmina's Kitchen and attract a new clientele.

In spite of her past experience, which encompasses a deceased son, Anastasia represents reconciliation. From her relationship with Deli, they are mutually benefited, because both are able to create a functional home. She even tries to draw together Ashley and his father, and she is almost successful. Hudson-Weems (2004) observes that the black woman is family-centered up from plantation times, and this is a mechanism for survival. To this matter, Clifton represents, twice, the disruption between black men and women, and therefore, the disruption from healing his manhood; he is the one who does not know how to work together with black women because he subjugates them. He first fails when he does

not know how to establish a functional home with Elmina, leaving her and their children; and later, he fails his son by seducing Anastasia and destroying any chances Anastasia has to be with him. When black men internalize the pattern of white hegemonic forces that dictates women's subjugation to men, as Hudson-Weems (2004) observes, they lead the functional development of their community and family to collapse.

Deli's family should have been the one to heal his wounds, "the family is where the Black male obtains his initial exposure to an environment of support, love and affection" (HALL, 1981 apud HUDSON-WEEMS, 2004, p. 59). Nevertheless, when Anastasia is taken out of their lives, in response to the very action of family members, the family itself collapses. The utmost symbol of failure is the image of Anastasia's dead son's jacket, left by her as a gift to Ashley, used to cover Ashley's dead body. The jacket works as a foreshadowing of disruption and death, and later as a statement that Anastasia and her son have probably already gone through the same issues Deli and Ashley are going through. Her presence serves as an alert and acknowledgment of what is going to happen to Deli's family. As a consequence of her leaving, the same fate befalls on his family.

Conclusion and final considerations

Elmina's Kitchen is an updated glance at the situation of black masculinities in England, and in the African diaspora as a whole. Kwei-Armah, focusing on the growing-up of young black British males, is able to point out the struggles they often go through. Moreover, he also presents the consequences brought to black men by their violent reactions to the pressure inflicted upon them.

Set in a working-class neighborhood, the play deals with the struggle of a single father to raise his son by serving as the best role model he can. Although he is willing to provide his son with college education and job opportunities, the image sold by the media of the black man performing the cool pose, as well as the constant presence of Digger in Deli's establishment, provide Ashley with the opposite role model intended by Deli. In this environment in which being cool and acting violent is seen as being a real man, Ashley, young and immature, buys such ideal only to bring his family more pain, obstacles and frustration.

Although, at first, the cool pose was a positive strategy that according to Majors and Billson (1994) has come from Western Africa with the slaves and showed black men how to positively deal with their emotions and stay calm in front of their obstacles, the current performance of such masculinity is a double-edged sword. The man who is performing the cool pose runs the risk of going from performing it to embodying it. The

difference lies in the fact that by embodying the cool pose the black man is unable to switch off his performance, affecting not only the ones who he feels threatened by, but also negatively affecting family, peers and himself.

Often, the cool pose is associated with the image of the “bad nigga,” thus also with violence. Acting violent is one of the most severely punished behaviors a black man can display, hence leading him to pay a high price for his “masculinity.” *Elmina's Kitchen* presents us with a strong image of punishment for violence through all its male characters. Even their differences in generation, in relation to living in England, and age are not that relevant when taking into account the fact that they are all black British men and behave violently in one way or another.

The key female figures of Anastasia as well as the lingering presence of late Elmina serve as a symbol of the importance of the black woman in the healing of both black womanhood and manhood. It is through the character of Anastasia that the possibility of patching Deli's and his family's wounds, and mending their lives, is presented. As the male leader and the head of household, Deli is able to see in bonding with Anastasia a way out of the pressure imposed upon him and his family. However, whereas Deli's son is immature and mesmerized by gangster culture, and Deli's father has had too vast an experience in life and is consequently frustrated with it, they both prevent Deli to heal his family. Deli's failure is due to his son and father's selfish actions and bad choices, which end up posing a negative impact upon them all.

When Deli breaks up with Anastasia he thus seals his family's destiny. By comparison, the play suggests that, to Deli's family, alike many other black families in the diaspora, when black men and women do not work together they create further obstacles for themselves and their family, increasing their chances of frustration and failure. The power and survival of the black family and community lie in the strength of working together as a unified cell to successfully overcome their obstacles, and thrive within white mainstream society.

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OROZIMBO PAOLUCCI NETO

Licenciado em Letras-ingles e mestrando em Estudos Literários – Literaturas de Expressão Inglesa, pela Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG). Bolsista da Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de Minas Gerais (FAPEMIG). E-mail: orozimbo.english@yahoo.com.