

# **Re-Placing British Theatre: Class and Regionality on the Contemporary Stage**

Submitted by Tom Nicholas to the University of Exeter  
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## Abstract

In this thesis, I bring together discussions surrounding the London-centricity of the English theatre industry (in terms of the distribution of public subsidy and that of theatre venues, production companies and performances) with discussions surrounding the representation of human geography on stage in order to analyse a set of stage representations of regional England. I argue that the aforementioned London-centricity of English theatre production is mirrored in the performance texts that industry produces. This manifests in a tendency to represent regional England as viewed from the privileged position of the capital and for the benefit of an assumed metropolitan spectator. Through the analysis of nine theatrical productions which each engaged with one of the three regional locations—Nottingham (and the surrounding region of Nottinghamshire), Hull and Bristol—and which premiered during the timeframe of this research, I then seek to consider how contemporary playwrights and theatre-makers might be responding to dominant London-centric national spatial imaginaries.

My primary focus is on regional, post-industrial cities. Much of the previous scholarship on the intersection between theatre, performance and the city has focussed on “global” cities or has otherwise sought to connect the cities (and performances) being discussed to a supposed globalised urban experience. In this thesis, I consider what might be gained from viewing these cities *as regional*, viewing the marginalisation of the post-industrial regions in “national” politics, economy and culture as being a key context to perceptions and experiences of these sites. I both explore how contemporary theatre-makers might be engaging with this dynamic of marginalisation and consider more broadly how theatre and

performance might be contributing to ongoing processes of place identity negotiation.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

The seed for this thesis was planted in March 2013. I was sat in the auditorium of the Drum Theatre, the 192-seat studio space at Theatre Royal Plymouth, waiting for the premiere performance of Glen Waldron's *Forever House* (2013a) to begin. It is not entirely unusual for the Drum Theatre to be busy (especially on a press night when the local great and good are tempted in with a glass of wine and a chance to see where their sponsorship money is going), yet this night there was a particular buzz in the auditorium. Despite then being in its third decade, Theatre Royal Plymouth had never previously mounted a professional production set in the city in which it lies. Indeed, David Prescott, the venue's Artistic Associate, went as far as to suggest that he had never 'come across a play set in Plymouth before' (in Theatre Royal Plymouth, 2012).<sup>1</sup> The promotional materials for *Forever House*, however, made it clear that this play would be, whilst also implying that it would have something to say about life in the city.

Aware that the play's local setting might attract those beyond the city's modest circle of New Writing enthusiasts, the theatre had issued a series of postcards in addition to the standard flyers and posters, each featuring a different image of Plymouth. Unlike the picturesque postcards one might find in the gift shops of the city's Barbican area, the theatre decided to focus on day-to-day

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<sup>1</sup> There had, however, been at least two examples of community productions set in the city: 1991's *High Heels in the Rubble* and 2000's *Union Street* (O'Leary, 2018).

scenes. The image that most stuck out to me, accentuated by the fact it was subsequently used on the cover of the published playtext (Waldron, 2013b: front cover), was that of a green recycling bin with the logo of Plymouth City Council etched into its face. There was something affirming in having that bin, ubiquitous in the back lanes I had been taking shortcuts down for much of my adolescence, presented in a format with which we generally associate beauty; it read as a celebration of the everyday and, by extension, implied that the production would do the same.

In many regards, *Forever House* met my expectations. Hannah Clarke's set design, in its strict naturalism, may have been unremarkable to anyone in the auditorium who was merely passing through the city, yet its recreation of the bay windows and (these days often merely ornamental) fireplaces found throughout Plymouth's Georgian and Victorian terraces stimulated a sense of commonality between the local audience (or at least this member of it) and the characters onstage. Moreover, it further indicated that this play would have something to say about the city in which we were gathered. If a core pretext to this thesis is the notion that having the spaces in which one lives represented onstage—considered a worthy subject of art—can be powerfully affirming, then *Forever House* can take much of the credit for convincing me of this. Nevertheless, the play ultimately left me with a sense of unease.

*Forever House* features three discontinuous scenes, with the through-line being not any individual character but the titular house. What makes this building notable is the slowly-revealed fact that, sometime after the exchange between middle-aged photography lecturer Graham and seventeen-year-old Richard in

Scene One, Graham murdered Richard. While there is a great deal of humour in the play, the tragedy of Richard's death thus hangs palpably in the air throughout.

The main topic of conversation in that opening scene is Richard's (ultimately unfulfilled) desire to leave Plymouth to study photography in London. There is a sense of naivety to Richard's desire to leave his hometown and his unwavering belief in the cultural mythology surrounding the capital. He is embarrassed, for instance, that his photography focuses on 'like, ordinary things' (Waldron, 2013b: 20), something which he considers a symptom of his mundane surroundings. He explains to Graham that 'well, this is Plymouth, it's not — it's not New York or [...]' (2013b: 21). He later tells Graham that he thinks Plymouth is 'crap. There's nothing, like—nothing ever happens here [...]' (2013b: 26). To Richard, London is a place of inherent significance and sophistication; Plymouth, by contrast, is neither of these things. Richard sees moving to London (and away from Plymouth) as essential if he is to acquire enough cultural capital to be able to effortlessly reference Man Ray and other canonical photographers as Graham does.

Occasionally, *Forever House* appears to have opened with this notion that Plymouth is lacking in comparison with London in order to critique it. In Scene Two, for instance, the audience is introduced to Laura, who is returning to Plymouth after several years living in the capital. When the estate agent showing her around the house turns out to be Becci, an old school friend, Laura is standoffish. Whilst Becci attempts to rekindle their old friendship, Laura either ignores her or brings the conversation back to her plans for redecorating the house. Laura's move away from Plymouth and experience of social mobility is

implied to have made her snobbish in comparison to Becci's (albeit crude) joviality and warmth. In contrast to the preceding scene, this exchange between Laura and Becci therefore suggests that there are benefits to living in Plymouth rather than London; it implies that living in the city might make one more generous and amiable. Nevertheless, even in doing so, the scene continues to position Becci's life as inconsequential and unrefined in comparison to Laura's. While Laura is trying to remember the difference between coving and cornicing (2013b: 31), Becci jokes on the phone to another of their former school friends about going 'down Union Street tonight and get[ting] inseminated by some nineteen-year-old lad' (2013b: 34).<sup>2</sup> All of this serves to make Laura feel uncomfortable about returning to Plymouth. She stresses later in the scene that she is 'not "moving back"' but instead seeking 'a new start' (2013b: 48). Although she protests, that Laura feels the need to state this reveals that she perceives her move back to Plymouth as evidence of failure, with Becci's role being to provide her with a warning as to what her new life might look like.

Despite *Forever House's* occasional attempts to convince us that, as Graham puts it, 'Plymouth has the same things as other places[.] The same life and—and love and happiness and sex and, and—humanity' (2013b: 21), the production thus generally sides with Laura and Richard in suggesting that lives lived in Plymouth are inherently less significant than those lived in London. Emblematic of this is the way in which Richard's dreams of departure in Scene One are used to amplify the tragedy of his death. The thought of what someone might have achieved is perhaps always a part of grief, especially when the deceased is so young. Yet, that Richard was set to leave Plymouth and to have

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<sup>2</sup> Coving and cornicing are different forms of decorative mould at the meeting point between a wall and a ceiling.

the opportunity to immerse himself in the abundant cultural capital of London serves to frame his death as more tragic than that of someone with more local ambitions for their future. And, with these sustained, unflattering comparisons of Plymouth with London in mind, the word Plymouth etched into that green bin took on a different, more direct connotation. Where the promotional literature had suggested that *Forever House* would celebrate Plymouth, the show itself represented the city in fairly derogatory terms.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Geography of English Theatre**

If Plymouth comes across negatively in *Forever House*, it is the result of the continual comparisons the production draws between the city and London. Each scene features two characters: one a permanent resident of Plymouth and another who has lived for at least some of their life in London. In the scenes discussed above, the primary conflict between the two characters stems from the gulf of cultural capital between them, and this is implied to be directly tied to the geography of their lives. The character who has lived in London is portrayed as “cultured” and “refined” in contrast to their Plymothian counterpart who is rendered as warm yet (in Richard’s case) naïve or (in Becci’s case) crude. The surfeit of cultural capital boasted by the characters who have lived in London is evidently not simply a result of their having lived in increased proximity to the Tate Modern or any of London’s other vaunted cultural institutions but, instead, that of a more holistic process of social mobility. Nevertheless, the inequity in cultural provision between Plymouth (and all other areas of England) and London is an

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<sup>3</sup> Waldron himself reflected in a 2018 interview that ‘the play spends about 90 minutes slagging off Plymouth’, which suggests he was aware that the play’s portrayal of the city might be read as negative (Bowie-Sell, 2018).

important factor to take into account in contextualising *Forever House's* representation of Plymouth.

Around seven months following my night in the Drum watching *Forever House*, debate flared up among artists and other cultural workers in England surrounding the geographical distribution of public arts subsidy. These discussions were sparked by the publication of Peter Stark, Christopher Gordon and David Powell's *Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital (ROCC)* report (2013) which, perhaps more plainly than had been done before, quantified how government funds distributed both directly by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and through Arts Council England (ACE) were apportioned between the English regions.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the authors drew attention to the discrepancy between the amount of funding awarded to London and that distributed across the rest of England.

The report's headline figure revealed that state subsidy 'produce[d] a benefit per head of population in the capital of £68.99 compared to £4.58 in the rest of England (6.6% of London levels)' (2013: 8). The rest of the report revealed further disparities between the capital and the rest of the country. For instance, the authors also analysed funds donated by the private and charitable sectors which they claimed 'exacerbates the situation' with 81.2% of all support from individual philanthropists, businesses, trusts and foundations being committed to organisations in London (2013: 26-27).

It is worth recognising that there are some mitigating factors which

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<sup>4</sup> The DCMS was renamed the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in 2017 to reflect increased responsibilities in overseeing the digital economy yet has retained the same acronym.

complicate this picture. London is home to many of the nation's largest and most-renowned cultural institutions, some of which are officially constituted to serve the nation as a whole. As a result, many people travel to London from elsewhere in England for the express purpose of visiting venues such as the National Theatre, National Gallery or South Bank Centre. As Stark *et al.* stress, however, the cost of doing so can be prohibitive: for a family in Leeds to spend three days in central London would cost five times what it would cost the same family living in Zone 6 before they have purchased a single ticket or paid a single entrance fee (2013: 58-59). While such institutions may describe themselves as "national", then, they are evidently far more accessible to those who live in the capital than they are to those living elsewhere in England.

More consoling in terms of accessibility is the fact that, as ACE stressed in their official response to the ROCC report, 'it can be misleading to look at London's benefit per capita. Figures on Arts Council funding relate to where the organisation is administered from, not where its "impact" is' (2013, n.p.). In their 2017-2018 Annual Review, for example, the National Theatre claimed that 'our touring audience was almost equal to our audience on the South Bank' (2018).<sup>5</sup> Other London-based companies tour so extensively as to present more work outside the capital than within it. New Writing company Paines Plough, for instance, performed upwards of four times as much outside of London as they did within it between 2016 and 2018 (Paines Plough, 2018: 4).

Such a critique of Stark *et al.*'s methodology may convince some that the

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<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, when taking into account those who attended a live screening of a National Theatre production as part of the venue's NT Live initiative, audiences outside London account for 65% of the venue's total audience (National Theatre, 2018).

inequity in arts funding between London and the English regions is less troubling than the headline figure implies. Yet, to my mind, the prospect of London-based companies exporting theatre productions to the regions raises as many questions as it answers. Even if touring makes it possible for such productions to be seen across the UK, might the fact that the company which produced that work is based in London not inflect the ways in which it represents the nation?

*Forever House* is more relevant to this discussion than it might first seem. Although the production was produced by Theatre Royal Plymouth, it was written by a playwright who had grown up in the city but who had long since moved to London. It was also directed by a London-based director, performed by a London-based cast and largely rehearsed in the capital too. The cast and creative team certainly did their research, travelling to Plymouth during rehearsals to visit 'all the Plymouth hotspots that appear in the play [...] including the uni and the library' and 'the sights of the Barbican, The Hoe and Royal William Yard' to gain an 'insight into the place, history and people' (Theatre Royal Plymouth, 2013). Nevertheless, without questioning whether a two-day trip is enough to gain a substantive knowledge of a place, it is evident that the company would have been viewing Plymouth through the eyes of Londoners, comparing and contrasting their experience of Plymouth with that of the places and sites which provide the setting for their lives in the capital. This image of a group of London-based artists visiting Plymouth for 48 hours before returning to the capital to transform their brief experience of the city into theatre seems to mirror the way in which the resulting production so frequently defined Plymouth by what it supposedly lacks in comparison to London.



More influential on the production's representation of Plymouth might have been Waldron's relationship with the city. This is more complex. Having grown-up in Plymouth, his experience of it is infinitely more substantial than that of the company who gave his play physical form. Nevertheless, Waldron's emigration from the city, and his experience of a successful career as a journalist in London (Bowie-Sell, 2018), does seem to have informed his perception of it, with *Forever House* consistently implying that, for a Plymothian to achieve economic, professional or educational success, they would be best off following a similar trajectory. The case of *Forever House* therefore suggests that accessibility to performances might not be the only issue worthy of consideration with regard to the geography of English theatre; it also raises the question of whether there is a relationship between the material London-centricity of English theatre production and the ways in which the performance texts produced by that industry represent different geographical sites across the nation.

Before going any further, it is worth further substantiating my suggestion that English theatre production is dominated by London. For, in examining only the distribution of public subsidy (and doing so with regard to all artforms rather than just theatre), the ROCC report only provides a partial picture. A more holistic outline of the geography of English theatre production can be found in Naylor *et al.*'s *Analysis of Theatre in England* report, commissioned by ACE in 2016, which set out to 'gain an in-depth understanding of the current picture of theatre production, presentation and audiences across the subsidised, unfunded not-for-profit, and commercial theatre sectors' (2016: ii). The report revealed that, despite being home to only 16% of the population, London plays host to 47% of all professional performances in England as well as containing 'over a third of the

producing and presenting companies of all scales' and 43% of the nation's theatre venues (2016: 2). This surfeit of theatre companies, venues and performances might partly be a result of the inequitable amount of funding the city receives from the public purse. Nevertheless, the city also benefits from other factors such as the presence of a robust middle class and elite able to afford higher ticket prices, the city's success as a tourist destination and the virtuous cycle of a greater availability of theatre leading to greater engagement.

As relevant as the agglomeration of theatre activity in London is the sway this gives the city over the portion of the industry located outside the capital. Some light on the impact that London's material dominance of the English theatre industry has upon the sector outside the capital was shed in 2017 when playwright James Graham was invited to submit evidence to the Labour Party's *Acting Up* inquiry into access and diversity in the performing arts. Although speaking on the broader issue of the barriers faced by working-class artists seeking a career in theatre, Graham's testimony regularly returned to issues of geography. He began by relaying his memories of watching the television show *Boon* (1986) as a child. The series was set in Nottingham where Graham lived, and he described having a similarly affirmational experience as I experienced when I first encountered *Forever House's* recreation of a Plymouth living room on stage. The act of seeing the spaces in which one lives represented in art, Graham admitted, 'sounds like it's insignificant' before continuing that 'if you're from a town that is deprived, that feels ignored, it isn't'. Despite clearly cherishing this formative moment, however, Graham continued by recalling how the London-centricity of English theatre production drew him to move to the capital. He 'had to' move to London, he suggested, 'all the major new writing producers are there.

[...] The agents are there'. Thus, he found himself drawn in by what he referred to as 'the self-fulfilling cycle of artists leaving their communities to work exclusively in London' (2017).

Graham's testimony is interesting in that it draws attention away from the geographical distribution of performances—he was evidently able to engage with theatre to the extent he could envisage a career within it—and instead to the geographical distribution of production. So concentrated is the theatre industry in London, Graham implies, that someone living outside the capital who wishes to forge a sustainable career as a playwright, director, actor or other form of theatre-maker will often benefit from moving to it. For many, he attested, such a move is not possible: the cost of living in the capital being too high or social and familial bonds and responsibilities requiring them to remain where they are.

The main thrust of Graham's argument was that the London-centricity of English theatre production has an impact on what stories get told on English stages. Discussing playwrights in particular, Graham asserted that 'if we aren't encouraging and generating writers from certain communities, classes or backgrounds to tell their stories, to write those roles, then there's not going to be a demand for actors from those communities to play them'. He also made a more nuanced point, arguing that, even when those living in regional England are able to envisage a career in theatre and are able to make the move to London, that move can create a rift between them and the community in which they previously lived. Reflecting that he had never written 'a story for [his] community' (2017), he implied that, as a writer assimilates into life in the capital, some of the potential they might have had to invite new geographical perspectives onto the stage is

lost.

This argument, that the tacit encouragement of regional playwrights (and other theatre-makers) to uproot their lives and move to London might lead them to be less likely to place the community in which they previously lived on stage, certainly holds water with regard to Graham's own career. Despite recognising the profound impact of seeing the region of his childhood represented on television, Graham has only rarely set plays he has written in his native Nottinghamshire. Prior to 2017's *Labour of Love* (discussed in Chapter Four), he had done so only twice, and in perhaps the lowest-profile of the 22 plays he had written up to that point: *Coal Not Dole!* (2002) was Graham's first full-length play, produced by a university society at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe while Graham was still studying and *Northern/Not Northern* (2010) was a ten-minute-long monologue written for Paines Plough's *Come To Where I'm From* series. By way of contrast, London has been a constant feature of his work, culminating in 2018's *Sketching* which explored the characters, contrasts and complexities of the capital.

Graham's testimony to the *Acting Up* inquiry and the example of Waldron's *Forever House* both suggest that there is a relationship between the London-centricity of English theatre production and the ways in which places outside of the capital are represented on stage. Graham's career to date suggests that the encouragement of aspiring playwrights, directors, actors and other theatre-makers to move to London might lessen the likelihood of regional communities being represented on stage. *Forever House* challenges this assessment; relocating to London did not deter Waldron from placing Plymouth on stage.

Nevertheless, his relocation does seem to have inflected the way in which he represented the city. Moreover, in production, the portrayal of Plymouth as inherently less significant than London was likely enhanced by the employment of an exclusively London-based creative team and cast.

The notion that the London-centricity of English theatre production is mirrored by a similar privileging of the capital in the performance texts that industry produces is a foundational argument of this thesis. In the analyses included in the main body of this study, I often return to the manner in which a production may be seen as conforming to or resisting this phenomenon. Before going any further, then, it is important to further substantiate this claim with reference to a wider range of productions.

### **The Geographical Poetics of English Theatre**

While the primary focus of both the *ROCC* and *Analysis of Theatre in England* reports was contemporary, the authors of the former document recognised that the present system is the result of ‘a long history’ (2013: 28). In considering whether there might be evidence to suggest a correlative London-centricity within English performance texts, it is similarly important to take a longer view than solely surveying theatre and performance being created in the present day. In his 1977 book *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams foregrounds the importance of recognising the ‘actively shaping force’ of ‘selective tradition[s]’ on artistic practices. He argues that the manner in which, ‘from a whole possible area of past and present, in a particular culture, certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are neglected or excluded’ is ‘powerfully operative in the process of social and

cultural definition' (1977: 115). In the following discussion, I therefore survey a body of 100 plays written and first performed since the end of the Second World War. In doing so, I argue not only that there is evidence of a consistent privileging of London as a site of unique significance in English theatre and performance texts, but also that this constitutes a selective tradition which itself might inform contemporary practices.

In order to enquire into the geographical poetics of the English post-war theatrical canon, the first requirement is a body of work to analyse. Given the inherent problematics of ruling what texts might be deemed canonical or not and the potential that, were I to choose them myself, I might simply foreground productions which support my hypothesis, I have based the following survey on the productions included in Kate Dorney and Frances Gray's *Played in Britain: Modern Theatre in 100 Plays* (2013). I was drawn to this list for several reasons. Firstly, it focuses on theatre productions rather than plays as written artefacts and includes several devised works. Secondly, the authors seek a balance between 'well-known plays and lesser-known works' which, regardless of how often they are spoken of in the present, the authors deem to have 'shaped the theatre we see today' (2013: 8). One result of this is a sensitivity in this collection of plays towards many of the biases of gender, race, and class which distort other similar lists. Finally, there is a clear attempt within the book to include plays produced outside of London in a way that ensures my analysis is representative of British theatre as a whole and not merely that which has taken place in London venues.

My discussion in the previous section suggests that there are two possible approaches to interrogating the geographical poetics of this body of work. The

first is quantitative: where are each of these plays primarily set? On surveying the plays included in Dorney and Gray's list, one finds that 32 of the 100 were set outside of England (either in one of the other three constituent nations of the UK or beyond). Seven were set definitively in England yet were difficult to place with any greater degree of specificity: the living rooms of Alan Ayckbourn's *How the Other Half Loves* (1969), for instance. 33 of the plays were set in London and eight in the city's immediate hinterland, the South East, with the capital casting a long shadow over many of those play's events: *The Mousetrap* (1952), for example, is set in a guest house outside London but the murder around which the plot revolves occurred in London the previous night. Finally, just 20 of these plays were set in the other seven English administrative regions. There is, therefore, a significant weighting in favour of productions set in London.

The second approach that my discussion in the previous section suggested one might want to take to considering the geographical poetics of English theatre was qualitative. My analysis of *Forever House* suggested that it is not only important to consider where a production is set, but also what ideological value a text attaches to the places invoked onstage. In his 2010 book *The Secret Life of Plays*, Steve Waters suggests to budding playwrights that 'increasingly, in contemporary life, geography is destiny; where you are is who you are' (2010: 51). As a result, he later continues, 'the inner concerns of a play are revealed by its geography and by its spatial shifts, because behind all such shifts lie journeys with moral implications; going somewhere else, or even just staying put, requires a choice to be made' (2010: 58). As *Forever House* showed, a character's arrival, departure or preference for remaining where they are says something both about that character and about the places they are choosing to journey to, depart from

or remain within. Perhaps more interesting than the mere matter of where the productions in Dorney and Gray's list are set, then, is the question of how these productions *use* geography as a narrative or thematic device.

The productions included in *Played in Britain* that are set in London are not entirely devoid of movement. Nevertheless, migration from one place to another, a reluctance or inability to do so and the geographical articulation of power are a core concern of almost all of the regionally-set plays. Above, I foregrounded the example of *The Mousetrap*, which is set in the South East yet revolves around a murder which took place in London. And, London is a constant point of reference in many of the plays set in the South East. Both Noël Coward's *Relative Values* (1951) and Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden* (1955), for example, feature characters arriving from London, with these characters' continuing or previous attachments to the capital working to establish their social status. In Laura Wade's *Posh* (2010), the opposite is the case, with much of the play's intrigue being the audience's knowledge that many of the grotesque, despicable characters featured will later find themselves pacing the halls of the Palace of Westminster. The inescapable presence of London in these plays might be explained by the matter of proximity. Yet, surveying the plays set in the other seven English regions, one finds a similar preoccupation with the relationship between the place in which a play is set and London.

*Look Back in Anger* (1956), for instance, is set in a fictionalised version of Derby in the East Midlands. Through a purely quantitative lens, the setting of what is often viewed as a seminal piece of English playwriting outside of London might be considered a significant rejection of London's dominance. Nevertheless,



looking closer, one finds that London is a constant presence in the play. In her 1987 book *Look Back in Gender*, Michelene Wandor foregrounds the decision to represent the English ruling class, towards whom the play's protagonist, Jimmy, directs constant bile, through the character of Alison. In doing so, she argues, the play transposes class conflict onto gender. 'Jimmy is a rebel in class terms', writes Wandor, 'but in terms of the world of this play, the only way in which he can construct a battleground that has any meaning for him is if the opposition is female' (2015: 11). With Alison the only stand-in for the ruling class for much of the play, blows against the class system often manifest as blows on Alison's body. *Look Back in Anger's* representation of class conflict, however, is also heavily geographically inflected.

Throughout the play, characters are constantly boarding or disembarking the train to London, where both Alison's immediate family and Jimmy's mother figure, Mrs Tanner, live, and this journey serves to spatialise the class dynamics of Jimmy and Alison's relationship. In Act Two Scene One, for example, Alison recalls her and Jimmy's relocation to Derby, telling him that 'you rescued me from the wicked clutches of my family, and all my friends! I'd still be rotting away at home, if you hadn't ridden up on your charger, and carried me off!' (Osborne, 2013: 50). When, later, Alison decides to escape her abusive life with Jimmy, this necessitates her father coming to collect her to take her back to the capital. That the play draws upon Derby's relative lack of wealth in comparison with London in spatialising Jimmy and Alison's relationship is not so much the issue here. What is striking, instead, is the extent to which Derby's role in the play is simply to be *not London*. For Jimmy, moving to Derby is merely a way in which he can irritate Alison's middle-class parents; for Alison, it merely once represented an

opportunity to escape the pretensions of her friends and family in the capital. As the play's reluctance to even name the city in which it is clearly set perhaps hints, the play invokes Derby and the Midlands as little more than a counterpoint to London—a site of brutish “working-class-ness” in comparison to the capital's sophistication—and is far more interested in what this might reveal about the latter than the former.

Browsing the rest of the plays set in regional England included in Dorney and Gray's canon, one is struck by how many follow a similar path of refusing the audience a specific setting. The first on the list, J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* (1945), sets its action in Brumley, ‘an industrial city in the North Midlands’ (1992: ix), for which no real corollary exists. David Storey's *The Changing Room* (1972), too, is given no more specific a setting than ‘the North of England’ (1972: 8), while John Godber's *Bouncers* (1987) is content with ‘a provincial discotheque’ (1987: 5). Given how precisely many of the plays set in London are located—Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen* (2009), for example, sets its action not only in London and not only in Hackney but specifically on the stretch of Clapton Road known as the “Murder Mile” (2009: 5)—, this seems notable. Plays set in London tend to be set in what Chris Morash and Shaun Richards refer to as ‘mimetic places’, inspired by specific, real-world sites. A large portion of the plays set in the regions are set, instead, in generalised ‘conceptual spaces’ such as “the North” or “the Midlands” (2013: 30). Across time and genre, whole swathes of the country thus find themselves flattened; their diversity eroded.

Other regionally-set plays are set in mimetic places yet, as in *Look Back in Anger* or *Forever House*, frame them as locations to be escaped from.

Sometimes this is as blatant as in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* (2004) in which the central plot centres on whether Lockwood *et al.* will achieve the grades necessary for them to break out of Yorkshire and attend university in Oxford or Cambridge. In other examples, such as Willy Russell's *Shirley Valentine* (1988), escape is not a character's goal at the opening of the play but comes to be essential for a character's self-fulfilment. Elsewhere, departure is denied but it is suggested to the audience that, were it possible, it would be beneficial for a play's characters. Una Chaudhuri has written of *Road* (1986), itself notably vague in its setting, for instance, that, 'throughout the play, the experience of the inhabitants of Road is presented as a form of imprisonment, but one whose economic and social causes are too vividly apparent to allow for the traditional poetic transformation of entrapment into a heroism of departure' (1997: 49-50). A similar appraisal might also be reached in relation to Andrea Dunbar's *The Arbor* (1988).

More interesting, to my mind, than the simple fact of where these plays are set, then, is the more complex matter of their geographical poetics; how they *use* geography in the telling of a story or the exploration of themes. The brief study undertaken in this section is far from exhaustive; it encompasses only 100 plays. In the set of productions compiled by Dorney and Gray, however, the English regions are frequently rendered as uniform, with the specific towns, villages and cities within "the North", say, framed as almost entirely interchangeable. When this isn't the case (and often even when it is), these places are regularly framed as sites to be escaped from.

I do not foreground these tendencies within English theatre in order to cast aspersions of "misrepresentation". As Stuart Hall has argued, 'there is no "purely

denotative”, and certainly no “natural”, representation’ that these plays could have adhered to (1993: 97). Nor do I wish to overlook the fact that many of these plays were written by playwrights with deep connections to the regions in which they are set and who thus seek to foreground spatial inequality in a manner sympathetic to those regions. Neither *Road* nor *The Arbor*, for instance, represent the working-class towns in which they are set to be derogatory but are either attempting to draw attention to the deprivation experienced within those communities in order to make a political point or simply reflecting the playwright’s lived experience of those places. I also do not wish to overlook the very real existence of theatre productions which subvert this tendency (several of which will be foregrounded in the latter chapters of this thesis). What I am interested in is the fact that, of all the stories that could be told about these places, it is those which invoke either genericism or departure that not only get written or created but also produced and, moreover, elevated to canonical status.

Furthermore, I am interested in how this geographical poetics relates to London’s dominance of English theatre production. For, at least in the 100 plays I have surveyed here, the material London-centricity of English theatre production seems to be mirrored by the texts that industry produces. Villages, towns and cities outside the M25 are consistently seen from the perspective of the capital and, though often more subtly than in *Look Back in Anger* (or *Forever House*), represented in a manner which implicitly measures them against a perceived metropolitan norm. It is beyond the means of this thesis to establish a causal link between these two phenomena. Even if one were to try to establish such a link, the process through which such a selective tradition is established and maintained would likely be infinitely complex; a combination of playwrights

seeking to ensure their work is legible to Literary Managers in the revered London New Writing venues, producers wanting to invest in work that can premiere in London or which might be suitable to transfer, the far greater number of critics who are based in the capital than in the regions and what Williams describes as the 'actively shaping force' of the canon itself guiding the hands of playwrights, directors and other theatre-makers (1977: 115). While causation may be impossible to prove, however, this correlation between a *material* London-centricity and *textual* London-centricity remains notable.

As hinted at in my discussion of *Road* and *The Arbor* above, the consideration of the geographical poetics of English theatre and performance is made more complex by the fact that, as Mike Savage *et al.* report in *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2015), in the present day, 'London [...] operates as the unquestioned centre of elite geography' and a focal point for political, cultural and economic power within the nation (2015: 295). Following the publication of the ROCC report discussed above, Danny Dorling and Benjamin D. Hennig suggested that spatial inequities in arts funding were consistent with other inequalities of politics, economy and culture. 'The inequality in arts funding appears shocking', they wrote, 'but it is, in fact, not as shocking as other key inequalities' (2016: 36).<sup>6</sup> In order to discuss stage representations of the English regions, it is thus important to not only be aware of the artistic and material factors surrounding the theatre-making process but also to have a firm grounding in the broader socio-political geography of England. For much of the rest of this chapter,

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<sup>6</sup> Dorling and Hennig primarily search for echoes of the disparities revealed by the *Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital* report in the economic sphere. They also, however, point to some less predictable forms of spatial inequality: they highlight, for example, that London is one of the few urban areas in England, Wales and Scotland which does not sit inside the "exclusion zone" around a nuclear power station (2016: 39).

I therefore seek to provide some of this socio-political context. Before doing so, however, it is useful to undertake a brief critical discussion of one of the key focuses of this thesis: the regional English city.

### **Regionality and the City**

I argued above that setting a play in the broad conceptual space of, say, “the North” can serve to flatten the inherent diversity of that region. My repeated use of the term “regional” throughout this thesis risks similarly mirroring the London-centricity that I have argued is endemic in English theatre. Nevertheless, my use of the term follows that of Ian Duncan who distinguishes the term “regional” from the more derogatory “provincial” (the emergence of which I discuss shortly) by suggesting that ‘the region [...] is a place in itself, the source of its own terms of meaning and identity, while the province is a typical setting defined by its difference to London’ (2002: 323). Though my use of the term does imply a difference to London through excluding the capital from the “regional” definition, it thus aims to describe the nation outside of London in a neutral sense, hostile to the manner in which, as Savage *et al.* have suggested is prevalent in English culture, ‘places are moralised through the lens of the dominant London worldview’ (2015: 323). It is certainly the case that, in seeking to retain a sympathy to regional variations, I could have chosen to focus on a specific region: the North, the Midlands, the South West. Why, then, have I chosen to give repeated focus to cities?

As I mentioned above, I have lived much of my life in Plymouth, a (now mostly ex-) naval city in the South West of England. One thing that’s always stuck out to me is the city’s incongruence with the wider South West. As Owen

Hatherley writes in *A New Kind of Bleak: Journeys Through Urban Britain* (2012), 'deindustrialised, poor, shabby but often glorious old Plymouth has more in common with a Bradford or a Liverpool than with the seaside, spa and silicon towns of the South' (2012: 182-183). While Hatherley's observation invokes Liverpool and Bradford merely to provide a point of reference for the architecture and civic identity of Plymouth, I believe this points to a broader commonality between regional English cities.<sup>7</sup> As I hope to show in the next section, the trajectory of English politics, economy and culture over the past hundred or so years has led to the regional English city becoming a marginalised and contested site both as a point of reference in popular discourse and as a lived environment. As such, I believe that critically appraising how such sites are represented on stage is important if we are to develop a full account of the intersection between human geography and performance.

"The city" has received a considerable amount of attention in recent scholarship on theatre and performance. In her 2009 monograph, *Theatre & the City*, Jen Harvie explores 'the relationship between theatre and the city' both in terms of how the latter has been represented by the former and in terms of how the city itself might be understood as 'performative' (2009: 4, 45). In oscillating between these two approaches, Harvie provides a fair representation of both the preceding research which had been undertaken at this intersection of theatre and performance studies, urban studies and cultural geography and that which has been published since. Edited collections such as D.J. Hopkins, Shelley Orr and Kim Solga's *Performance and the City* (2009), Nick Whybrow's *Performance and*

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<sup>7</sup> This commonality is further foregrounded by Savage *et al.* who claim that, counter to the popular conception of spatial inequalities in England as a North-South phenomenon, 'the dominance of central London is now paramount and overwhelms that of the north-south divide' (2015: 265).

*the Contemporary City* (2010), Hopkins and Solga's *Performance and the Global City* (2013b) and Whybrow's *Performing Cities* (2014) all combine chapters which explore how various forms of performance have drawn upon urban life as subject matter and chapters which consider the ways in which what Richard Schechner refers to as 'everyday life performances' contribute to the creation of urban meaning (2013: 2).

Harvie's book is representative of the wider scholarship in a further way. She makes the decision, early on, to limit her study to performances which engage with 'the two cities which produce the most English-language theatre, London and New York' (2009: 10). This bias towards what Saskia Sassen refers to as 'global cities'—those which function 'as highly concentrated command points in the organisation of the world economy' (1991: 3)—is relatively consistent throughout the existing research. In their introduction to *Performance and the City*, Solga, Hopkins and Orr acknowledge that 'there are four chapters here [...] about New York City and two [...] about contemporary London' (2009). *Performing Cities* is similarly dominated by global cities such as Paris, Sydney, LA and Toronto. This skew is not entirely uniform. There are a handful of chapters in each of the collections foregrounded here which draw attention to cities which fall outside of the Sassen's definition of the global city. Despite its title, for instance, *Performance and the Global City* (a follow-up of sorts to *Performance and the City*) seeks to directly amend the former book's emphasis on London and New York through adopting a critical, rather than normative, approach to the term "global city". Hopkins and Solga explain that the collection 'sets out deliberately to query the centrality of North American and European cities' in the existing literature (2013a: 13). This expansive definition of what makes a city "global"



results in a collection in which chapters on Johannesburg, Shanghai and Athens are joined by chapters on cities with less cultural renown such as Sarajevo, La Plata and, most pertinently to this study, the East Midlands coastal town of Skegness.

When focussing on less-dominant cities, however, chapters in this collection often seek to connect those cities (and performances which engage with them) to a global urban experience. In the above-mentioned chapter, for example, Simon Jones and Paul Rae discuss the process of adapting a walking performance initially conceived to be performed in Singapore for a series of performances in Skegness. They write of the former city that ‘the global city seeks to disguise the very materiality of the local’ (2013: 151), suggesting that the practices and discourses which work to constitute that city as “global” often work to frame local specificities as anomalies rather than as central to what makes that place meaningful to those who live in and otherwise engage with it. The connections that chapters in this collection draw between multiple cities—including Jones and Rae’s discussion of Singapore and Skegness as well as Nesreen Hussein’s discussion of London and Cairo (2013) and Jennifer H. Capraru and Kim Solga’s discussion of Toronto and Kigali (2013)—do certainly foreground differences between how the cities under consideration are experienced and how performances encountered in them differed in production, presentation and reception. Nevertheless, there is a sense throughout these chapters that these sites also have considerable commonalities due to their shared “city-ness”.<sup>8</sup> The attempt to claim the “global” designator for cities which, under the normative understanding of the term, might be denied it thus presents

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<sup>8</sup> Skegness, however, is, both officially and under most popular definitions of the term, not a city but a town.

as many problems as it solves; at once recognising and erasing key discrepancies in political, economic and cultural power.

As the persistent use of the term “the city” might imply, the notion that there is some level of uniformity to city life, wherever it occurs, has been a consistent presence throughout the literature. Both *Theatre & the City* and *Performance and the City* open by referring to data revealing that, at some point in the mid-2000s, ‘more than 50 percent of the Earth’s population could be called urban dwellers’ (2009: 1). Nevertheless, as Henri Lefebvre, who himself predicted a ‘completely urbanised’ world,<sup>9</sup> recognised, the term “city” has been used throughout history to refer to numerous types of settlement with ‘nothing in common’ other than a relative density of living (2003: 1). The same holds true in the present day: as more of the world has become “urbanised” and as more cities have sprung up, the phrase “city” has come to refer not to a homogenous spatial form but an array of different social realities.

The variance in the social reality represented by the term city is a particularly complex matter in the UK, which retains a peculiar process for designating a settlement as a city rather than a town. Some cities, such as Exeter, Bath and Lincoln are considered cities ‘by ancient prescriptive right’, due to the presence of a cathedral within their bounds. This relationship between city status and the presence of a cathedral was ‘formalised’ in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Henry VIII established six new dioceses, with the resulting cathedral towns, including Oxford, Chester and Bristol, also becoming cities (Beckett, 2017: 12). Henry’s

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that, as Edward Soja has written, Lefebvre’s ‘use of the terms “urban” and “urbanism” stretched well beyond the immediate confines of cities. Urbanisation was a summative metaphor for the *spatialisation* of modernity and the strategic “planning” of everyday life’ (1989: 50, emphasis in original).

intervention also established the precedent that city status was something that could only be conferred by the monarch. This led to a strange situation following the Industrial Revolution and subsequent urbanisation of England (discussed in the following section) in which, by 1881, only three of the 20 largest settlements in the UK could officially describe themselves as cities (Becket, 2014: 710). This contributed, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the emergence of a new procedure whereby city status would be granted by the monarch under guidance from the Home Office. City status would, furthermore, no longer be awarded solely on the basis of a settlement's importance to the established church but primarily on the basis of population size (2014: 711). This process has remained relatively consistent into the present day. While it did ensure that, by 2002, 17 of the largest settlements in England were now cities, however, some anomalies remain. According to the 2011 census, for example, Reading is a town with a population of 218,705 (City Population, 2019a), whilst Wells remains a city despite having a population of just 10,536 (City Population, 2019b). Moreover, whilst the City of London and Westminster are both cities, the wider metropolis of London is not.

Even putting aside the anomalous cases of those cities in the UK which retain that title due to historical religious significance and following, instead, the colloquial definition of the term as referring to 'a municipality [...] being larger in size or population, or having greater status, than a town' (*city, n.*, 2020), it is evident that there is still a considerable degree of variation amongst the social realities which the term "city" is used to describe. The present literature has often overlooked these variations. As Jennifer Robinson has argued, the 'understandings of city-ness' that have come to dominate the literature on "the city" 'have come to rest on the (usually unstated) experiences of a relatively small

group of (mostly western) cities' (2002: 531). Arguing a similar point, Alasdair Rae has suggested that the dominance of 'a globally powerful and elite group of cities' in the conceptualisation of "the city" 'leaves contemporary academics with the difficult task of positioning the less powerful and less visible cities within an increasingly uncomfortable and sometimes unworkable conceptual framework' (2005: 67).

Hopkins and Solga's redefinition of what makes a city "global" is interesting for its attempt to dislodge hegemonic perceptions of which cities are deemed globally notable and which are not. In this thesis, however, I take a different approach which echoes that of Mike Pearson and Heike Roms in their contribution to *Performing Cities*. Introducing their study of the history of performance in Cardiff, Pearson and Roms write that 'Cardiff—and many other cities like it—has [...] often been dismissed as "provincial"'. Yet, they preface this by suggesting that 'it is its relative insignificance that makes this city interesting in our eyes' (2014: 121). Rather than attempting to make the case for Cardiff's global significance, Pearson and Roms embrace Cardiff's marginality within what Arthur S. Alderson and Jason Beckfield refer to as the 'world city system' as an essential, constitutive factor in that city's identity and how it is experienced (2004: 812).

This marginality is something which is perhaps experienced more acutely in the UK than in other countries. In attempts to define which cities are "global" and which are not, London is regularly positioned alongside New York as one of the most powerful cities in the global capitalist system, owing to both the legacy of colonialism and the continued presence of the City of London. The rest of the

nation's cities, however, are far less of a presence on the global stage. According to the Globalisation and World Cities Research Network at Loughborough University which categorises cities based on their connectivity and influence, London is an "Alpha ++" city situated at the very top of the pile. The next "most global" city in the UK, Manchester, is a full six categories and 116 cities lower in the rankings and described as a "Beta -" city (2018). In this thesis, I thus not only seek to draw scholarly attention to these more marginal cities, but, like Pearson and Roms, seek to place that marginality at the heart of my analysis.

It is not only due to their relative lack of influence within the global capitalist system that I draw attention to England's regional cities, however. A far greater concern within this thesis is the marginalisation of these cities within the economy, politics and culture of the nation itself. I have already begun to articulate how such a marginalisation might manifest in both the spatiality of theatre production and the geographical poetics of English performance texts. Such an "othering" of certain aspects of English geography on the nation's stages has received some attention in recent years. In *Social Housing in Performance* (2019), for instance, Katie Beswick reports on representations of the 'contested space' of the council estate in recent New Writing and other performance practices (2019: xii).

With regard to the centre-periphery dynamic discussed above, however, the primary focus has been on the representation of rural sites. In *Theatre & the Rural* (2016), for example, Jo Robinson foregrounds the consistent construction of a rural-urban binary on British and Irish stages in which the former is regularly processed from the perspective of the latter. Though instances of resistance

exist, Robinson argues that, from Shakespeare through to Jez Butterworth (writer of *Jerusalem* (2009)) there has been 'a tendency to persistently return to a nostalgic and idealised perspective of the rural' in a manner which elides the 'everyday reality of the negotiation and interpretation of rural life' (2016: 3, 29). Such a poetics of the rural is, of course, likely aided by the fact that the vast majority of theatres are in cities with representations of the countryside thus primarily being produced by and for those living outside of it.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, just as this rural-urban binary often relies on what Robinson refers to as 'a kind of *ur-rural*' (2016: 11, emphasis in original), so too does it rely on an *ur-urban*. A consistent point of reference in studies of representations of the rural is Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973) in which, reviewing representations of the urban and the rural in literature from the end of the 18th century to the middle of the 20th, he suggests that the city has regularly been parsed as 'an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light' and 'as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition'. Representations of the countryside, on the other hand, he found to have oscillated between emphasising 'peace, innocence and simple virtue' and 'backwardness, ignorance, limitation' (1973: 1). The fact that his study extends only to the middle of the 20th century is, however, notable. The following period has been one in which the economic, political and cultural geography of England has undergone significant changes which have complicated Williams' proposed rural-urban binary, particularly with reference to regional cities. In order to explore what this binary might have given way to, it is necessary to undertake a brief review of the history of England's regional cities,

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<sup>10</sup> Gemma Edwards performs such a contextualisation of theatrical engagements with rural subject within the material London- and urban-centricity of English theatre in her 2020 article on the "rural turn" on London stages' (2020: 72).

their rise and, perhaps, fall.

### **The Rise (and Fall?) of the Regional English City**

In *The Country and the City*, Williams argues that the changes which occurred in how the country and the city were represented in literature between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were a product of industrialisation and urbanisation. Understanding this process of industrialisation is a vital prelude to this thesis as it was the emergence of manufacture as the core activity of the UK economy in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that was the primary reason the vast majority of the country's regional cities—and certainly those which I focus on in this thesis—came into existence at all. The rise of the industrial cities of the North of England was perhaps first deemed of scholarly significance by Friedrich Engels in his 1845 study *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Declaring that 'the face of the country has been completely changed as a result of the Industrial Revolution', Engels reports on the emergence of "great towns" where once there was little but villages and fields. In Lancashire, he observes, 'what was once an obscure, poorly-cultivated bog is now a thickly-populated industrial district. Lancashire's population has increased ten-fold in 80 years; and many large towns have grown up there. Liverpool and Manchester, for example, have together 700,000 inhabitants' (1958: 16).

The reason these cities grew so rapidly in size was largely due to the reliance of industrial activity on natural resources that simply were not available in the South East. As Brian Robson writes, 'geographically London had many advantages, but it lacked the proximity to coal and iron and the fast-flowing water from steep hillsides which were so vital in the first industrial revolution' (1986:

217). London had hitherto been the unchallenged commercial centre of Britain since its establishment by Emperor Claudius as the provincial capital of Britannia. With the arrival of the Industrial Revolution, however, a great deal of the nation's economic activity began to take place elsewhere.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this shift in the nation's economic geography had consequences for the spatial dynamics of its politics and culture. Robson continues that, before the Industrial Revolution, 'there were many small, bustling towns but these were only locally influential. Norwich, Worcester, Hereford, Exeter, York were important market centres, but there was only one *town* that mattered' (1986: 217, emphasis in original). With the rise of the industrial cities of the North and the shifting of economic activity towards the regions, London's centuries-long political and cultural supremacy also began to be disputed.

Challenges to London's dominance in national affairs took numerous forms and regularly intersected with other political and cultural formations. Among these was the emergence of a shared consciousness among the English working class as recorded by E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). While, as John Langton highlights, Thompson focusses on showing a 'nationwide cohesion among labour movements, an emerging *national* class-consciousness' (1984: 146, emphasis added),<sup>11</sup> the calls for parliamentary and electoral reform which form the spine of Thompson's study regularly exhibit a geographical dynamic. In one chapter, for instance, Thompson attests to the

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<sup>11</sup> Soja accuses Thompson as being vehemently opposed to geographical or spatial modes of inquiry, characterising Thompson's later essay *The Poverty of Theory* (1995) as a 'passionately anti-structuralist reassertion of the primacy of history and British Marxist historicism against' what Thompson perceived to be the 'francophonic abstraction' of non-historicist approaches, such as those centred on geography and space (1989: 56-57).



concentration of radical activity in Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds, all cities which 'were without any representation in the unreformed House', framing these movements as ones in which agitators sought to overthrow 'the repression of the provinces' by the capital (1963: 471). Indeed, Langton suggests that many of the movements calling for such reforms were the result of people 'in newly industrialising areas [...] becoming conscious of [...] regional distinctions and identifying with them' (1984: 150). Such is also true of the other force which Thompson saw as crucial in raising the shared consciousness of the English working class: nonconformism. For, as Simon Goldsworthy argues, 'although there were active nonconformist communities in London, religious dissent and chapel going was usually seen as synonymous with provincialism' (2006: 395). Alongside challenging London's economic supremacy, then, the rise of the industrial cities also posed a series of challenges to the capital's dominance in other spheres, with the increasingly wealthy and confident regions either forcing concessions from its institutions, as in the case of Parliamentary reform, or, as in the case of nonconformism, turning away from them altogether.

The threat felt by the London establishment when faced with these insurgent regional cities is perhaps best articulated in the emergence of the term "provincial" as a pejorative among metropolitan writers. Where, previously, the term had been used as a fairly inert topographical descriptor, in his 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*, Samuel Johnson both defined the term itself as 'rude' or 'unpolished' and also put it into action in describing vernacular that he deemed unbecoming (1768: PRO-PRU). Google's Ngram Viewer, which measures the relative use of phrases over time, shows the term experiencing a boom in popularity over the following decades (The Google Books Team, 2019).

A little over a hundred years later, the term had clearly taken hold with Matthew Arnold, in his 1869 essay *Culture and Anarchy*, consistently framing 'provincialism' as something which required a 'cure' (1869: xxvi). For something to be "provincial" was thus no longer simply a reference to its being (or coming from) outside the capital but also for it to be lesser in comparison to a metropolitan norm. That such rhetoric was required, however, reveals those very "norms" to have been under threat in a society in which, as George Eliot implied in the titling of her 'study of provincial life' (1965: 23), *Middlemarch* (1871), the "provincial" was fast becoming the centre (or *middle*) of English economic, political and cultural life.

The challenge posed by the regions to the metropolis was, nonetheless, short-lived. For, whether extracting coal, manufacturing or exporting the resulting goods, the wealth of the English regions was built on industry. This had significant advantages during the short period in which, due to Britain's early industrialisation and its ability to force its colonies to purchase its merchandise, the country could describe itself as the "workshop of the world". As Ron Martin writes, however, by the 1880s, 'Britain's long-standing domination of world manufacturing production and trade' began to be 'challenged by the more rapidly growing economies of the United States and Germany' (1989: 87-88). Thus began a century-long period of Britain's 'relative decline' as a manufacturing nation (Grahl, 1980: 5). Despite government-led attempts to sustain the competitiveness of the nation's manufacturing industries through, 'among other things, nationalisation, subsidies and restraints on foreign trade and investment' (Silverwood and Woodward, 2018: 87-88), Britain's manufacturing output continued to fall throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and with it the ability of England's regional, primarily-industrial cities to

compete with London for economic, political and cultural hegemony. The most crucial moment for this study came when, as John Grahl writes, the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 led to the 'relative' decline of British manufacture becoming 'absolute' (1980: 5).

Through Thatcher's neoliberal ideological lens, government support of manufacture amounted to tying what Adam Smith referred to as the 'invisible hand' of the market (1937: 423). Her government thus set about privatising state-owned entities such as British Steel, British Aerospace and British Leyland whilst also reducing funding to the Department for Trade and Industry. The result, report John Silverwood and Richard Woodward, was that 'between 1979 and 1990, 1.779 million UK manufacturing jobs disappeared' and that, since 'the balance of trade in goods turned negative in 1983', the UK has continued to import more manufactured goods than it exports (2018: 633). With the regional cities still so heavily centred on industry, the relative then absolute decline of British manufacture had a disproportionate effect outside the capital. As Marion Temple explained in the mid-1990s, 'deindustrialisation due to the shrinking of the manufacturing sector has not affected the UK economy evenly. All regions have been affected to some extent, but the outer regions have been particularly adversely affected' (1994: 29). To make matters worse, where growth has been recorded since has been in the financial and service industries which, due to the presence of the City of London and its "global city" status, London was far better positioned to take advantage of. If Britain's industrialisation in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries allowed a brief glimpse at a potentially less-centralised nation, its deindustrialisation thus saw the capital firmly re-establish its economic supremacy.

Once again, this gradual then sudden shift in economic geography was concurrent with a geographical shifting of power in other spheres. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one can observe a re-centralising of political power by both Labour and Conservative governments, often as a direct response to regional municipalities (and often the London City Council and, later, the Greater London Council too) being at odds with central government.<sup>12</sup> The media, too, drifted towards the Thames. Most symbolically, where the *Manchester Guardian* once served a national readership from a regional base, in 1959 it changed its name to simply *The Guardian* before relocating its offices to Fleet Street two years later (Beavan, 1986: 172-173). The number of regional newspapers has continued to shrink and, of those that remain, a recent report commissioned by DCMS revealed that more than 75% are owned by London-based media companies (Mediatique, 2018: 4). Radio and television, which both emerged during this period, have also had conflicted relationships with the regions. Both began as heavily centralised industries with the BBC only opening its first studio outside of London in 1954. In 1967, the BBC began its roll-out of local radio stations with the launch of BBC Radio Leicester and the birth of commercial radio further enhanced region-specific coverage. Nevertheless, while the commercial stations, unlike their BBC counterparts, were initially required to be owned and managed locally, these conditions were swiftly dropped and, though the BBC remains

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<sup>12</sup> Notable episodes in this process of centralisation include the post-war nationalisations of utilities and other services which were as often undertaken to the detriment of local governments as to private companies (Leopold and McDonald, 2012). Later, in the 1980s, the Thatcher government passed 'five major Acts dramatically altering the emphasis of local-central government relations, and carried a mass of allied legislation extending central control in individual policy areas such as housing, transport and civil defence', often seen as a response to Labour-controlled metropolitan councils defying her political programme (Goodwin and Duncan, 1989). Finally, despite claiming that he wanted 'nothing less than radical decentralisation' in 2009, David Cameron's two terms as Prime Minister saw resources available to local government once again stripped back thus giving councils little means to act on their supposedly increased autonomy (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013).

dedicated to region-specific programming, the commercial stations have gradually become dominated by syndicated programming produced in London (McDonald and Starkey, 2016).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, despite an initial boom in regional television production following the introduction of commercial television in 1955, during which regionally-based companies such as Granada in the North East produced a slew of dramas set in a particular region to be broadcast both within it and beyond through the ITV network (Cooke, 2012), by the turn of the millennium, regional studios were increasingly limited to producing news and documentaries. This trend has been stemmed somewhat with the BBC (and, soon, Channel 4) relocating some departments to Salford yet, with this still being a recent development and with both retaining their primary base of operations in London, the effect this might have on the perceptual dynamics of their programming remains to be seen.<sup>14</sup>

In short, since the high watermark of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the English regions have become increasingly disempowered in comparison to London across multiple spheres. In 2016, Phillip McCann argued that the nation ‘exhibits one of the most highly centralised governance systems in the industrialised world’ (2016: 1). This is concurrent, he argues, with the UK being ‘one of the most interregionally unequal countries in the OECD on a range of different economic, health and wellbeing indicators’ with these inequalities exhibiting ‘a very specific core-periphery logic’ (2016: xxvii). As I hope to have shown above, the structures

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<sup>13</sup> In 2019, for instance, Global Radio, which operates more than 40 local radio stations in the UK and already relied heavily on syndicated content, closed 10 of its 24 regional studios (Waterson, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> In fact, in May 2020, the BBC began consultations with the Office of Communications (Ofcom), seeking permission to reduce local news output, including cancelling regional Sunday morning political debate programmes and *Inside Out*, an often investigative region-specific current affairs programme which, according to *The Guardian*, was ‘the last remaining major regional current affairs show on British television’ (Waterstone, 2020).

of the nation's media also ensure that both factual and fictional representations of the nation are ultimately overseen by the capital, leading to a scenario in which, as Savage *et al.* write,

London [...] has more power in defining the deficiencies of other locations. London has become a magical and aestheticized city, its quality etched into its innovative-high-rise corporate blocks, such as the Gherkin, but with its aura extending to its murkier territories of the Hackney psycho-geography of Ian Sinclair or J.G. Ballard's west London suburban dystopia. This is the mirror for rendering non-metropolitan space as grey, dull and disreputable. (2015: 262)

The nation thus comes to be perceived from the perspective of the capital, with the regions judged by their similarities to or differences from London.

The emergence and subsequent political, economic and cultural decline of the regional English city has therefore served to disrupt Williams' rural-urban binary. For, at the same time as London has become increasingly aestheticized, deindustrialisation has had the opposite effect on perceptions of the regional cities for whom manufacture was once not only the central economic engine but also a source of civic identity. Jamie Peck and Kevin Ward write that deindustrialisation in Manchester seemed to 'pull the guts out the place. Industry had not only been a source of jobs but also of cultural identity for a city that had long prided itself on the tradition of no-nonsense graft and money-making' (2002: 1). This sense of a loss of purpose has bled into how such cities are perceived from without. When anger at economic hardship and unemployment as a result of deindustrialisation as well as at widespread police brutality against Black people in Liverpool spilt over into civil unrest in 1981, for example, Chancellor of the Exchequer Geoffrey Howe wrote to Margaret Thatcher encouraging her to consider a 'managed decline' of the city (in Travis, 2011). This notion of regional,

industrial cities having served their purpose has become pervasive. While attempts to “regenerate” such cities (some of which will be discussed later in this thesis) have proliferated since the turn of the millennium and have been met with some degree of success, discourses surrounding such projects regularly acknowledge that they are undertaken against a cultural and discursive backdrop of ‘pervading negative perception[s]’ of regional cities as sites of ‘industrial decline’ (Trueman, Cornelius and Killingbeck-Widdup, 2007).

Where Williams might once have been able to suggest that it was the countryside that held a monopoly on being represented as a ‘place of backwardness, limitation and ignorance’, then, this mantle has seemingly been inherited by the post-industrial, regional cities. Unlike the countryside, however, these cities have little recourse to the concurrent positive associations of ‘peace, innocence, and simple virtue’. The concept of “city-ness” on which Williams’ study relies thus no longer coheres with reference to the regional cities of the present day which find themselves divorced from nature yet failing to live up to the promise of ‘noise, worldliness and ambition’ which urbanisation once seemed to present (1973: 1). In this thesis, I therefore work to incorporate the regional city into discussions of the representation of the English regions on stage, arguing that the regional city in the present-day fosters a ‘structure of feeling’ which has more in common with rural areas of the English regions than with the metropolis (1973: 59). This structure of feeling will undoubtedly vary depending on the city in question. Yet, what is clear is that, as Peck and Ward suggested above, it is dominated by an attempt to negotiate a new identity for sites in which the manufacturing base which once supplied a sense of purpose has all but vanished. Alongside considering how the material London-centricity of English

theatre production might be reflected in the performance texts it produces, a further goal of this thesis is therefore to consider how contemporary theatre and performance might be contributing to that process of communal identity formation.

### **The Structure of this Thesis**

The London-centricity of English culture, and the manifestation of that London-centricity in English theatre practice is a key context to this thesis. Throughout, I consider how the identities of the locations I discuss have been shaped or otherwise inflected by a sense of “regionality”. This is partly a result of the regional perspective that I bring to theatre and performance and partly a result of how persistent this theme of marginality within the nation is in the productions I analyse. Nevertheless, whilst this is an important context, my focus is not only on the manner in which contemporary performance texts which engage with regional sites represent the relationship between those sites and the capital. I also seek to enquire more broadly into how the regions are being represented on stage in the present day. This includes considering how stage representations of a certain place engage with other cultural and media representations of that same site as well as how the act of placing a regional community on stage might form a part of the broader process through which place identities are conceived, contested and otherwise negotiated.

Throughout, I am guided by Hall’s declaration that ‘there is always a great diversity of meanings about any topic, and more than one way of interpreting or representing it’ (1997a: 2). By extension, any representation of a place, on stage or otherwise, is only ever one of a myriad of possible representations and the



result of perceiving that place from a specific angle, at a specific time and through a specific lens. In recognition of this, I therefore structure my thesis around three “case study” cities and regions, in order to be able to foreground three productions which seek to represent each. A side benefit of this is that it enables me to provide greater context as to the current challenges and opportunities facing each location. More importantly, it allows me to consider how each production I discuss confirms or contests the versions of the same place presented by the others. Such a structure thus allows me to consider how each production might be involved in a complex and often contradictory process of place identity negotiation.

In Chapter Two, I proceed by more rigorously mapping out the existing literature pertaining to the intersection between theatre and geography in order to situate this study within existing research. I begin by discussing some of the key scholarship concerning what has been referred to as the “spatial turn” in the humanities with a particular focus on scholarly engagements with how geography intersects with power (Warf and Arias, 2009: 1). I continue by considering how the spatial turn has informed the study of theatre and performance. I divide this review of the existing literature into two sections. Firstly, I focus on *geographies of theatre*, a phrase I use to refer to the study of the spatial and geographical dynamics of theatre practice. In this section, I discuss existing research which foregrounds the inherent spatiality of theatre as a creative practice and which questions the politics of where a performance is conceived, created and performed including that of productions which are created in one location and performed in another and that of what Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert call ‘cross-cultural’ practices (2002). Secondly, I focus on *theatrical geographies*, a phrase

which I use to refer to the use of geography as a dramaturgical device. I review the existing literature pertaining to how the dominant meanings ascribed to certain places are drawn into performance texts as a means of, among other things, characterisation and scene-setting.

In Chapter Three, I set to work constructing a methodology for the analyses contained within this thesis. I draw upon the work of scholars including Tim Cresswell, Maria Lewicka, David Seamon and Doreen Massey to outline how places come to be invested with meaning and how place meanings operate in the service of power. I then introduce John Agnew's 'three aspects to place' which distinguish between *locale*, *location* and *sense of place* (1987: 5-6), each of which intersect to "produce" places as they are experienced in the everyday and which I use as an organising principle for my discussion of each production in this thesis. I proceed by demonstrating the benefits of this approach through a brief analysis of Rimini Protokoll's *100% Salford* (2016). In doing so, I also flesh out my critical framework through introducing further concepts which I will return to throughout my later analyses.

The following three chapters each focus on a different site within regional England, first providing some context as to some of the present challenges facing the place in question before considering how three productions engage with these in representing that place on stage. In Chapter Four, I discuss three productions which set their action in Nottinghamshire. Inspired by Nottingham Playhouse's pride in appointing 'local boy' Adam Penford as artistic director in 2016 (My Theatre Mates, 2016), I place James Graham's *Labour of Love* (2016a), a production which, though set in Nottinghamshire, was produced by

London-based company Headlong and performed solely in the West End, into dialogue with Beth Steel's *Wonderland* (2014a) and Mufaro Makubika's *Shebeen* (2018c), which were both produced by and performed at the Playhouse. In doing so, I continue my discussion of how the material London-centricity of English theatre might be mirrored by a similar privileging of the capital in the performance texts it produces, whilst foregrounding regional producing theatres as potential sites of resistance to such a theatrical geography.

In Chapter Five, I focus on Kingston-Upon-Hull (more frequently referred to simply as Hull) which, in 2017, held the title of UK City of Culture and played host to thousands of cultural events, many of which explicitly sought to engage with what the port city's communal identity might be in the present day. I provide some background on the UK City of Culture initiative and 'cultural regeneration' practices more broadly (Wansborough and Mageean, 2000: 181). Then, analysing the various trailers and brochures produced to promote the event, I foreground an attempt on the part of event organisers and other city elites to use the City of Culture year to "rebrand" Hull in a manner deemed attractive to businesses and the middle class. With this in mind, I analyse three productions which were produced for and which premiered during Hull UK City of Culture 2017—*Mighty Atoms* (2017a) by Amanda Whittington, *The Hypocrite* (2017a) by Richard Bean and *All We Ever Wanted Was Everything* (2017a) by Luke Barnes—in order to identify how each might have concurred with or contested the representation of the city favoured by the event's organisers.

In Chapter Six, I return to the West Country to discuss three productions set in Bristol. The wealthiest of the three places I discuss in this thesis, Bristol has

regularly been represented in both cultural and media representations as a city defined by a 'strong independence and unorthodoxy' (Palmer, 2017). The home of Banksy and the setting of the Channel 4 series *Skins* (2007), the city has gained a reputation as uniquely "alternative" or "counter-cultural" city. In recent years, however, that identity has increasingly been preyed-upon by estate agents and urban developers seeking to encourage middle-class gentrifiers to move to the city in a manner which disproportionately displaces working-class and Black Bristolians. In discussing *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* (2018a) by Sam Halmarack and JOF, *Princess and the Hustler* (2019b) by Chinonyerem Odimba and *Junkyard* (2017a) by Jack Thorne, I therefore consider how each production might be read as a response to contemporary gentrification in Bristol and how each might contest or make-complex the underlying middle-class, "alternative" place identity that makes it possible.

In my concluding chapter, I draw upon my findings from the previous three chapters to foreground some commonalities among the three regional locations I have discussed. I outline the aspects of this thesis which I deem to present an original contribution to knowledge and highlight some questions which remain for future research. I then restate some of the key arguments of this thesis in order to express the urgency with which scholars must further take into account the London-centricity of English theatre production and the challenges and opportunities this presents to regional theatre-makers.

### **Coda: The Post-Brexit Spatial Turn**

When I first wrote the proposal for this study in 2016, the London-centricity of English politics, economy and culture seemed a niche concern. Reams of

scholarship existed on the challenges facing post-industrial cities and economic geographers continued to sporadically report on the existence of uneven geographical development within England (Pike and Tomaney, 2009)—though the centre-periphery dynamic to these inequalities was often, to my mind, underplayed. The problem wasn't that such issues were unrecorded or undiscussed but simply that they were seen as a given, a natural state of affairs in a nation that, as Dorling and Hennig have argued, had 'become culturally attuned to seeing and experiencing a geography of extreme inequality as normal' (2016: 35). Just a few months after Dorling and Hennig's article was published, however, all that began to change.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016, the UK voted by 52% to 48% to leave the European Union. It being a nationwide referendum, where one voted had no sway on the final result. Nevertheless, as the votes were being counted that evening, this didn't stop broadcasters from using the same constituency-divided maps they might have used for a general election to visualise the emerging result. Perhaps the most interesting division on the resulting maps was that between the constituent nations of the United Kingdom, with Scotland and Northern Ireland both opting to remain whilst England and Wales backed leaving. The statistic that drew the most attention in the following days, however, was that which revealed that, whilst London had voted to remain, every other English region had favoured leaving (BBC News, 2016b). Such a reading ignored the fact that many of the larger English cities including Manchester, Bristol and Newcastle had voted to remain and subsequent analyses have shown geographical location to be a relatively weak indicator as to how one might have voted in the referendum when compared with other factors such as age or formal educational attainment.

Neither of these facts, however, stopped the referendum from being widely conceived of as ‘a protest by those left behind by modernisation and globalisation. London versus the regions, poor versus rich’ (Kaufmann, 2016).

Brexit itself and the advantages or disadvantages of Britain leaving the European Union are of little importance to this thesis. What Olivier Sykes refers to as the ‘spatial imaginaries’ that emerged in its aftermath (2018), however, are both a consistent presence in the theatre productions I discuss and inescapable in contextualising the cities to which I turn my attention. In the years since the vote, British political discourse has become obsessed with geography and, in particular, a perceived schism between London and the English regions. The day before I first wrote this sentence, for instance, Home Secretary Priti Patel sought to gain favour with pro-Brexit voters by decrying the apparent self-interest of the ‘north London, metropolitan, liberal elite’ in a now-standard attribution of wealth, liberalism and elitism to the capital (2019). The regions, by contrast, have come to be characterised as having been “left behind” not only economically but also culturally in their supposed scepticism towards multiculturalism and Britain’s stumble towards being a more socially tolerant society (Isakjee and Lorne in Burrell *et al.*, 2019: 8-11).<sup>15</sup>

There is clearly a kernel of truth in this new geographical discourse. As I have argued above, London is very much the centre of gravity of the English elite

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<sup>15</sup> This geographically-inflected political discourse has taken since taken something of a backseat following the arrival of the COVID-19 virus in the UK in early 2020. Nevertheless, examples of its invocation remain with right-wing columnist Mary Harrington suggesting in April 2020 that the lockdown measures put in place to stem the spread of the virus might lead the ‘young aspiring members of the London “metropolitan elite” to ‘bin the polluted, hypercompetitive metropolis, and the over-reliance on “open” values, and make a difference instead in the clean air, affordable housing and friendly communities of Britain’s towns’ (2020).

and the regions have been heavily affected by deindustrialisation. On top of these real inequities, however, have been laid a collection of more spurious suppositions as to who resides in such spaces and what their political orientations might be. While London is home to many of the richest and most powerful Britons, for example, it is an extremely socio-economically diverse city. Its truly elite residents, moreover, whilst perhaps favouring remaining in the European Union so that they might better access global financial markets, are unlikely to be anything approaching “liberal”, with the City of London having consistently returned Conservative MPs since 1874. The dominant perception of the “left behind” regions is also highly simplistic, eliding the existence of alternate political allegiances in the regions whilst also (explicitly or implicitly) tending to racialize them as spaces of an imagined “white working class”.

The manner in which the populist right including UKIP, the Brexit Party and the post-Brexit Conservatives have preyed upon these spatial imaginaries in order to present their protectionist, nationalistic, anti-EU project as one in service to the “left behind” regions is so transparent as to warrant little discussion here. The manner in which right-wing politicians and commentators have co-opted spatial inequity, however, has sparked several responses among their liberal and left-leaning counterparts which are worth briefly reflecting upon. One response has simply been to claim, as Luke Cartledge has done in *The Guardian*, that the term “metropolitan elite” is ‘a lazy, harmful cliché’ and thus should be ignored altogether (2019). Another related reaction has been to attempt to reclaim such terms. Elaine Glaser, for instance, wrote in the *New Statesman* in 2016 that it was ‘time to stand up for good elitism—for professional judgement, cultural excellence and enlightenment values’ (2016). While it is important to

acknowledge the deeply problematic manner in which reactionary voices have used such language, both Cartledge and Glaser's positions seem to me to either elide the very real spatial inequities that have allowed these geographically-inflected terms to resonate or, worse, to suggest that such inequality is justified.

Others have been more sympathetic. In 2017, John Harris and John Domokos launched a video series on *The Guardian* website called *Anywhere But Westminster*, in which they travel to various (primarily, though not always, Leave-voting) parts of the UK to attempt to excavate beneath the rhetoric and report on the challenges facing people living outside the capital (2017). Such projects strike me as being far more productive. Yet, as Joe Kennedy has argued, Harris 'also falls into the trap of making everywhere he goes look fundamentally the same, with the consequence that his efforts to rub the faces of "Britain's elites" in reality's grit can end up sounding trite. The horror never ends, becomes drudgingly familiar' (2018: 84). In some regards, much like the plays surveyed earlier in this chapter, *Anywhere But Westminster* levels the English regions, presenting each town or city featured not as a mimetic place but as a mere slice of the expansive conceptual space of the "left behind regions". Furthermore, it is notable that, at the end of each episode, it is not someone from the town or city which Harris and Domokos have visited that month who synthesises the challenges that might be facing that community (and, usually, why those challenges might have led to that place voting for Britain to leave the European Union) but Harris himself. The result is that there is a faint sense of a colonial ethnography to each episode in which the residents of Wigan or Boston or Bolton are deemed unable to accurately identify the source of their anguish and in need of a trained journalist to explain their experiences back to them. Whether coming from a well-intentioned place of



seeking to understand the material and political challenges facing regional England or taking a more combative form, then, liberal and left-leaning engagements with this emergent, post-referendum geographically-inflected discourse often seem to echo the anti-provincialist rhetoric of Johnson and Arnold in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The emergence of such discourses presents several challenges to this study. Firstly, it presents a new context to be aware of, with many of the productions I discuss in this thesis directly engaging with the contemporary framing of regional England as either inherently reactionary or intellectually and culturally lacking in comparison with the capital. Alongside this, where I initially imagined that the issues of London-centricity which underpin this thesis would be met with ambivalence, I now find myself writing into a space which is hotly contested and highly politicised. Alongside all of this, however, lies an opportunity. For, though the geographically-inflected discourses dominant in the present moment are highly problematic, the post-referendum spatial turn has engendered a scenario in which we have become far more attuned to thinking geographically about politics, economy, culture and other aspects of what might hitherto have been levelled as English “national” life. Already in this chapter, I have placed such a geographical lens on post-war English theatre in order to consider how *where one is* might alter *what one sees* in a certain production. Throughout this thesis, I continue to demonstrate the importance and value of applying such a regional perspective to theatre and performance. Moreover, I seek to foreground how such a perspective might alter how the English regions are represented and to consider whether theatre, as a definitively sited form, might present an opportunity for a more democratic representation of the diversity

of English geography.

## Chapter Two

# Geographies of Theatre, Theatrical Geographies

In 2015, Fiona Wilkie suggested that, since the early 1990s, there had been ‘an explosion of texts arguing for the centrality of ideas of space and place in performance’ (2015: 735). So mainstream has thinking geographically (or “spatially”) about theatre and performance become that, when Bloomsbury launched its new, theatre-studies-focussed series of theoretical primers in 2019, it was Kim Solga’s *Theory for Theatre Studies: Space* (2019) that was the first to be released. This emergence of a theoretical approach which foregrounds issues of space, place, landscape, site and geography has not been confined to theatre and performance studies. Instead, it has been consistent with a wider “spatial turn” across the humanities in which, as Barney Warf and Santa Arias write, scholars have sought to ‘assert that space is a social construction relevant to the understanding of human subjects and to the production of cultural phenomena’ (2009: 1). Where, previously, social and cultural phenomena had tended to be viewed as primarily historical, with the crucial question to ask of a given event or text being *when* it happened or was produced, an increasing emphasis has been put on the question of *where*.

The story of this wider spatial turn is an intellectual narrative which has been frequently recounted, with the now widespread acceptance of spatially-informed critical approaches to cultural forms (including theatre) and society more broadly perhaps making re-telling it here somewhat less vital. Nevertheless, whilst doing so will require putting the discussion of theatre itself to the side for one moment,

it allows me to foreground some of the key texts which have laid the groundwork for what Sarah Whitmore has called the 'new cultural geography' which has emerged since (2006: 600). Moreover, it enables me to further substantiate one of the core underlying principles of this thesis: that thinking geographically about theatre and performance is a vital endeavour.

### **The “Spatial Turn” in the Humanities**

The term *space* is the first of several key geographical terms which will appear regularly throughout this thesis. Later, I will disentangle it from the related yet distinct term *place*. For now, it is enough to know that, when referring to the spatial turn, the term *space* refers broadly to, as Nigel Thrift writes, 'the fundamental stuff of human geography' (2009: 96). To think *spatially* about social and cultural phenomena is thus, in this sense, to think *geographically* about such things. With reference to a cultural text such as a theatre performance, it is to recognise that one's understanding of that text is not complete until one has considered its spatial dynamics, including where it was produced, where it was encountered by an audience, the journey it undertook between inception and reception and how it engages with geography as a container of meaning.

As mentioned above, in the present, such a recognition might not seem that notable. Yet, for much of the 20th century, geographical concerns were somewhat marginalised within the humanities. There were several reasons for this. Primary among them, perhaps, was the sheer weight of the legacy of Karl Marx for whom history and a society's progression from one mode of production to another was everything and geographical variation little more than an 'unnecessary complication' (in Harvey, 1984: 9). The historicist method for which

Marx advocated was highly productive. Nevertheless, as Warf and Arias continue, the tendency to view *when* a certain text was produced or event occurred as the *only* significant contextual factor in analysis led to 'a despatialised consciousness in which geography figured weakly or not at all' (2009: 3). Compounding matters, throughout that same century, the field of geography had become increasingly insular with Courtney J. Campbell arguing that, by the 1960s, 'the study of geography [had] turned away from social concerns' and been 'overcome by technical, statistical and quantitative study' (2018: 23, 25). Geography thus came to be viewed by both geographers and non-geographers alike as inert, a backdrop to human events which warranted only description, exacting little influence of its own on social, cultural and political matters at all.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, several scholars set out to reconnect geography with the humanities. Directly critiquing the absolutism of the dominant historicist tendency, in 1982, David Harvey began to advocate for 'reading Marx through a spatio-temporal lens' with a view to recognising 'the spatiality of power and command over space as a productive force and a political asset' (2009: 96). In developing his 'theory of uneven geographical development' (2019: 71), he sought to frame spatial inequality as an integral and structuring feature of capitalism, arguing that, when it comes down to it, 'capitalism *is* uneven geographical development' (2019: 115, emphasis in original).<sup>16</sup> Doreen Massey was another influential figure in the development of this new, critical geography. In her 1984 book *Spatial Divisions of Labour* (1995), she made the case for 'a new way of thinking about economic space' (1995: 1) which not only describes,

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<sup>16</sup> This echoes a similar statement by Ernest Mandel, who argued that 'the unequal development between regions and nations is the very essence of capitalism, on the same level as the exploitation of labour by capital' (in Soja, 1989: 81).

in a neutral sense, the different forms of employment dominant in different regions, but also examines 'the social relations on which those [...] jobs depend, and which link them together' (1995: 3). Massey sought not only to describe the differences in the types of employment between South East England and the North of England, but also to consider 'the inequality—the relations of dominance and subordination—currently inherent in all these things' (1995: 1). In a similar tone to Harvey, Massey also made the case that geography is not only shaped by capitalism but is also itself a 'structuring' force (1995: 1).<sup>17</sup> Massey and Harvey notably have not only had an impact on geography itself, but have consistently brought their geographical outlooks to bear on wider discussions of capitalism and life under its rule. Harvey specifically encouraged other geographers to break their disciplinary bounds, whilst also encouraging non-geographers to draw on the insights of his field in their work, asserting that 'geography is too important to be left to geographers' (1984: 7). To both Harvey and Massey, then, geography is not passively shaped by economic and political forces but is a crucial part of their operation and itself a locus of power.

Although often left out of retellings of the spatial turn, the seminal work of Edward Said who, as Michael C. Frank writes, 'emphasised the relevance of geography long before the topic of space had become fashionable' (2009: 69), was also no doubt critical. In *Orientalism* (1978) and, later, *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Said foregrounded the interdependence of geography and power, arguing in the latter text that 'just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography'. Moreover, continues Said, 'that struggle is complex and interesting because it is

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<sup>17</sup> Massey was also crucial to the development of contemporary conceptualisations of *place*, which I discuss later in this chapter and in the next.

not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings' (1994: 7). Where, at least in their early work, both Harvey and Massey focussed on how the physical or economic control of a region, nation, city or other site might allow certain groups a degree of control over life within it, Said recognised that power over physical space is as often wielded through control of the discourses surrounding and representations of it.

Said's work is highly relevant to my study. Throughout his work, he sought to critique the ways in which "the West" has represented "the East" in art, literature and political and academic discourses. Central to Said's argument is that the West's political (including military) and economic dominance has been concurrent with a cultural dominance in which "the Orient" has seldom been able to 'represent itself' to the West (1978: 23). Instead, representations of "the Orient" (or at least those which exist within "Western" culture) have been the product of the West itself. These representations, argues Said, have 'less to do with the Orient than [they] do with "our" world' (1978: 17). Conceptions of "the Orient", argues Said, have been 'based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged' (1978: 14). In short, "the Orient" provided an "other" against which "the West" could define itself. Furthermore, representations of this geographical "other" served to legitimise the West's domination of an "Orient" supposedly populated by 'savages, natives and monsters' which needed (and would benefit from) disciplining and educating by the 'civilised West' (1978: 97, 32). I do not wish to draw too great an equivalency between colonialism and its legacy and London's economic, political and cultural dominance over the English regions. As I mentioned in my introduction, the industrial regions of the UK owe much of their

growth to colonial practices. Furthermore, London's suppression of the regions, whilst consistently exploitative and occasionally violent (or at least violently negligent), does not parallel the extent of violence inflicted by Britain on its colonies. Nevertheless, the process in which a powerful geographical entity defines itself and legitimises its domination through spurious representations of its subjugated "other" does have some echoes in the way in which, as Savage *et al.* describe, the English regions are 'moralised through the lens of the dominant London worldview' (2015: 263).

The work of Harvey, Massey and Said that I have discussed above primarily engages with spatial 'configurations of power' on the national and global scales (Said, 1978: 12). The contributions to the spatial turn which have proven most influential within existing theatre and performance research, however, have been those which seek to understand how space is implicated in power relations on a more proximate scale. The first scholar that bears mention here is Michel Foucault. Foucault was a significant influence on Said's *Orientalism*. This influence, however, stems from 'Foucault's notion of a discourse' (1978: 10) as outlined in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) and other works, with Said himself applying the concept to matters of geography. Nevertheless, in a 1967 lecture (published 20 years later as *Of Other Spaces* (1986)), Foucault directly addressed the relationship between geography and power. Noting that, as discussed above, the previous century had witnessed a popular and scholarly obsession with history and historicism, Foucault proposed that 'the present epoch will perhaps above all be the epoch of space' (1986: 22). He continued by directly attacking the prevalent scholarly view of space as inert, instead arguing that space 'draws us out of ourselves, [...] claws and gnaws at us' and shapes both



our behaviour in and understanding of the world (1986: 23). His approach differed from that work described above in that, rather than focussing on spatial inequalities on a global scale, Foucault turned to the hyper-local, foregrounding the manner in which certain types of site structure our behaviour and social relations.

Foucault is broadly interested in 'emplacement' and the specialisation of different sites for different activities. His primary focus, however, is on 'heterotopias' or 'contradictory' sites which (for better or worse) suspend the social norms and relations present elsewhere in society (1986: 23). Trains, museums and cemeteries are all, to Foucault, forms of heterotopia. A crucial element of such sites is the manner in which, in contrast to the closed-off, specialised sites which we more regularly frequent, they foreground their relations to other sites: the train to its point of departure and destination; the museum to the locations in which each artefact originated; the cemetery to the city, town or village of those buried within it (1986: 25). Notably, Foucault also foregrounds the theatre as an example of a heterotopia due to the manner in which it 'brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another' (1986: 25). Heterotopias thus disrupt spatial logic and (in some cases) have the potential to emancipate us from space's tendency to organise and segment.

In Foucault's description of the heterotopia, one can begin to see how space operates as a locus of power not only on the global scale but also more proximately. Certain sites encourage us to behave in certain ways. Nevertheless, Foucault's lecture is somewhat brief and survives only as a transcription by a third

party. A more complete conceptualisation of the manner in which space intersects with power can be found in the work of Edward Soja. In his 1989 book *Postmodern Geographies*, Soja, like Harvey and Massey before him, took aim at what he saw as historicism's 'implicit subordination of space to time that obscures geographical interpretations of the changeability of the social world' (1989: 15). He thus sought to open scholarly thought up 'to a necessary and overdue spatialisation, to a materialist interpretation of spatiality that would match its magisterial historical materialism' (1986: 40). Crucially, Soja recognised that the tendency to stash 'the geographical imagination in some superstructural attic' was not a global phenomenon. For, while the anglophone academy might have been quiet on issues of geography, Soja held that French theorists had fostered 'a vibrant spatial discourse' (1986: 43). In seeking a theoretical framework through which to consider how geography and space come to shape human behaviour and relations, he therefore turned to the work of the French neo-Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre.

The interdependence of space and power is a consistent concern throughout Lefebvre's work. In *The Right to the City* (1996), he makes the case that understanding contemporary capitalism (and, for what it's worth, developing a strategy for overthrowing it) requires the development of a deep understanding of the city (or, more broadly, "urbanism") (1996: 63). In *The Urban Revolution* (2003), he continues this line of thought by arguing that the form that cities have taken over time has constantly changed in order to best serve the dominant mode of production (2003: 15). Most relevant to my discussion here is Lefebvre's 1974 book *The Production of Space*. Translated into English in 1991 partly as a result of Soja's advocacy for it, in *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre conceives of

space as 'a means of production' and also 'a means of control, and hence of domination, of power' (1991: 26). Just as, for Said, the interdependence of geography and power was 'about ideas [...] and imaginings' as much as 'soldiers and cannons' (1994: 7), to Lefebvre, the control of space is as much about 'the (mental) forms' of space as its 'practical (social) contents' (1991: 90). Lefebvre draws on Gramsci's (1971: 4) concept of hegemony to consider how space (and, in turn, those who operate within it) might be controlled not only through the 'use of repressive violence' but also through the bodies of knowledge that come to exist around it (1991: 10-11).

Where Foucault was primarily interested in the exceptions to a society's hegemonic spatial logic, Lefebvre turned his attention to our more habitual engagements with space. Again, adamant that the discourses surrounding space are as important as its physical contours, Lefebvre developed a spatial trialectic consisting of 'spatial practice', 'representations of space' and 'representational space' to account for different ways in which we encounter and engage with space (1991: 38-39). Lefebvre uses the term *spatial practice* to refer to space as we encounter it in the everyday, as a material phenomenon. He uses the phrase *representations of space* to refer to how we might encounter space on maps, in architectural drawings and planning permission applications; *representations of space*, for Lefebvre, refers to 'the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers' (1991: 38). Finally, *representational space* refers to the manner in which 'the imagination seeks to change and appropriate' space and describes how we might encounter space through cultural, media or other discursive representations (for example, as the setting for a performance) as well how we apply those (as well as our own

narratives) onto the spaces we engage with (1991: 39). While we experience space differently through each aspect of this triad, Lefebvre was adamant that these three aspects 'presuppose one another', 'proffer themselves to one another' and 'are superimposed upon one another' (1991: 226). One's having lived in Salford, for instance, might inform one's response to watching a performance of Harold Brighouse's *Hobson's Choice* (1916). Equally, one having read the work of Daphne du Maurier might inflect how one views a map of Cornwall. Furthermore, while each of these aspects of space might present an opportunity for us to influence the social relations which govern a given site and the meanings attributed to it, each also presents a means through which our behaviour in space can be controlled.

Other conceptual frameworks exist for unpacking the relationship between space and power. Soja, for example, does not only repeat Lefebvre's insights but, in his later book, *Thirdspace* (1996), builds on them with reference to other scholars including Foucault, Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and bell hooks in developing the concept of 'Thirdspace' (1996: 2). Soja seeks to 'build on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the "real" material world and a Secondspace that interprets this reality through "imagined" representations of spatiality' in order to construct a theoretical approach which foregrounds the manner in which our everyday experience of space is informed both by the "real" and the "imagined" (1996: 6). Shortly, I will draw upon Soja's distinction between Firstspace, Secondspace and Thirdspace as an organising principle for the later part of this chapter.

Soja's reading of hooks' work on marginality, as developed in her 1990

essay collection *Yearning*, is particularly relevant to this thesis. In *Yearning's* opening chapter, hooks writes that 'location [is] a crucial site for critical intervention' (1990: 6), and she refers frequently to 'the politics of location' throughout (1990: 145). hooks foregrounds the way in which racist structures push Black scholarship, art and experience (and that of other oppressed groups) to the margins of scholarly and cultural discourse. Rather than promoting 'imitation' of or 'assimilation' into the discursive centre (1990: 20), however, hooks posits that the margins can not only be a site of subjugation but also of 'liberatory' thinking and praxis (1990: 22). She argues for choosing 'marginality as a site of resistance, as [a] location of radical openness and possibility' (1990: 22). It is important to note that, as Soja comments, 'this creative spatialisation involves more than wrapping texts in appealing spatial metaphors. [...] It also leads to a new spatial conception of social justice based on the politics of location and the right to difference' (1996: 96). hooks writes not only of the metaphorical 'spaces' of 'writing and speaking', but also the radical potential of the seminar room, for example, and of the way in which Black homes can be 'spaces where black women and men can dialogue' and 'engage in critical dissent without violating one another' (1990: 6, 19).

In *Thirdspace*, Soja puts the theoretical tools he develops through his reading of hooks and others into practice in discussing Los Angeles. As he attests, LA is both an economically and cultural dominant city, having 'been amongst the most propulsive and superprofitable industrial growth poles in the world economy' and having considerable 'ideological reach', broadcasting 'its self-imagery so widely that probably more people have seen this place—or at least fragments of it—than any other on the planet' (1989: 191, 223). Soja

conducts a 'heterotopology' of LA (1996: 96), foregrounding the marginal spaces within the ideological centre of Anglophonic visual culture. This thesis takes influence from hooks in a different way. While I do not wish to draw parallels between the experience of Black Americans and that of the English regions, hooks' highlighting of the radical potential of both metaphorically and geographically marginalised spaces and perspectives echoes throughout this thesis in the regions and the productions I discuss and also, hopefully, in my application of a regional perspective to those productions.

Nevertheless, despite the existence of these alternative models and those of scholars (including Massey) who have focussed on the importance of *place* and the implications of our tendency to build meaningful relationships with specific sites (something I shall discuss in more depth shortly), it is Lefebvre who has had the greatest impact on the study of theatre and performance. In 2003, Joanne Tompkins suggested that *The Production of Space* had come to be 'considered the foundational text' of scholarship pertaining to the intersection of theatre and geography (2003: 538). Twelve years later, Fiona Wilkie argued that little had changed and that Lefebvre's 'theorisation of space continue[d] to inform spatial approaches to performance' (2015: 736). This seems a suitable point, then, to return to the discussion of theatre and to consider how the "spatial turn" has manifested in theatre and performance studies itself.

### **Space, Theatre and Performance**

To reiterate, the fundamental argument of the "spatial turn" was that space and power are interdependent and, therefore, that a complete understanding of an event or cultural text necessitates an inquiry into the geographical configurations

of power that structure it. This is worth stressing for, in his introduction to the edited collection *Performance and the Politics of Space* (2013), Benjamin Wihstutz makes the case that

a spatial perspective is nothing new to theatre research. Rather, if there has ever been something resembling a spatial turn in theatre studies, then it must refer to the founding of an autonomous discipline separate from literary studies, focusing on the performance and *mise-en-scène* of theatre instead of on the analysis of dramatic literature. (2013: 1, emphasis in original)

In some regards, he is correct; Tompkins writes that ‘space is theatre’s medium of articulation and thus an essential element in theatre’s analysis’ (2006: 3) whilst Lefebvre notes that theatre ‘in addition to a text or pretext embraces gesture, masks, costume, a stage, a *mise-en-scène*—in short, a space’ and is thus inherently ‘spatial’ (1991: 62).<sup>18</sup> Yet, to *think spatially* about theatre and performance in the sense that the spatial turn encouraged is an altogether different matter to the recognition of the three-dimensionality of the form.

When Peter Brook declared in 1968 that he could ‘take any empty space and call it a stage’ (1968: 11), for instance, he was absolutely recognising that theatre was an inherently three-dimensional art form; ‘the vehicle of drama is flesh and blood’, he writes, not ‘ciphers on paper’ (1968: 20, 15). Nevertheless, in conceiving of the space he was about to transform into a rudimentary stage as “empty”, he was actively eliding the inherent *politics* of space. The idealism of Brook’s perception of an “empty space” was famously critiqued by Rustom Bharucha who, reflecting on Brook’s trips to India to find “inspiration” for his 1985 stage adaptation of *The Mahabharata*, highlighted that, each time Brook sat down

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<sup>18</sup> David Wiles, too, has suggested that ‘theatre is a pre-eminently spatial medium, for it can dispense with language on occasion but never space’ (2003: 243).

to be entertained by a group of Indian performers, there was an inherent spatial politics at play. Brook was the Western ‘maestro’ and a ‘guest of the government’ and thus, even if attuned to the manner in which their cultural forms were likely to be ‘appropriated’, those performing for Brook were coerced by the inherent politics of that space into ‘submitting to deference and exploitation’ (1988: 1642). The space was thus anything but “empty” and was instead heavily laden with spatial power relations on both the micro (hosts and guest) and macro (spectator from a former colonial power watching a performance by residents of a nation that power had colonised) scales.<sup>19</sup>

In this chapter, then, I prioritise scholarship which not only recognises that theatre and performance rely upon three dimensions to make meaning, but which also seeks to unpack theatre’s relationship with space and geography *as a locus of power*. As Said argued, and as Lefebvre’s spatial trialectic conceptualised more methodically, this is a two-way process: theatre is both shaped by the spatial dynamics of its production and reception and, through engaging with geography in its performance texts, influences perceptions of human geography and contributes to how it is shaped in the future. Both these processes have been the subject of some level of scholarly thought. Indeed, the two books which Wilkie (2015: 735) cites as the earliest examples of the spatial turn manifesting in theatre and performance studies, Marvin Carlson’s *Places of Performance* (1989) and Una Chaudhuri’s *Staging Place* (1997), each explore the relationship between

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<sup>19</sup> Alan Read concurs with this assessment when he argues that ‘theatre only “in all innocence” can occur in an empty space. A critical theatre [...] requires a fully theorised, but not fetishized, understanding of the differential developments of the space as well as time, in which this theatre occurs’ (1993: 161). Wiles, too, has written that ‘Brook’s ideal of “empty space” was always philosophically untenable. In order to *take* an empty space and *call* it a bare stage, he (the unseen director) needs to frame that space, and separate it from the clutter round about’ (2003: 243, emphasis in original).



theatre and geography from one of these two angles.

In his study, Carlson invokes a spatial lens to argue that

the way an audience experiences and interprets a play [...] is by no means governed solely by what happens on the stage. The entire theatre, its audience arrangements, its other public spaces, its physical appearance, even its location within a city, are all important elements of the process by which an audience makes meaning of its experience. (1989: 2)

In a similar mode to Bharucha's critique of Brook, Carlson argues that the space in which a performance takes place is never "empty" but, instead, is overflowing with pre-existing meaning. While a playwright, director or theatre-maker might wish to think that it is only that which takes place onstage which will inform the meanings inferred from a performance, Carlson posits that the meaning an audience derives will also necessarily be informed by the semiotics of the performance space, the theatre building as a whole and its location within the wider city, town or village in which it is situated.

Chaudhuri, on the other hand, only rarely discusses such contextual matters. Instead, in seeking to 'theorise a geography of theatre' (1997: xi), she focuses almost exclusively on written scripts. Following Wihstutz's argument above, such an approach might seem definitively anti-spatial. Yet Chaudhuri seeks to draw attention to 'the broad thematic of place in drama' (1997: xii), arguing that

the problem of place—and place as *problem*—informs realist drama deeply, appearing as a series of ruptures and displacements in various orders of location, from the micro- to the macrospatial, from home to nature, with intermediary space concepts such as

neighbourhood, hometown, community, and country ranged in between. (1997: 55, emphasis in original)

Chaudhuri foregrounds the manner in which notions of home, belonging, departure and exile are invoked in order to construct dramatic conflict. In doing so, she highlights that theatre *uses geography* in a manner that is far more substantial than just locating the action of a given scene in a certain place; theatre, instead, recognises that places are, to borrow Massey's term, 'relational' (1995: 1), deriving their meaning from the relationships which exist between them.

Just as Franco Moretti distinguishes between the study 'of *literature in space*' and that 'of *space in literature*' (1998: 3, emphasis in original), then, so too is it possible to distinguish between two different emphases in geographical analyses of theatre and performance. The former, represented here by Carlson, foregrounds the *geography of theatre* and focuses on the geographical and spatial contexts of a performance. The latter, represented here by Chaudhuri, turns its attention instead to the matter of *theatrical geographies* and the study of how human geography is drawn into a performance text and utilised as a dramaturgical device.

Such a distinction has much in common with Soja's distinction between 'Firstspace' epistemologies which prioritise the discussion of material, "real" space and 'Secondspace' epistemologies which hold that 'spatial knowledge is primarily produced [through] discursively devised representations of space' (1996: 79). It also shares much with Gay McAuley's suggestion that any given theatre performance brings 'theatre space' (1999: 24), that of the auditorium and

the wider building in which a performance is undertaken, into a relationship with ‘theatrical space’ (1999: 32), the “imagined” spaces which are invoked within the performance text.<sup>20</sup> For my purposes, however, I refer to *geographies of theatre* and *theatrical geographies*. For, my focus lies not in the immediate spaces in which performances take place, but, instead, in the spatial dynamics of theatre on the broader scales of the region and the nation.

As Soja’s Thirdspace model foregrounds, these *geographies of theatre* and *theatrical geographies* can never be entirely untangled from one another. They often overlap—as in the case of a site-specific production. Elsewhere, they can cause friction—as in the case, discussed by Chaudhuri, of Jim Cartwright’s *Road* (1986), a play set in a deprived Northern neighbourhood, being performed at the Royal Court Theatre in decidedly upper-class Chelsea in London (1997: 47). Indeed, a central focus of my study is the relationship between the two. Nevertheless, while I will continue to discuss the relationship between *geographies of theatre* and *theatrical geographies* throughout this chapter (and thesis), I believe it useful here to retain this flawed distinction as an organising principle for discussing the existing scholarship at the intersection of theatre and geography.

## **Geographies of Theatre**

Above, I introduced the concept of *space* as, in Thrift’s terms, ‘the fundamental stuff of human geography’ (2009: 96). Another key concept from geography which is worth bearing in mind throughout this chapter is that of *scale* which

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<sup>20</sup> Morash and Richards bring McAuley’s delineation between *theatre space* and *theatrical space* into conversation with Lefebvre when they write that ‘in the theatre two forms of space coexist: the perceived and the conceived’ (2013: 28).

(initially at least) I here use in what Andrew Herod calls its 'analytical' definition as 'a mental contrivanc[e] for circumscribing and ordering processes and practices so that these may be distinguished from one another as part of a hierarchy of spatial resolution' (2009: 219). Where the wealth of scholarship which has been grouped together as that of the spatial turn might share a great deal in terms of its focus on the relationship between space and power, different scholars have sought to unpack that relationship on different scales, from the local to the regional to the national to the global. Where Harvey was initially interested in the 'spaces of the world economy' (2019: 71), for instance, Lefebvre and Soja turned their attention to the city and Foucault to individual sites. A similar range of emphases is present in the literature surrounding the spaces of theatre and performance.

### ***Performance Space***

To begin at the hyper-local level, one way in which the spatial turn has influenced the study of theatre and performance has been to inspire a reappraisal of theatre auditoria and other performance spaces. Most such studies proceed from Carlson's argument that 'our traditional emphasis on the dramatic text, both written and performed, has often led us to neglect the other conditioning elements of the theatre event' (1989: 208). As discussed above, Carlson himself sought to analyse how the architecture of a theatre building (both the performance space but also the box office and foyer) might influence the meaning a spectator derives from a performance. As Juliet Rufford argues in *Theatre and Architecture* (2015), 'even theatre that is ostensibly unconcerned with architecture is powerfully conditioned by it nonetheless. Architecture articulates space, giving it a particular feel' (2015: 3). The "feel" of a particular venue thus might come to inflect the

meaning that different audiences at different venues decipher from a touring production no matter how consistent the on-stage aspects of the performance remain.

Others have focused on how the physical orientation of theatre buildings and performance spaces might inform our behaviour within them. Much emphasis has been put on how a building's physical organisation might influence the relationship between audiences and performers (and the performance itself). In her 1999 book *Space in Performance*, for instance, McAuley foregrounds a 'demarcation between audience space and practitioner space' in conventional theatre buildings (1999: 70). Audiences and performers often enter through different doors, walk through different corridors and meet only in the auditorium where they are often separated by a proscenium arch. McAuley continues that this, 'experienced from the audience side, serves to constitute the practitioners' domain as one of mystery and romance' (1999: 70). This has ideological implications, best expressed by Jacques Rancière's use of the theatre audience as a metaphor for induced passivity in wider society in his 2009 book *The Emancipated Spectator*. Rancière writes that, in the theatre, 'the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production and about the reality it conceals' (2009: 2). While, for many, the "magic of theatre" might be a key draw to the form, Rancière argues that this physical passivity might lead to a critical passivity in which the audience is reluctant to question the ideological assumptions and implications of the work presented to them on stage.

Both scholars and artists have responded to a discomfort with what Pearson describes as the 'conservatism' of the conventional theatre auditorium which

pretends to be 'a neutral vessel of representation' whilst it, in fact, 'keeps us in our place' by embracing forms such as site-specific, environmental, promenade and immersive performance (in Pearson *et al.*, 2007: 148).<sup>21</sup> These forms often construct a more intentional relationship between performance space, performance text, performer and spectator. The manner in which such practices disrupt the border between what I refer to here as *geographies of theatre* and *theatrical geographies* has made them an alluring object of study for scholars interested in the intersection between theatre and geography. I discuss some of this work later in this chapter. Nevertheless, for reasons I will discuss in the following chapter, I generally bracket off the analysis of performance space itself in this study in order to draw focus with productions which do occur within conventional auditoria.

### ***Theatre in the City***

As one widens one's field of view to the scale of the city, the existing scholarship begins to become more relevant to my study. The vast majority of the performances I discuss within this thesis were produced by and took place in civic theatres located in city centres. As Carlson argues in *Places of Performance* and Michael McKinnie argues in *City Stages* (2007) and his book chapter *Performing Like a City* (2013), where a theatre venue is situated in a city clearly implies who that venue is "for". The playhouses of Elizabethan London, for instance, were, as Robert Weimann writes, located 'beyond the city walls, seen as the most licentious, most unruly, and juridically the least defined of sites', an area which 'was appropriated by unsanctioned social groups [...] who defied the traditional

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<sup>21</sup> Whilst the emergence of such forms is often taken to be a relatively recent formation, in his 2003 book *A Short History of Western Performance Space*, Wiles draws on an expanded definition of performance to suggest that this is far from the case.

economic demarcations and actually seemed to thrive on social mobility' (1988: 403). In the same city in the present day, however, Naylor *et al.* have pointed to a 'density of theatre organisations in Westminster's West End' which contrasts 'with the lack of organisations in boroughs such as Bexley, Bromley, Barking and Dagenham and much of the rest of Outer London' (2016: 19). One might come to the conclusion that, where the previous scenario may have led to theatres being more welcoming to less-wealthy Londoners, the present situation serves to constitute theatre as an artform "for" those who can afford the exorbitant rents and houses prices in the capital's centre.

McKinnie has also theorised how the location of a theatre might inform what Lefebvre referred to as 'spatial practice' within the building itself and how it might operate within the realm of 'representations of space' (1991: 38-39). For, the building or regeneration of theatre buildings often plays a role in wider processes of urban planning and regeneration. In *City Stages*, for example, McKinnie considers how a concentration of theatre buildings in downtown Toronto has contributed to the reconstitution of what was previously an area dominated by manufacturing premises as an 'Entertainment District' (2007: 49). In having such an effect, he later suggests, there is the potential for the opening or development of a theatre venue to contribute to processes of 'gentrification' whereby making an area more attractive to the middle class and elite leads to working-class residents of that area no longer being able to afford to live there (2007: 124). Elsewhere, Claire Cochrane has brought the discussion of how theatre buildings operate within the realm of *representations of space* to bear on regional theatres in her discussion of the contribution of the building of the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry in 1958 to the construction of a 'utopian vision' for post-war Coventry

(2013: 305) and her consideration of the manner in which both the original and current Birmingham Repertory Theatres have acted as 'civic emblem[s]' for that city (2000: 144).

The consideration of how the location of theatrical activity might imply who it is "for" can equally be applied to the scale of the nation. This is something I have already discussed in my introduction. The findings of Stark *et al.*'s *Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital* report (2013) and Naylor *et al.*'s *Analysis of Theatre in England* both showed a huge disparity in theatre activity between London and the English regions. While Nadine Holdsworth has argued that 'theatre, as a material, social and cultural practice, offers the chance to explore national histories, behaviours, events and preoccupations in a creative, communal realm that opens up potential for reflection and debate' (2009: 6), I remained sceptical as to whether an artform so dominated by artists and arts organisations based in London could ever speak for the nation as a whole. Indeed, Holdsworth herself queries this in relation to the National Theatre of Great Britain, which produces and performs most of its work in its building on London's South Bank. She argues that the founding of the National Theatres of Scotland and Wales, which, by contrast, are roaming, non-building-based entities, raises 'the question of whether a single theatre, normally in a national capital, can legitimately claim to serve as a theatre of and for the nation as a whole' (2009: 34).

### ***Cross-Cultural Theatre***

In terms of exploring the spatial dynamics of theatre production and reception, however, the greatest attention has been paid to the global scale. In the 1970s,



several practitioners including Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine began experimenting with what Schechner refers to as an 'intercultural aesthetics' which drew influence from multiple national and regional cultures from across the world (1990: 43). Where Margaret Croyden initially praised Brook's stage adaptation of *The Mahabharata* for attempting 'to transform Hindu myth into universalised art, accessible to any culture' (1985: 20), numerous scholars have highlighted that the production relied on a highly Eurocentric notion of the "universal". As Bharucha's critique of the research process behind *The Mahabharata* implied, there was a clear spatial dynamics to this formation in which, as Gilbert and Tompkins have argued, practitioners 'examined the theatre forms and styles of other cultures and often embraced the possibilities inherent in adopting them for use in a western context' (1996: 9).

That is not to say that intercultural practices cannot take on a more progressive dynamic. In his 1994 book *The Location of Culture*, for example, Bhabha makes the case that 'political empowerment, and the enlargement of the multiculturalist cause, come from posing questions of solidarity and community'. Yet he is clear that such questions must come from an 'interstitial perspective' (1994: 3). By this, he means that a truly intercultural approach must seek to find commonalities 'in-between' cultures (1994: 148), rather than simply seeking to bring a cultural form from one culture to the awareness of an audience in another, as was largely the case in the work of Brook, Mnouchkine and their contemporaries.

The implication of Bhabha's critique is that, as Erika Fischer-Lichte has written, intercultural theatre practices should seek to create 'something new that

cannot readily be identified with any culture in particular, yet still resonates with members of different cultures' (2010: 294). Nevertheless, early scholarship on such practices took a less critical view of the spatial dynamics of inspiration and reception. The earliest model for analysing intercultural practices was conceptualised by Patrice Pavis in his 1992 book *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*. And, although Pavis' decision to use the term '*interculturalism*, rather than *multiculturalism* or *transculturalism*' due to it being 'appropriate to the task of grasping the dialectic of exchanges of civilities between cultures' seems to imply a preference for an interstitial perspective (1992: 2, emphasis in original), he proceeds to visualise the process of intercultural theatre-making as an hourglass. At the top of this hourglass is a 'source culture' and, at the bottom, a 'target culture' with 'some dozen filters put in place by the target culture and the observer' lying in between which a cultural fragment or form must pass through to be readable by the audience for which it is intended (1992: 4). Here, then, there is a clear sense of a cultural form being "translated" from one culture to another; indeed, Pavis suggests that he is describing the process of how a cultural fragment or form 'reach[es] us' in a manner that very much implies a "non-Western" culture being prepared for presentation to a "Western" audience (1992: 4).

As Li Ruru and Jonathan Pitches report, 'Pavis' model of cultural mixing [...] predicated on the idea of "source" and "target" cultures, and by extension on a belief that such bounded definitions of culture exist in the first place' has been 'hotly disputed' (2012: 123). In *Theatre and the World* (1993), for example, Bharucha suggests that 'ideally, interculturalism evokes a back-and-forth movement, suggesting the swing of a pendulum rather than a downward

movement through the narrow trajectory of filters by which the “source culture” is emptied while the “target culture” is filled (1993: 241). Yet, Pavis’ model remains interesting for how accurately it reveals the spatio-cultural dynamics of the work of artists such as Brook and Mnouchkine. For, the interculturalist formation of the late 20th century often seemed to mirror the spatio-cultural dynamics described by Said in *Orientalism* in which the geopolitical dominance of the “West” has enabled it to represent “the Orient” as “other” in comparison to its own supposed ‘unchallenged centrality’ (1978: 12). Indeed, Bharucha writes that ‘as much as one would like to accept the seeming openness of Euro-American interculturalists to other cultures, the larger economic and political domination of the West has clearly constrained, if not negated the possibilities of a genuine exchange’ (1993: 2). In their 2002 article *Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis*, then, Lo and Gilbert, alongside amending Pavis’ model in a manner which recognises a ‘two-way flow’ between cultures (2002: 44), formulate a critical approach to intercultural theatre practices more cognisant of the geographical configurations of power which influence such processes.

Lo and Gilbert begin by arguing that, while intercultural practices might have a great deal of emancipatory and/or progressive potential, it is vital that they ‘be critically situated within a historicised and politicised configuration’ which foreground[s] agency as a critical issue’ (2002: 31). In seeking to make steps towards such a politicised critical framework, they propose a spectrum between ‘collaborative’ and ‘imperialistic’ modes of intercultural practice in order to distinguish processes in which artists from different cultural backgrounds engage in a genuine, equitable exchange of ideas and forms from those in which, for example, “Western” practitioners seek to ‘tap into “Other” cultural traditions that

are perceived as “authentic” and uncontaminated by (Western) modernity’ (2002: 39). Yet, as the title of the article suggests, Lo and Gilbert are interested in much more than practices which one might describe as “intercultural”. For, while that term has generally come to describe processes involving cultural exchanges between nations (or the broader “West” and “East”), it is evident that cultural exchange can occur on several different scales. In providing a more comprehensive outline of cross-cultural theatre practices, they draw heavily on the work of Bharucha. Most interesting for this study is their brief discussion of Bharucha’s notion of *intracultural theatre*.

### ***Intracultural Theatre***

As Lo and Gilbert have it, ‘*intracultural theatre* is Rustom Bharucha’s term to denote cultural encounters between and across specific communities and regions within the nation-state. More specifically, in relation to his own “intracultural” work, Bharucha points to internal diversity within the boundaries of a particular region or nation’ (2002: 38, emphasis in original). Bharucha’s writing on intracultural theatre focusses on such practices as they have manifested in India. He argues that

there is no “national culture” worth its name in India that does not take into account the multicultural manifestations of our history. The challenge in India is to create a “national culture” that does not homogenise the specificities of our so-called “regional” cultures. (1993: 159)

As Ric Knowles has noted, ‘western academics have taken less note of [Bharucha’s] contribution to the theory and practice of what he calls *intraculturalism*’ (2010: 32, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, while India is

evidently far, far larger than England and has a very different cultural demography, the core notion clearly has a great deal to offer my study here. For, it not only provides the basis for a critique of the notion of a homogenous “national” English culture but also highlights the possibility of viewing theatre practice *within* England as a form of intracultural exchange. Furthermore, as I expressed above, while I do not wish to draw any equivalencies between colonial and imperialistic practices in the past and the subjugation of the English regions in the present, it is certainly possible to recognise that representations of the English regions will be similarly locked ‘in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power’ within the nation as Said suggests that representations of the “Orient” are (1978: 17).

Nevertheless, such a focus on the local scale has often been viewed with scepticism by theatre studies scholars. Dan Rebellato, who has written a great deal on the relationship between contemporary globalisation and the theatrical geographies of British playwriting, for instance, has argued that ‘localisation presumes that our cultures are self-sufficient’ and that ‘by expressing a particular concern for those inside the community, localisation entails a certain disregard for those outside it’ (2009: 55). He continues by framing the prioritisation of the local as inherently reactionary, arguing that theatre’s response to the negative and inequitable effects of contemporary globalisation should not be to embrace more localised practices but, instead, ‘to offer an arsenal of experiences that can help us to grasp the everywhere and the everyone’ and which, by extension, ‘allow us to glimpse the breadth and intensity of the cosmopolitan community’ (2009: 85). To my mind, however, such a view is almost as idealistic as that of Brook and elides the manner in which any construction of an “everywhere” and

an “everyone” will always be informed by underlying spatial configurations of power. The invocation of “cosmopolitanism” is telling here, for this notion of a harmonious global community has come under much criticism in the academy. As Gilbert and Lo write in their 2009 book *Performance and Cosmopolitics*, there is a significant ‘tension between the promise of cosmopolitanism as the enactment of a universal community’s and its limits as a theory of embodied practice’ (2009: 4). The notion of us looking beyond cultural difference to what unites us might seem positive, yet it raises the question of *whose difference* it is we are being encouraged to ignore.

### ***Problematizing Scale***

It is here that it becomes vital to recognise that scale is not just analytical but also highly political. As Herod argues, ‘the key aspect of geographical scale is to understand that scales are socially produced through processes of struggle and compromise’ (2009: 219). As was the case of the Eurocentric universalism of the intercultural theatre practitioners, what counts as “global” is highly informed by geopolitical matters. It would certainly be possible to argue that the *Star Wars* franchise (1977), say, is a “global” phenomenon, yet such a statement is only made possible by America’s political, economic and cultural hegemony; were another nation or continent to have a greater degree of geopolitical power than the USA, we would likely view the very same films as a “local” cultural fragment specific to America. Indeed, in her 2005 book *For Space*, Doreen Massey posits that, where a preference for the local has often been considered by scholars as inherently reactionary, ‘the defence of place by working-class communities in the teeth of globalisation’ should not so quickly be written-off (2005: 6). For, again, it is important to engage in a historicised and politicised reading of such

phenomena and, while a defence of the local might be reactionary when articulated from a position of power, it is a very different matter when such a defence emerges as a response to the potential erasure of a disempowered local culture by more powerful forces.

In their 2002 book chapter *Beyond Global vs. Local*, J.K. Gibson Graham further critique the inherent politics of scale by foregrounding that “the local” and “the global” are not disconnected or conflicting phenomena but, instead, ‘are positioned in a familiar hierarchy wherein each derives meaning from the other’ (2002: 30). They continue that ‘the global does not exist, or at least not in any stable and generic relation to other scales. Scratch anything “global” and you find locality’ (2002: 32). It stands to reason, then, that an understanding of global culture (whether for the purposes of scholarship or art) is more accurately predicated on the recognition of local difference and an exploration of how those differences interact with one another—what Bhabha referred to as the ‘interstitial passage[s] between fixed identities’ (1994: 4)—rather than on the assumption that it is possible to approach the “global” as something material.

### ***The Local and the Regional***

In a 2007 article in *New Theatre Quarterly*, Robinson attests that such an approach to understanding the global through the local has been highly influential on theatre history. Robinson foregrounds Phillip B. Zarrilli *et al.*'s *Theatre Histories* (2010 [2006]) in which the editors argue that ‘a global perspective’ on theatre and performance requires ‘allowing cultural performances that are relatively neglected in the West to be considered, and not in the margins of western theatre or according to its criteria but in and of themselves and as a

means for illuminating our understanding of human expressiveness at large' (2010: 229). Robinson concurs with such an assessment, stressing that 'in a rush to the global we should not abandon or denigrate the local. To do so would be to ignore a research area which can offer us access to a variety of cultures, to new sites and kinds of theatrical performance' (2007: 237). She draws on Zarrilli *et al.*'s approach which seeks to understand the global *through* the local to ask whether the same approach might be taken to British theatre practices. Robinson posits that 'the provincial British local [...] also has a long history of neglect, having historically been marginalised in writing about British theatre' (2007: 237). Though reams of scholarship exist on British theatre as a whole, there has been a clear and consistent bias towards examining the minutiae of practices in London while scholarly engagements with practices outside of the capital have often been few and far between. Far from a reactionary endeavour, then, to prioritise the local as I do in this thesis is to begin to fill the gaps in the existing literature in which, as Cochrane has argued, an 'unexamined prejudice has driven much British theatre history to skew the record towards the assumption that everything important in British theatre happened in London (2011: 3). While my focus is contemporary rather than historical, a similar assumption exists throughout the scholarship on theatre and performance as it exists in the present day.

It is the sub-field of theatre history that has done the most to address this gap in the existing literature. Following in the footsteps of the pre-existing example of George Rowell and Anthony Jackson's *The Repertory Movement* (1984), which documented the development of the 'predominantly [...] regional phenomenon' of repertory theatre in Britain from the 19th century to the mid-



1980s (1984: 5), publications such as Olivia Turnbull's *Bringing Down the House* (2008), Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin's edited collection *The Glory of the Garden* (2010) and Cochrane's *Twentieth-Century British Theatre* (2011) have contributed to a more "global" picture of theatre practice through adding the experience of England's numerous regional "locals". Where other studies have recounted the history of individual venues,<sup>22</sup> what is interesting about these works is their foregrounding of the core-periphery dynamic of English theatre production as a key context to regional performance practices. This context is present throughout this body of work. Cochrane's articles on the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry (2013) and the Birmingham Rep (2000), discussed above, regularly foreground the relationships of those venues to London.<sup>23</sup> Robinson has similarly sought to apply a spatial lens cognisant of the London-centricity of English theatre production to historical performances in her discussion of the reception of the work of Ibsen and Pinero in Birmingham and Nottingham (2018). Though the term is not used, each of these studies recognises the existence of *intracultural* difference within the bounds of the nation and (at least implicitly) frames the creation and touring of theatre productions within England as acts of *intracultural* exchange.

I have already discussed the persistence of this London-centric geography of theatre within England in my introduction. Throughout this thesis, I regularly continue this discussion, drawing upon Stark *et al.*'s *Rebalancing Our Cultural*

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Cochrane's *The Birmingham REP: A City's Theatre 1962-2002* (2003) and Merkin's *Liverpool Playhouse: A Theatre and Its City* (2011) and *Liverpool's Royal Court Theatre: A Brave Venture* (2019)

<sup>23</sup> Cochrane writes, for instance, of the manner in which the Belgrade's premiering of Arnold Wesker's *Chicken Barley with Soup* (1958) prior to its performances at London's Royal Court allowed the theatre to gain prestige 'within the spatial formation of metropolitan influence' (2013: 310).

*Capital* report and Naylor *et al.*'s *Analysis of Theatre in England* in order to consider the present challenges and opportunities facing regional theatre venues and practitioners. Alongside this, I take into account the wider political, economic and cultural configurations of power discussed in my introduction which, over the course of the 20th century, have led to regional England becoming relatively disempowered in comparison to London. In doing so, I employ a similar lens to that invoked by much of the scholarship discussed in this section; one which recognises that such configurations of power (whether related to the theatre industry itself or English politics, economy and culture more broadly) are an essential context to understanding how English geography comes to be represented. In order to do so, however, it is vital to also consider the existing literature surrounding what I have here called *theatrical geographies*.

### **Theatrical Geographies**

Where I have used the phrase *geographies of theatre* to refer to where a performance takes place and the spatial dynamics of its production, I use the phrase *theatrical geographies* to refer to the invocation of geography within a performance text. As I mentioned above, the study of theatrical geographies can usefully be said to have begun with the publication, in 1995, of Chaudhuri's *Staging Place*. Echoing Soja's call-to-arms in *Postmodern Geographies*, in her preface to *Staging Place*, Chaudhuri makes the case for the development of 'a new methodology for drama and theatre studies, a "geography" of theatre capable of replacing—or at least significantly supplementing—its familiar "history"' (1997: xi). Chaudhuri is interested in the ways in which theatre uses geography as a semiotic system; how normative understandings of place, space, landscape and geography are drawn into dramatic texts as a shorthand to

characterisation or the creation of dramatic tension. Where, previously, scholars might have considered geography as doing little more than providing a backdrop for a performance text, Chaudhuri's work has informed a growing body of literature that considers geography (and human relationships with geography) as being central to the creation of theatrical meaning.

### ***Staging Place***

Chaudhuri's primary focus is on 20<sup>th</sup>-century playwriting, in which she identifies a consistent thematic interest in characters' relationships with geography. She writes that

the problem of place—and place *as problem*—informs realist drama deeply, appearing as a series of ruptures and displacements in various orders of location, from the micro- to the macrospatial, from home to nature, with intermediary space concepts such as neighbourhood, hometown, community and country ranged in between. (1997: 55)

Chaudhuri is interested in how geography can serve as a narrative device within a play through a character wanting or needing to escape, return or remain in a certain location as well as how characters' identities might be built through their relationships with certain sites.

Chaudhuri is particularly interested in 'the figures of home, exile and dispossession' (1997: 55). Among many close readings of 20<sup>th</sup>-century plays, she foregrounds the example of *A Doll's House* (1879), in which she suggests that Nora's relationship not just with the house she shares with her husband but with the broader concept of *home* is central. Chaudhuri writes that the play explores a 'painful noncongruence between the literal dwelling and the feeling of *being at*

*home* (1997: 49, emphasis added). Over the course of the play, Nora begins to recognise the house in which she lives as a ‘pseudohome’ (1997: 68), which may be her place of residence but in which she never truly feels a sense of belonging. Chaudhuri thus reframes *A Doll’s House* as an acutely spatial play, the narrative “problem” of which is not only found in Nora’s relationship with Torvald but in her relationship with space and place.

Chaudhuri’s articulation of the manner in which playwrights appropriate human relationships with space and place in their construction of narrative informs this thesis greatly. Chaudhuri suggests that late 20<sup>th</sup>-century realist playwriting was often ‘organised around the actions of arriving, staying, leaving, returning, and so on’ (1997: 91). My short survey of post-war British plays found this to be particularly acute in plays set in the English regions, with characters often seeking an “escape”. Nevertheless, Chaudhuri’s work primarily centres on theatrical engagements with what Morash and Richards refer to as ‘conceptual spaces’ rather than ‘mimetic places’ (2013: 30); it is with the *idea* of home that Chaudhuri is interested rather than the matter of how a particular home with a real-world corollary has been represented on stage.<sup>24</sup> Later in *Staging Place*, Chaudhuri does consider how playwrights have engaged with ‘the figure of America’ (1997: 91). Nevertheless, her attention remains on how the *ideas* of home, exile and dispossession might relate to the *idea* of America. Despite her suggestion that ‘the most significant intervention that realism made into the discourse on space was [...] an emphasis on particularity’ (1997: 9), Chaudhuri’s study is thus primarily focussed on theatrical engagements with generic

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<sup>24</sup> That’s not to say that there is no element of mimesis in plays such as *A Doll’s House*. Ibsen evidently does seek to mimetically evoke a typical bourgeois home. Yet, it is still the *concept* of the bourgeois home, a generic bourgeois home, rather than a specific one which exists in actuality.

geographical concepts rather than with particular elements of real-world geography.

The same can be said of *Land/Scape/Theater* (2002), edited by Chaudhuri along with Elinor Fuchs. Here, the focus shifts to the concept of landscape. In her contribution to the collection, Fuchs, for instance, foregrounds the manner in which Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), though set in New York City, regularly invokes pastoral imagery in Willy's reminiscences of his father driving across the country's Western states selling flutes and in Biff's having left the city to become a farmhand.<sup>25</sup> Fuchs writes that the play is 'torn between the alienating density of the urban environment, and the pastoral nostalgia stirred by the disappearing open space' (2002: 33). Her analysis therefore remains centred on theatrical engagements with the concept of landscape and the conceptual spaces of the urban and the pastoral rather than the mimetic places of New York or the rural states in which Biff's work has taken him.

The contribution to *Land/Scape/Theater* which is most relevant to this thesis is Stanton B. Garner Jr.'s chapter on urban landscapes. Garner is acutely aware of the relationship between "the city" as a conceptual space and its real-world manifestations. He foregrounds the ways in which several plays, including Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913) draw on the intricacies of New Orleans and London respectively in constructing their narratives. The former play, writes Garner, 'appropriates the city of New Orleans both poetically and allegorically, gesturing

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<sup>25</sup> Although, Fuchs points out that Willy's "memories" are very likely false. She writes that 'in realistic terms, nothing is less probable than that a mid-century salesman from Brooklyn would have sprung from a father who ventured across the United States in a covered wagon selling homemade flutes' (2002: 31).

toward its history of cultural encounter and mapping its psychic attractions and terrors' (2002: 99). Nevertheless, Garner ultimately opts to read these plays in relation to 'the idea of the city' instead of in relation to the specific cities in which they are set (2002: 96), going as far as to argue that 'traditional theatre depends on the suspension, or deactivation, of the specific urban environment' (2002: 100). His argument is that the 'portability' of productions which take place in dedicated auditoria leads to the mimetic places in which such plays are set being consumed by the conceptual space of the city (2002: 100).

### ***Conceptual Spaces and Mimetic Places***

Morash and Richards' *Mapping Irish Theatre* (2013), from which the distinction between conceptual spaces and mimetic places that I have cited several times in this thesis already is drawn, is acutely interested in this relationship between generic approximations of certain types of site ("the city", say, or "the village") and specific places (Liverpool, say, or Manchester) as they appear on stage. Their development of this distinction draws upon the work of Yi-Fu Tuan who posits that 'if we think of space as that which allows movement, place is pause' (1977: 138). If, as Thrift writes, space is 'the fundamental stuff of human geography (2009: 96), place thus refers to specific, bounded locations. Tim Cresswell expands upon this definition by suggesting that

space [...] has been seen in distinction to space as a realm without meaning—a "fact of life" which, like time, produces the basic coordinates of human life. When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is such a way) it becomes a place. (2004: 10)

Places are thus bounded locations within the field of space to which meaning has

been attributed by an individual, group or often both.

Morash and Richards draw upon this distinction between the genericism of space and the meaningfulness of place in order to distinguish between stage representations of conceptual spaces such as “a city”, “a wood” or “a farm” and those of mimetic places in which a real-world place is, to paraphrase Garner, “appropriated” by a dramatic or performance text. Morash and Richards argue that ‘Irish theatre has been shaped by a deeply politicised, conflictual opposition between space and place’ (2013: 112). They concur with Chaudhuri that shifts towards specificity and mimesis have often been informed by realist aesthetic tendencies. Nevertheless, they also suggest that, in the Irish context, representing real Irish places on stage has been a deeply political act. They argue that a sense of place—a deep connection with the places in which one lives—has been central to Irish culture. ‘Ireland’s colonial history of underdevelopment has contributed to a distinctive spatiality’, they write, that is based ‘on words and stories, on place names and their histories, in short, on the activities of place-making that exists through narration and memory’ (2013: 102). They foreground, for example, William Phillips’ *St Stephen’s Green, or The Generous Lovers* (1699) which was set in the Dublin park of the same name. Against ‘the constant gravitational pull of London’, they write, ‘to see one’s own spaces staged appropriately, in accordance with one’s own sense of worth, was [...] a profoundly political act’ (2013: 30). To represent specific Irish places on stage was to allow an audience to see Ireland not merely as a conceptual space defined by its “otherness” to London and to England but as comprised of specific places and thus as having its own rich, diverse identity.

The tension between conceptual spaces and mimetic places, whether these terms are used or not, informs a great deal of writing on theatrical geographies. In *Theatre & the Rural*, for example, Robinson foregrounds a tendency in British and Irish theatre ‘to persistently return to a nostalgic and idealised perspective of the rural’ (2016: 3) in a manner which elides the ‘everyday reality of the negotiation and interpretation of rural life’ (2016: 29). She foregrounds Arnold Wesker’s *Roots* (1956) in which ‘the rural is constructed as other, even though the focus is ostensibly on those who live and work there’ (2016: 31). ‘The apparent realism of the rural representation’, she continues, ‘masks a utilisation of the countryside as a place of ignorance: the “rural manner” the “other” to urban enlightenment’ (2016: 32). Such an analysis perhaps provides the counter example to Morash and Richards’ assessment of *St Stephen’s Green*; here, as Garner suggested can be the case with cities, the conceptual space of “the rural” (with all the accompanying ideological baggage of pastoral idealism) effaces the inherent diversity of specific, placed rural experiences.

Beswick similarly explores this tension between conceptual spaces and mimetic places in her 2019 book *Social Housing in Performance* which sets out to

explore how council estates are conceptualised on stage and to understand how performative representations work as “transmission processes”, creating and contesting our understandings of estate space; reinforcing and also resisting negative conceptions of the council estate that circulate within and beyond popular and political discourse. (2019: 3)

Beswick undertakes readings of estate-set plays such as Simon Stephen’s *Port* (2002). Despite being set in a mimetic place, Stockport, Beswick suggests that,



with its 'landscape of poverty, domestic violence, crime and longing for escape', *Port* 'resonates with dominant estate tropes' and thus might be read as being informed as much by the conceptual space of "the council estate" (and, again, the classist ideological baggage which accompanies it) as by the idiosyncrasies of Stockport as a unique place (2019: 94). Nevertheless, Beswick also foregrounds several productions which subvert dominant perceptions of the conceptual space of the council estate. She discusses Conrad Murray's *DenMarked* (2016), 'an autobiographical one-man "confessional" performance' which 'combines *Hamlet* and hip-hop to narrate his experience of growing up on a council estate in Mitcham, south west London' (2019: 103). Beswick highlights one particular section of the performance in which 'Murray recounts how stereotypical narratives of council estate girls as promiscuous and sexually excessive played out on his estate. He describes how he befriended a local girl called Dawn, who was rumoured to have "had sex in the graveyard"'. Beswick argues that 'the direct address mode of delivery allows him to explore the conditions that produced Dawn's behaviour, presenting her as complex and human' (2019: 105). Murray thus punctures the sweeping, classist generalisations which dominate other cultural and media representations of council estates by summoning his own experience of a specific estate.

### ***Theatre and the "Struggle Over Geography"***

What one sees in such research is a far greater emphasis being placed upon how stage representations participate in what Said refers to as the 'struggle over geography' (1994: 7). Beswick's focus, along with that of Robinson and Morash and Richards is often on how the representation of mimetic places on stage might trouble the assumptions an audience might have about certain conceptual

spaces. All four scholars seek to account not only for the ways in which a dramatic or performance text might appropriate geographical meaning but the role that theatre plays in the generation, legitimisation or problematisation of that knowledge.

Not all studies which engage with stage representations of mimetic places take such a politicised approach to their analysis. J. Chris Westgate's *Urban Drama* (2011), for example, considers how American playwrights have appropriated mimetic places as a means to build character and invoke atmosphere. In one chapter, Westgate conducts a close reading of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991). Discussing Joe and Harper Pitt, both Mormons who have moved to New York (where the play is set) from Salt Lake City, he writes that 'long before *Angels in America* begins Joe and Harper Pitt have left Salt Lake City, but to some degree, it never leaves them' (2011: 45).<sup>26</sup> Westgate highlights the manner in which, in a densely-packed play, Joe and Harper's having come from Salt Lake City works as a shorthand to characterisation. The connection to that city is used in order to notify the audience that, not only are Joe and Harper Mormon, but they are a *particular kind of Mormon*: devout, and likely from families which are similarly devout. Later, Westgate appraises the play's use of Central Park to evoke a particular atmosphere. He writes that

in *Angels in America* Central Park becomes synonymous with transgression. Hidden by the twisting paths and thickets of the Rambles, on the north shore of the lake in Central Park, gay men meet anonymously for sex [...]. Already encoded with connotations of casual sexual encounters in the gay community, this location

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<sup>26</sup> Westgate's foregrounding of Joe and Harper's experience of "departure" and "displacement" has some interesting parallels with Chaudhuri's analyses in *Staging Place*; to the Pitt's, place is very much a "problem".

supplies all the exposition necessary. (2011: 48)

As with Salt Lake City, *Angels in America* therefore draws upon dominant perceptions of Central Park as an expository shorthand, relying on the audience's pre-existing knowledge of Central Park and the Rambles to invoke an atmosphere of transgression and danger.

Nevertheless, whilst Westgate's study once again points to the ways in which dramatic and performance texts appropriate real-world places in order to create meaning, it elides the inherent subjectivity of the dominant perceptions of those places. *Angels in America* may draw upon *popular* perceptions of Salt Lake City, Central Park and the Rambles but, as I explore at greater length in the following chapter, such perceptions will always be contestable. For, despite Morash and Richards' use of the term "mimetic places", James Duncan writes that a representation of a given place 'cannot create mimesis (reveal the naked truth): rather, through its ideological distortions, it operates in the service of power' (1993: 39). This recognition concurs with Foucault's suggestion that 'truth isn't outside power. [...] Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power' (1980: 131). The "truths" about Salt Lake City or Central Park that *Angels in America* appropriates as part of its semiotic fabric are thus not natural or unavoidable but, as Said argued, have emerged as part of a "struggle over geography". A high proportion of Salt Lake City residents, for instance, may be Mormon. Yet, as *The Salt Lake Tribune* reported in 2018, they comprise less than 50% of the city's population (Canham, 2018). Those who are not Mormon thus likely attribute (or at least might wish to attribute) very different meanings to the city. Furthermore, even if Kushner's intention is to mock American conservative Christianity, *Angels*

*in America's* appropriation of these dominant perceptions of Salt Lake City plays a small role in reinforcing the identification of the city with Mormonism and the elision of other attributions of meaning to it.

The sub-field of theatre studies which has most frequently explored the relationship between stage representations of places and the ongoing negotiation of the meanings attributed towards them is that of Early Modern Drama. This is in part due to the fact that late-16<sup>th</sup>- and early-17<sup>th</sup>-century London saw the emergence of a theatrical genre which actively invites such an analysis: the City Comedy. Exemplified by the work of Ben Jonson, Harvie writes that 'set in London, filled with recognisable details of real locations and peopled with characters familiar from everyday life—lawyers, lenders, traders, craftsmen, apprentices, prostitutes, servants and criminals—city comedies explored contemporary changes to the social order and especially to socio-economic mobility' (2009: 15). Books including Brian Gibbons' *Jacobean City Comedy* (1980), James D. Mardock's *Our Scene is London* (2008) and Dieter Mehl, Angela Stock and Anne-Julia Zwierlein's *Plotting Early Modern London: New Essays on Jacobean City Comedy* (2016) all inquire to some extent into how plays within this genre engage with London as it actually existed at that moment in time.

There are some echoes in this body of scholarship of the kind of analysis that Westgate undertakes. Mardock writes, for instance, that 'Jonson's use of spatial specificity is intricately linked with his characterisation' (2008: 48). Mardock highlights several examples from *Every Man in His Humour* (1598) in which a character living in or being otherwise associated with a certain part of

London (or a place outside of it) is used as a shorthand to inform the audience of the social status of that character. Yet, Mardock goes further. Drawing on Theseus' assertion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1605) that 'the poet's pen [...] gives to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name' (2007: 403), he suggests that

city comedy begins not with an airy nothing,<sup>27</sup> but with local habitations that already have names, with London places that are already laden with meaning. Jonson's city comedies are often centrally about London as a stage, and as a corollary, about the playwright's ability to shape the meanings of familiar space and the audience's perception thereof.<sup>28</sup> (2008: 45)

To Mardock, then, a playwright does not merely draw upon already-existing attributions of meaning to place. Instead, they are actively involved in the creation of that meaning. A dramatic or performance text has the ability to either channel dominant perceptions of a place, thereby further reifying that attribution of meaning, or to subvert it. Dramatic and performance texts therefore do not only "appropriate" geographical meaning but play an active role in shaping it.

In *Dramaturgy and Architecture* (2015), Cathy Turner applies a similar lens to the "garden city" movement of the late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century which stemmed from the vision of Ebenezer Howard who argued for the development of settlements which combined the benefits of town and country living, in doing so enabling 'better [...] opportunities of social intercourse [...] than are enjoyed

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<sup>27</sup> The edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which Mardock references uses a different spelling to my own.

<sup>28</sup> The distinction drawn by Mardock between the work of Shakespeare and that of Jonson can be read as another example of that between conceptual spaces and mimetic places. Much of Shakespeare's work involves the appropriation of conceptual spaces such as "the woods" or "the city" (even when they are given the name of a real-world location) whereas Jonson represents London as a mimetic place, drawing upon its specific geography and idiosyncrasies.

in any crowded city, while yet the beauties of nature may encompass and enfold each dweller there within' (1902: 18). The garden city movement was inspired by a utopian, broadly socialistic vision: Howard argued that commercial land within the proposed settlements should be municipally owned in order that 'increased rents' accrued over time could be 'expended in permanent improvements' for all (1902: 26). Drawing focus to George Bernard Shaw's plays *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) and *Major Barbara* (1905) as well as to a series of pantomimes performed in the first actually-existing garden city, Letchworth, Turner argues that 'theatre in and about the garden city both reflected and contributed to its early development' (2015: 53). In these texts, Turner identifies a consistent tension between appeals to the utopian potential of the garden city concept and recognitions of the compromises that were eventually necessitated by the fact that these settlements ultimately had to exist within a capitalist society. While Shaw was a supporter of the garden city movement, for example, Turner writes that, 'in his dramatic works, [...] his understanding of the spatio-temporal complexity of the garden city [...] means that he neither unhesitatingly endorses it, nor is it dismissed within them' (2015: 59). Turner foregrounds a similar 'clash between impotent idealism and pragmatic cynicism' in the Letchworth pantomimes (2015: 62), suggesting that, whilst they did occasionally 'suggest a belief in democratic principles and the possibility of change', they also pointed to 'the way in which the gradual realisation of the new town could congeal into a fixed order that imposed its own limitations' (2015: 65). In particular, Turner highlights the manner in which the Letchworth pantomimes 'satirise the management and local government' of the city (2015: 59), portraying the local government as being 'engaged in accommodating and absorbing tension, rather than in producing or facilitating change' (2015: 63). Where Shaw wrote as an

outsider, Turner highlights that the pantomimes were 'produced by critical insiders, amateurs with a deep commitment to the development of their community' (2015: 78). These latter texts, then, can be read not only as drawing on Letchworth for their subject matter, but as forums in which residents were involved in a collective and public negotiation of the meanings attributed to the city in which they lived.

Some scholars have applied a similarly contextualised, politicised lens to contemporary stage representations of cities. In her 2001 article *Theatre, Crime, and the Edgy City in Post-Apartheid Johannesburg*,<sup>29</sup> Loren Kruger considers the way in which dominant perceptions of Johannesburg have been supported or contested by theatre productions which have been set in the city. Kruger begins by noting that 'crime and money have been persistent themes of writing about Johannesburg since the 1890s, barely a decade after the city's founding in 1886' before considering how such a perception of the city as lawless might have been supported or contested by (then) recent stage representations of it. Several plays which took place at the Market Theatre in the 1990s, Kruger argues, revelled in perceptions of Johannesburg as a city of 'gangster glamour' (2001: 252). Junction Avenue Theatre Company's *Love, Crime and Johannesburg* (1999), however, does not focus on the "edginess" of street-level crime, but frames such activity as a consequence of 'corruption and grandiose planning' (2001: 252). Kruger thus further points to the ways in which, rather than merely parroting dominant perceptions of a place, performance texts can encourage an audience to reconsider the meanings they attribute to the places they represent on stage.

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<sup>29</sup> Some aspects of this article were also incorporated into Kruger's more recent book *Imagining the Edgy City* (2013) which takes a broader look at representations of Johannesburg across a wide range of cultural forms.

## ***Beyond the Auditorium***

When analysing the relationship between contemporary performance and the production (or disruption) of spatial and platial meaning, however, scholars have most often taken as their objects of study work which occurs outside of designated auditoria. Much of this has focussed on what Steven Hodge refers to as either 'site-specific' or 'site-generic' work; the former term referring to 'performance generated from/for one select site' and the latter referring to 'performance generated for a series of like sites (e.g. car parks, swimming pools)' (in Wilkie, 2002: 150). One can see why such objects of study might be alluring: in such practices, the site (or at least type of site) which the performance engages with on a textual level is not made present merely through scenography, movement or verbal description but is actually present in the moment of performance. Such performances thus operate within what Soja refers to as 'Thirdplace epistemologies' in their collapsing together of the "real" and "imagined" (1996: 81).

Pearson, for example, has drawn extensively on his own site-specific and site-generic work which, he writes, takes place 'in the slash between performance/everyday' (in Pearson and Shanks, 2001: 15). Pearson's practice and scholarship both focus on the ways in which such practices bring together 'artistic and quotidian activities' and on the relationship between 'aesthetic endeavours' and 'the performance of everyday life' (2013: 11). He argues that site-specific performance 'recontextualises [...] sites: it is the latest occupation of a location at which other occupations—their material traces and histories—are still apparent' (2001: 23). Such work, as Pearson sees it, is not only inspired by



the locations in which they take place but has the ability to constitute an intervention. A site-specific performance can encourage spectators to think critically about how they have engaged with that site in the past (both practically and imaginatively) and how they will engage with it in the future. It can also problematise dominant perceptions of that site and, in doing so, reveal the spatial politics which underlies those perceptions.

Analyses of site-specific and site-generic performances dominate the literature on theatre, performance and “the city”. Following his assessment that the ‘portability’ of auditorium-based work often leads to ‘the suspension, or deactivation, of the specific urban environment’ and his suggestion that ‘more traditional drama’ tends towards ‘a certain conservatism in addressing actual urban terrains’ in his chapter on urban landscapes cited above (2002: 100), for instance, Garner quickly moves on to discussing what he refers to as ‘urban environmental theatre’ (2002: 102). In *Theatre & the City*, Harvie equally leaves behind the discussion of stage representations relatively quickly in favour of work which takes place amidst the urban environment itself. She discusses, for instance, Fiona Templeton’s *You—The City* (1990) and Blast Theory’s *Rider Spoke* (2007), both of which position the spectator as an active participant in the performance. In the former piece,

one audience member at a time follows a scripted route of encounters through a series of public and private urban spaces. In Manhattan, the “client” (audience member) started the show in an office on midtown Times Square and moved through various encounters in locations that included a church, a taxi ride to downtown Hell’s Kitchen, a playground and an apartment. (Harvie, 2009: 57-58)

The result, Harvie argues, is that the audience is 'invited [...] to be explicitly self-reflexive about everyday urban encounters and journeys she or he would probably usually make without particular notice' (2009: 58). By participating in the performance, the audience is again encouraged to think actively and critically about spaces they usually might engage with habitually. To draw on Lefebvre, such performances thus directly problematise the ways in which 'the imagination seeks to change and appropriate space' through explicitly encouraging audiences to think about the ways in which they attach meaning to certain sites (1991: 39).

Garner and Harvie's focus on performances which take place outside designated auditoria is echoed in edited collections such as McAuley's *Unstable Ground* (2006), Leslie Hill and Helen Paris' *Performance and Place* (2006), Hopkins, Orr and Solga's *Performance and the City* (2009), Hopkins and Orr's *Performance and the Global City* (2013b) and Whybrow's *Performing Cities* (2014). The predominance of such work within the scholarship on theatre, performance and "the city" is, in part, a result of the spatial turn in theatre studies coinciding with the emergence of Performance Studies. Performance Studies seeks to apply critical lenses that might previously have been utilised with reference to aesthetic performances on stages to what Schechner refers to as 'performance in everyday life' (2013: 17). It recognises that "performing" is something we do habitually, whether we are "performing" our gender, class, race or given role is a situation. Much performance studies scholarship is, in fact, entirely divorced from the discussion of theatre. Yet, the study of performances which take place in the same site (or same category of site) in which they are "set" enables scholars to keep one foot in the field of theatre studies whilst also

coming to broader conclusions about those sites as they are “performed” prior to and after an aesthetic performance has occurred. Harvie, for instance, writes that ‘theatre and performance can help us understand city experience and some of the grounds on which we need to understand cities’ (2009: 5). Indeed, the edited collections listed above all include discussions of everyday performance as well as civic performances such as parades, pageants and protests alongside analyses of artistic endeavours.

This is not to say that analyses of performances which occur within designated auditoria are entirely absent. In her chapter on Los Angeles in *Performing Cities*, for example, Sue-Ellen Case foregrounds several theatre productions which have ‘brought the streets into the theatre’ (2014: 43). These are, however, fleeting engagements within a chapter which mostly focuses on how LA performs itself in the everyday. A similar approach is taken by David Williams in his chapter in the same collection on Palermo which describes three sequences from Pina Bausch’s *Palermo Palermo* (1989). Yet, these serve primarily as epigraphs to a broader discussion of the city, with the reader having to draw the dots between these *theatrical geographies* and Williams’ engagements with the everyday performance of Palermo. In *Performance and the Global City*, Jean Graham-Jones’ discussion of the 2008 production of *Eva, the Great Argentine Musical* focuses not on the *theatrical geographies* of that production, but instead on the political ramifications of its premiere occurring in La Plata, Brazil rather than the nation’s capital, Buenos Aires (2013). Capraru and Solga’s discussion of the Rwandan tour of Theatre ISÔKO’s *The Monument* (2008), again in *Performance and the Global City*, equally focuses on what the presence of a production produced in Toronto in the Rwandan city of Kigali

reveals about 'Kigali's current and future economic and infrastructural aspirations and Toronto's ongoing "creative city" goals' rather than how the play represents its Bosnian setting (2013: 43). The anomaly within these collections is Susan Bennett's analysis of Robert Le Page's *The Dragon's Trilogy* (1988) and *The Blue Dragon* (2009) and her comparison of the 'fantasies of "old Shanghai"' contained within those productions (2013: 82) with David Henry Hwang's 2011 'pairing of Cleveland and Guiyang' to dramatize 'the shift in economic dominance from the United States to China through the course of the twentieth century' in *Chinglish* (2013: 83).

In scholarship on contemporary performance, one therefore senses a scepticism towards engaging too heavily with stage representations of real-world places. The position which seems to underlie much of this work is stated outright by Tompkins in *Theatre's Heterotopias* (2014) when she writes that 'many theatre buildings do tend to curtail the potential for engagement with the world beyond their walls' (2014: 40). By contrast, as Hill writes in *Performance and Place*, performance and Live Art are seen as 'the art form[s] with an umbilical cord to real space and time' (2006: 5). The inherent physical distance which exists between a stage representation and the place that it is representing has led many to conclude, like Garner, that theatre productions which occur within designated auditoria are less able to problematise hegemonic forms of geographical knowledge. By extension, critically appraising those representations is implied to be less vital.

### ***Representations and Non-Representational Theory***

This view draws theoretical influence not only from performance studies but also

from the emergence, in the field of geography, of what has become known as non-representational theory. As a codified approach to cultural geography, non-representational theory finds its origins in Thrift's 1996 book *Spatial Formations*, in which the author questions 'representational models of the world, whose main focus is the "internal", and whose basic terms or objects are symbolic representations' (1996: 6). He argues that such approaches allow 'a hardly problematised sphere of representation [...] to take precedence over lived experience and materiality' (1996: 4). To counter this, Thrift makes the case for geography's adoption of 'non-representational models' which 'valorise all the senses, and not just the visual' (1996: 7). As a critical framework for geographical enquiry, non-representational theory thus foregrounds what Lefebvre calls 'spatial practice' as its primary object of enquiry (1991: 6); it views space as being primarily experienced through embodied practice rather than through language or our visual comprehension of it.

To be clear, then, Thrift's argument is not merely that cultural geographers should turn their attention away from representations of geography in books, films, performances *etc.* and onto the sites themselves, but that scholars should be dissuaded from viewing space itself as representational. Whilst Thrift may have been influential in codifying this approach, however, a focus on the field of practice over that of representation evidently has a much longer lineage. In their introduction to *Performance and the City*, Solga, Hopkins and Orr (2009: 4) highlight Lefebvre's warning against 'the overestimation of texts' which runs the risk of 'conceding a monopoly on intelligibility' to 'the readable and the visible' (1991: 62). They also draw attention to Walter Benjamin's figure of the *flâneur* (2006: 40) and the *dérives* of the Situationist International (2006b: 62). Finally,

partly inspired by a later article by Thrift (2004), they draw attention to Michel de Certeau's essay *Walking in the City*, included as a chapter in his 1980 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. They do so in order to critique a popular metaphor in urban studies which posits that the city can be viewed as a kind of text. This metaphor, they write, 'conceive[s] of the city as a "legible" text, one represented as if seen from above, writing and image sliding seamlessly into one another to produce the city as unproblematically visible, readable, knowable' (2009: 4).<sup>30</sup> Whilst recognising that "the text of the city" metaphor has been a 'valuable [...] conceptual tool for thinking through the vectors of power and pleasure that sustain our urban spaces', Solga, Hopkins and Orr question whether 'the idea of the urban "text"' might 'fail fully to account not only for the multiple physical, material, and psychic interactions between city and citizen, but also for the city as a space of tension and negotiation framed in countless ways by formal and informal works of performance' (2009: 5). Like Thrift, Solga, Hopkins and Orr thus posit that a more useful understanding of the "interactions between city and citizen" might come about by viewing the city not through a representational lens but through one which regards the city as embodied or *performed*.<sup>31</sup>

The coincidence of the spatial turn's manifestation in theatre studies with the rise of performance studies and of non-representational approaches to urban studies has thus tacitly encouraged scholars to view critical engagements with stage representations of geography as of less pressing concern than

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<sup>30</sup> Solga, Hopkins and Orr foreground Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of the Four Ecologies* (1971) and Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (2000) as notable examples of scholarship which invokes "the text of the city" metaphor.

<sup>31</sup> In *Theory for Theatre Studies: Space* (2019), Solga suggests that we might even view cities as performative in the sense suggested by J.L. Austin (1962) and developed further by Judith Butler (1999), drawing again on de Certeau's *Walking in the City* to suggest that we might view 'urban walking' (and, presumably, other acts of everyday performance) as 'a kind of performative speech act' which brings the meaningful city into being (2019: 39).

performance which combines a textual intervention into our relationships with place with a physical one. In this thesis, I seek to rebalance the scales. Terry Eagleton has written that the ‘rejection of the notion of representation’ is, ‘in fact, a rejection of an *empiricist* model of representation, in which the representational baby has been thrown out with the empiricist bathwater’ (1991: xi-xii, emphasis in original). Eagleton is writing more broadly on ‘the notion of ideology’ which, he suggests, ‘has evaporated without a trace from the writings of postmodernism and poststructuralism’ which hold that power is not exacted from above through the field of representation but is, instead, diffuse throughout society (1991: xi). Eagleton does not necessarily argue against what he sees as the postmodernist view of ‘all ideology as teleological, “totalitarian” and metaphysically grounded’ (1991: xii),<sup>32</sup> yet he recognises that such a scholarly recognition does not mean that powerful interests in society have ceased to engage ideology as a way of cementing their power or that those opposed to the status quo have stopped framing their opposition in ideological terms.<sup>33</sup> Even if one holds that all ideologies are merely teleological fictions, then, this does not mean that their deployment is not worth studying.

To bring my discussion back to geography, de Certeau’s essay *Walking in the City* provides two positions from which one can engage with a city: that of the voyeur and that of the walker (1984: 92). The voyeur sees the city from a distance, as if atop its tallest building. The voyeur is thus able to ‘read’ the city,

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<sup>32</sup> Although there is a sense throughout the book from which this passage is taken, *Ideology: An Introduction* (1991), that he might like to.

<sup>33</sup> Eagleton was writing in 1991, in a political context in which, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, many were lauding the “end of ideology”. Eagleton still identifies several examples of existing ideological frameworks in the resurgent Islamic Fundamentalism in the Middle East, Christian Evangelicalism in the USA and Thatcherism in the UK (1991: xi). The persistence of ideology, however, perhaps seems more self-evident 30 years later, when the so-called ‘crisis of liberalism’ has seen oppositional ideological framings of the world on both the political left and right claw their way back into mainstream political discourse (Zevin, 2019: 18).

‘to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god’ (1984: 92). The walker, by contrast, lives “down below”, below the thresholds at which visibility begins. [...] They write [the urban “text”] without being able to read (1984: 93). de Certeau evidently considers the walker to have a more authentic experience of the city: he writes of the “text” regarded by the voyeur as ‘a “theoretical” (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices’ (1984: 93). It is this notion, that the city as viewed by the voyeur is a mere fiction, which underscores much of the scholarship discussed above. My own position on the matter is more closely aligned with that of Lefebvre and Soja and holds that, to truly understand a place, we must be both walkers *and* voyeurs, as well as being attuned to the ways in which both these perspectives intertwine in how we experience space. For, even if one holds that it is in the field of embodied practice rather than that of representation that space is ultimately forged, this belief does not mean that geographical sites have ceased to be represented; as Eagleton argues, the rejection of the empiricist model of representation does not mean that representations cease to circulate. In fact, maybe the potential for the “oblivion” or “misunderstanding” of certain practices makes their critical appraisal as essential as ever.<sup>34</sup>

Just as theatre historians have analysed *theatrical geographies* in order to understand past representations of the city, in this thesis, I therefore focus upon representations of regional England which do take place within designated

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<sup>34</sup> With reference to the use of non-representational modes of analysis for site-specific and site-generic performance, it is also worth noting that, whilst such practices *can* problematise habitual practice and understanding within a given site, it does not always do so. Laura Levin has argued that site-specific and site-generic performance ‘often [...] restores the dream of spatial mastery’ rather than challenges it (2014: 68). Such work is thus as prone to the “oblivion” and “misunderstanding” of practice than that which occurs within designated auditoria and is thus more acutely “representational”.



auditoria, to consider what such an analysis might reveal about how theatre is engaging with regional life in the present day. All but two of the productions I discuss took place in theatres, and the two exceptions took place in music venues in which the audience were stood and were afforded some degree of movement yet generally remained passive and in the dark rather than being active participants in the production itself. This focus is partly a result of a lack of site-specific, site-generic and other environmental work taking place in the regions I decided to write about during the time period in which I have undertaken this study. Yet, it is also the result of an active desire to draw attention back to the stage, and to the ways in which stage representations might equally invite audiences to reconsider the meaning they attribute to place.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have sought to summarise some of the key scholarship pertaining to the intersection between theatre and geography. At the intersection of these two fields, I have pointed to two dominant tendencies in how a geographical outlook has been utilised in the analysis of theatre and performance. The first, I have referred to as *geographies of theatre*. Studies which take this approach have sought to consider the spatial politics of theatre-making processes, highlighting factors such as where a production is conceived, where it is rehearsed and where it is seen by an audience. The scholarship most relevant to this study is that which has investigated theatre practices which take place across cultural boundaries. Such work is interested in the geographical distribution of political, economic and cultural power and how this might affect who is afforded agency in such processes. The second, I have referred to as *theatrical geographies*. Studies which have taken this approach have sought to

consider how theatre and performance *use* geography in order to create meaning. The scholarship from this tendency most relevant to this thesis has sought to unpack how theatre and performance engage with real-world places and how their representation of those places might support or contest dominant attributions of meaning toward those sites.

As do many of the scholars I have cited in this chapter, in this study I combine these two approaches, to consider the relationship between these *geographies of theatre* and *theatrical geographies*. Throughout, I seek to contextualise the theatre productions I discuss within an English theatre industry that remains both materially and textually London-centric and within a broader English politics, economy and culture which is equally so. Furthermore, where the emphasis in the existing scholarship on the relationship between place and performance has been either on historical representations of cities, or on site-specific, site-generic and other environmental forms of contemporary performance, I seek to consider how contemporary stage representations of regional England might also contribute to an ongoing process of place identity negotiation.

## Chapter Three

# Re-placing Theatre

In the previous two chapters, I have provided some background to this study, articulated why I believe it to be an important undertaking and foregrounded some of the existing scholarship which will inform the analyses contained in the following three chapters. As I have already outlined, this thesis focuses on theatrical engagements with regional England. In my case study chapters, I discuss nine theatre productions, each of which is set in either Nottinghamshire, Hull or Bristol. I have chosen these locations as they represent a cross-section of regional experiences. Firstly, Nottinghamshire is a partly-urban, partly-rural county consisting of a city and several smaller towns and villages whilst Hull and Bristol are both cities. Secondly, together, they span a considerable portion of England, with Hull being located in Yorkshire and the Humber in north-eastern England, Nottinghamshire in the Midlands and Bristol in the South West. Thirdly, their economies differ greatly. Both the city of Nottingham and Hull feature regularly in the most recent edition of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's *English Indices of Deprivation* report (2019), with one method of calculating the "most deprived" local authorities in England positioning the cities at tenth and ninth place respectively (2019: 11); by contrast, in 2017, Barclays declared Bristol to be the UK's fifth most prosperous city (2017). Finally, as will become evident in the chapters focussing on each of these places, whilst all have industrial pasts and have experienced considerable upheaval as a result of deindustrialisation, they are in very different positions when it comes to redeveloping their place identities for a post-industrial context. The core way in

which this thesis seeks to provide an original contribution to knowledge is that, rather than solely drawing attention to performance which engages with regional England, I do so in a manner which embraces that regionality and views marginalisation within England's London-centric politics, economy and culture as a crucial phenomenon to take account of in discussing these sites as, to quote Soja, both "real" and "imagined" places (1996: 11).

This thesis also differs from much of the pre-existing scholarship which has applied a spatial and/or platial lens to performance analysis in that, rather than focussing on site-specific work, I focus exclusively on theatre productions which occurred within designated auditoria. This is partly a result of the performances which were produced during the period in which I undertook this research. Nevertheless, having found evidence of a London-centricity in post-war British playwriting, I also believe that critically appraising performances which are not site-specific but which have the potential to tour to places within and beyond the nation other than that in which they are set (as did most of the productions which I analyse) to be important. Such work does not only have the potential to invite spectators who are present within that place (whether they live there or have solely visited for that performance) to reconsider the meanings they attribute towards it, but also the potential to invite those who may never have the slightest intention of visiting the place being represented to do so.

My focus on theatre is informed both by my own proclivity towards the form and by a more practical concern. As I discussed in my introduction, the English media and cultural landscape is heavily London-centric, with regional newspapers, television studios and radio stations having either been brought

under the stewardship of London-based entities or having otherwise had their influence eroded over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In a 2018 open letter published in *The Bookseller*, The Northern Fiction Alliance accused the publishing industry of being equally ‘London-centric [...] both in terms of workforce and the range of writers being supported and published’ (2018). Perhaps as a result of these industrial geographies, cultural representations of Nottinghamshire, Hull and Bristol have often been few and far between, at least in comparison to the inescapability of representations of the capital.<sup>35</sup> There certainly exist regional publishing houses and independent film studios which seek to combat this London-centricity within their respective mediums. Nevertheless, as I see it, the ubiquity of regional theatres in the English regions, despite their relative lack of resource in comparison to London venues, gives theatre a unique potential to produce representations which subvert the dominant worldview of the capital, uplift the experiences of those who live within their jurisdictions and engage in a meaningful way in the ongoing process of place identity negotiation within the English regions.

### **Place Identity**

My primary interest, then, is how the theatre productions I discuss in this thesis engage with the locations in which they are set as loci of identity. As such, I employ a critical framework rooted firmly in the concept of place. I have already briefly unpacked the relationship between the concepts of space and place in the previous chapter. To reiterate, however, space refers to ‘the fundamental stuff of human geography’ (Thrift, 2009: 96), whilst place refers to a portion of space

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<sup>35</sup> Although, as I discuss in Chapter Six, Bristol has been far more frequently represented than either Nottingham or Hull.

decoupled and, to quote Cresswell, 'invested with meaning' (2004: 12).<sup>36</sup> Space is often viewed in more abstract terms as the basic field of geographical enquiry whereas place refers to specific locations with which humans have developed relationships and have connected certain ideas. The concept of place thus provides a suitable basis for considering how a location comes to be seen as more than simply a collection of buildings and people and, instead, as a site of significance and identity.

Maria Lewicka has observed that 'the concept of "identity", when applied to a place, may carry two altogether different meanings. In the first meaning "identity" refers to the term "place" and means a set of place features that guarantee the place's distinctiveness and continuity in time' (2008: 211). An insight into the dominant interpretation of the place identity of a city, town, village or region in this sense might be gained from looking at the information circulated by that place's tourist board. The website for Marketing Manchester as it appeared in November 2019, for instance, described the city as 'the original modern city'. It featured an array of photographs of the city's architecture, making sure to include both the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Town Hall (a symbol of the city's manufacturing past) as well as a wide-angle photograph of the present-day cityscape adorned with cranes. Alongside this, the webpage included a listing for an exhibition at the People's History Museum about the Peterloo Massacre and several images of the Etihad Stadium, the home of Manchester City, one of the city's two top-flight football teams (2019). Together, these images do more than

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<sup>36</sup> While this distinction between space and place has become fairly consistent in contemporary scholarship, it is worth highlighting that it has not always been this way. de Certeau, for instance, writes that '*space is a practiced place*' (1984: 117, emphasis in original). For de Certeau, place refers to a site as viewed through the logistical, "voyeuristic" lens of the urban planner whilst space refers to the same site as practiced by the "walkers" who physically operate within it.

simply offer a potential itinerary for a visit to Manchester, they also construct a place identity. They infer that this is a city proud of its industrial heritage and its connections with working-class institutions such as association football and the labour movement but, with that image of cranes, it also implies that the city has managed to channel that same industriousness and cultural vitality into the present.

For the second definition that scholars have attached to the term place identity, Lewicka refers to the work of Harold M. Proshansky for whom place identity describes 'those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals, and behavioural tendencies and skills relevant to this environment' (1978: 155). In this understanding of the term, the emphasis shifts away from how human beings attribute meaning to a place and instead to the manner in which certain places come to inform the personal identities of those who have a relationship with them. The relationship between identity and place thus runs both ways: people invest meaning into places, but places also shape people's sense of themselves. While I often give precedence to the former understanding of place identity in my analyses, this understanding is also worth being aware of, as it points to why interrogating conceptualisations of place identity is so important.

The suggestion that place identity might valorise "distinctiveness" and "continuity" has sometimes led place to be viewed as, in Phil Jones and James Evans' words, 'a fundamentally static, conservative and regressive concept' (2011: 2320). That this perception has occasionally crept into theatre and

performance studies was evident in my discussion, in the previous chapter, of Rebellato's comments on localism (2009: 55). I certainly do not wish to argue that place can never manifest as a reactionary and exclusionary phenomenon; as Cresswell has argued, place often works to distinguish between "insiders" and "outsiders": 'outsiders are not to be trusted, insiders know the rules and obey them' (1996: 154). Yet, I question the notion that reactionary manifestations of place are inevitable or that to study place is to ignore or accept such a scenario. As Sally Mackey has written in her work on place and applied theatre, 'place can be reconciled conceptually and practically to reference alienation *and* attachment, roots *and* routes, stasis *and* mobility' (2016: 107, emphasis in original). Massey, too, has argued that we might develop a 'global sense of place' which views the journeys of people, ideas and commodities to and from a certain location as of equal importance to that which has remained static within its bounds (1991: 29). Furthermore, Agnew has suggested that the meanings attributed to a place are not fixed, but constantly 'evolving' (1987: 2). Just as places slowly change their physical appearance over time as buildings are demolished and new ones built over their foundations, so too do place identities continue to be redeveloped and renegotiated. It is this relational and dynamic view of place that I carry into my analyses.

### **Re-placing**

My analyses foreground stage representations as participating in this ongoing, dynamic evolution of the meanings that are attributed to a place. I refer to theatre's interventions into this process as acts of *re-placing*. I do so in order to reinforce the notion that the act of representing a place on stage is never one of merely transforming some already-existing, essential place identity into art.



Regardless of intention, representing a given place through theatre (or any other cultural or discursive form) is always an intervention; even if only subtly, it dislodges pre-existing conceptualisations of a place's communal identity and offers a new way of viewing it. My use of the term *re-placing* thus stresses that to represent a place onstage is always to contribute to an ongoing process of place identity negotiation.

The term *re-placing* intentionally draws parallels with the act of representation more broadly. Hall has argued that the term "representation" can be deceptive. He writes that it 'does sort of carry with it the notion that something was there already and, through the media, has been *represented*' (1997b: 6, emphasis in original). Yet, he contends, this is not the case. Drawing on the example of how newspaper headlines can serve to contextualise an image in a manner which privileges certain interpretations of that image in the mind of a reader over others, he writes that 'meaning "floats". It cannot finally be fixed. However, attempting to "fix" it is the work of a representational practice, which intervenes in the many potential meanings of an image in an attempt to privilege one' (1997b: 228). In its nod to representation more broadly, the term *re-placing* foregrounds a similar understanding of place identity. A given place does not have an objective meaning that, through careful enough observation, can be incontrovertibly said to be "correct". Instead, it holds only infinite *potential meanings*. Some performance texts defy specific placement, seeking to trouble prevailing forms of spatial logic. Nevertheless, a production which is set in a specific place, regardless of intent, will always filter those potential meanings and "fix" one set of meanings to the exclusion of others.

It is hopefully apparent that my approach throughout this thesis will be to do more than simply foreground a set of representations of regional England in order to argue that, through only recognising certain perceptions of the places they engage with, they are inherently false. The observation that places do not hold inherent meaning might be broadly categorised as a poststructuralist position and critical approaches informed by poststructuralism have long been accused of such smug fault-finding. Nevertheless, though himself healthily sceptical of poststructuralist modes of literary criticism, Eagleton, discussing the impact of Roland Barthes' seminal essay *The Death of the Author* (1977), comments that 'it is not as though "anything goes" in interpretation, for Barthes is careful to remark that the work cannot be got to mean anything at all; but literature is now less an object to which criticism must conform than a free space in which it can sport' (1996: 119). If one views stage representations as a form of commentary or criticism (in the sense of critique) of the place which they represent, then it becomes possible to view those representations as engaged in a similar act of "sporting" in the "free space" of place identity interpretation. The concern therefore becomes less a matter of identifying how "accurate" or otherwise a given representation of a place might be but, instead, one of considering how the meanings attributed to the place in question by that representation concur or clash with those attributed to the same place by other representations of it.

While it might be useful in highlighting the impossibility of identifying an objective, "true" meaning of a place, however, it is worth problematising this notion of a "free space" of place identity negotiation. As Hall writes elsewhere, certain attributions of meaning to a given phenomenon 'may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture [...] that they

appear not to be constructed—the effect of an articulation between sign and referent—but to be “naturally” given’ (1993: 95). This is evidently true of places. Whilst, in truth, each person who engages with a place might invest it with an entirely unique set of meanings, certain perceptions of that place will usually come to be more prevalent in cultural representations and popular discourses surrounding that place than others.

To return to the example of Manchester, an interpretation of the city which foregrounds its industrial heritage and the community and camaraderie which developed amongst its working-class residents during long hours labouring together in cotton mills has come to dominate representations of the city’s place identity. One might look, for instance, at the prevalence of the worker bee as a symbol for the city. As well as appearing on the city’s coat of arms, one can find it emblazoned on bridges, public waste bins, entertainment complexes and across the tiled floor of the city’s Town Hall. In the aftermath of the 2017 terror attack at the Manchester Arena, thousands of Mancunians (along with the American singer Ariana Grande who was performing during the attack) had the symbol tattooed on their bodies as a way of showing their defiance and deep connection to the city (O’Connor, 2018). Other allusions to Manchester’s industrial past can be found in the naming of Factory Records, the proprietors of the Hacienda night club and central force of the “Madchester” music scene of the late 1980s, and in the naming of offices and workspaces in the city in the present day. Numerous office buildings exist with names such as *The Assembly*, *Boat Shed*, *Beehive Mill* and *Flint Glass Works*. Whether these were the previous names of those buildings or not, the naming of such spaces, presently used by those working in the service industries which have largely supplanted industrial

employment in present-day Manchester, serves to foreground a connection with the city's industrial past and further hegemonize a conceptualisation of the city's place identity which prioritises notions of industriousness, hard work and community.

One might take an idealistic view of how certain attributions of meaning to a place come to be more dominant than others. Perhaps certain attributions of meaning simply resonate with a larger portion of those who engage with a place and, over time, the interpretation which resonates with the most people comes to dominate? Such a view is certainly alluring. In the previous chapter, however, I repeatedly stressed the centrality to the spatial turn of the recognition that human geography is a locus of power. And, this is equally true of place. Above, I cited Cresswell's description of place as 'space invested with meaning'. The full passage continues, however, that place 'is space invested with meaning *in the context of power*' (2004: 12, emphasis added). It is evident that inequities of economic, social and cultural capital will play a considerable role in which conceptualisations of a site's place identity will reach the largest audience. A journalist for a local paper, the owner of a successful local business or a member of a local council, say, will clearly have a far greater ability to influence how others perceive a place than someone without such a platform. Just as Peter Brook's "empty space" was, in reality, overflowing with power relations, then, so too is the "free space" in which those representing a given place "sport" subject to powerful economic and political forces which work to suppress certain attributions of meaning to a place whilst privileging others.

Furthermore, as hinted at above, place identities are not only shaped by

power; they also have considerable consequences for its future distribution. In his 1996 book *In Place/Out of Place*, Cresswell argues that 'we differentiate through place between "us" and "them", "in" and "out", "high" and "low", "central" and "marginal"' (1996: 161). To continue with the example of Manchester, Craig Young, Martina Diep and Stephanie Drabble have suggested that urban development companies working to "regenerate" central Manchester have sought to 'dispel Manchester's ex-industrial, northern city image and to replace it with a new "cosmopolitan" city-centre lifestyle' (2006: 1695). These developers' attempts to *re-place* the city centre in a manner deemed attractive to potential middle-class relocators has, the authors continue, relied 'on the construction of a working-class other' (2006: 1706). Brochures advertising the various apartment complexes, bars, restaurants and other developments being built have worked to frame activities associated with the middle class and elite as central to the city's place identity and those associated with the working class as marginal. The negotiation of place identity is thus central to what Said describes as the 'struggle over geography' with conceptualisations of a city's place identity often serving to legitimise the presence and power of some whilst presenting others as marginal or "out of place" (1994: 7).

To view a stage representation as an act of *re-placing* is thus, regardless of the intentions of those who created it, to view it as intervening in this struggle. It is to recognise that the act of representing a place on stage is inherently political. It is to ask whose interests a performance text's conceptualisation of a site's place identity serves. What experiences of that place does it imply are "central" and which "marginal"? What practices are deemed "normative" and which "other"? Does a performance text celebrate that place as it exists (or has existed at

another moment in time) or critique it? It is to consider how, in affirming or contesting dominant perceptions of a given place, stage representations intervene in extra-textual processes of place identity negotiation and thus might impact how that place is perceived and practiced within in actuality.

### **Contextualising Place on Stage**

Throughout this thesis, I therefore consistently interrogate the relationship between text and context. In doing so, I draw in part on Knowles' notion of a 'materialist semiotics' (2004: 22), as developed in his 2004 book *Reading the Material Theatre*. As the term itself implies, materialist semiotics is an approach to performance analysis which 'combines a cultural materialist approach as it has developed in Britain with theatre semiotics as it has evolved in Europe and North America' (2004: 9). Semiotics views theatre and performance as, in Elaine Aston and George Savona's words, 'a sign system' (1991: 3); it seeks to inquire into how theatre and performance uses the various signifying devices at its disposal—including dialogue, movement, light, space and anything else a creative team might throw into the mix—to infer meaning in the minds of an audience. Cultural materialism, as Chris Barker explains, stresses that cultural texts (including performance texts) are 'the consequence of a range of material activities embedded within material circumstances' (2004: 39); it foregrounds the fact that cultural texts are *produced* and thus subject to the same constraints as any other commodity created, marketed and sold under the capitalist mode of production. Knowles argues that synthesising these two approaches can provide 'a method that brings the analysis of the material conditions for the production of meaning to bear on the close reading of performances in the contemporary theatre' (2004: 14). In so doing, materialist semiotics enables 'a more precise and more fully

contextualised and politicised understanding of how meaning is produced in the theatre' (2004: 9).

My focus is primarily on the relationship between each performance text and what Knowles refers to as their 'conditions of production' (2004: 19); throughout, I consider 'the ways in which the cultural and ideological work done by a particular production may be seen to have been mediated by the cultural and, particularly, theatrical conditions through which it has been produced by theatre workers' (2004: 10). As in the brief survey of post-war British playwriting undertaken in my introduction, I examine how the manner in which each performance text I discuss *re-replaces* the location it engages with might be influenced by (or, alternately, might resist the influence of) the material and textual London-centricity of English theatre. Moreover, in each chapter, I consider how the productions I analyse respond or otherwise relate to contemporary social, political and/or economic questions facing the city or region they *re-place*. The result is a politicised reading of the texts I analyse which foregrounds the relationship between the performance text itself, the material contexts in which that text was produced and contemporaneous extra-textual discourses surrounding the place identity of the location being *re-placed*.

Where my work differs from that of Knowles is that I largely bracket-off what he refers to as 'conditions of reception' (2004: 19). Whilst the 'spatial geographies of theatrical location' and a recognition that differently geographically-located audiences will often infer vastly different meanings from the same production is implicit throughout my study (2004: 11), I do not directly investigate how each production has been interpreted differently in different locations. This is partly the

result of a practical concern. As Knowles writes, his methodology is 'more problematic in practice than in principle, particularly when it comes to providing evidence of the ways in which productions have been read' (2004: 21). Knowles' solution to this is to draw upon 'local reviews of the same production in different places' (2004: 21). Here, the London-centricity of English theatre (in concert with the London-centricity of the English media) rears its head once more. As Lyn Gardner acknowledged in a 2016 article for *The Guardian*, the vast majority of English theatre critics are based in London, leaving 'theatre outside London less [...] likely to get critical attention' (2016). A lack of critical responses to each production as performed in the regions, along with the fact that not all of the productions I discussed did tour to more than one venue would thus have made such an analysis very difficult indeed. Whilst I regularly indicate local factors which may have inflected an audience's reading of a production, then, I forego the comparative approach advocated for by Knowles in order to focus more resolutely on the relationship between the performance text and the conditions of production which may have enabled, constrained or otherwise shaped the "cultural and ideological work" which each production does with regard to the place identity of the location it *re-places*.

There are several similarities in terms of the material contexts in which theatre and performance are produced in the three locations I discuss during the course of this thesis. For one, theatre-makers and producing organisations in all three regions operate within a national theatrical ecology dominated by London. Furthermore, the legacy of what Rowell and Jackson refer to as the 'repertory movement' of the early- and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (1984: 1) means that, as Cochrane reports, much theatre and performance which takes place in regional England



'happens inside building-based theatres or externally but within their artistic purview' (2013: 304); in many cases, much of the public subsidy diverted to these regions is concentrated in one building-based organisation located in an urban centre which casts a long shadow over the rest of that region's theatre and performance sector. Nevertheless, there is much that is unique to each region about the circumstances in which theatre and performance is made. Moreover, with reference to the broader processes of place identity negotiation into which each of the productions I discuss intercede, the economic and ideological formations at work vary wildly. Deindustrialisation and attempts to regenerate regions in its wake are certainly a running theme yet, in each location, these processes take highly different forms and appear to be having very different consequences. Given that I have stressed the necessity of recognising the distinctive experiences of different places, I therefore think it would be reductive to try and present a unified outline of the contextual matters relevant to each of my case study regions here. Instead, I will introduce the material and/or ideological contexts most relevant to each place I discuss in the introduction to the corresponding chapter. Before proceeding to those analyses, however, I believe it worthwhile to provide an outline of the place-informed critical framework I will employ within my analyses of the productions which I put into conversation with those contexts.

### **Untangling Place**

Noel Castree has written that 'place is among the most complex of geographical ideas. In human geography it has three meanings: a point on the earth's surface; the locus of individual and group identity; and the scale of everyday life' (2009: 153). Some studies which draw on the concept of place give a greater emphasis

to one of these meanings than to the others. Beatriz García's work evaluating the effect of Glasgow's hosting of the European Capital of Culture title in 1990 on how that city has been *re-placed* in print media, for instance, focuses primarily on matters of "group identity" and the ascription of meaning through discourse (2005). As I explained in the previous chapter, much of the existing scholarship on the relationship between place and performance has focussed on "the scale of everyday life". In truth, however, picking and choosing between these three definitions when discussing theatre and performance is simply not possible. As an artform which combines speech and movement, sound and images, words and space, theatre carries over much of the complexity of place as experienced in actuality into its representations.

It is not only in dialogue that a performance will infer meaning about a place, for instance, it is also in its scenography as well as in more subtle ways such as in the forms of employment characters are engaged in, how they spend their free time, the clothes they wear, the opinions they express and how each character reacts to the choices of others. The kind of social and familial networks that characters exist within and the quality of the relationships between them (from hostile to entirely peaceable) will also contribute to how a performance *re-replaces* a site. Whether characters are depicted as frequently leaving and returning to the place in question—commuting elsewhere for work perhaps—or whether a place is portrayed as isolated from the world around it will be equally notable. While I have suggested that the primary focus of this study will be on how stage representations intervene in ongoing processes of place identity negotiation, then, it is evident that theatre productions do so through engaging with place in all its complexity. Unpacking what meanings a stage representation attributes to

a place thus requires one to engage with that text through a theoretical lens cognisant of this complexity.

In the previous chapter, I introduced several theoretical models for discussing space and place including Lefebvre's spatial triad (1991: 38-39) as well as Soja's concept of Thirdspace (1996). The underlying principles of space as "socially produced" and of the relationship between the "real" and "imagined" experiences of space and place are, as I hope to have already articulated, highly influential to this study. Nevertheless, several frameworks exist which engage more directly the terminology of place. David Seamon, who approaches place from a predominantly phenomenological standpoint, for example, foregrounds six "place processes" which 'maintain and buoy places; or, on the other hand, [...] undermine and shatter places' (2018: 167). Seamon uses the terms *place interaction*, *place identity*, *place release*, *place realisation*, *place intensification* and *place creation* to refer to related yet distinct processes through which a portion of space is transformed into and sustained as a place or, alternately, work to erode meaning and return that place to being an abstract portion of space once more (2018: 167-168). The model which I draw upon in this thesis, however, is that devised by Agnew in his 1987 book *Place and Politics*. Agnew's model, which encompasses all three of Castree's definitions of place, has been highly influential and is regularly cited in introductions to place as a concept. Furthermore, where Seamon's six processes have been devised to enable a phenomenological analysis of place, Agnew's model, initially developed as a critical framework for exploring place as a contributor to individual and collective political outlook and practice, is more easily used as the basis for semiotic analysis.

Agnew argues that ‘three aspects to place can be identified: locale, location and sense of place’ (1987: 5). He writes that *locale* refers to ‘the structured “microsociological” content of place, the settings for everyday, routine social interaction provided in a place’ (1987: 5). *Locale* thus foregrounds place as practiced and invites us to consider how places are habitually encountered by those who frequent them. Concurring with the tenets of the “non-representational” theories discussed in the previous chapter, *locale* identifies that the meaningful relationships humans develop with places are greatly informed by how we physically behave within them. Lest this sound too idealistic, *locale* also encourages us to consider how those “habitual” engagements with place might be structured and to identify why certain practices might be encouraged and others deemed improper within a given place.

*Location* refers to both ‘the relationship between places’ as well as ‘the impact of the “macro-order” in a place (uneven economic development, the uneven effects of government policy, segregation of social groups, etc.)’ (1987: 5). *Location* in many ways pre-empts Massey’s suggestion that how we behave in and think about place is informed not only by what occurs within a place but by the ‘relations [...]—economic, political, cultural—between any local place and the wider world in which it is set’ (1991: 28). *Location* foregrounds the movement of people, ideas, commodities and capital from and to a place. On an ideological level, it might also involve considering whether a place is considered to have solidarities or rivalries with other places. Furthermore, it asks us to think about how broader economic, political and social policies and trends on the scale of the nation, region or globe manifest in specific ways in specific places.

Finally, *sense of place* refers to ‘the subjective orientation that can be engendered by living in a place’ (1987: 5-6). *Sense of place* thus refers to place as a locus of identity. Where the previous two aspects to place primarily foreground our habitual and practical engagements with place, *sense of place* invites us to consider the manner in which those who live in (or have any other kind of relationship with) a place might engage more explicitly in a critical and reflective manner with notions of a collective place identity.

Agnew’s three aspects to place share a great deal with both Lefebvre’s and Soja’s models.<sup>37</sup> As long as one remembers that each of these aspects are, in truth, inseparable and that each informs (and is informed by) the others, Agnew’s model provides a means for delineating between interconnected processes in order to allow for a more focussed discussion of how we come to act within and attribute meaning to places. As a tool for the analysis of performance texts, it enables one to consider how a production engages with place in multiple ways. In response to some of the criticisms of place as a potentially conservative or reactionary conceptual lens, it also offers a model for place which recognises place as relational and constantly evolving.

In each of the analyses I undertake in this thesis, I draw on Agnew’s three aspects to place as an organising principle for my discussion. Doing so allows me to consider how a production engages with each aspect to place in turn before coming to some broader conclusions as to how that production represents the

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<sup>37</sup> Although they are not entirely reducible to one another, one might find similarities between Agnew’s locale and Lefebvre’s perceived space, Agnew’s location and Lefebvre’s conceived space and Agnew’s sense of place and Lefebvre’s lived space, for instance.

place it evokes onstage as a whole. Alongside coherence, my utilisation of Agnew's model also lends my analyses further rigour, ensuring that each aspect to place is given at least some level of consideration when discussing each production. It is not a rigid framework; there are often overlaps between each aspect and, when discussing some productions, one or two aspects will be more relevant than others. Nevertheless, it provides a coherent framework for unpacking the complex manner through which a production *re-places* a site.

While Agnew's model provides a means to organise my discussion of each performance text, my consideration of each aspect to place draws on a range of scholarship from both human geography and theatre studies. In the following three sections, I therefore flesh out this critical framework for performance analysis further. Focussing on each aspect to place in turn, I foreground relevant literature from both fields which will further inform my analyses. In order to provide a clearer illustration of how these ideas will be used in performance analysis, I do so by putting them into practice in a brief analysis of Rimini Protokoll's *100% Salford* (2016).

Commissioned by and performed at The Lowry in Salford as part of the 2016 iteration of the venue's biennial Week 53 Festival, *100% Salford* is an iteration of Rimini Protokoll's *100% City* project in which the company have used the same framework to devise productions in cities worldwide. Unlike many of the productions discussed later in this thesis, *100% Salford* was performed entirely by participant-performers who are residents of Salford. As with other cities that Rimini Protokoll have created a version of *100% City* in, the performers were recruited to reflect the demographic make-up of the city. As Salford is comprised

of 50% women and 50% men, for instance, the performing company similarly comprises 50% women and 50% men (with these categories intersecting with several other criteria including age, ethnic group, residential location within Salford and relationship status). The goal, according to Rimini Protokoll, was to put 'the humanity into statistics as we examine what it is to live in this incredible, varied city in 2016' (2016). This was achieved in several ways. One sequence, for instance, sees the participant-performers asked a series of questions such as 'who has done open water swimming on the Quays?' (Rimini Protokoll, 2016: 37:33), to which they respond by moving to sections of the stage marked "me" or "not me" in order to signal their agreement or otherwise. Elsewhere, performers deliver short monologues which reflect on their lives and their relationship with Salford. Whilst the productions analysed later in this thesis are all narrative-driven and few involve non-professional performers in a significant manner, I hope that my discussion of *100% Salford* shows that this framework can be used in analysing stage representations of places no matter what form they take.

### ***Locale* in Performance**

*Locale* refers to place as it is habitually encountered and experienced in the everyday. The most obvious element that one might take into account when viewing a place through the prism of locale is its physical appearance. The architecture of a place implies a great deal about its supposed function and this carries over fairly directly into stage representations of places. One might consider, for example, how the scenography of a production conjures up certain locations. Moreover, Garner writes that naturalistic productions set in cities often rely upon 'metonymic strategies for staging urban landscapes' with certain sites being used to stand in for a place as a whole (2002: 98). The choices made as

to which sites might be used for this purpose thus reveal something about the version of the place that production is presenting us with.

*100% Salford*, however, is an interesting case as, in-keeping with its form, it makes little attempt to mimetically evoke Salford in its scenography; the only stage dressing is the same revolving, green, circular carpet that Rimini Protokoll have used in other iterations of the *100% City* project. In order to unpack how *100% Salford* represents Salford as locale, it is therefore necessary to focus on how the production engages with the city as a site of practice. As I have discussed above, our relationships with place are not only the product of conscious, reflective thought but also of embodied experience. In fact, it is probable that most people who engage on a regular basis with a place do so through physically acting within it far more than through consciously mulling over the meanings that have been attributed towards it. Nevertheless, whilst, as de Certeau has argued, the practices we undertake in a place might be 'characterised by blindness' to the impact they have upon that place as a locus of meaning (1984: 93), they continue to contribute to the development of place identity.

Seamon has foregrounded a similar idea. He refers to the process through which practice in a shared site turns a portion of space into a meaningful place as a 'place-ballet', suggesting that it is 'through habitual meetings in time and space' that 'an area can become a place shared by the people who come into spatio-temporal contact there' (1980: 161). Again, there is no indication that anyone participating in this place-ballet has any intention of creating meaning. As a place comes to be habitually practiced in, however, meaning is created nonetheless.



Throughout his work, Cresswell is expressly interested in the relationship between place, practice and meaning. He writes that 'places are neither totally material nor completely mental; they are combinations of the material and mental and cannot be reduced to either' (1996: 13).<sup>38</sup> Central to Cresswell's conceptualisation of this relationship is the notion that places encourage a level of conformity. He suggests that, when we enter a place, we have a tendency to observe how others are acting within it and to copy that behaviour. Over time, this leads to the emergence of what he calls 'normative geographies' (1996: 10). In order to illustrate how this leads to the attribution of meaning, Cresswell takes the example of a church. One element of the normative geography of many Christian churches in the Anglican and Catholic traditions is the act of kneeling during prayer. Cresswell posits that 'kneeling in church is an interpretation of what the church means' yet 'also reinforces the meaning of the church' (1996: 16). The belief that a church is a sacred place informs the way in which people act within it and, in turn, the presence of individuals acting in a reverential manner further reinforces the perception of the church as a sacred place. In some cases, this will involve a critical engagement with the meaning of a place; a devout Christian, for instance, will kneel in a church precisely because they understand it to be a sacred site. Nevertheless, many non-Christians will, informed by the practice of others, also kneel when in a church. And, despite their own belief system investing that place with little importance whatsoever, their actions will still serve to support the attribution of notions of sanctity to it.

The existence of normative geographies presupposes the existence of what

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<sup>38</sup> This echoes Soja's conceptualisation of places as "real-and-imagined" (or perhaps "realandimagined") (1996: 11).

Cresswell calls 'heretical geographies' (1996: 11): practices which are deemed improper or inappropriate within a certain place. And, in this tendency for place to work in a manner which normalises certain practices whilst vilifying others, one further sees how place operates as a locus of power. As Cresswell writes, 'those who can define what is out of place are those with the most power in society' (1996: 39). Defining certain practices as "heretical" or otherwise inappropriate within a given place has the consequence of making some feel more comfortable in that place than others. By extension, some individuals and groups come to be excluded from that place or marginalised within it.

Although not explicitly drawing on Cresswell's work, Kirsty Sedgman has argued that contemporary British theatre auditoria have become the site of highly contentious debates surrounding normative and heretical geographies. In her 2018 book *The Reasonable Audience*, she argues that the normative geography of British theatre auditoria, which tends to involve stillness and quietness, whether enforced by venue staff or simply through the fear of disproving glances from other audience members, works to exclude those who might prefer to engage with live performance differently. She argues, for instance, that theatres 'overwhelmingly [prioritise] the experiential preferences of privileged whiteness, and as such often work to make people of colour feel "uncomfortable", "inferior", and "out of place" (2018: 110). The normative geographies of many British theatre auditoria thus work to exclude Black people and people of colour. By extension, they also come to be associated with whiteness.

While *100% Salford* might not seek to represent Salford as locale visually, it regularly engages with the city as a site of practice. In one sequence, two

participant-performers approach microphones positioned either side of the stage and, alternating, call out times of the day, starting at 5am through an entire 24-hour cycle (Rimini Protokoll, 2016: 29:50). As this happens, the performers each individually mime the activity they would usually be doing at that time. This includes all manner of activities from washing the dishes to driving a car to sleeping. What is interesting in terms of the production's representation of the city as locale are the moments of convergence and divergence which emerge. The section is introduced, for instance, by Debbie who declares that she is 'the lark of the house' getting up 'every morning at 5am' to 'do [her] exercises and have a cup of tea' (2016: 29:40). When the rest of the company begin miming what they are doing at the same time, however, it becomes evident that Debbie is an anomaly, with only a handful of the rest of the company also being awake at this time. As the hours roll forward, there begins to be a level of conformity amongst the company; by noon, only one of the performers remains asleep, the vast majority miming what appears to be work or education. Nevertheless, by 11pm, a new anomaly appears. Most of the company mime being asleep while a handful remain on their feet, dancing (or, in the case of one of the younger members of the cast, being on the computer). What makes this scene engaging to watch, then, is precisely the way in which, from a hundred personal routines, similarities become evident and normative geographies established, with the "heretical" practices (waking early, sleeping late, clubbing *etc.*) providing an amusing counterpoint.

*100% Salford* thus intentionally foregrounds Salford as being home to a wide range of practices and, through placing them alongside one another, actively encourages us to identify which are normative and which "heretical".

Nevertheless, it discourages us from engaging too critically with how this might lead to inequitable power relations between those who conform to the practices favoured by the majority and those who do not. This sequence follows one in which the participant-performers remind the audience of the statistics which they have been recruited to represent. Here, an emphasis is put on both the residential districts of Salford in which the participant-performers live and the ethnic composition of the performing company. The intention is evidently to encourage us to view the city's demographic diversity as a strength, in a way that largely occludes the manner in which either residential location or ethnicity might be indicative of economic, social or economic capital. The fact that Rimini Protokoll 'could only recruit one person' who was Asian or Asian British (2016: 26:05), for example, is quickly brushed over, despite this raising questions about how empowered the 4% of the city's population who are Asian or Asian British feel when it comes to engaging in civic artistic activities such as this.<sup>39</sup> We are thus invited to view Salford's diversity of practice as a positive whilst remaining uncritical of how the "normalisation" of certain practices might be influenced by and operate in the service of power.

*Locale* is perhaps the most complex of Agnew's three aspects to place. It encourages us to consider how a place, as habitually encountered and practiced within, constructs meaning. This can involve analysing its physical appearance or the practices which occur within it. As a visual and physical medium, many of the methods used for analysing locale in actuality can be easily appropriated for the study of theatrical representations. Nevertheless, as the case of *100% Salford*

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<sup>39</sup> There is also something rather uncomfortable about the framing of two of the performers (both, for what it's worth, children) as "mixed ethnic group" without those performers being given the opportunity to expand on how they define their ethnicity (2016: 27:28).

makes clear, whilst acts of *re-placing* can work to reveal how dominant understandings of what a place means and of what practices are deemed normative within a place relate to power, at other times they can also work to obscure those relationships.

### ***Location in Performance***

As I use it in this thesis, the term *location* refers to the examination of two distinct yet related phenomena. The first is the relationships between one place and others. For, though places are defined by their distinctiveness from that which surrounds them, they are never entirely walled-off from the outside world. Indeed, whether as a result of contemporary globalisation or advances in communication technologies, Castree argues that the past 50 years have seen places becoming ever more connected. He writes that the ‘challenge’ is thus ‘to explain an apparent paradox: how can places remain different at a time when they’re more interconnected—indeed interdependent—than ever before’? With this perceived paradox in mind, Castree thus argues that ‘a concept of place fit for our times in one that sees *place differences as both cause and effect of place connections*’ (2009: 154, emphasis in original). Such a view asks us to recognise that the meanings we attribute to places are informed as much by their relationships with other places (and to the wider field of space) as by that which occurs within them.

Sometimes, a relationship between two places might contribute to a city’s place identity discursively. It may be that two places have common interests, such as having a long-standing history of mutually-beneficial trade. In other instances, two places might simply have similar histories which invite a sense of solidarity. To return to the example used above, Manchester is “twinned” with Chemnitz in

Germany, with the Manchester City Council website stating that this is due to Chemnitz sharing ‘a similar industrial heritage with Manchester’ (2020). Places also often come to be defined in opposition to other places. For a 2018 paper, Alice Butler, Alex Schafran and Georgina Carpenter analysed a pool of 2,337 posts from the website Twitter, all of which originated from within the UK or Ireland and included the term “shithole”.<sup>40</sup> Of the posts they analysed, they found that ‘cumulative “other” geographies (i.e., other area, other city, other region, other nation, and international) were most frequently stigmatised and branded as “shitholes”, with 36.6% of all tweets directed at the “other” geographical scale’ (2018: 500). Though not the central focus of their article, Butler *et al.* posit that, in many cases, ‘denigration [is] being used as a method of othering, stratification and self-identification based on definition of an “other”’ (2018: 502). Ascribing negative meanings to a place that one does not feel a sense of place attachment to is thus, here, a method of attributing positive meanings to a place that one does have some affinity with. Of course, the opposite might also be true, describing another place in a positive light might be read as a manner of denigrating the place in which one resides.

A similar mode of attributing meaning to a place through comparing it to other places can occur within stage representations. In defining his notion of the heterotopia, Foucault foregrounds the manner in which theatre ‘brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another’ (1986: 25). If, as Solga has argued, heterotopias ‘invite “foreign” spaces into conversation in real time and place’ and are thus ‘spaces where difference can be framed, recognised, and reckoned with’ (2019: 74-75),

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<sup>40</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines a “shithole” as ‘a wretched place’, in this usage referring to ‘a remote, downtrodden, or unpleasant city, town, *etc.*’ (2011).

it stands to reason that a performance text will at least tacitly encourage us to compare the places it features (or mentions) with one another.

*100% Salford* is again an interesting example here as, throughout the piece, considerable emphasis is put on the relationship between Salford and Manchester. Salford is both a place on its own terms and part of Greater Manchester, with no countryside separating the city from Manchester itself. This can cause both confusion and tension. In one sequence, one of the participant-performers recalls that 'when I got my MBE, I was quite upset because when they shouted my name up, they said Thomas Lever for services [to] Lower Kersal in Manchester. I said to Prince Charles, I'm not from Manchester, I'm from Salford' (2016: 35:26); a retort which elicits cheers from the audience. Thomas then asks whether the rest of the company 'considers Salford to be a city' (2016: 35:48). Underlying this question is that of whether, regardless of its official designation as such, the company consider Salford to be a city *in its own right*. Salford's connection to and distinction from Manchester regularly gets explored elsewhere in the production through the proxy of whether individual performers support Manchester United, Manchester City or the more local (but less successful) Salford City.

Connected to this consideration of a place's relationships to other places is the question of how porous or otherwise a place is implied to be; is it portrayed as cut off from the world around it or as bearing witness to frequent arrivals and departures? *100% Salford*, for example, regularly foregrounds journeys that have been made to the city. The opening sequence of the production involves each of the participant-performers introducing themselves to the audience and telling us

about an object that they have chosen to bring with them. Throughout, an emphasis on geography is apparent, with performers either revealing a life-long attachment to the city or recalling their journey to it. Melissa, for example, tells us that she has 'lived in Salford all my life' (2016: 01:36), whilst Maria tells us that she has 'brought the wedding album, it reminds me about family we left in Poland' (2016: 05:35). Many of those who have come to the city from elsewhere in the country or the world pair a revelation of the "routes" they have taken to Salford with the "roots" they have laid down in the city.<sup>41</sup> Wendy tells us that 'I came to Salford 40 years ago and I'm still here, so this is my city' (2016: 13:36). Murat, too, tells us that 'I am originally from Turkey. I brought with me a picture of my wedding that took place five years ago in Salford registry office' (2016: 19:58). A picture thus begins to be painted of a Salford that is open to the world and defined by the journeys that have been made to it as well as that which has stayed consistent.

*Location* therefore involves examining place as relational. It invites us to recognise the inherent interdependence of places and to consider the manner through which meaning comes to be ascribed to them through both affective and material relationships with other places and with the spaces of the region, nation and globe. It ensures that, even whilst focussing on the idiosyncrasies of a place, one does not view it as entirely decoupled from the world around it. With regard to performance analysis, location enables us to consider how these relationships are represented, whether they are acknowledged or not and, if so, what influence a performance text implies these relationships have upon what the place represented means.

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<sup>41</sup> This "roots" and "routes" wordplay is one which is invoked often in writing about space and place. See, for example, Gustafson's article in *Environment and Behaviour* (2001).



## ***Sense of Place in Performance***

The final element of Agnew's three aspects to place is *sense of place*. This, he explains, 'refers to the subjective orientation that can be engendered by living in a place. This is the geosociological definition of self or identity produced by a place' (1987: 6). It is this aspect of place which speaks most directly to the notion of place identity as discussed earlier in this chapter. As I noted, drawing on Lewicka, the term place identity can have two meanings. For Proshansky, it refers to the ways in which the places with which we engage (whether through living within them, working in them or having any other form of relationship with them) shape our individual identities (1978: 155). While I do regularly consider the ways in which a certain place (and representations of it) might encourage certain behaviours or attributes in individuals, however, for the purposes of this thesis, I primarily use the terms *place identity* and *sense of place* to refer to the collective notions of identity engendered by place.

In some respects, all three of Agnew's aspects to place relate to this notion of a collective identity. What distinguishes my discussion of sense of place is a focus on conscious and intentional engagements with what a place means. Where, in discussing locale and location, I draw out how aspects of a production which initially might seem relatively inert (such as what behaviours and practices are presented as dominant within the place a production is set and the journeys that characters take between that place and others) work to attribute meaning to the place being represented, when discussing sense of place, I am instead interested in more overt engagements with matters of identity.

*100% Salford* is often hesitant to present its audience with a coherent interpretation of the city's sense of place. Some emphasis is put on the tensions that have emerged as a result of recent changes within the city. The decade prior to *100% Salford* had seen the redevelopment of a portion of what was Manchester Docks into MediaCityUK, a primarily commercial and leisure development which is now home to over 200 businesses, many either technology or media based (MediaCityUK, 2018). Alongside a shopping centre and numerous office buildings, MediaCityUK includes television studios used by the BBC and ITV, a campus of the University of Salford and The Lowry, the theatre in which *100% Salford* was performed. Throughout the production, one gets the sense that the arrival of MediaCityUK has been something of a shock to Salford's ecosystem. At the very opening, Melissa states that 'I have lived in Salford all my life and I have never seen as much changes as there's been in 22 years' (2016: 01:36). When the company are asked 'who likes new developments in Salford like MediaCity' (2016: 34:44), all but two of the company move to the "Me" portion of the stage, with only three more moving to the "Not Me" section when they are subsequently asked 'who feels they have benefited from these new developments' (2016: 35:00). Nevertheless, the production is not entirely uncritical of these shifts in Salford's economic base and architectural fabric. In her opening monologue, for instance, Melissa suggests that 'Salford is a city of contrasts with a large employment area such as where we are now in Salford Quays but the inner-city still struggles with inequality and [un]employment' (2016: 01:02). *100% Salford*, therefore, does hint that the benefits of such developments have not been felt equally by everyone in the city and, by extension, that not everyone identifies with the new sense of place that the arrival of MediaCityUK has begun to establish.

As interesting in terms of *100% Salford's* discourse on Salford's sense of place are the two songs which feature in the production, performed by Louis Barabbas and the Debt Records Collective. The first of these, *Landscape with Chimneys*, was written especially for the production and was described by the band as being 'inspired by Ewan MacColl's *Dirty Old Town*' (Debt Records, 2016). *Dirty Old Town* is itself about Salford, written by MacColl to accompany a scene change in his play *Landscapes with Chimneys* (1951), from which the song featured in *100% Salford* takes its name.<sup>42</sup> The first line of *Landscape with Chimneys* (the song) directly reworks that of *Dirty Old Town*, with the "gasworks wall" against which the protagonist of MacColl's ballad met their love being replaced by an 'outlet mall' (Rimini Protokoll, 2016: 46:47). If MacColl's song is about finding romance amidst the industrial smog, *Landscape with Chimneys* is about finding something similar amidst the 'dishwater grey' commercialism of the corporate developments that have taken the place of the docks, factories and canals (2016: 46:50). The song initially seems hostile to these developments. Where MacColl sung of "clouds [...] floating across the moon", *Landscape with Chimneys* suggests there is now 'no moon at all' (2016: 46:52). With its frequent references to cleaning, the song suggests that Salford's place identity is that of a city which has been scrubbed of any ability to foster romance or place attachment. Gradually, however, the song grows more ambivalent. The band sing that 'money is the sickness and money is the cure' and suggest that 'we're all guilty' (2016: 47:12). Where, in the early lines of the song, regeneration is painted as a kind of Faustian pact for the city, it is gradually reframed as unavoidable; the

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<sup>42</sup> *Landscape with Chimneys* (the play), is not explicitly set in Salford but Claire Warden has argued that, 'with its "thousand factories" and impoverished working class, the similarities are too obvious to be ignored' (2012: 87).

song remains sceptical towards the developments and the new, “cleaner” sense of place they are fostering but accepts them as necessary for the city to continue to exist.

Such direct engagements with what Salford’s sense of place might be, however, are few and far between. Whilst *100% Salford* continually highlights tensions within the city, the form of the piece essentially occludes the possibility of it providing the audience with any kind of synthesis with regard to the city’s place identity. Much of the production is devoted to the participant-performers revealing their opinions on topics ranging from equal adoption rights for LGBTQ+ people to the film *Frozen* (2013). Yet, once they have revealed to the audience where they stand on these matters, the production quickly moves on to a vote on the next motion. One of the propositions asks the participant-performers whether they have been ‘affected by violence in Salford’ (2016: 36:23), with around 40% of the performers stating that they have. Nevertheless, one can only speculate on whether or not this might lead to any of the performers identifying the city with violence as, again, the production quickly segues into one of the performers delivering a monologue about their obsession with genealogy.<sup>43</sup>

It might be possible to view this as a radical intervention in Salford’s sense of place. Massey has argued that, in studying places, it is important to be wary of ‘the idea that places have single, essential identities’ (1991: 26). Discussing Massey’s work, Castree concurs, writing that ‘there is ultimately no one sense of place or place identity (think of how a poor immigrant woman in Hackney, London, might view that place as opposed to a wealthy young male professional’ (2009:

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<sup>43</sup> It is also notable that the participant-performers are forced to respond to the questions they are asked in a binary fashion, with their being no middle-ground between “Me” and “Not Me”.

164). Each of the 100 individuals on stage thus likely has an entirely different perception of Salford's sense of place, and perhaps this focus on tensions rather than resolutions reminds us of the subjectivity of any coherent conceptualisation of the city's place identity?

Yet, this is a somewhat idealistic position. Numerous, clashing visions of Salford's sense of place may exist. To not consider the question of which perception of the city's sense of place is dominant, who agrees with that perception and who is discomforted by it, however, is to elide the relationship between place identity and power. As I have argued above, any site's place identity works to "centralise" the experiences of some whilst "marginalising" those of others. *100% Salford* is entirely uninterested in how differing conceptualisations of Salford's sense of place might operate in this way. In a similar manner to the sequence which celebrates the city's ethnic diversity whilst brushing over Rimini Protokoll's failure to recruit three of the four people required to represent the city's Asian and Asian British population, *100% Salford* settles for celebrating how broad the range of perceptions of Salford's sense of place is without ever inquiring into how those perceptions of the city's communal identity might empower some whilst disempowering others.

This focus on Salford as a 'city of contrasts' (2016: 01:02) with regard to perceptions of its sense of place and the corresponding lack of interest in interrogating how those perceptions might be informed by (and help to sustain) the distribution of power within the city is best understood by considering what Knowles calls the 'conditions of production' surrounding the piece (2004: 19). For, although *100% Salford* appears to have been commissioned solely by The Lowry

(which, though it receives funding from ACE, Salford City Council and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, has a considerable degree of independence in deciding what it produces), versions of *100% City* are regularly commissioned directly by city governments. *100% Melbourne*, for instance, was commissioned by the City of Melbourne, with its programme containing messages from the Lord Mayor, the Minister for the Arts for the State of Victoria and the area's indigenous elders (2012: 4-6). City governments may wish to portray their jurisdiction as diverse and cosmopolitan, but they likely do not wish to focus too heavily on how power is distributed within their city. There is thus an economic motivation on the part of Rimini Protokoll to avoid doing so in order to ensure the project remains marketable to other cities.

To return to the discussion of *sense of place*, as I use it in this thesis, sense of place draws attention to a performance text's intentional, conscious engagements with notions of identity. This will often, though not always, involve analysing spoken dialogue. Sense of place enables the discussion of moments in a production where, in contrast to the other two aspects to place which tend to present as more inert and require some drawing out, there are clear engagements with the "spirit" or "energy" of a place, what it means to be from that place and what a place's communal place identity might be.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have given some insight into the methodology which will inform the analyses I undertake in this thesis. Drawing on the existing scholarship on place, including that by Agnew, Cresswell, Massey and others, I have further outlined why I believe the critical analysis of stage representations of regional

England to be an essential pursuit. I have articulated that place is a locus of power and that representations of it (on stage or elsewhere) are both informed by the ways in which power is distributed within a place and, regardless of intent, serve to either legitimise or contest dominant perceptions of what and who is considered “central” and what and who “marginal” within that place. Any performance text which evokes a real-world place on stage thus has the potential to considerably influence how those watching that production perceive of and act within that place in actuality. And it is this process, in which a performance text intervenes in the ongoing negotiation of place identity by *re-placing* a site that is the central focus of this thesis.

## Chapter Four

### 'There is no "here" anymore'

#### Artists, Audiences and Authenticity at the Nottingham Playhouse

As I explained in my introduction, the English theatre industry is, like so much else in English culture, politics and economy, dominated by London. The city attracts a far greater amount of public arts subsidy than any other location in England whilst also hoovering-up the vast majority of money donated to the arts by individuals, trusts and foundations (Stark, Gordon and Powell, 2013: 8, 26-27). This, alongside the city hosting 47% of all theatre performances taking place in England (Naylor *et al.*, 2016: ii), means that London looms large in the minds of all involved in making theatre across the country. I also discussed in my introduction the manner in which an inequity of opportunity works to tacitly encourage theatre-makers of all stripes to move to London in order to better their chances of fostering a sustainable career in the industry. While it is certainly possible to forge such a career elsewhere in the country (and while being based in London might lead to greater competition from the surfeit of other theatre-makers based in the city), the concentration of producing companies, theatre venues and industry press in the capital means that those who can will often feel the call to relocate.<sup>44</sup> Finally, I drew upon this dynamic in order to consider how the *geography of theatre* in England might be reflected in its *theatrical*

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<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting here that, as James Graham attested in his evidence to the Labour Party's *Acting Up* inquiry into access and diversity in the performing arts, this presents a significant barrier to embarking on a career in the theatre industry for those whose economic, social and/or familial situation means that they cannot make such a move (2017).



*geographies*. I argued that London's domination of the English theatre industry is mirrored in the texts it produces, with the cultures, practices and people of regional England often coded as "other" in comparison with a metropolitan "norm".

In this chapter, I continue my discussion of the relationship between *geographies of theatre* and *theatrical geographies*. In particular, I consider how the concentration of theatre performances in London might encourage an emphasis, in the creation of performance texts, on legibility to a London-based audience. In a 2018 article in *The Stage*, Mark Shenton argued that securing London transfers for in-house productions has increasingly become a key focus for regional producing houses.<sup>45</sup> He suggested that 'a London transfer will inevitably increase a venue's profile and potentially earn it valuable ancillary income' (2018). Elsewhere, Naylor *et al.*'s *Analysis of Theatre in England Report* (2016) stresses that, in correspondence with the report's authors, 'venues expressed a wish to see more touring by the national companies' including the National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company (2016: 4). Cochrane has suggested that seeking approval 'within the spatial formation of metropolitan influence' has long been a focus for regional theatres and the artists which reside within them (2013: 310). As these organisations have come under increasing financial pressure due to dwindling subsidy, however, they appear to be further prioritising their relationship with London, either as a source of "high quality" touring stock or as a touring destination to make in-house productions more

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<sup>45</sup> A "producing house" here refers to a theatre venue which creates theatrical productions to be performed on its own stages and, often, elsewhere, as opposed to a "receiving house" which solely presents touring work created by external companies. As producing houses often also host touring productions, an "in-house" production refers to one which has been produced by that theatre.

lucrative and “noteworthy” within metropolitan critical discourses.<sup>46</sup>

In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), Jill Dolan writes that, while theatre audiences are, like any gathered group, inherently heterogeneous,

the performance apparatus that directs the performer's address [...] works to constitute that amorphous, anonymous mass as a particular subject position. The lighting, setting, costumes, blocking, text—all the material aspects of theatre—are manipulated so that the performance's meanings are intelligible to a particular spectator [...]. Historically, in North American culture, this spectator has been assumed to be white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male. (1988: 1)

With even regional theatres prioritising the hosting of productions produced in London and its periphery and creating productions with the potential to tour to the capital, I would like to argue that, on this side of the Atlantic, this “assumed spectator” finds themselves geographically located too. Informed by the *geography of English theatre*, performance texts are created to be readable by an ideal spectator resident in, or at least having some kind of affinity with, London.

While this might seem a pessimistic pronouncement, in this chapter I foreground some instances of resistance. In the following pages, I consider the role that regional theatres might play in destabilising both the material London-centricity of English theatre and the tendency of that industry to create productions with a metropolitan spectator in mind. In doing so, I risk falling foul of

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<sup>46</sup> This is likely to be exacerbated by the financial instability which regional theatres have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing, for example, Theatre Royal Plymouth has begun the process of making all of its artistic staff redundant (Bakare, 2020), signalling that the theatre will not be producing *any* work in-house for the foreseeable future. Where regional theatres do continue to create their own productions, there is likely to be an even greater focus on maximising the return on their investment, including through securing London transfers.

Williams' warning that, in considering how such cultural phenomena are established and maintained, 'it is an underestimate of the process to suppose that it depends on institutions alone' (1977: 117). However, while I hope to have already acknowledged the role of individual agency, it is worth noting that the production of a piece of theatre is highly dependent upon the involvement of institutions. In particular, the presentation of a piece of theatre necessitates a venue for performance. While there exist numerous theatre companies and practitioners who create work outside of conventional auditoria, designated theatre venues continue to hold a distinguished position in the minds of both artists and audiences. *The Stage's* annual "Theatre Power" list, for instance, highlights how dominant Artistic Directors and Executive Producers of theatre buildings are perceived to be, only occasionally overshadowed by West End producers such as Sonia Friedman or celebrity performer/directors such as Kenneth Branagh (2017). In a context in which theatre buildings are so influential, then, such an emphasis on the role of institutions does not seem so naïve.

### **Nottingham Playhouse**

The institution which is my central focus in this chapter is Nottingham Playhouse. In November 2016, it was announced that Giles Croft, who had been the theatre's Artistic Director since 1999, would be stepping down from the role and would be succeeded by Adam Penford. Despite an impressive string of directing credits—including work at the National Theatre, Hampstead Theatre and Donmar Warehouse—the press release announcing Penford's appointment eschewed the opportunity to talk up his CV in favour of foregrounding the director's relationship with Nottingham. Penford himself was quoted as saying that 'I was born and raised in Nottingham and had my first theatrical experiences as a child

at the Playhouse', with Stephanie Sirr, the venue's CEO, adding that Penford had 'impressed the Board with his combined passion for Nottingham and his artistic vision' (in Nottingham Playhouse, 2016). In the following months, Penford's 'local boy' status was repeatedly wheeled-out as evidence for him being the right person to lead the organisation (My Theatre Mates, 2016).

As is often the case when an organisation comes under new direction, there was much talk following Penford's hiring about the changes that his tenure might bring. Writing in *The Guardian*, Gardner commented that Penford's arrival 'may mark a turning point for the venue. Despite successes under Croft, the Playhouse has not had the sense of purpose of some of its immediate neighbours' (2017). Whether Gardner's assessment of the theatre's success under Croft is accurate or not, the announcement of Penford's debut season did seem to seek to reinvigorate perceptions of what the organisation could achieve. A production of Alan Bennett's *The Madness of George III* (1991) starring Mark Gatiss, for example, aimed to prove that the Playhouse could attract high-profile performers and create commercially-lucrative work. Alongside this in the forthcoming schedule, however, sat a revival of Beth Steel's 2014 play *Wonderland* and a new play called *Shebeen* (2017) by Mufaro Makubika. What made these latter plays stand out was that both were written by playwrights with deep connections to Nottinghamshire and that both took the region itself as their setting. While Nottinghamshire had not been entirely absent from the Playhouse's stage under Croft, the instances were few and far between. Furthermore, it was only on rare occasions, such as the 2017 revival of Stephen Lowe's *Touched* (1977), that these engagements with the region were granted the prominence (and associated budget) of the main auditorium rather than, as with Nick Wood's *The*

*Underground Man* (2016), being relegated to the 110-seat Neville Studio. The locally-inflected framing of Penford's appointment thus precipitated a similar turn in Nottingham Playhouse's programming, with two productions with the surrounding region at the heart of their text being granted residence on the theatre's main stage for multiple weeks.

There were many possible reasons for this turn. Perhaps this was a conscious attempt by Penford to ingratiate himself with the Playhouse's local audience. The pre-existing example of *Touched* would suggest that there might have been an economic rationale for engaging with Nottinghamshire in this way too. Following that production, Sirr revealed that an 'innate demand' for tickets had allowed the theatre to increase seat prices to such an extent that audiences paid 'top rate even for seats at the back of the circle' (in TRG Arts, n.d.). *Touched* perhaps provided an indicator that producing a show with a local focus (albeit a revival of a relatively well-known play) could not only provide a clear "sense of purpose" for the venue but also increase turnover. Finally, perhaps there were entirely uncynical motivations for staging these plays and Penford and his team merely had an artistic desire to represent the local area on stage and felt that *Wonderland* and *Shebeen* did so in an engaging way.

Whatever the reasons behind doing so, including two productions which engaged so explicitly with the region in which the theatre is situated seemed a notable development. Equally important to note is that neither production was performed solely at Nottingham Playhouse. *Shebeen* transferred directly to Theatre Royal Stratford East whilst *Wonderland* followed its Nottingham performances with a run at Northern Stage in Newcastle. Above, I argued that,

whatever the *geography* of a given production, the prestige associated with the securing of a London transfer often leads to the creation of performance texts designed to be readable to a metropolitan audience. At first glance, the 2017 productions of *Wonderland* and *Shebeen* seem to have tried to subvert this tendency. Both can be viewed as examples of a regional theatre utilising its influence as one of the “big 12” regional English theatres to contest the customary relationship between London and regional England through creating and touring performances created specifically for a regional audience.<sup>47</sup>

In the following pages, I utilise the place-informed approach to performance analysis developed in the previous chapter to consider how the *geography of theatre* behind *Wonderland* and *Shebeen*, in which plays by Nottinghamshire playwrights were produced by a Nottingham theatre with the involvement of numerous creatives from the region, relates to the *theatrical geographies* of the resulting performance texts. In this instance, my discussion of *geographies of theatre* focuses heavily on playwrights and production companies (which, in the case of the Nottingham Playhouse, is also a theatre venue). Nevertheless, I hope the manner in which these discussions might be extrapolated out to other creatives is implicit. Prior to discussing *Wonderland* and *Shebeen*, however, I first undertake an analysis of James Graham’s 2017 play *Labour of Love*. *Labour of Love* was also written by a playwright with a considerable connection to Nottinghamshire and also takes the region as its setting. Yet, the production was neither produced by a company from the region nor has it, to date, been

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<sup>47</sup> While regularly used within the industry, publicly-available references to the “big 12” regional English theatres (a group of largely ex-repertoire theatre deemed to have a considerable degree of prestige) are rare. That being said, the phrase does appear once in the *Analysis of Theatre in England* report (2016) and again in a 2015 letter from Deborah Aydon, Chief Executive of Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, to *The Stage* (2015).

performed outside London. As such, it provides a useful point of comparison in considering how who is involved in the creation of a performance text, and who that text is created *for*, might shape the theatrical geographies present within.

### **Labour of Love**

*Labour of Love* was a co-production between the Michael Grandage Company (MCG) and Headlong and was performed at the Noël Coward Theatre in London's West End from 27<sup>th</sup> September to 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2017. Written by James Graham, the play is set in the constituency office of the fictional Nottinghamshire MP David Lyons (played by Martin Freeman) and employs an Epic chronology to track the changing lives and electoral fortunes of the local Constituency Labour Party and its members from 1990 to 2017. Performed amid a period of heightened internal conflict within the Labour Party following the election of Jeremy Corbyn as party leader in 2015, *Labour of Love* dramatises the changing contours of the rift between the Labour Party's democratic socialist and social democrat traditions and explores how shifting allegiances to and within the party (particularly in Nottinghamshire but also elsewhere) might relate to contemporary processes of deindustrialisation.

As discussed in my introduction, although appointed as an Artistic Associate of Nottingham Playhouse in October 2018, Graham's prior relationship with that institution and the region more generally had been somewhat contested. In addition to his never having been commissioned by the Playhouse and the rarity with which Nottinghamshire had featured in his work, productions of his plays had only infrequently toured to the region. Despite this, in recent interviews, Graham has been very keen to highlight his Nottinghamshire upbringing. Speaking to the

*Evening Standard* in 2018, for example, he suggested that his upbringing in the region gave him a unique knowledge of ‘what it felt like to grow up in a post-industrial town in the 1990s and feel voiceless’ (in Manzoor, 2018). There are echoes here of the comments made by Penford on joining the Nottingham Playhouse as Artistic Director. Nevertheless, it seems slightly incongruous to hear someone for whom, prior to *Labour of Love*, Nottinghamshire has never seemed an artistic priority so eager to present himself as being heavily shaped by the region.

With regard to *Labour of Love* (and the Channel 4 drama *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (2019) which the interview cited above was intended to promote), Graham’s statements on his upbringing might be viewed as an example of what Beswick has described as a ‘new writing trope where the life experiences of the playwright become authenticating mechanisms for stage representations’ (2019: 84). Beswick foregrounds the example of Andrea Dunbar and her play *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1982), recounting the frequency with which Max Stafford-Clark, who first directed that play, would highlight the fact that Dunbar had lived for much of her life on the estate around which the play is set in order to imply a degree of authenticity in the performance text’s representation of estate life. Graham here seems to be attempting to achieve a similar goal, to suggest that his having grown up in Nottinghamshire means that any plays or television shows he writes which are set in the region will be in some way “authentic”.

In my introduction, I argued that the UK’s Referendum on Membership of the European Union in 2016 fundamentally reconfigured how geography was discussed in mainstream British political discourse. As Kaufmann wrote in a blog



post for the London School of Economics, though geographical location turned out to be a fairly weak indicator of how one had voted in the referendum, the perception that Remain votes had been concentrated in London and Leave votes in regional England led to the referendum being parsed by the commentariat as ‘a protest vote by those left behind by modernisation and globalisation. London versus the regions, poor versus rich’ (2016). Drawing on this perception of the Leave vote as a “protest” by a disempowered regional England, in the month following the referendum, Rufus Norris, then one year into his tenure as Artistic Director of the National Theatre, described the vote as a ‘huge wake-up call for all of us to realise that half the country feels that they have no voice’ (in Gentleman, 2017). Given its London-centricity, it is no surprise that, as Alex Sierz articulated in an article in *Performing Arts Journal*, there was a sense within the English theatre industry that the art form would need to change in order to better represent the nation as a whole (2017). Dom O’Hanlon, Commissioning Editor at Methuen Drama, for instance, suggested that, as a Northerner working in theatre, he’d become ‘used to Southern bias and Northern stereotypes, so much so that I’m probably immune to them’ and that theatre needed to ‘[break] out of the London-centric bubble’ (2016).

While Graham’s comments on how his Nottinghamshire upbringing shaped his outlook on the world were likely grounded in some truth, then, it is important to position his desire to foreground those roots against this discursive backdrop. For, although Graham had already established himself as one of the UK’s foremost dramatists of representative politics through the success of productions such as *Tory Boyz* (2008), *This House* (2012) and *Ink* (2017), the post-Brexit political context had reconstituted regional England as a privileged site within

English political discourse. Within this emergent, geographically-inflected political discourse, Graham's foregrounding of his regional upbringing thus served to frame him as perfectly positioned to provide the new insight that post-Brexit English theatre supposedly needed.

The marketing materials for *Labour of Love* engaged even more directly with this geographically-inflected rhetoric. The promotional copy on the webpage for the production stressed that, whilst the play would retain the scope of Graham's previous work in presenting audiences with 'a clash of philosophy, culture and class', it would be 'set away from the Westminster bubble'. Rather than call Nottinghamshire by its name, however, the promotional copy instead settled for describing the region as an example of 'the [Labour] party's traditional northern heartlands' (Headlong, 2017). In doing so, it drew in a further aspect of post-Brexit political discourse. As Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin reported a year after the vote, the Leave campaign 'attracted majority support in approximately 70 percent of Labour-held areas, winning especially strong backing in poorer northern post-industrial areas' (2017: 25), despite the Labour Party officially backing the Remain campaign. In a manner which echoes the concerns within the theatre industry, then, there followed a debate surrounding whether Labour had lost touch with voters in regional, post-industrial England.

As Ford and Goodwin continue, this defiance on the part of voters in areas which had long voted for the Labour Party led to then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn coming under criticism 'for failing to deliver an unambiguous and passionate case for Remain' (2017: 24). In June 2016, this resulted in Owen Smith, MP for Pontypridd, challenging Corbyn for the leadership of the party in

the second leadership election in as many years. While Corbyn's leadership had proved divisive within the party since his initial election in 2015, the 2016 referendum came to be framed as the final straw, with Smith stating that he worried 'about there being a split' and describing the party as 'standing on the edge of a precipice' (BBC News, 2016a).

The ensuing leadership contest became an early testing ground for the geographically-inflected rhetoric which had emerged in the aftermath of the Brexit vote. Andrew Crines, David Jeffrey and Timothy Heppell write that there was a 'repeated insinuation' on the part of supporters of Smith 'that Corbyn [was] too London-centric and part of a narrow metropolitan elite' (2018: 366), while Smith's campaign team publicly expressed concerns that their own candidate might fall victim to similar accusations (Mason, 2016). There was thus a clear desire among both campaigns to avoid being associated with London and to claim the mantle of the "left behind" regions.

Amid this discursive context, Graham's decision to depart from his usual approach of exploring the nation's representative politics through dramatizing the comings and goings of sites such as the Houses of Parliament or the newsroom of *The Sun* newspaper and to engage with how such matters are experienced from a regional perspective makes a great deal of sense. With the perceived desires of those living in the post-industrial regions (and in particular the North of England) featuring so heavily in debates surrounding the Labour Party leadership contest and British politics more generally, placing those sites on stage seemed to speak well to that particular moment in time.

As mentioned above, however, despite its Nottinghamshire setting, *Labour of Love* was the product of a highly London-centric *geography of theatre*. Both producing partners, MCG and Headlong are based in London and the production was performed solely in the West End. This is interesting in relation to Beswick's notion of "authenticating mechanisms". For, Beswick posits that their very deployment often reveals a certain assumption about who the audience for a given production will be. She suggests that, when the performance text in question draws upon working-class subject matter, the playwright is 'almost always positioned as an "other" — a means by which the theatre-going (presumably middle-class) elite can further enrich their understanding of the world' (2019: 87-88). In his comments cited above, there is an extent to which Graham appears to be attempting to secure such a position of mediator between regional subject matter and metropolitan audience for himself; something further evidenced by the fact that he made those particular comments to the *Evening Standard*, a newspaper circulated exclusively in London. From a material and promotional point of view it therefore seems fair to suggest that *Labour of Love* was aimed almost exclusively at the assumed metropolitan spectator described at the opening of this chapter. The question to be asked, then, is whether the production took advantage of the shift of the attention of national political discourse away from the capital and toward the regions in order to insert new perspectives, or whether this privileging of metropolitan spectators extended into the performance text itself.

### **Nottinghamshire as Locale in Labour of Love**

Whilst, temporally, *Labour of Love* spans a full 27 years, the onstage action remains located exclusively within the constituency office of David Lyons MP. At

the curtain's rise, the audience is introduced to David and his constituency officer Jean (Tamsin Greig). It is the night of the 2017 general election, and both are waiting anxiously in the constituency office as the votes are being counted across town in Nottingham's Festival Hall. Soon, a report comes in from a colleague at the count which reveals that the latest tally has David trailing the local Conservative candidate by 129 votes. This might be a blow to any candidate but, in David's appeal to Jean to tell him 'how long since this seat wasn't Labour' and to confirm how 'historic' his 'failure' is (Graham, 2017b: 4), we quickly learn that, in this constituency, it is truly shocking.

Although the production evades specific placement within Nottinghamshire, this opening exchange hints that *Labour of Love* took influence for its setting from constituencies such as Ashfield and Mansfield.<sup>48</sup> The latter returned Labour MPs to Parliament consistently from 1923 to 2017. In 2016, however, the town defied the party's endorsement of a vote to remain in the European Union, registering the seventh-highest Leave vote of any UK local authority (Gartzou-Katsouyanni *et al.*, 2018). Then, a year later, what one commentator described as 'the unthinkable' happened (Quinn, 2017), and the former Labour safe-seat elected the Conservative Ben Bradley.

While the matter of whether David will keep his seat certainly seeks to pique the audience's interest, then, the central dramatic question of the play is *why* he has come so close to doing so; how is it that an area which once voted Labour so dependably has even flirted with electing a Tory? In pursuit of an answer, the

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<sup>48</sup> In a 2017 interview with *Prospect Magazine*, Graham implied that *Labour of Love*'s setting might indeed be Ashfield, yet he quickly brought Mansfield into the conversation too (Dickson, 2017).

play presents us with a series of scenes following an ensemble of local Labour Party activists through the period between David's ascendancy via by-election in 1990 and the evening of the 2017 general election. The play first cascades backwards through time, from 2017 to 2011 to 2001 to 1994 to 1990 before, after the interval, tracking forwards again through each of these years. As I will discuss in the following section, each of the play's characters in some way represent a different tendency or tradition within the Labour Party. Yet, they also come to represent different responses to deindustrialisation in a region for which the extraction industries were once a key source of employment, identity and community.

*Labour of Love*, therefore, very much sets out to present the audience with what was often referred to in the wake of the Brexit referendum as a "left behind" region.<sup>49</sup> Early on, Jean directly invokes the post-Brexit geographical-political lexicon when she tells David that 'we were left behind. Weren't we?' (Graham, 2017b: 6). In doing so, the play suggests that, over the course of its run time, it will reveal to us exactly what being "left behind" means and how this particular constituency within Nottinghamshire came to be so.

A considerable emphasis within the play is placed on changes to employment within the region. In the two scenes set in 2011, David, Jean and the Deputy Leader of the local council, Margot (Susan Wokoma), are charged with convincing a Chinese businessman, Mr Shen (Kwong Loke), to choose Nottinghamshire as the location for a new train manufacturing facility. In doing

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<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, in a 2014 blogpost for *Discover Society*, the sociologist Lisa McKenzie used the residents of Ashfield as an example of what she called 'the "left out", the other "other", the white working-class who have felt at the mercy of a changing globalised world, leaving them behind and in which they have not felt included for a long time' (2014).

so, they conjure up an image of a great industrial tradition in the region. David describes manufacture as being 'in our DNA', noting that 'Arkwright's mill, the first ever factory' which 'birthed the industrial revolution' is 'just down the road' (2017b: 29). Similarly, he adds that 'there's been limestone mining, in this area, for centuries' (2017b: 28). Nevertheless, there is a sense of desperation in the air; a desperation that becomes most evident when David, suffering from a bout of nervous perspiration, attempts to apply some deodorant, discovering only too late that, in his haste, he has picked up a can of whipped cream instead.

The source of this desperation is soon made clear. A nearby Government Data Centre, a significant local employer, has recently closed and David, Jean and Margot are desperate to find a new economic base for the town. The coming-to-power of a Conservative-led government only adds to the pressure with David suggesting that 'we're particularly vulnerable, with so many jobs in the public sector, to cuts from this new government' (2017b: 27-28). Where David implies that this moment represents a once-in-a-lifetime rupture in the region's locale, however, Mr Shen takes a different position. Instead, he suggests that, even prior to the closing of the local limestone quarry (an event which is central to the two scenes set in 1994), the region has been consistently economically stagnant. Mr Shen suggests to David, Jean and Margot that,

before, there was money pouring into these quarries, and mines, [...] digging for things you no longer needed. Your answer was to fill those holes, and build on top these "centres". Which you didn't really need. And ... now they're closing too? Is that not work for work's sake[?]. (2017b: 28)

While David remains adamant that securing the manufacturing facility (which itself would be supported by incentives from central government) would lead to

'jobs that would lead to spending and lead to growth and then to jobs that could sustain themselves' (2017b: 28), Mr Shen remains unmoved in perceiving Nottinghamshire as a region locked in a terminal cycle of economic stagnation.

*Labour of Love* does seek to highlight some of the challenges that come with Nottinghamshire's supposed inability to sustain an economic base without outside support. In the opening scene, for instance, David reveals that a lack of employment in the local area has compounded with cuts to welfare and social security programmes to devastating effect. Scrolling through emails from constituents, he lists some of the issues being faced: 'DLA benefits frozen, fella with spina bifida told he's fit to work, fella can't get his dad into a care home, [...] no school places, "why is the library closing?"[,] sanctions on job seekers, food banks' (2017b: 105). For the most part, however, the production focusses on foregrounding what might be called the "infrapolitical" responses that have emerged to these circumstances.

James C. Scott describes infrapolitical acts as 'low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak their own name' (1990: 19). Guillaume Marche expands on this definition, writing that,

because they are deprived of access to legitimate channels of expression, subaltern people will not vent their frustrations or claims in conventional political ways, but rather in discreet, stealthy ways—their goal being not to gain official legitimacy, for which they are somehow disqualified, but to make a claim for dignity. (2012: 4)

Infrapolitics, then, refers to minor acts of resistance to systems which the enactor sees themselves as having little ability to change. These acts often have no impact on the systems themselves, but, nevertheless, provide the enactor with



the feeling of agency; they may not have altered the system, but they have also not entirely given into passivity. The primary example of this in *Labour of Love* is the wry gallows humour shared by many of the play's Nottinghamshire-based characters. When she finds out about the opening of a branch of Aldi nearby, for instance, Margot responds by quipping that there 'used to be a Morrisons here, and before that a Tesco. That's a better indicator than GDP, ey David? From Tesco to Aldi in three short years' (Graham, 2017b: 22). Such darkly comic responses to the weight of the region's situation are part of a wider set of dominant practices which, it is implied, have arisen as a means of persevering in the face of adversity. Such perseverance is most evident in Jean who, in David's description, is 'hard as nails, a legend in her own town' (2017b: 17). This hardiness is not only apparent in her consistent campaigning but also in the emotional traumas she endures: through the course of the play she loses one husband from pneumoconiosis (a respiratory disease common in miners) and divorces another.

What is notable is that, in a manner consistent with Mr Shen's assessment of the region, *Labour of Love* presents both these economic hardships and the infrapolitical practices which have been developed in response to them as consistent over time. Despite its Epic structure, there is a relatively stability in *Labour of Love's* depiction of Nottinghamshire as locale. Rather than answering the question of how Nottinghamshire came to be "left behind", *Labour of Love replaces* the region as having always had a tendency to be economically lagging.

### **Nottinghamshire as Location in Labour of Love**

Although *Labour of Love* is certainly interested in exploring the economic and

social challenges that Nottinghamshire has faced in the past and is facing in the present, the driving force of the play's narrative is the turbulent relationship between David and Jean. Initially an alliance of convenience between a naive MP parachuted in by the party elite and a committed campaigner wary of such interferences in the party's internal democratic processes, their relationship throughout the play oscillates between visible hatred and concealed love. Alongside providing *Labour of Love* with a level of intrigue in terms of whether they will admit their feelings for one another, David and Jean's relationship also serves as an allegory of the often fraught relationship between the social democratic and democratic socialist tendencies within the Labour Party.<sup>50</sup> Though this is later deconstructed, the play initially frames this debate as centring on the matter of whether the Labour Party should promote radical policy platforms aimed at transforming the lives of society's most vulnerable or, alternatively, prioritise getting elected even if that means compromising in its pledges to the electorate. Over the course of the production, both these positions come to be heavily geographically-coded and, thus, this ideological tension becomes central to *Labour of Love's* re-placing of Nottinghamshire as location.

While each of the play's characters sit somewhere along the Labour Party's ideological spectrum, the two furthest poles are represented in caricature-like fashion by Elizabeth (Rachael Stirling), David's wife, and Len (Dickon Tyrrell), the leader of the local council. A close friend of Cherie Blair (2017b: 49), Elizabeth is very much of New Labour stock, displaying an almost pathological fear of the Labour Party's more overtly socialist traditions such as marching with banners or

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<sup>50</sup> While the play very clearly associates the former group with the New Labour project, it is a little vaguer about the second group, although it faintly aligns this faction with support for John Prescott's candidacy for leader of the Labour Party in 1994 and that of Jeremy Corbyn in the 2015 and 2016 contests.

the singing of *The Red Flag* (2017b: 51). And, from the moment she steps on stage, this political position is paired with a view of Nottinghamshire as being nothing more than ‘a spring board [...] to Something Else’ (2017b: 112). Elizabeth makes little attempt to hide her perception of David’s victory in Nottinghamshire as simply a foothold from which to begin an ascent towards the front bench and, perhaps, beyond. Indeed, David’s increasing contentedness with being a constituency MP—and thus, in Elizabeth’s eyes, abandonment of ambition—is a key factor in their eventual break-up. Elizabeth is therefore heavily inspired by perceptions of New Labour devotees as ‘apparatchik-careerist[s]’ (Cooper, 2017), loyal only to themselves. Yet, the primary outlet this careerism finds in *Labour of Love* is in Elizabeth’s view of Nottinghamshire. Her assessment of the region as valuable only in so far as it might offer personal gain therefore serves to bind the New Labour project to a notion of metropolitan cultural elitism, suggesting that its supporters have little interest in Nottinghamshire as a meaningful place.

In stark contrast to Elizabeth, Len is a horn-playing, Kier Hardy-worshipping, devout socialist. Yet, while their politics might be different, Len and Elizabeth’s relationships with Nottinghamshire have a great deal in common. In the published playtext, Graham introduces Len as being ‘London born, nominally middle-class, with a slightly affected working-class tone’ (2017b: 48), and, though Len clearly goes much further than Elizabeth in integrating into Nottinghamshire by becoming Leader of the local council, it is regularly implied that his attachment to the region might be just as disingenuous. Len regularly bursts into tirades about how New Labour has ‘damage[d] the movement, and the party that I love’ (2017b: 109). Doing so, however, necessitates waving off David’s reminders of achievements

such as ‘lifting millions out of poverty’ and ‘record investment in hospitals, schools, police’ which undoubtedly had a positive effect in Nottinghamshire (2017b: 109). Graham’s characterisation of Len is thus inspired by perceptions of those on the left of the Labour Party as ‘ideologues’ (Katz, 2020), who will always prioritise staying true to their values even if this means being unable to put them into practice. Len’s relationship with Nottinghamshire, by extension, comes to be framed as just as indifferent as Elizabeth’s, with the implication being that those on Len’s wing of the party will always choose ideological purity over having a meaningful impact on the lives of people in Nottinghamshire.

In this way, *Labour of Love* clearly channels elements of the post-Brexit spatial imaginaries discussed in the introduction to this thesis and earlier in this chapter and transposes a political dichotomy onto a geographical one. Len and Elizabeth are both positioned as different flavours of a metropolitan elite either unable or unwilling to acknowledge the needs and interests of Nottinghamshire. The play therefore comes to associate having a degree of place attachment to London with being politically suspect and insincere.

In contrast to this, the characters within *Labour of Love* who have deep, often life-long place attachments to Nottinghamshire are portrayed as having a strong sense of sincerity and “authenticity”. This is evident in Jean and Margot’s constant campaigning to help those living in the region, often against the odds, and their relative lack of interest in internal disputes within the Labour Party. The manner in which having a place attachment to Nottinghamshire becomes associated with notions of authenticity, however, is most evident in David himself. For, throughout the play, David undergoes a gradual redemption from ambitious

careerist to dedicated constituency MP. And, while his commitment to winning elections never wanes, David's motivations increasingly become less selfish than they first appear.

In the scenes set in 1994, the Labour Party is undergoing a leadership election during which David expresses frustration at being 'powerless, to do anything, because for the Fourth, Fucking, Time in a row, [we] couldn't get [our] shit together' (2017b: 91). Rather than solely wanting to win in order to further his career, however, by this point, his desire to win has become far more predicated on the notion that forming a government on a less radical platform and being able to do *something* is infinitely better than losing on a more ambitious platform and being able to do *nothing*. It is notable that, alongside these disclosures about his motivations, the play also gradually reveals that, despite his being forced upon the constituency by party head office, David was 'born about fifteen minutes from here. [...] Went to the comp, Dad a joiner, Mum a machinist, yes Oxford, but scholarship — I was lucky' (2017b: 65). The concurrency of David's journey towards becoming a more sincere, less self-centred politician and the revelation of his Nottinghamshire roots thus further works to reinforce the play's association of London (here, through David's installation by Labour Party HQ) with untrustworthiness and insincerity and Nottinghamshire with notions of authenticity.

### **Nottinghamshire's Sense of Place in Labour of Love**

Notions of "authenticity" and the conceptualisation of Nottinghamshire as being incapable of fostering any kind of sustainable economic base both highly inform *Labour of Love's* suggestions as to what Nottinghamshire's sense of place might

be. After David, Jean and Margot fail to convince Mr Shen to choose Nottinghamshire as the site for the new train manufacturing facility in Scene Two, Margot becomes dejected and this leads her to directly express her thoughts on the region's sense of place. She begins to wonder why they put so much effort into trying to improve life for people living in the region, asking 'what's the point? There is no "here" anymore' (2017b: 35). In doing so, Margot suggests that the ongoing economic troubles that the region is facing has led to Nottinghamshire no longer entirely cohering as a meaningful place. It is evident both in David's foregrounding of Nottinghamshire's industrial past earlier in the same scene and the emotional weight that is placed on the closing of the local limestone quarry in the scenes set in 1994 that a considerable portion of the region's identity was drawn from industrial labour. With these gone, and the likelihood of them being replaced by anything new now seeming low, Margot therefore posits that there might be little sense of place left to hold those living in the area together.

This moment of the production is notable in its highlighting of how central notions of identity and meaning are to our perception of places; without them, Margot infers, it is hard to conceive of somewhere as a "here" (or as a place) at all. And this short line from Margot is indicative of *Labour of Love's* wider *re-placing* of Nottinghamshire's sense of place. Throughout, the play revels in the notion that, as a result of its failure to find a sustainable economic base, the region's sense of place has been gradually hollowed-out.

Related to this, *Labour of Love* comes to imply that Nottinghamshire's sense of place is bound up in notions of under-confidence. This is evident in Margot herself who, in the two scenes set in 1994, first visits the constituency office

having spent the past month passionately (though unsuccessfully) campaigning to halt the closure of the local quarry. When Jean suggests that she might ‘chip in’ and campaign for the Labour Party, however, Margot balks at the idea: ‘what, like, “politics” [?]’ (2017b: 82). In campaigning to keep the quarry open, Margot had considered her actions as simply an attempt to stop her Dad from becoming unemployed. As soon as it is suggested that, through very similar actions, she might be involved in something that might be referred to as “politics”, that self-regulating under-confidence rises to the surface and she begins to question her own suitability for such a task.

Elsewhere, Jean, despite her hardiness, exhibits a similar self-doubt. This is evident in her hesitancy to tell David of her feelings for him but also in her attitude to her political work. For the majority of the play, Jean appears entirely content in her role as constituency office manager with there being little to suggest she has ever contemplated running for office herself. In the play’s closing scene, when David implores her to do just that, Jean’s reaction mirrors that of Margot’s to campaigning. Jean reacts with anguish, retorting ‘me? What you talking about, me, no I can’t do that’ (2017b: 118). To David and to the audience, Jean very clearly has the makings of an outstanding MP yet, even when someone who she trusts dearly articulates this to her, the same internalised lack of confidence steps in, barring her from seeing the truth of her own abilities.

What is particularly notable about this closing exchange between Jean and David is that it is not merely presented as a local intervention but as a broader solution to the Labour Party’s supposed present disconnect from its “traditional” working-class base. David surmises in no uncertain terms that ‘Old Labour didn’t

hijack the party from me, New Labour didn't hijack it from them. We *all* hijacked it — from *you*. The future ... the *answer* ... is you, Jean' (2017b: 119, emphasis in original). In line with the geographical coding of the ideological tensions in the Labour Party discussed above, this thematic synthesis directly posits that Jean—and, by extension, other regional working-class people like her—standing for office would be a benefit to both a Labour Party seeking to reconnect with regional, post-industrial England and the country as a whole. And, furthermore, beneath its present under-confidence, it identifies Nottinghamshire with an innate wisdom currently absent from British politics.

### **Authenticating Nottinghamshire**

*Labour of Love* is heavily invested in the post-Brexit spatial imaginaries which, from 2016 onwards, have held that regional, post-industrial England has been “left behind” by the metropolitan centre. Amid such a discourse, the production implies that, in David's words, ‘the answer’ (2017b: 119), at least in so far as the Labour Party is concerned, to this supposed disconnect between the London-centric establishment and the regions is for voices from the regions to be better empowered to participate in the nation's democratic institutions. In many regards, this is a highly powerful statement to make, particularly given that *Labour of Love* was performed just a 20-minute walk from the Palace of Westminster.

One further way in which *Labour of Love* works to challenge dominant, London-centric narratives is in the terms on which the play suggests that Nottinghamshire has been “left behind”. As Lawrence McKay has argued, there has been both a ‘cultural explanation’ and an economic explanation given for this phenomenon (2019). The cultural explanation is given an airing by David in



*Labour of Love*. Ruminating on the challenges the Labour Party faces in the wake of the EU Referendum, he tells Jean that ‘we go “up” in university towns and cities for the same reasons we’re “down” round here. Lose the “heartlands” for being too soft on immigration, lose the young metropolitans for being too hard’ (Graham, 2017b: 12). Such cultural explanations have often taken precedence in post-Brexit political discourse, with the “left behind regions” being framed as hotbeds of racism and bigotry. This narrative has the effect of pushing aside discussion of interregional economic inequities whilst also discouraging those from elsewhere from viewing these areas with much sympathy. *Labour of Love*, however, gives far greater emphasis to the economic explanation for the “leaving behind” of Nottinghamshire, as seen in the scene in which David, Jean and Margot negotiate with Mr Shen. The play’s view of the region as being entirely unable to foster sustainable economic growth is highly simplistic.<sup>51</sup> By avoiding depicting people living in Nottinghamshire as inherently reactionary and foregrounding the economic challenges the region has faced, however, the play provides a further powerful retort to dominant, London-centric narratives about the post-industrial regions.

Nevertheless, it is worth digging deeper into the production’s suggestion that the London-centric establishment would benefit from spending more time listening to people living in Nottinghamshire. For, while *Labour of Love* explicitly positions Jean and other regional, working-class people like her as being, in David’s words, ‘the answer’ to the perceived slide in support for the Labour Party

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<sup>51</sup> In fact, in 2019, the *Financial Times* reported that the East Midlands was ‘the UK’s fastest growing region’ (2019); although it is important to recognise that this growth is likely not felt equally throughout it. It is also important to note that there exist many metrics for conducting economic comparisons of different regions, with these often conflicting with one another. Above, for instance, I highlighted that the 2019 *English Indices of Deprivation* report recorded Nottingham as the tenth most-deprived local authority in England (2019: 11).

in post-industrial regions (2017b: 119), it is notable that David only acknowledges Jean's clear suitability to stand for office after 27 years of his gentle coaching. While the play may suggest that the future of the Labour Party lies in fostering regional, working-class voices (perhaps those of regional, working-class women in particular), then, it seems to imply that only those who have absorbed appropriate education from the party's metropolitan clerisy need apply. In doing so, the production infers that, while the innate wisdom that *Labour of Love* attributes to Nottinghamshire is something which should be valued by the Labour Party, it requires heavy mediation so as to be acceptable to an electorate which is assumed to be metropolitan and middle-class.

In his 2018 book *Authentocrats*, Kennedy argues that, following the EU Referendum, a 'dominant narrative' has emerged in the UK 'that "real people" need to be "listened to" and "respected"' (2018: 11). In a manner consistent with *Labour of Love's* re-placing of Nottinghamshire as location, Kennedy continues that these discourses have often been geographically inflected, relying on 'the circulation of a one-dimensional portrait of "provincials" grounded in a simplistic, badly modelled opposition between them and the "elites of Islington", or wherever' (2018: 11). Even taking into account this simplification, such a narrative might still have the ability to foreground the concerns of the regional working class. Yet, Kennedy argues that, for all its supposed concern about those living in the regions, 'the provincialism of recent years has taken the form of [...] a kind of pseudo-ethnography [...] that pretends to be getting away from "metropolitan elites" to tell it like it is but, in fact, has already decided what it wants to find when it gets there' (2018: 78-79). He suggests that post-Brexit political discourse has often had little time for class and regionality as material phenomena, treating

them, instead, as aesthetic ones, with regionality drawn-upon primarily as a rhetorical device to give credence to pre-existing political ideas emerging from the metropolis.

David's late acknowledgement of Jean's suitability to stand for public office reveals a similar engagement with both "working-class-ness" and regionality within *Labour of Love*. For, Jean's character arc throughout the play is one in which she is gradually shorn of her initial radicalism. Through David's tutelage, she is slowly pulled away from her initial ideals and towards accepting David's ways of technocratic compromise. This ideological journey is not only evident in her changing political views during the debates which regularly break out in the constituency office but also in the allegory of her love life as she divorces Len, the radical leftist, and reveals her love for David. When David suggests that Jean run for office, then, it seems to be less that David has come to value Jean's insight as a regional, working-class woman and more that he has managed to shape her views to align with his. The suggestion that the Labour Party would benefit from fostering more regional, working-class voices thus seems to be predicated not so much on the prospect of these voices leading to a shift in policy but rather on being able to wrap up pre-existing ideas in an aesthetic of regional, working-class "authenticity".

Indeed, despite its promotional framing, *Labour of Love* provides little new insight into the internal geopolitics of England. Whilst it does foreground interregional economic inequality, it primarily does so within a framework of social exclusion and inclusion. As Ruth Levitas writes, this framework conceives of 'the primary significant division in society as one between an included majority and

an excluded minority' with the proposed solution to economic hardship and political disenfranchisement being the ushering of marginalised groups 'across the boundary to become an insider rather than an outsider in a society whose inequalities remain largely uninterrogated' (2005: 7). The manner in which *Labour of Love* associates Nottinghamshire with notions of under-confidence suggests that Nottinghamshire has not become "left behind" or marginalised because the UK's economic and political structures work hard to exclude it but, instead, puts culpability for that marginalisation on the shoulders of those living in the region themselves.

In a similar mode to the connotations of Jean becoming suitable to run for office after 27 years of David's tutelage, *Labour of Love* thus primarily uses the then-in-vogue aesthetic of regionality in order to defend the London-centric status quo. The primarily metropolitan audience gathered in the Noël Coward Theatre (which included several prominent Labour MPs during the run (Weigand and Saner, 2017)) may have found themselves harshly satirised at points, with their sincerity regularly brought into question. This audience may also have found itself being exhorted to recognise the existence of interregional economic inequality within England and the related sense of disenfranchisement felt by many living in the regions. Nevertheless, the play stops short of suggesting that the London-centricity of English politics, economy and culture might itself bear responsibility for these inequalities. Whilst there is some recognition of declining funding for regional local councils, that there exists economic deprivation in the first place is framed as being a consequence of Nottinghamshire being unable to sustain a local economic base and its political marginalisation is implied to be the result of an under-confident populace. While the play might provide this audience with

some insight into life in Nottinghamshire, it thus largely channels dominant, reified perceptions of the “left behind” regions in a manner which absolves the metropole of any responsibility for contemporary spatial inequality. Furthermore, in David’s 11<sup>th</sup>-hour acknowledgement of Jean’s suitability to run for office, it works to reassure its intended metropolitan audience of their own superior political insight.

## **Wonderland**

Written by Beth Steel, *Wonderland* bears several thematic similarities to *Labour of Love*. The play splits its focus between a group of miners working at the Welbeck Colliery in Meden Vale, Nottinghamshire prior to and then during the 1984-1985 miners’ strike and a set of Conservative party politicians and activists in London seeking to bring an end to the strike in order to proceed with a planned programme of mine closures. Similarly to *Labour of Love*, the play takes an unflinching approach to assessing still raw wounds in Nottinghamshire, dramatizing a key moment in contemporary deindustrialisation processes and the intra-community tensions that the miners’ strike fostered in mining communities across the country between those who joined in with the industrial action and those who chose to continue working.

Nevertheless, *Wonderland* and *Labour of Love* differ in their intended audiences. As I have discussed, although Graham reports having spent a significant amount of time in Nottinghamshire while writing *Labour of Love* (in Thorpe, 2017), it was written to be performed in London to a primarily metropolitan audience. *Wonderland’s* journey to production on the Nottingham Playhouse stage was less linear. Unlike the other shows discussed in the main body of this thesis, the 2018 Nottingham Playhouse production of *Wonderland*

was not its premiere. The play had previously been produced at the Hampstead Theatre in North West London in 2014 in a production directed by that theatre's then artistic director Edward Hall. It is important to note, however, that the play had not been written specifically with that theatre or director in mind. Being only Steel's second play, *Wonderland* was written entirely speculatively, with no concrete idea of where it would be staged if it were to be staged at all. Steel recalled in an interview with Gardner the frustrating experience of attempting to persuade theatres to even read the script (2014). Such a process of trial-and-error submission following an independent writing process is a far cry from Headlong and MGC's outright commissioning of *Labour of Love*.

Nevertheless, Hall did read the script and programmed an in-house production of *Wonderland* on the Hampstead Theatre's main stage. The promotional copy for that production suggests that Hall saw the opportunity to mark 'the thirtieth anniversary of the Miners' Strike' and to contribute to the debates surrounding the strike's legacy which would undoubtedly accompany such an anniversary (Hampstead Theatre, 2014). Prior to the opening of the show, Hall wrote of his excitement to creatively engage with 'a pivotal event that realigned the post-war political settlement and set the template for modern Britain' (2014). In their response to the production, however, many critics found a different emphasis in *Wonderland*, with reviews discussing the play's 'poetic' representation of Nottinghamshire, as both landscape and community, at least as much as the portrayal of the strike itself (Taylor, 2014).

Having clearly interpreted the play in a similar manner, when Penford announced that Nottingham Playhouse would be staging a revival of *Wonderland*,

he claimed that, in doing so, they would be ‘bringing it to its spiritual home’ (2018). The different resonances each director found in *Wonderland*—with Hall hearing echoes of a nation-wide event which had a seismic impact on British society and Penford finding more localised, Nottinghamshire-specific overtones—had a noticeable impact on how each production was framed to potential audiences. At first glance they might seem similar. Both the Hampstead Theatre’s claim that ‘as the daughter of a miner Beth Steel is uniquely placed to write about the seismic political events of 30 years ago’ (Galton, 2014) and Penford’s highlighting of the fact that ‘just over half of the cast are from the local region [...] Most of the company have truly personal connections to the coal mine’ (in Woodward, 2018) echo the authenticating mechanisms employed by Graham in order to position himself as an “authentic” mediator between regional, working-class subject matter and a metropolitan audience. However, I would argue that, in the case of the later production, such discourses were adopted for a slightly different purpose.

Nottingham Playhouse was evidently not framing *Wonderland* for an audience for whom the play’s subject matter would be “other”. Instead, the suggestion that those involved in creating the production would be able to *replace* the region “authentically” was intended to reassure a Nottinghamshire audience that not only is *Wonderland* a play *about* “people like us” and *for* “people like us”—at least in the sense that it was being presented in the region and the theatre would like to sell some tickets—but also that it has been created *by* “people like us”. I think it important, then, to distinguish between two different forms of authenticating mechanism. That employed by the Hampstead Theatre (and Headlong, MCG and Graham in relation to *Labour of Love*) might be

described as a *mediative* authenticating mechanism, the objective of which is to convince a (usually relatively empowered) audience that there will be a level of “authenticity” to a performance text which will give them an insight into the lives of an “other”. That employed by the Nottingham Playhouse, however, is perhaps best described as a *relational* authenticating mechanism in which the goal is to convince a (usually relatively disempowered) audience that the artists reflecting their community back at them will treat their stories with care because they have commonalities with that audience. There is some evidence that, in the case of *Wonderland*, the deployment of such relational authenticating mechanisms was successful, with Peter Mortimer, who describes himself as having been ‘born and brought up close to several pits in Nottingham’ and having ‘played half-back for Gedling Colliery FC for two years’, writing in his review of the show for *British Theatre Guide* that ‘the fact that Beth Steel [...] is the daughter of a Nottingham miner’ was a big part of the play’s appeal to himself and others (2019). The very invocation of the notion of “authenticity” means that relational authenticating mechanisms certainly have the potential to be just as problematic as mediative ones. Nevertheless, the power dynamics at play are very different.

While it may have proven insightful, I will not here undertake a comparison of the Hampstead Theatre and Nottingham Playhouse productions of *Wonderland*. I draw out these issues surrounding the writing, programming and promotional framing of each production simply to highlight the complexity of the *geography of theatre* behind *Wonderland*. In many ways, the Nottingham Playhouse revival of *Wonderland* felt like an attempt to reclaim a dramatic text which had been met with a relatively positive critical response for the region from which it draws its influence. However, while Penford may have attempted to



present the play as being created specifically with a Nottinghamshire audience in mind, this was evidently not the case. In fact, the different emphases in Hall and Penford's responses to the play suggest that, where *Labour of Love* had a very specific intended audience, *Wonderland* lacked such a clear velocity of communication. In the following sections, I thus consider how a more complex *geography of theatre* than that behind *Labour of Love* might have allowed for a less transactional *theatrical geography*.

### **Nottinghamshire as Locale in Wonderland**

According to Kennedy, one aspect of post-Brexit political discourse has been the propagation of a 'reified conception of class, most specifically [...] what it means to be "working class"' (2018: 32), and it would not be hard to levy similar accusations at *Wonderland*. For one, the play's cast is entirely comprised of men, continuing what Lisa McKenzie argues is a tendency for 'the lives and experiences of the history of women' to be 'left out of depictions of working-class life' (2015: 26). While the miners' wives and daughters play a crucial role in the play's narrative, not a single female character appears on stage and those that are mentioned exist solely to further the narratives of the men to whom they are related. Like many other cultural texts which engage with working-class communities, *Wonderland's* representation of Nottinghamshire as locale positions practices derivative of what R.W. Connell refers to as 'hegemonic masculinity' at the centre of the region's normative geography (2005: 36).

This is evident during the audience's first introduction to the Welbeck Colliery, around which much of the play is set, where we are introduced to Spud (Harry Hepple) and Fanny (Jack Quarton). Due to the oppressive heat in which

they work, both are stripped down to their briefs, their sweat-drenched bodies signifying that these are physical rather than intellectual beings. Furthermore, this early scene revolves primarily around the characters boasting about their recent sexual conquests. Spud is not only currently having an affair with ‘posh piece of skirt’ Christina but also holding out hope for a ‘*full* examination’ from Nurse McKenzie (Steel, 2014: 12-14, emphasis in original). Such misogynistic banter is a mainstay of scenes set in the pit. Later, Malcom (Chris Ashby) comes in for ridicule simply because his wife has given birth to a daughter, with Spud sarcastically reassuring him that ‘it takes a big man to sire girls’ (2014: 53). In this, there is some acquiescence to the notion, particularly prevalent in recent political discourse, that the regional English working class is in some way inherently reactionary. Nevertheless, *Wonderland* does at least contextualise such practices, reminding its audience that, if they are indeed as dominant as the stereotype suggests, they do not simply exist *a priori* but have very specific origins.

Through the characters of Malcom and Jimmy (Joshua Glenister), for instance, *Wonderland* suggests that a great deal of pressure was placed upon local young men to graduate straight from school to the pit. When, towards the opening of the play, they arrive at the pit for their induction, the site foreman, known only as the Colonel (Deka Walmsley), tells them that, even at sixteen-years-old, they ‘shoulda been down there two year ago’ (2014: 7). Choosing to work elsewhere is deemed a personal failing by men who ‘can’t hack it’ and, moreover, as ungrateful (2014: 8). While all acknowledge that the colliery is a mentally and physically gruelling workplace, it is considered—at least early in the play—stable employment amid the global recession of the early 1980s. Like the

gallows humour of the characters in *Labour of Love*, *Wonderland* thus implies that practices such as swearing, fighting and misogynistic banter are acts of infrapolitical resistance. Rather than simply engaging in such practices for the sake of it, *Wonderland* suggests that the miners have repurposed society's casting of them into alienatingly physicalised roles by reinterpreting that physicality—and, by extension, hypermasculinity—as a virtue.

Elsewhere, *Wonderland* suggests that while their treatment of the women in their lives is highly problematic, the pitmen's intentions are relatively well-meaning. This is evident in Fanny's complaint to the Colonel about a recent comedy act at the Working Men's Club. Despite his own expletive-laden conduct whilst at work, Fanny is clear that he 'will not pay good money to sit there listening to swearing' (2014: 14). His grievance specifically revolves around the presence of women in the room. In this he is supported by Bobbo (Tony Bell) who claims that 'there's two things the wife's never heard me do in all our years and that's fart and swear. I feel very fucking strongly about both' (2014: 15). Again, such behaviour aligns resolutely with reified perceptions of working-class communities as being highly patriarchal. Yet, as before, *Wonderland* provides context to this practice. Beneath this attempt to "protect" their wives' femininity lies a desire to retain a perception of respectability for themselves and their wider community.

Beverley Skeggs has suggested that the pursuit of respectability has long been a pressing concern for working-class people as a pretext to positioning themselves as 'a worthy, moral individual' against a popular discourse which more often associates the working-class 'masses' with immorality (1997: 3). Whilst Skeggs' work is primarily focussed on the experiences of women, Anoop

Nayak has suggested attempts by working-class men to remind others of their 'power in certain circuits' can also be an attempt to claim respectability (2006: 825).<sup>52</sup> Crucially, this obsession over respectability is one which does not emerge from within working-class communities but is imposed from without. In framing these hypermasculine and patriarchal displays as a consequence of a desire to claim respectability, then, *Wonderland* implies that they are not definitively working-class practices but have middle- or upper-class origins, only being adopted by the men of Nottinghamshire in order to better position themselves and their community as "respectable" within a class system which regular seeks to deny them such worth.

In a 2017 article titled *How Not to Think About Class*, Faiza Shaheen and Ellie Mae O'Hagan posit that 'when we think of the average working-class person, we might picture a sooty white man emerging from a coal-mine' despite the fact that 'the working-class people of 2017 are more likely to work in call centres than coal-mines; they're more likely to be women than men, and they're more likely to be BAME than a middle-class person is' (2017: 22). In its choice of temporal and geographical setting, *Wonderland* has little interest in subverting this reified perception. Indeed, it depicts regional, working-class communities as being dominated by heteronormative, hypermasculine practices. Reviews by audience members who were either coalminers themselves or who come from coal-mining families largely celebrated the play's portrayal of 'the great camaraderie, the

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<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, Nayak's focus is on more contemporary masculinities in post-industrial cities. Discussing the "Real Geordie" subculture in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, he suggests that this hypermasculine subculture can be characterised as what Williams' calls a 'residual cultural element' (1977: 122-123). Nayak writes that 'by symbolically valuing the culture of mining, shipbuilding and heavy engineering through a preservation of routine, regulation and masculine chauvinism the *Real Geordies* appeared men out of time, the unreconstructed outsiders-within whose claim to regional authenticity remains forever symbolic' (2006: 826).

humour [and] the coarseness of the miner's language' (Castle, 2018). To have written out such practices therefore might have been to misrepresent Nottinghamshire as it existed in that moment in time. Nevertheless, *Wonderland* works to contextualise such practices, reminding the audience that they did (and, perhaps, do) not exist in a vacuum but were born of particular social and historical circumstances.

### **Nottinghamshire as Location in Wonderland**

In my analysis of *Labour of Love*'s representation of Nottinghamshire as location, I focussed on that production's depiction of the relationship between Nottinghamshire and London. I was interested in how different political positions became geographically-encoded within the performance text. There are some traces of a similar encoding in *Wonderland*. A great deal of the play, for instance, focusses on the 'occupation' (Steel, 2014: 67)—a distinctly spatial term—of Nottinghamshire by London's Metropolitan Police. Furthermore, the play intersperses its depiction of the lives of the miners themselves with scenes featuring members of Margaret Thatcher's cabinet. Not only does the fact that these scenes are set in London intensify a conceptualisation of the miners' strike as a war waged on Nottinghamshire by those with place attachments to the capital but, similarly to Elizabeth in *Labour of Love*, the cabinet members show a blatant disregard for Nottinghamshire as a meaningful place, with one member positing that the rest think 'the coalfields are on Mars' (2014: 64).

Nevertheless, in discussing how *Wonderland* represents Nottinghamshire as location, it is useful to take a slightly different approach. As I discussed in Chapter Three, Agnew does not only use the term *location* to describe 'the

relationship between places' but also 'the impact of the "macro-order" in a place' (1987: 5). This latter approach is useful here. As I explained in differentiating the Nottingham Playhouse production of *Wonderland* from that mounted by the Hampstead Theatre, it is possible to interpret the play as simply another in a long line of cultural texts which recount the events of the miners' strike of 1984-1985. Yet, *Wonderland* regularly seeks to foreground the specific experiences of Nottinghamshire miners (and the wider community) during that dispute, with a particular focus on how these localised experiences differed from that implied by the national picture.

As early as February 1985, Raphael Samuel expressed a fear that future narratives surrounding the miners' strike would be 'determined by the terms of the settlement' in a manner which omitted many of the complexities and contradictions on both sides of the dispute (2017: ix). Considering how the strike has been rhetoricised in political discourse in the years since, his concerns were not unfounded. Commentators on the left, such as Owen Jones, often frame the strike as 'a shattering victory in Thatcher's war on social democracy' (2014: 29) during which she 'callous[ly]' crushed the miners who 'had been the vanguard of the union movement in Britain' (2012: 55). David Hart—a former advisor to Margaret Thatcher and key antagonist in *Wonderland*—alternately remembers the dispute as the folly of '[Arthur] Scargill and his thugs' who were 'not only wrong' but went 'against their families' and the country's interests' in contesting the 'good moral and practical reasons to contract Britain's coal-mining capacity' (1992: 9-10). In this way, the miners' strike often seems to be remembered as an entirely binary dispute with the only deviance in interpretation being who one considers having been in the right.

*Wonderland* intervenes in this simplified recollection in several ways. Most obviously, the play avoids what Steel describes as the ‘convenient narrative of the miners’ strike that pits the iron wills of Scargill and Thatcher against each other’ (in Gardner, 2014) by omitting both from the stage entirely. In doing so, the production allows more stage time for those lower down the ranks on both sides, including individual miners and pit managers, police officers and Conservative activists. Most interesting for my discussion here, however, is the frequency with which *Wonderland’s* critique of simplified narrativizations of the miners’ strike rests on foregrounding the manner in which the experiences of miners in Nottinghamshire differed from those elsewhere in the UK.

While 187,000 miners across the UK did down tools following the announcement of plans to close 20 collieries in Scotland, Wales and the North of England in 1984, 73% of Nottinghamshire miners did not (Perraudin, 2016). Multiple reasons have been given for this. Richard Vinen suggests that Nottinghamshire miners ‘had political traditions that separated them from miners elsewhere in the country and their jobs seemed safer than those of their colleagues elsewhere’ (2010: 164). David Amos, more sympathetically, suggests that it was ‘the lack of a national ballot’ by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) prior to sanctioning the strike and ‘the nature of picketing from Yorkshire’ (which was often highly confrontational) which dissuaded many Nottinghamshire miners from joining the industrial action (2012: 319).<sup>53</sup> While *Wonderland* gives most of its attention to the minority of miners in Nottinghamshire who did strike,

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<sup>53</sup> The lack of a national ballot was a key point of controversy during the dispute. The reasoning given by Scargill and the NUM executive for forgoing a vote was that a huge number of miners had already walked out, thereby “voting with their feet”. Others, however, saw the lack of an official ballot as undemocratic.

it is notable that, in foregrounding the specific experiences of Nottinghamshire, it turns over significant stage time to those who chose not to.

The play's principal strike-breaker, Spud, shows signs of hesitancy from the moment the strike is announced. He protests that 'there can't be a national strike without a national ballot' and declares that he's 'not striking until I've had my vote' (Steel, 2014: 58). This debate quickly becomes more intemperate. Fanny interjects that 'you can't scab, Spud', doubling down when Spud objects to the use of the term "scab" by telling him to 'get used to it. That's what you're gonna be hearing' (2014: 60). There are certainly moments when Spud is given a less sympathetic portrayal. As the play progresses, he is convinced by David Hart (Jamie Beamish) to act as the lead plaintiff in legal action against the NUM for the lack of a ballot. He is shown strutting around a suite in the upmarket Claridge's Hotel with a cigar in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other with little regard for the consequences his actions might have on those he lives and works alongside. Nevertheless, despite this suggestion that his motives may have gradually been warped, Spud faithfully clings to his earlier position that '*I am right. The union has denied me my right to vote*' (2014: 78, emphasis in original). The play invites further sympathy for Spud when it depicts the earlier name-calling developing into something far more sinister. Spud suggests that standing against his co-workers will 'change everything for me. Permanently. [...] I'd have to move. I'd have to do something else' (2014: 89). Rather than presenting the strike in an entirely binary manner, *Wonderland* thus highlights the divisions that existed within Nottinghamshire's mining communities, the factors that led to the appearance of those divisions and their consequences.



In *re-placing* Nottinghamshire as location, *Wonderland* therefore draws attention to the ways in which the region's experience of the miners' strike differed from that of others. In particular, it revels in the ways that those experiences puncture simplified narrativizations of the dispute. While rifts were felt in mining communities across the country, the tendency not to strike was nowhere stronger than in Nottinghamshire. In a similar manner to its reliance upon reified perceptions of the regional working class, *Wonderland* certainly draws on what is an oft-told narrative of recent working-class history. Yet, once again, the production chooses to present that narrative within its proper context, reminding the audience that it was not as clear-cut as it is sometimes remembered to have been.

### **Nottinghamshire's Sense of Place in Wonderland**

*Wonderland's* suggestions as to what Nottinghamshire's sense of place might be share a great deal with *Labour of Love*. While *Wonderland* takes place a decade prior to even the earliest years of *Labour of Love's* timeline, it regularly precipitates the impact that the mines' closing will have on the region's place identity. This coalesces in Fanny's final speech when, having been fatally wounded by falling debris following the strike's failure and the miners' return to work, he predicts that those who so vigorously pursued the closure of the mines will 'bury their swords and cover their tracks/ [...] and we will fight amongst ourselves/ who has only two children who has four/ which have fathers which don't/ who has a disability who really don't/ [...] low-life – shirker – salt dissolved into scum' (2014: 131-132). In doing so, Fanny forecasts the manner in which the ruling class' exploitations of divisions within Nottinghamshire depicted in *Wonderland* will serve as a model for future attempts to pacify the region so that

those in power can exploit it.

Nevertheless, despite such premonitions, *Wonderland* takes a less deterministic view of Nottinghamshire's sense of place than *Labour of Love*. *Labour of Love* presented the region's sense of place as equally as static as it presented its economy. So central was the association of Nottinghamshire with under-confidence and perseverance to its broader thematic explorations that such a sense of place was presented as unavoidable. Williams has suggested that such an approach proliferates within casual discussions of society. He writes that we often make the mistake of

taking terms of analysis as terms of substance. Thus we speak of a world-view or of a prevailing ideology or of a class outlook, often with adequate evidence, but in this regular slide towards a past tense and a fixed form suppose, or even do not know that we have to suppose, that these exist and are lived specifically and definitively, in singular and developing forms. (1977: 129)

In contrast, partly because of its historical setting, *Wonderland* highlights the dynamism and historical contingency of Nottinghamshire's sense of place. For one, it stresses that the region's supposedly pessimistic contemporary sense of place might at one point have been avoided. During the strike, for instance, the Colonel envisages his life after retirement, imagining that 'when I've packed up and retired, I'll walk down street, sit in Club, and people will nod their heads— young men, old men—and say to themselves: ah, I know him, he's seen some graft, he was a real worker' (Steel, 2014: 113). This moment is bittersweet, the audience knowing that history will take a different path. Nevertheless, through the inclusion of such moments, *Wonderland* reminds us that it was, at one point, a possibility and, thus, that Nottinghamshire's sense of place, like that of any

region, is continually in flux.

This equally serves to remind us that the region's contemporary sense of place might be subject to change. In the closing speech referenced above, Fanny makes a prediction to this end, anticipating that 'there will be another march/ [...] we will be marching with them/ an army of black and avenging ghosts' (2014: 132). In doing so, he continues a discourse of inheritance which is present throughout the play. This first surfaces when the Colonel inducts Jimmy and Malcom into the Sisyphean task of shovelling coal during which he tells them that 'there's only one thing that'll keep you going. And that ... is *pride*. When you stand before that wall of coal with the task of shovelling two tonne off of it, you think of the men that have done it before you. [...] Your brother! [...] Your father! [...] Your grandfather!' (2014: 51, emphasis in original). This notion of inheritance is also transposed onto the miners' relationship with trade unionism when Bobbo reminds his fellow workers that 'everything we have, somewhere down line, somebody's had to put up a fight for it' (2014: 41) and, later, a chorus of pickets reminds the protagonists that 'Our fathers. [...] Our grandfathers. [...] Our great-grandfathers. [...] Have had to stand their ground. [...] Have fought. [...] Have starved. [...] None of 'em wanted to do it. [...] It's our turn now, lads' (2014: 63-64). In that final monologue, *Wonderland* therefore implies that, just as the miners within the play found inspiration in the actions of their forebears, so too might contemporary Nottinghamshire find the inspiration to negotiate a future, more radical sense of place in what it suggests is a tradition of resistance in the region.

*Wonderland*, then, does not dispute the notion that Nottinghamshire's present sense of place might be defined by under-confidence and a degree of

passivity. Nonetheless, again, it contextualises it, subverting the notion that such an identity is eternal or unchangeable. *Wonderland* stresses that Nottinghamshire's historical and contemporary sense of place is part of an ongoing process subject to continual negotiation and development. It highlights that there were moments in the past where things could have taken a different path and, by extension, suggests that the region's contemporary sense of place might equally be temporary.

### **Contextualising Nottinghamshire**

The *geography of theatre* behind *Wonderland* was more complex than that behind *Labour of Love*. Some aspects both productions share: *Wonderland* was also written by a Nottinghamshire playwright who has since lived away from the region and it is impossible to ignore the fact that the play was first produced in London.<sup>54</sup> There are, however, several differences: though Steel undertook a writing course at the Royal Court, this only being her second play, she had not had the longevity of career to know exactly who would be sat in the auditorium watching *Wonderland* whilst writing it (or, indeed, if it would be staged at all). This contrasts with Graham who would have known exactly where and when *Labour of Love* was to be performed before starting writing.

The crucial difference in comparing *Wonderland* to *Labour of Love* is that the former was not written specifically for a metropolitan audience. In this regard, it is interesting to view both productions through the lens of what Kobena Mercer describes as the 'burden of representation' in which 'artists positioned in the

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<sup>54</sup> Steel moved away from Nottinghamshire to live for five years in Greece before subsequently moving to London (Gardner, 2014).

margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production [...] are expected to “speak for” the [...] communities from which they come’ (1990: 62). The expectation, furthermore, is that an artist must “speak for” those in the margins in a manner intelligible to an audience very much of the centre. Graham’s invocation of mediative authenticating mechanisms in order to stress his ability to *re-place* Nottinghamshire to a metropolitan audience with a degree of “authenticity” implies that he embraced this burden of representation willingly. This becomes even more plausible when one takes into account that his desire to engage artistically with Nottinghamshire coincided with a political moment in which regional, post-industrial communities had become of interest to a metropolitan audience. Above, I argued that *Labour of Love* often represented Nottinghamshire in terms that its metropolitan audience would likely be amenable to, drawing on a reified, aestheticized perception of the conceptual space of regional, post-industrial England. *Wonderland* does not entirely subvert such a perception. Nevertheless, its commitment to contextualising various aspects of the region’s place identity do suggest that the lack of a neatly-defined intended spectator may have curtailed the pressure to *re-place* Nottinghamshire in a manner easily readable by a metropolitan audience.

As a result, *Wonderland’s theatrical geographies* are as complex as the *geographies of theatre* which birthed it. Occasionally, *Wonderland* falls into the same traps as *Labour of Love*, channelling reified perceptions of the regional (specifically Northern/Midlands) working class. The ensemble of protagonists, for instance, are portrayed as almost entirely physical beings with little in the way of intellectual ability. Women are notable only in their absence and the men on the stage are portrayed as highly misogynistic. While responses to the production

from those who lived in the region during the miners' strike have attested to the accuracy of some elements of this representation, it is hard to believe that not a single miner deviated from the recipe of social conservatism, stupidity or, for that matter, whiteness.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, while *Wonderland* may show little interest in subverting reified perceptions of Nottinghamshire, it does work to remind the audience that, if such practices were ever dominant, then they were the product of a specific set of lived circumstances. In this way, the production subtly critiques the manner in which such practices and values are often extrapolated and presented as definitive of Nottinghamshire (and the English regions more broadly) beyond these specific contexts.

### **Shebeen**

Where *Labour of Love* and *Wonderland* were both set in rural or small-town Nottinghamshire mining or former mining communities, *Shebeen* takes as its setting St Ann's, a working-class area in the city of Nottingham. Written by Mufaro Makubika, the play is set in 1958 and follows a group of Caribbean immigrants and their white neighbours in the days preceding the outbreak of the St Ann's Riots, in which inter-racial tensions within the area spilled over into civil unrest. *Shebeen* premiered at the Nottingham Playhouse in June 2018 before transferring to Theatre Royal Stratford East later that same month.

Both the plays I have discussed so far in this chapter were written by playwrights who, despite being raised in Nottinghamshire, moved away from the region prior to the commencement of their artistic careers. In interviews, both

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<sup>55</sup> Historian Norma Gregory 'estimates that between the early 50s and the late 80s there were nearly 1,000 men of African-Caribbean origin working in Nottinghamshire mines at any one time' (in Perraudin, 2016).

Steel and Graham hint at a struggle, early on, to find support in developing their craft and showcasing their work. And, in a further substantiation of the manner in which the London-centricity of English theatre production encourages those in pursuit of sustainable careers to move to the capital, finding the desired support necessitated both playwrights moving to London. On taking over as artistic director of Nottingham Playhouse, Penford set out to respond to this deficit in support for artists living in Nottinghamshire. Gardner reports that he waited no longer than his first day in order to set wheels in motion for a formalised artist development programme at the venue (2017). Shortly christened Amplify, the scheme seeks to allow ‘artists from this area to flourish[, ...] to support and build theatre-makers who are full of potential, who have talent and creativity, and who are resilient’ (Nottingham Playhouse, n.d.). In its first twelve months, the scheme led to a festival of work by local emerging theatre-makers in the Neville Studio, several “scratch nights” enabling artists to showcase extracts of work-in-progress and a series of skills-building workshops including one on directing with Penford himself.

While this may hint at some of the Playhouse’s long-term intentions, it is worth stressing that Amplify did not play a role in the commissioning of *Shebeen*. Mufaro Makubika’s relationship with the Playhouse predates the existence of the scheme by several years and *Shebeen* was commissioned by Penford’s predecessor. In 2015, Makubika had been resident at the Playhouse as part of a collaboration with the BBC Writers Room, culminating in a production of his play *How To Breathe* (2015) in the Neville Studio. The commissioning of *Shebeen* was thus perhaps a natural progression from the sell-out success of that comparatively small-scale production. While other organisations such as the

Royal Court Theatre or Curve in Leicester can claim to have contributed to Makubika's development as a writer, then, it is Nottingham Playhouse which has proven most consistent in its support. In many ways, Makubika's career is the antithesis of those of Steel and Graham. For the Playhouse, Graham is perhaps the-one-that-got-away and Steel the prodigal daughter. Makubika, in contrast, is a case study in how regional theatres might support artists to establish meaningful careers in theatre without needing to first uproot their lives and detach from their communities.

At a very basic level, this means that, in representing Nottinghamshire on stage, Makubika occupies a very different position to those other playwrights; he remains surrounded by the community that is the play's subject matter. Furthermore, supporting artists *in situ* in this way (rather than expecting them to make the move to London) removes some of the economic barriers to a career in theatre, thus bringing to the stage perspectives which would be less likely to be channelled by those with the means to move to the capital. Born in Zimbabwe, Makubika moved to the UK at the age 16 and lives in St Ann's, a largely working-class estate in Nottingham. These experiences of migration and living in St Ann's are both given voice in *Shebeen*.

It is important to acknowledge the manner in which the challenges faced by regional artists intersect with those faced by Black artists, Asian artists and other artists of colour. In their 2015 book *Contemporary Black British Playwrights*, Lynette Goddard highlights an 'increased visibility of black playwrights' on the London stage during the early 2000s (2015: 3). Goddard is not uncritical of this surge in support for Black playwrights by venues such as the National Theatre,



Royal Court Theatre, Soho Theatre and Hampstead Theatre, noting that the manner in which commissioning and programming decisions are still overwhelmingly made by white artistic directors means that ‘the kinds of black plays that are produced’ often ‘fulfil their [the artistic directors’] own perceptions and biases of black Britain’ (2015: 11). Goddard points in particular to the recurring themes of ‘black masculinity, crime and violence’ (2015: 10). Nevertheless, Goddard opts to develop ‘a more positive understanding of black British playwrights’ position within mainstream contexts’, seeking to ‘understand how contemporary black British plays portray politicised debates about race and nation’ (2015: 14). Whilst some Black British playwrights may have experienced increased support in the capital, however, a 2020 report by Eclipse Theatre stressed that the same cannot be said outside of London.<sup>56</sup> Consulting with over 40 Black artists working in the North of England, Eclipse found that a ‘historical lack of recognition for Black artists and especially outside of London meant that many “regional” artists felt disempowered and ignored’ (2020: 6). The report continues that ‘Black artists in the North were “hidden” within an assumption that Black artists, if they existed, lived only in London’ (2020: 7), a view likely informed by the broader way in which, as touched upon in the previous section, the English regions are often racialised as homogenously white. The commissioning and production of *Shebeen* therefore challenged dominant industry trends with regard to both regionality and ethnicity.

In promoting the show, Makubika exhibited pride and purpose in both his decision to *re-place* St Ann’s and his personal relationship to the play’s subject

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<sup>56</sup> Eclipse Theatre, which was founded in response to the *Eclipse Report* (2001) into institutional racism in the theatre sector, is discussed in greater length in relation to *Princess & the Hustler* (2019), which was co-produced by the company, in Chapter Six.

matter. He told *The Stage* that *Shebeen* was ‘a play about the place I live—St Ann’s in Nottingham. *Shebeen* is about my neighbours, my family and the community of St Ann’s, and a history that you might not know, but I felt it was important to shine a light on’ (in Masso, 2017). If, as I argued at the opening of this chapter, the London-centricity of English theatre often leads to performance texts being created with an assumed metropolitan audience in mind, Makubika’s passionate determination to *re-place* the community in which he lives (and, it is implied, *for* the community in which he lives) suggests that the opposite might also be true.

In fact, Makubika and the Nottingham Playhouse went as far as to explicitly frame *Shebeen* as a play ‘written in Nottingham for Nottingham’ (2018a). This was reinforced by the regular invocation of relational authenticating mechanisms which foregrounded commonalities between Makubika (and other artists involved in the creation of the production) and the community who were represented within the play and who were presumed to be its audience. This occasionally strayed into more problematic territory. In one interview, Penford suggested that ‘programming work by artists such as Mufaro Makubika’ would ‘engage new and hard to reach audiences’ (in Woodward, 2018). The term “hard to reach” here suggests that the reason a certain group (in this case Black, working-class Nottingham residents) does not regularly attend the theatre is due to them hiding from it rather than there being any flaws in the way the theatre programmes or promotes its work. As Ifeyinwa Frederick has argued in *Exeunt Magazine*, “‘hard to reach’ audiences are not hard to reach if you speak their language’ (2017). However, unfortunate phrasing aside, *Shebeen* does follow Frederick’s logic and aimed to encourage Black, working-class Nottinghamshire residents to attend the

theatre through adapting the work presented so as to be enticing to a local audience rather than through attempting to enact a culture-change among the potential audience themselves.

Most pertinent to my discussion is the manner in which, in being written by a Nottinghamshire-based playwright, produced by the Nottingham Playhouse and created with an audience living within the region in mind, *Shebeen's geography of theatre* is almost the exact inverse of that behind *Labour of Love*. As such, it potentially provides some insight into how regional theatres might contribute to the subversion of English theatre's tendency to create work for an assumed metropolitan audience and the related framing of regional sites (and those who live in them) as "other" in comparison to a supposed metropolitan norm.

### **Nottinghamshire as Locale in *Shebeen***

Both *Labour of Love* and *Wonderland* represented Nottinghamshire as locale in a manner which implied it to be largely homogenous. While there were deep-seated ideological disagreements between characters in both plays, there was little competition for what practices might be deemed part of the region's normative geography. *Shebeen*, however, is set in a historical moment in which Nottinghamshire (in particular Nottingham itself) abruptly became home to a new set of practices. McKenzie writes that,

after the Second World War there was a new group of migrants in Nottingham, workers coming from the break-up of the British Empire from all over the West Indies. These migrant workers, like others, found the cheapest and most affordable places to settle, predominantly settling in St Ann's [...]. Initially, the West Indian

community and the white working class struggled to live side by side. (2015: 32-33)

With this particular migration, as in many others, a set of practices which were dominant in the West Indies were transposed into Nottingham. And, much of the dramatic tension of *Shebeen* derives from the collisions that can occur when two different sets of practices compete to be considered part of the normative geography of a place.

It is from one of these practices that the play takes its name. Though originating in Ireland, the term “shebeen” has been used to refer to illegal bars across the globe, including in the Caribbean. After arriving in Nottingham, *Shebeen*’s protagonists, Pearl (Martina Laird) and George (Karl Collins), open such a shebeen in the living room of their home. This causes some discomfort and anger among those who had already been living in the area. Nevertheless, while the marketing for *Shebeen* overwhelmingly foregrounds the ‘tempers [...] flaring’ and ‘tensions mount[ing]’ which ultimately exploded into civil unrest between St Ann’s white and Caribbean communities on the night of 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1958 (Nottingham Playhouse, 2017), it is only towards the end of the play that these two groups become so directly antagonistic. For the most part, it is the subtle abrasions which occur as the result of these two group’s different perceptions of what constitutes acceptable practice that dominate *Shebeen*’s representation of Nottingham as locale.

This is most evident in the opening scene during which Sergeant Williams (Karl Haynes), a white police officer who lives and works in St Ann’s, visits Pearl and George’s home. George having popped to the shops, it is Pearl who answers

the door and invites Williams inside to wait for her husband's return. This instantly leads to some discomfort between the two. Williams tells Pearl that he doesn't 'think that's a good idea. [...] You are a woman alone in her home. Your husband isn't here' (Makubika, 2018b: 3). For Pearl, however, the idea that she would let someone wait outside on the street is ludicrous. While Pearl does eventually persuade Williams that waiting inside would not be improper, the discrepancies between the two characters' notions of acceptable practice continue to impede their conversation: Pearl has to go to some lengths to persuade Williams to sit down and then has to pile on even more pressure to persuade him to take a drink. What is most interesting about this exchange is that both characters are acting entirely in good faith with neither harbouring the out-and-out racist sentiment exhibited by other characters elsewhere in the play. Nonetheless, despite their best efforts, their differing perceptions of what constitutes acceptable practice continue to create friction.

As in *Wonderland*, what drives both characters in this scene (and many others in *Shebeen*) is the desire to be perceived as "respectable". Following on from the comments on class I referenced in discussing *Wonderland*, Skeggs has suggested that respectability is often perceived to be central to 'the notion of Englishness' and, thus, there is a double implication here for Pearl (1997: 3). Without discarding her Caribbean heritage, Pearl very much wants to integrate into St Ann's. While she is aware that the shebeen is a provocative presence, she therefore goes to great lengths to ensure it remains "respectable". At one point, she warns a guest that 'nobody allowed a foul mouth in me house! Curse you out myself!' (Makubika, 2018b: 27). It is, in part, this self-policing that allows Sergeant Williams to 'turn a blind eye' to the establishment (2018b: 12). Again,

however, while Pearl might see her hospitality and creation of a community space as foundational to being perceived as respectable, for many of the play's white characters, the shebeen is a hinderance to that same goal. The pursuit of respectability is therefore a key motive among all of the play's characters; it is disagreements surrounding what practices will achieve such a perception that cause tensions to appear.

*Shebeen* thus subverts reified perceptions of the regional working class through acknowledging that working-class communities are not, as both of the other plays discussed in this chapter would seem to imply, homogenous in their practices. It is also worth making the more obvious observation that, by centring its action around an ensemble of characters who were born in the Caribbean, *Shebeen* also contests the aspect of that reified perception, foregrounded by Shaheen and O'Hagan (2017: 22) and Kennedy (2018: 83), that assumes regional working-class people to be white. While *Labour of Love's* Margot was played by a Black actor, this went unacknowledged in the play's dialogue. While to suggest that Margot should have been defined in some way by her ethnicity would be to give credence to the notion that non-white bodies signify while white ones do not, it did jar a little in a play which often played on the well-meaning yet culturally-insensitive practices of its white characters for laughs. *Shebeen*, however, disrupts this reified image by placing Black, working-class Nottingham residents at the heart of its dramatic action. Where both *Labour of Love* and *Wonderland* represented Nottinghamshire as locale in terms of homogeneity, *Shebeen*, instead, *re-replaces* the region as a site of practical and cultural diversity.

### **Nottinghamshire as Location in *Shebeen***

Both *Labour of Love* and *Wonderland's* representations of Nottinghamshire as location centred on tensions between either Nottinghamshire and London or Nottinghamshire and the more abstract concept of the nation. This is a recurring theme in many of the productions I discuss within this thesis. The manner in which characters discuss the capital often has what Chaudhuri refers to as 'geopathological' implications for the ascription of meaning to the places in which those production are set (1997: 166); in short, the ascription by a character of positive or negative meaning to the capital often sheds some light on how that character perceives the place in which they are presently located. There are several examples of this in *Shebeen*. George, for instance, worked as a professional boxer in London prior to moving to Nottingham. When Robert, a promoter, comes to tempt George back into the ring, he suggests that George might have 'come to Nottingham to hide' (Makubika, 2018b: 23). The implication of such a statement is that, in comparison with London, Nottingham is in some way "off the grid". A similar geopathology is evident in one of the younger shebeen regulars, Linford (Theo Solomon), who repeatedly confesses a desire to move to London where he imagines he might find better paid, more meaningful work. In London, he says to his girlfriend Mary (Choe Harris), 'maybe someone could use me./ Could use my skills'. While Earnest (Rolan Bell) is less sure, having already 'been there./ Seen it./ Nothing to be found down there', Earnest's main concerns seem to be that one 'always got demons chasing you. Down in London' (2018b: 40-41). While their assessment of London as a "good" or "bad" place to live differ, then, the characters within the play share the sentiment that to be in London is to be subject to higher stakes than when one is in Nottingham.

Nevertheless, by focussing on an immigrant community, *Shebeen* more

regularly works to remind us that relationships between places are not bound by national borders. Furthermore, in foregrounding the direct relationship, personified by the majority of the shebeen's guests, between Nottingham and the Caribbean, the play works to subvert the notion that London always plays a role in mediating between regional England and the rest of the world. Though many of the play's characters have at least passed through the capital, it is direct comparisons between Nottingham and the Caribbean that are most frequent.

Many of the characters are driven to draw such comparisons as an expression of longing for their place of birth. Earnest, for instance, misses the climate, stressing that, despite an unusually hot summer in 1958, 'this heat isn't like the heat back home. [...] That heat, warm your skin up./ Like the sun kissing you all over'. In contrast, suggests George, 'this heat makes you sweat!' (2018b: 31). Yet, Pearl is vitally aware that departure from a place often fosters a rose-tinted view of it. Her position echoes Salman Rushdie's suggestion that 'physical alienation from' one's homeland often means one 'will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost' and so, instead, will 'create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands' (1992: 10). Pearl is perhaps less poetic about the matter, adamant that 'missing things is a luxury./ Got to be practical about things' (2018b: 46). Later, she is more direct, suggesting that the 'money too good to leave' (2018b: 48). It is notable that these fleeting desires to leave are not the result of the racism these characters have experienced but are, instead, a broader consequence of what Michael Pearce has referred to as 'the complex homeland/host-land relationship' experienced by many migrants (2017: 178). Pearce argues that this negotiation of allegiances between homeland and host-land is a recurring theme in Black British playwriting.



Pearce discusses, for instance, Inua Ellams' *Untitled* (2010), a solo performance in which Ellams' takes on the roles of twins referred to as X and Y. Pearce writes that 'the twins represent the psyche of the diasporic individual split between home and host-land'. At the end of the play, X and Y are reunited and 'consequently Ellams who plays both roles becomes one' (2017: 185). The resulting hybrid character, argues Pearce, is located 'between places with an allegiance that exists both beyond and within the nation', thereby challenging 'restrictive notions of belonging, identity and culture' (2017: 187). The discussions of the Caribbean within *Shebeen* achieve a similar result, reminding the audience that one can form deep, meaningful relationships with multiple places without any single one of those attachments being compromised.

In this way, there is a tension which runs throughout *Shebeen's re-placing* of Nottingham as location. On one hand, in line with Makubika's stated intent, the production takes a regional, working-class community which might be considered marginal in English culture and places it at the centre of its performance text. Yet, on the other, *Shebeen* often works to de-centre Nottingham, reminding us that the city cannot be conceived of having, as Massey has written, 'some long, internalised history' but is, instead, part of a complex, global tapestry of places (1991: 29). Where *Labour of Love* and *Wonderland* represented Nottinghamshire as disconnected, sealed off to the outside world (and somewhat sceptical of it), *Shebeen* joins the dots between local idiosyncrasies and global heterogeneity.

### **Nottinghamshire's Sense of Place in *Shebeen***

Just as *Shebeen* suggests that Nottingham as locale might be defined as much by dissent as by harmony, so too does the play *re-place* the city's sense of place

as being contested during 1958. The play's focus on experiences of migration and the racism that many Caribbean immigrants were subjected to on their arrival in Nottingham means that the negotiation of Nottingham's sense of place within *Shebeen* largely revolves around who might be included within that meaningful conception of the city and who excluded. For many of the more outwardly racist characters among St Ann's white contingent, being included in the city's sense of place goes hand in hand with conforming to what they perceive as the normative geography of the area. When Mrs Clark (Hazel Ellerby), a white neighbour of Pearl and George, stresses to Pearl that 'we are good people here. Working people' (Makubika, 2018b: 105), for instance, she is not only expressing her distaste towards the presence of the shebeen. The word "we" here is highly politicised; Mrs Clark is implying that, not only do Pearl's actions sit outside of what she considers to be St Ann's normative geography, but, by extension, so too does Pearl herself sit outside of the "we" that is St Ann's and Nottingham.

Mrs Clark's consistent racism throughout the play perhaps makes such an observation less interesting; she would likely find reason to exclude Pearl from her conception of Nottingham's sense of place whether she could justify it in terms of practice or not. More interesting is the case of Sergeant Williams. I discussed above Sergeant Williams' relatively good-natured interactions with Pearl and George. While Karl Haynes' performance suggests that Williams retains a wariness towards cultures other than his own, he also displays a genuine desire to understand and learn from Pearl. Nevertheless, during the opening scene discussed above, he stresses to Pearl that 'I was born here./ I live here./ It's my home', continuing later that, 'I'm not saying we're all angels./ There are streets, I wouldn't walk alone at night./ But it's home' (2018b: 13). Here, that

political “we” returns. The implication is that, while Williams has come to accept Pearl, George and many of St Ann’s Caribbean community as neighbours and, by extension, as part of the practical fabric of Nottingham, he has yet to accept them into his conception of the city’s meaningful tapestry; he might consider Pearl and George to be part of Nottingham as locale, yet still excludes them from his understanding of the city’s sense of place. In such a way, the play suggests that Nottingham’s place identity is much less malleable than its locale and that, for the Caribbean immigrants featured in *Shebeen*, acceptance into the former was much harder to come by than acceptance into the latter.

It is interesting to observe how some of the Caribbean characters within *Shebeen* have internalised this exclusion from Nottingham’s sense of place. This is hinted at in Linford’s desire to leave the city but is evidenced more acutely by Gayle (Danielle Walters) who, towards the end of the play, emphasises to Pearl that ‘this is not your world’ (2018b: 100). Had this line been spoken by Mrs Clark, we could have parsed it as simply another instance of out-and-out racism; however, coming from Gayle, its significance is more complex. The seed of Gayle’s position is planted earlier in the play when she (offstage) is fired from her job at a local factory for being too fast at sewing and thus earning more than her white colleagues (2018b: 68). Tacit in this firing is the notion that Gayle is “other” to the white women and, thus, to Nottingham’s sense of place. Her response, rather than to seek to undo such an ostracization, is to take ownership over it and to encourage others to do the same. Later, when she sees Linford dancing with Mary, his white girlfriend, she intervenes, telling Linford that she needs ‘a man to hold me now./ My own kind’ (2018b: 62). Rather than stemming from any real interest in dancing with Linford, the intention behind this line is to foreground Mary

and Linford's different ethnicities. Gayle continues by accusing Mary of having slept with numerous other men in an attempt to shame her into leaving the shebeen. Here, Gayle's desire to eject Mary from the shebeen, thus ensuring it remains a space solely for the Caribbean community, echoes her embracing of her outsider status. Having been ostracised from many of the white community's conception of Nottingham's sense of place, she has come to identify with ostracization itself in much the same way that the shebeen emerged from the immigrant community's exclusion from many of Nottingham's other community spaces. From Gayle's point of view, the presence of a white person within the shebeen devalues the political potency of that site and, by extension, of that outsider identity. In this way, *Shebeen* highlights how, while wholly initiated by St Ann's white residents, the exclusion of the immigrant community from the area's sense of place might have in some ways also been sustained by that community itself in order to reclaim a degree of agency in their marginalisation.<sup>57</sup>

While such viscerally tense moments may stick more resolutely in the mind, however, there are several subtler moments in which *Shebeen* foregrounds commonalities between St Ann's white residents and its immigrant community. In particular, the play reveals that, despite attempts to exclude the Caribbean community from Nottingham's sense of place, all of the play's characters share the same material conditions in a manner which, were racist sentiment to be exorcised, might unite them. On Sergeant William's visit to Pearl and George's home, for example, he observes the peeling wallpaper, commenting that his 'comes off too./ It's these old houses./ Get the damp' (2018b: 6). Later, in spite

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<sup>57</sup> The "taking ownership" of marginalisation can be read as a further example of an infrapolitical response to oppression. It also echoes hooks' endorsement of 'choosing the margins' (1990: 145).

of her malicious intentions, Mrs Clark is equally taken aback when entering Pearl and George's house. She states that she 'didn't expect it to look like this', to which Pearl wryly responds: 'look like what? [...] Like your place [?]' (2018b: 103). Despite their fractious relationships, then, the shared architecture of the character's homes and the shared social and economic status which that connotes serves to foreground that they are not as dissimilar as some might like to believe.

Through such moments, our attention is guided to Grace Smart's (mostly) realist set which, in its mimicry of post-war, prefabricated social housing, undercuts any notion that *Shebeen's* ensemble of Caribbean immigrants are any less a part of Nottingham's sense of place than the play's white characters. Yet, *Shebeen's* recounting of the struggle that the city's Caribbean community had to endure to be included in that sense of place is notable. *Re-placing* Nottingham's sense of place inclusive of the city's Caribbean community without acknowledging the struggle that such an inclusion required would have been to erase those experiences from the record. *Shebeen*, much like *Labour of Love and Wonderland*, very much identifies Nottingham's sense of place with the presence of a consistent class struggle waged primarily from without. Yet, it also asks us to recognise that that struggle has not always been one founded on solidarity and has not always been experienced equally by all of the city's residents.

### **De-reifying Nottinghamshire**

I referenced above Makubika's description of *Shebeen* as being a play 'written in Nottingham for Nottingham' (2018a). In being so explicitly directed towards a

specific audience, *Shebeen* thus shares a clarity of intended audience with *Labour of Love*. Nevertheless, where *Labour of Love* was created to be readable by the same metropolitan audience towards which much of mainstream English theatre is angled, *Shebeen* is directly antagonistic towards this dominant practice. In being created with working-class Nottinghamshire residents as its primary intended audience, *Shebeen* directly intervenes in the English theatre industry's privileging of metropolitan audiences and its broader metropolitan selective tradition.

Such a practice, however, may have simply been problematic in another way. Just as *Labour of Love*'s London-centric *geography of theatre* led to a representation of Nottinghamshire which foregrounded the images of decline perhaps expected by its metropolitan audience, so too might a show with a *geography of theatre* centred so heavily around Nottinghamshire have been overly optimistic about the region, pandering to a local audience who were also the subject matter of the performance text. Such overtly affirmational work certainly does exist. *Shebeen*, however, conveys that this does not always have to be the case. Not dissimilarly to *Wonderland*, *Shebeen* asks its intended audience of Nottinghamshire residents to confront a disturbing moment in the city's past which, moreover, has significant resonances in the present day in the context of the Conservative party's "hostile environment" policy and the continued presence of a significant level of hate crime in the city (Pandya-Wood, 2018).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> The term "hostile environment", originating in Theresa May's introduction of new immigration policies (2012), has come to be used to refer to a set of Conservative government policies focussed on pressuring those who are living in the UK illegally to leave the country. It has, unsurprisingly, been accused of encouraging racism and led to more than 5,000 members of the "Windrush Generation"—the generation of immigrants largely from the Caribbean depicted in *Shebeen*—being falsely detained and/or deported (Grierson, 2018).

Where *Wonderland* sought to contextualise reified perceptions of what it means to be working-class and from Nottinghamshire and to remind its audience of the specific origins of such perceptions, *Shebeen* goes one step further, puncturing those reified perceptions entirely. Most significantly, it subverts the dominant image of regional, working-class communities as exclusively or predominantly white. It reminds us that such a conflation of “working-classness” and regionality with whiteness is a falsehood both in relation to the past and present. Yet, this approach permeates the performance text. Whichever of Agnew’s aspects of place one considers *Shebeen* in relation to, one finds the play foregrounding conflicting perceptions of what Nottinghamshire means. The play does not, as with *Labour of Love* or *Wonderland*, simply set ideological and interpersonal conflicts within Nottinghamshire. Instead, the play’s dramatic and thematic conflicts are resolutely concerned with what meanings might be attributed to the region. Whether it is the consideration of how Nottinghamshire relates to the wider world or the issue of who can claim to be part of Nottinghamshire’s communal identity, *Shebeen* emphasises that such answers will always be unstable and open to critique. Even more than *Wonderland’s* foregrounding of process over product, it reminds us that, at any given moment, multiple attributions of meaning will necessarily exist. In such a manner, *Shebeen* does not only resist one particular reified perception of Nottinghamshire but critiques the very process of reification itself. It foregrounds that the circulation of any such image relies upon a process of simplification which says far more about the perceiver than the object they are supposedly perceiving.

## **Conclusions**

In *Reading the Material Theatre* (2004), Knowles invites scholars to

consider theatrical performances as cultural productions which serve specific cultural and theatrical communities at particular historical moments as sites for the negotiation, transmission, and transformation of cultural values, the products of their own place and time that are nevertheless productive of social and historical reification or change. (2004: 10)

In this chapter, I have considered how such an approach might provide insight into the relationship between *geographies of theatre* and *theatrical geographies* in contemporary England with a specific focus on stage representations of Nottinghamshire. I have analysed three performance texts, each of which took Nottinghamshire as their subject matter, yet which were created for very different “theatrical communities” (or what I have referred to as intended audiences). In doing so, I have sought to foreground the ways in which the creation of a performance text for a particular geographically-located audience might inflect the *theatrical geographies* of that text.

What has been particularly notable with regard to these three productions has been the relationship between the intended audience for a production and its tendency to sustain or subvert reified perceptions of Nottinghamshire (and of regional, post-industrial regions more generally). Common to all three of the performance texts discussed was a representation of Nottinghamshire as definitively working-class. Sierz has argued that, during the 2000s, ‘on British stages, the respectable working class was far less in evidence than the underclass, or chavs, the latest incarnation of the Victorian idea of the fearsome undeserving poor’ (2011: 128). The three productions discussed in this chapter put a very different emphasis on what it means to be working class. There are few working-class characters in *Labour of Love*, *Wonderland* or *Shebeen* which



we are not invited to feel some level of sympathy for. Furthermore, rather than being due to an innate “undeserving-ness” or lack of “respectability”, for the most part, economic hardship is framed as something which is beyond the control of those experiencing it.

This representation of working-class characters as “deserving” is not solely the result of a latent radicalism within the plays themselves. Instead, it is that of a shift in the way that working-class communities and individuals (particularly regional working-class communities and individuals) have been rhetoricised in recent years. Following the flawed perception of the outcome of the UK’s vote to leave the European Union as a ‘working-class revolt’ (Jones, 2016), English political discourse has been awash with what Kennedy has described as ‘opportunistic faking[s] of affinity for a hitherto overlooked provincial averageness’ in which elites and politicians alike pay ‘tribute to the “real people” of non-metropolitan Britain (and particularly provincial England, and even more particularly its so-called rust belt in the post-industrial Midlands and North)’ (2018: 12, 28). Largely for reasons of political expediency, the tones in which the regional working class has been discussed in recent years has significantly altered. Yet, as with any such representation, this new reified perception of the (now specifically regional) working class remains a gross simplification.

Where that former, more explicitly derogatory stereotype positioned working-class people as inherently immoral in order to justify growing inequality, this new, pseudo-populist discourse lauds the supposed (and vaguely defined) “authenticity” of the former industrial working class in the English regions. This new discourse relies on a conceptualisation of the regional working class as

homogenously white, predominantly male and inherently reactionary. In my discussion of *Labour of Love*, I directly explored how theatre and performance texts might become tangled up in such discourses. I argued that, although it borrowed some of the key tropes of this new geographical-political discourse in order to satirise its intended metropolitan audience, it ultimately deferred to reified perceptions of the English regions as unable to foster economic growth and those living there as too underconfident to successfully petition for their own cause without support from their metropolitan betters. In discussing *Wonderland* and *Shebeen*, I was therefore interested in how alternate *geographies of theatre*, those which, in their marketing efforts, implied a different intended audience, might take an alternate approach to engaging with reified perceptions of the regional working-class and Nottinghamshire specifically.

*Wonderland*, in its eschewing of a clear intended audience, had a complex relationship with reifying processes. In presenting the audience with images of Nottinghamshire dominated by whiteness, physicality and social conservatism it did not radically subvert them. Yet, it did position such representations within the context of the 1984-1985 miners' strike, reminding the audience of the historical and material contingency of such perceptions. *Shebeen*, alternately, punctured these reified perceptions through drawing on a local narrative which enabled it to represent Nottinghamshire in terms of diversity. That play not only subverted the notion that Nottinghamshire is definitively white in its foregrounding of the region's ethnic diversity but also highlighted diversities of practice and conflicting attributions of meaning to the region. In this manner, *Shebeen* not only critiqued the presently dominant reified perception of Nottinghamshire but the reification of class identity itself.

That regional theatres such as Nottingham Playhouse have the potential to subvert the material London-centricity of English theatre through supporting artists within their constituency to create work is perhaps obvious (if, as I have argued, not always acted upon). Discussing the manner in which the presence of a theatre building in a region contributes to that region's place identity, Cochrane has argued that the prospect of 'a single theatrical enterprise [...] in, moreover, a single building' seeking to represent a region in all its diversity is inherently 'problematic' (2000: 140). The same can be said for the artistic work produced by such an organisation which will never be able to completely account for the multitude of experiences of the region in which that theatre sits. Yet, what *Shebeen* and *Wonderland* evidence is that regional theatre can at least intervene in the London-centric *theatrical geographies* which dominate English performance texts. Through creating work by regional artists, within that region and for an audience which resides there, regional theatres can allow representations of regional communities to be created outside of productive contexts which emphasise readability by a metropolitan audience. And, in creating such alternate *geographies of theatre*, regional theatres can create a context in which richer, more complex and more fluid *theatrical geographies* can thrive.

## Chapter Five

### **‘Blades, blue people and belief’**

#### **Competing Capitals during Hull UK City of Culture 2017**

The core proposal of the previous chapter was that the material London-centricity of English theatre is reflected in a tendency for performance texts produced by that industry to be created for an assumed metropolitan spectator. By extension, the *theatrical geographies* of that work often *re-place* regional communities as if viewed from the privileged position of the metropole, confirming external assumptions about life in the region being represented and tacitly comparing the idiosyncrasies of that region to a supposed metropolitan norm. Against this backdrop, I considered how regional theatres such as the Nottingham Playhouse might, in creating work for regional audiences, enable alternate *theatrical geographies* to emerge.

The past decade has seen a resurgence of discussion surrounding the inequitable distribution of the means of cultural production in England. As I have discussed, much of this debate was sparked by the publication, in 2013, of Stark *et al.’s Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital* report which, among other things, revealed government subsidy of cultural activity in London to be 15 times the average of that assigned to the English regions (2013: 8). These discussions have led to some action. Arts Council England (ACE), for instance, has begun to give more weight to geography in the appraisal of funding bids with an uplift in funding for arts organisations in the regions being the key narrative of its announcement of which organisations would be included in the National Portfolio

from 2018-2022 (Arts Council England, 2017).<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, 'local impact' was included as one of the nine criteria which comprised the new Quality Metrics by which organisations in receipt of the largest amounts of funding would be required to evaluate their activity (Arts Council England, n.d.).<sup>60</sup>

While pressure from artists, audiences, academics and media commentators played a considerable role in pushing ACE towards such action, these measures were also influenced by regime change at the governmental level. A year before becoming Prime Minister in 2010, David Cameron wrote in *The Guardian* that 'over the last century Britain has become one of the most centralised countries in the developed world as power has been sucked to Westminster', looking to woo regional voters with the claim that 'the Conservative party wants nothing less than radical decentralisation'. Cameron opened this op-ed by claiming the mantle of left-wing Labour MP Tony Benn who, Cameron wrote, spoke of 'wanting a fundamental shift of power and wealth to working people' (2009). Despite suggesting that his decentralisation programme would achieve a similar end, however, the localism of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government which followed was not one built on progressive values. Alan Convery and Thomas Carl Lundberg have written that it was instead driven by a desire to 'reduce the size of the British state and promote fiscal responsibility' (2017: 390). Nick Clarke and Allan Cochrane highlighted at the time that 'the claim that power [was] being put back in the hands of local government' obscured

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<sup>59</sup> The "National Portfolio" here refers to the group of organisations to which Arts Council England awards regular revenue funding for a fixed period (currently four years) as opposed to limited-term project funding.

<sup>60</sup> Though not overly relevant to my discussion here, it is worth noting that, as Charlotte Higgins summarised in an article in *The Guardian* (2016), the Quality Metrics which were first proposed in 2013 were the source of some controversy, perceived by some as an attempt to instrumentalise art.

a reality of savage cuts to funding which left local authorities with little means to act on their supposed increased autonomy (2013: 12).<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, though Tory localism often amounted to little more than a decentralisation of blame for the swinging cuts to public services which have defined subsequent Conservative governments, there were a few outcomes which resulted in a genuine decentralisation of decision-making.

Some of these initiatives were the direct result of policy. The so-called "Metro Mayors", for example, first elected in 2017 to preside over several urban regions, may face the same challenges with regards to funding as local councils, however they have proven strong champions for the regions which they serve (Carter, 2017). Other outcomes have been only tangentially influenced by policy yet were significantly emboldened by the "localism agenda". This is undoubtedly the case in ACE's increasing preoccupation with geography. For, while the *Localism Act* adopted in 2011 contained no references to art or culture (House of Commons, 2011), *The Culture White Paper* published by DCMS in 2016 frequently drew links between the 'devolution revolution' and ACE's 'commitment to increase the proportion of Lottery funding it allocates outside London' (2016: 29-30).

*The Culture White Paper* stressed that attending to the inequitable distribution of public subsidy for the arts would be but one element of a wider set of measures to support the development and emboldening of cultural infrastructure in the English regions. In particular, alongside the heritage-oriented

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<sup>61</sup> James Avis has also posited that Cameron's proposed localism might be viewed as less of a new phenomenon and, instead, a continuation of the "new localism" of the New Labour governments of 1997-2010 (2011: 423).

“Great Place” scheme, the document enthusiastically anticipated the launch of the “UK City of Culture” initiative. The UK City of Culture programme in fact predated the coming-to-power of the Conservative Party in 2010, having first been proposed in 2009. Nevertheless, the initiative not only survived the transfer of power but went on to be used as a showcase for the benefits of a localist approach to arts and culture.

What those perceived benefits are, however, is another matter. The UK City of Culture title which, since 2013, has been awarded to one regional English city every four years, is not intended to simply support the development of cultural infrastructure for the sake of allowing more or “better” art to be created in the winning city. Cities applying for the title are expected to demonstrate not only that they can ‘deliver a high quality cultural programme’ but also that holding the title would have ‘a demonstrable economic impact’ and engender ‘lasting social regeneration’ (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2013: 6). Of course, that the initiative presents cultural activity as a potential catalyst for economic and social benefit rather than being of value in and of itself does not necessarily devalue the work presented during a city’s holding of the title. Nevertheless, as I argue in the following pages, the second iteration of UK City of Culture in Hull during 2017 did often reveal a friction between organisers’ desires to use the title to establish a place identity considered appealing to economic stakeholders in the city (and, as importantly, those from elsewhere who might be persuaded into relocating to it) and artists’ desires to *re-place* Hull in more nuanced terms. By positioning three theatre productions which were commissioned for and which premiered during Hull UK City of Culture 2017 in dialogue with the framings of the event provided by its organisers, what becomes apparent is a rift in the event

between the claiming of economic and cultural capital on behalf of Hull and an attempt to claim a more complex symbolic capital.

### **Hull UK City of Culture 2017**

It is important to stress that the UK City of Culture initiative's prioritising of economic and social outcomes is not the result of a post-2010 Conservative repurposing of the project; these goals have been central to the project since it was first proposed in 2009 by television producer Phil Redmond. Redmond had been creative director of Liverpool's 2008 tenure as European Capital of Culture and, bolstered by early indications that holding this European title had improved external perceptions of Liverpool and had a significant economic impact, Redmond wrote to then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Andy Burnham, suggesting that the government consider developing a similar initiative on a national level.<sup>62</sup>

The UK City of Culture initiative was thus built in the image of its continental analogue which was first introduced in 1985 as a somewhat vague scheme which sought to highlight the cultural offering of a different European city each year in order to promote integration across what was then the European Economic Community (Liu, 2014: 449). By the time Liverpool came to host the title in 2008, however, the European Capital of Culture project had come to have very different and more defined priorities. The proceeding decades had seen a growing interest in a model of urban development and regeneration known as 'cultural planning'

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<sup>62</sup> There has since been some dissent over whether Liverpool 2008 did indeed have a sizeable economic impact on the city or whether, as Mark Graham Connolly argues, the reported economic growth was solely 'incidental' to the event and the product of more long-term processes (2013: 172).



(Stevenson, 2004: 119). Popularised in no small part by Glasgow's turn as European Capital of Culture in 1989, cultural planning holds that investment in cultural activity and large-scale cultural events can lead to social and economic benefits through driving tourism and, in the longer term, increasing a city's attractiveness to the "skilled" middle class and the businesses that want to make use of those skills. Where, initially, the title had been awarded to cities such as Athens, Florence and Paris, already widely renowned for their cultural offering, following Glasgow, it increasingly came to be bestowed upon cities which it was considered might benefit from the opportunity to reinvigorate their external image and restructure their economic base.

Where the use of the European Capital of Culture title as leverage for potential social and economic benefit remains a tendency rather than a formal requirement, the working group put together by DCMS to sketch out what a UK City of Culture programme might look like cemented cultural planning into the initiative's very foundations. As mentioned above, cities vying for the title are expected to demonstrate that their proposed programme of activity will have significant social and economic outcomes. And, as a further indicator of how central economic concerns are in the decision-making process, applications for both the 2013 and 2017 iterations of the title were first assessed by the economic development consultancy Regeneris prior to being passed on to an Independent Advisory Panel headed by Redmond to make the final decisions (Hatch Regeneris, 2019).<sup>63</sup>

The interventionist orientation of UK City of Culture was only solidified by

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<sup>63</sup> Regeneris has since been rebranded Hatch Regeneris.

Derry~Londonderry's experience as the inaugural recipient of the title. As Phil McDermott *et al.* report, Derry~Londonderry 2013 'was regarded by many in the city as an opportunity to override the notoriety gained during the violence of the Northern Ireland "Troubles" and demonstrate instead the economic, social and cultural benefits to be gained from the ongoing peace process' (2016: 610). The initiative came to have far more bearing on the core enquiry of this thesis, however, when, in the closing months of that event, it was announced that the second beneficiary the title would be Hull.

The challenges that holding the UK City of Culture title might have remedied in Hull may be, on the face of it, less visceral than those it intervened in during the Derry~Londonderry iteration of the initiative. Yet, they are far from inconsequential. Like Nottinghamshire, Hull has suffered considerably from contemporary deindustrialisation. Once a hub of the shipping industry and home to hundreds of deep-sea trawlers, over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city witnessed sharp economic and social decline to the point that, by 2014, it regularly ranked as one of the UK's most deprived cities (English, 2014). In fact, Hull in 2013 greatly resembled Glasgow and Liverpool prior to their hosting of the European Capital of Culture title, all three being formerly significant shipping ports which have since suffered from high unemployment and decreasing influence on the national and global stage. The hope, therefore, was that Hull's holding of the European title might have a similar effect as holding the European version had on Glasgow and Liverpool, allowing it to challenge negative external perceptions whilst increasing the role of the cultural and creative industries in its economy.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Due to it only being tangentially relevant to the core of my discussion, there is not space here to unpack the vagaries of the terms "creative" or "cultural industries". Nicholas Garnham, among others, has criticised the term "creative industries" as 'serv[ing] a specific rhetorical purpose within

## Competing Discourses during Hull UK City of Culture 2017

Hull UK City of Culture 2017 certainly encompassed an impressive array of cultural events. Alongside the three productions I discuss in this chapter, the city played host to more than 2,800 artworks and cultural events throughout the year including Spencer Tunick's *Sea of Hull* (2017), in which 3,200 locals were photographed naked and painted blue in notable locations around the city, and Nayan Kulkarni's *Blade* (2017), in which the 75-meter-long rotor blade of an offshore wind turbine was installed bisecting a popular city centre square. Elsewhere, Slung Low's multimedia epic *Flood* (2017) told a post-apocalyptic narrative through live performance and online video, while Rembrandt's *The Shipbuilder and his Wife* (1633) had an extended stay in the city's Ferens Gallery. Far from simply being something that the event organisers could use to package their favoured conceptualisation of Hull's place identity, each of these pieces heavily engaged in exploring what Hull's contemporary place identity might be and, in their own way, *re-placed* the city.

In the lead-up to the event, the CEO of Hull 2017, Martin Green, had promised a programme 'that speaks of the city, its people, their creativity and energy' (in Hull City of Culture 2017, 2016: n.p.). Reviewing the pieces described above and those detailed in the following pages, it would be hard to argue that this was not delivered upon. Nevertheless, there was a clear preference among organisers for *how* the various works presented during 2017 would *re-place* Hull.

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policy discourse' which works 'to mobilise a very disparate and often potentially antagonistic coalition of interests around a given policy thrust' (2005: 16). The terms "creative industries" and "cultural industries" have both been used similarly vaguely surrounding the UK City of Culture initiative and, as such, where I use either within this chapter, I do so to indicate that same vagueness of aspiration.

Two years prior to the event, Green had attempted to attract corporate sponsors by framing the event as an opportunity to promote Hull as ‘an outward looking, progressive European city’ (in Hull City of Culture 2017, 2015: 7). This was in-keeping with the usual rhetoric surrounding cultural planning. Since the publication, in 2002, of Richard Florida’s book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, cities engaging cultural planning approaches to urban development have often sought to associate their cities with broadly liberal sentiment. Florida’s book argued that ‘the rise of creativity as a fundamental economic driver’ had prompted ‘the rise of a new social class, the Creative Class’ (2012: vii), continuing that there is ‘a strong association between the Creative Class and openness towards gays and ethnic and racial minorities’ (2012: 61). Florida’s thesis was that constructing an aura of tolerance around a city can attract this proposed “Creative Class” and, by extension, foster economic growth. There is much to be critiqued in Florida’s book. The “Creative Class”, for instance, often seems to be little more than a synonym for the middle class and the economically-motivated reasoning he gives for encouraging tolerance towards marginalised groups is troubling.<sup>65</sup> What is important to note for my discussion here is what this reveals about Green’s above-cited comments: that the hope was not only that 2017 might alter external perceptions of Hull but that the event was viewed as an opportunity to *re-place* the city in a manner appealing to big business and the middle class.

Attempts to *re-place* Hull in a manner favourable to such stakeholders were evident throughout the promotional literature for Hull 2017. Whilst the brochures for each of the event’s four seasons of work occasionally highlighted the city’s

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<sup>65</sup> This is not to mention the manner in which Florida’s description of the Creative Class’ “openness” towards LGBT+ people and people of colour seems to exclude them from this group. Further discussion of discourses surrounding the “Creative City” can be found in an article by Jamie Peck (2005) and in Harvie’s *Fair Play* (2013).

'radical independence' (Hull City of Culture 2017, 2017a: 3) and 'unique cultural voice' (Hull City of Culture 2017, 2017b: 3), they were largely dominated by framings of Hull as 'a gateway to Europe' with 'global connections' (Hull City of Culture 2017, 2017c: 3) and as being defined by a long history of 'migration, flux and internationalism' (Bianchini *et al.*, 2018: 6). Such descriptions were not duplicitous: Hull has historic links with Northern Europe and was the birthplace of slavery abolitionist William Wilberforce.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, contemporary globalisation has made international connectivity a key concern for cities wanting to entice businesses to relocate within their bounds. Alongside further associating Hull with a broadly-defined progressivism, then, it is convenient that the foregrounding of these particular elements of Hull's past also connoted a degree of integration into the global economy.

In many instances of cultural planning, such appeals to corporate interests and the middle class would maybe have been met with some dissent but largely shrugged off as inevitable. The case of Hull in 2017, however, was somewhat unique in that, just 18 months prior to the mesmerising light show, *Made in Hull* (2017), which kicked off the year's programme, Britons had cast their votes in the Referendum on Membership of the European Union. And, in a blow to Green's proposed "European", "outward-looking" vision of the city, 67.6% of Hull residents who voted backed the country leaving the EU. As Duncan and David Ley posit, attributions of meaning to a city can only ever be 'partial truths, the outcome of a relation between an empirical world and a historical subject' (1993: 7). I do not wish to suggest, then, that the local weight of the Leave vote renders the

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<sup>66</sup> This being said, Hull residents' view of Scandinavia has likely soured since the Cod Wars of the 1970s in which Iceland extended its exclusive fishing waters, in doing so putting the final nail in the coffin of Hull's trawling industry (Steinsson, 2016).

internationalist framing of Hull preferred by event organisers "wrong" in any absolute sense. Yet, the level of dissonance between the politics of the promotional discourses surrounding the event and the inferred preferences of the city's voting population is hard to ignore.

This sense of dissonance is explored further in this chapter. In particular, I consider how three theatre productions which were commissioned for and which premiered during Hull UK City of Culture 2017—*The Hypocrite* (2017), *Mighty Atoms* (2017) and *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* (2017)—engaged with notions of class and symbolic capital. By placing the ways in which these performance texts *re-placed* Hull into dialogue with the version of Hull's place identity preferred by the wider event's organisers, I foreground some of the tensions which ran through the event while also asking what this might reveal about conflicts between economic, cultural and symbolic capital in the contemporary regional city.

### **Mighty Atoms**

It seems pertinent to begin my discussion by focusing on the Hull Truck Theatre production of *Mighty Atoms* by Amanda Whittington. In its journey to the stage, the production had a great deal in common with *Shebeen* (discussed in the previous chapter). *Mighty Atoms* was commissioned by Hull Truck, the city's sole subsidised producing theatre, and received a four-week run in The Heron, the venue's 429-seat "main" space. The play is set in The Six Bells, a fictional pub in an unnamed working-class estate in Hull. It follows a group of six women as, inspired by the story of Hull-born boxer Barbara "The Mighty Atom of the Ring" Buttrick, they start a boxing club and stage an exhibition match to fundraise to

save The Six Bells from closure. The play was the third instalment in what the venue's artistic director, Mark Babych, labelled "The Hull Trilogy" (in Bowie-Sell, 2017). Consisting of a series of three plays exploring Hull's recent past, the trilogy had begun in 2015 with *Dancing Through the Shadows*, a romance set among the rubble of the Hull Blitz written by Richard Vergette, which was followed in 2016 by *The Gaul* by Janet Plater, a dramatisation of the effect on Hull families of the sinking of a trawler of the same name in 1974. With its contemporary setting, *Mighty Atoms* in many ways completed the trilogy's trajectory into the present day. Yet, in its allusions to the rise to international acclaim of Buttrick, it also kept one foot firmly in the past.

*Mighty Atoms* formed part of the second of Hull 2017's four, loosely-themed seasons, *Roots & Routes*, which ran from April to June. Knowingly or not, in naming this season, organisers drew upon a piece of word play employed often by geographers to foreground the inherent tension in human relationships with geography between the creation of meaning through stasis, idiosyncrasy and *place* and the creation of meaning through movement, migration and *space*.<sup>67</sup> The focus in the promotional materials for the season was expressly on the latter. Green wrote in his introduction to the season brochure that *Roots & Routes* would provide an opportunity to consider 'the arrivals and departures that create stories of the city' (in Hull City of Culture 2017, 2017c: 3). Such an interest in the flow of ideas and people to and from Hull is certainly not absent within *Mighty Atoms*. Nevertheless, the promotional materials for the show itself implied that it might prioritise a different conceptualisation of Hull's place identity.

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<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Gustafson's article in *Environment and Behaviour* (2001).

The promotional image for *Mighty Atoms* which appeared on the show's poster featured a woman boxer, seemingly poised to exact her revenge for the bruised cheekbone and split lip that had presumably been inflicted on her by her opponent. More interesting, however, was the collage of images behind her. Along with the ropes of a boxing ring, the poster featured a low-angle photograph of three blocks of council flats (most prominently the Mildane Flats which stood in the Orchard Park estate and comprised the tallest residential building in Hull until their demolition in 2013), a community hall and a row of identical, green-doored, corrugated-iron-roofed garages. The image thus worked hard to position *Mighty Atoms* as what Beswick terms an 'estate play' (2019: 186): a play which, in one way or another, engages with life on or around a working-class estate. Sketching out the contours of theatre's engagements with working-class estates, Beswick positions such productions within a cultural imaginary which, as a result of decades of classist rhetoric, has come to position such sites as 'requiring "escape"' (2019: 50). And, the flock of birds flying away from the estate images in the top left-hand corner of the poster seemed to imply that *Mighty Atoms* would engage with those discourses in a similar manner.

There is much to be said about the manner in which *Mighty Atoms* engages with these discourses. Continuing her discussion of class and spatiality in contemporary English theatre practices, Beswick writes that the structures of English theatre often serve to 'elide working-class people—maintaining the middle-class lens as the status quo, even where working-class voices are foregrounded' (2019: 111). It is of note that Amanda Whittington, the writer of *Mighty Atoms*, is not from Hull and, according to a profile in *The Guardian*, grew up comfortably middle-class (Hickling, 2014). Watching (or reading) the play, one



often senses the influence of that classed perspective in its representation of both the working-class pub in which the play is set and the wider (fictional) Hull estate which surrounds it. While *Mighty Atoms* occasionally avoids the ‘middle-class morality’ with which Beswick suggests Stephens infuses his “estate play” *Port* (2019: 100), so clearly are each of Whittington’s characters drawn in relation to prevailing stereotypes of the working class (even when subverting them) that it is hard to shed the feeling of a middle-class playwright attempting to sail the narrow channel between sympathising with and patronising the working-class community she is writing about.

For my discussion, it is enough to note the manner in which the poster for *Mighty Atoms* defied the broader messaging surrounding the *Routes & Roots* season and Hull UK City of Culture more broadly. Against a promotional backdrop which prioritised the celebration of the *routes* which have been taken in and out of Hull throughout its history, the poster for *Mighty Atoms* implied a greater interest in the denial of such journeys and, instead, the *roots* of those living in the city. Furthermore, where Hull 2017’s organisers were heavily invested in foregrounding a broadly positive conceptualisation of Hull’s contemporary place identity, the promotional image’s highlighting of deprivation in the estates which were once primarily home to those working in the city’s fishing industry served as a reminder of the economic troubles the city has faced in recent years. In the following sections, I consider how this representation of one (albeit fictional) such estate community might sit in dialogue with the broader Hull 2017 event’s attempts to *re-place* Hull.

### **Hull as Locale in *Mighty Atoms***

The dramatic action of *Mighty Atoms* is confined entirely to the function room of The Six Bells pub. As the audience filter in, the thrust configuration of the Hull Truck Theatre and the lack of curtain to conceal the playing space gives those seated early a good deal of time to take in its naturalistic scenography. The pub has clearly seen better days; its once cream-white walls are now patched with a mixture of grime and black mould and the varnish on the parquet dancefloor is heavily worn. Beyond its deterioration, the thick turquoise carpet which surrounds the dancefloor and the chair rail running waist-height along the wall give the pub a dated feel, and one gets the impression that this is an establishment with one foot still firmly in the 1970s.

Within the logic of the play, this dated appearance is the result of a lack of funds available for renovation. The pub's landlady, Nora (Judi Earl), reveals early-on that she's 'paying out more than [she's] taking' and that essential repairs are being carried out by 'Eddie, who'll fix it for pints' (Whittington, 2017b: 12). Nevertheless, the pub's decor also reflects Nora's preference for a certain, "old-fashioned" way of doing things. Her first action on stage is to duck a call from the brewery who she fears will once again try to sell her a 'computerised summat-and-nowt. Wi' music and games and quizzes and bingo and karaoke, all-in-one for six grand' (2017b: 11). Such a device is not only beyond her means, it is an aberration to everything she holds dear. To Nora, this is 'not just a pub' but 'a community 'ub' and, as she sees it, numbered 'ping-pong balls [and a] cardboard box' can achieve that community feel far better than any computerised bingo machine (2017b: 12-13). The spectre of the 1970s thus not only haunts the pub aesthetically but also in its economic and social priorities, with Nora's preference for make-shift bingo apparatus and her opening-up of the pub to community

groups free of charge positioned in antagonism to what the play implies is a hyper-commercialised present day.

In unpacking what role these traces of the past play in *Mighty Atoms*, it is useful to turn to Rachel Clements' examination of the political ramifications of the many ghosts which appear in the plays of Caryl Churchill. Drawing upon Jacques Derrida's notion of 'hauntology' (2012: 10), Clements writes that 'Churchill's ghost figures often issue direct challenges to political hegemony' by invading a seemingly fixed present with reminders of the political flux of the past. The appearance of these 'ghosts of political protest' serve to remind us of the contingency and fragility of the present political status quo (2014: 68). Though *Mighty Atoms* itself features a ghostly apparition in the form of the original "Mighty Atom", Barbara Buttrick (Kat Rose-Martin), it is the pub itself which performs a similar function here.

The estate which surrounds The Six Bells is portrayed as heavily deprived. The play stresses in particular the devastating effects that austerity measures have had upon this community: the local community centre has burnt down and has yet to be rebuilt (Whittington, 2017b: 13), a boxing club which sought to keep local young men 'off streets, off drugs, outta jail' lost its funding and has also closed (2017b: 14) and there is a six-month wait for an appointment at the local GP surgery (2017b: 17). The state has thus seemingly all but retreated from the area. Furthermore, other than Nora and Aneta (Maya Barcot), the pub's sole employee, none of the characters in *Mighty Atoms* are presently in employment. The ensemble who frequent The Six Bells are thus consistent with what Guy Standing refers to as the 'precariat', a proposed new class grouping who, unlike

the 'traditional industrial working class' who could at least rely on some consistency in their work, are, as a result of the neoliberalisation of the UK economy since the 1980s, reliant on informal and casual work and, as a result of the concurrent weakening of the welfare state, also precarious in terms of health and social interaction (2011: 22). Against this backdrop of precarity, the nostalgic aesthetics of *The Six Bells* seems to taunt the play's cast with the fading memories of an era in which working-class people could at least expect some level of economic security and, failing that, support from a more cohesive community and the state.

This nostalgia may be naïve: the trawling industry which employed many working-class people in Hull during the 20th century was notoriously dangerous. Yet, noting a rise in the presence of such hauntological elements across British culture in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Mark Fisher argues that 'what is being longed for in hauntology is not a particular period, but the resumption of the *processes* of democratisation and pluralism' (2014: 27, emphasis in original). That this is the case in *Mighty Atoms* becomes evident in one of the few moments in which the spectre of post-war social democracy is made diegetic. Fired up by the brewery threatening to close down *The Six Bells* after the boiler gives out and fearing the implications of the pub's closure for the estate as a whole, Nora tells those gathered that she is a 'Hessle Road girl. Married twenty-eight years to Davy, skipper on' *Susie May*. Who worked and saved so his son wouldn't have to do as he done. And he didn't. He left us September 16<sup>th</sup> 1993. Aged seventeen. Overdose. Heroin' (Whittington, 2017b: 96). As suggested by Fisher, there is no suggestion here that life before neoliberalism was perfect. What Nora recalls instead is a feeling, when her son was born in 1976, that life for working-class

people in Hull was steadily improving; a feeling she no longer senses in the present.

It is worth noting that, among these indicators that life has become harder for those living in the estate since the 1970s, the play does suggest that, more recently, the community has pulled together to overcome some of the challenges that economic hardship has placed in their path. Nora reminds Taylor (Caitlin Drabble) that, not long ago, the estate saw 'crime through the roof, folks scared to go out in the day, never mind dark. Lads shooting up in the street, young girls having sex in the stairwells for money' and praises those who 'fought for the streets to be safer, the shops to stay open, the schools not to sink in the mire' (2017b: 62-63). Nevertheless, Nora's defiant declaration that 'we're not going back to that' hints at the precariousness of these efforts (2017b: 38). And, when The Six Bells' boiler breaks, there is a sense that the closure of the pub could instigate the falling of a series of dominoes which put the estate firmly back on square one.

Against the backdrop of an event which primarily sought to make Hull more appealing to businesses and the middle class, *Mighty Atoms*' privileging of working-class lives was significant. More than this, where the messaging surrounding Hull 2017 as a whole often sought to *re-place* the city as being on a trajectory from a solidly working-class past to a more prosperous future, *Mighty Atoms* complicates such a narrative. The stated aim of the promotional discourses surrounding Hull 2017 was to challenge perceptions of Hull as a 'city of decay' (Bianchini *et al.*, 2018: 127), yet *Mighty Atoms* invokes what Beswick refers to as a 'ruin aesthetic' in which 'the horrors of the past and their threat to

the future are brought into sharp focus' (2015: 32, 37). Viewed through the eyes of The Six Bells' regulars, the spectre of Hull's "traditional working-class" past does not inspire a celebration of progress, but a lamenting of a stability and agency lost through 30 years of neoliberalisation.

### **Hull as Location in *Mighty Atoms***

As I discussed above, *Mighty Atoms* occasionally veers into placing the characters who frequent The Six Bells within a moralistic frame which suggests that they are themselves to blame for their present precarity. For the most part, however, poverty and precarity are framed as having been inflicted from without. A key device in establishing this dynamic is a running gag in which Nora refers to her contact at the brewery as 'Theresa May', a reference to the then Prime Minister (Whittington, 2017b: 62). This may be a simple joke, but it does make room for some exploration of class analysis within the play. Theresa May (the character), while feigning some respect for Nora's desires to 'save the community', is adamant that 'The Six Bells is a business' and grows increasingly frustrated at Nora's continued prioritising of the social role the pub plays within the community over its profit-making potential (2017b: 6); the implication being that the government of Theresa May (the Prime Minister) might similarly have had little time for the people of Hull.

Nevertheless, there is not just a class dynamic at play within this joke but a geographical one too. Theresa May (the character) does not once appear physically on stage but is represented through a disembodied voice at the end of a telephone. Her patronising tone is thus implied to not only be a result of the arrogance of assumed class superiority but also of physical dislocation; Theresa

May's (the character) physical separation from Hull means there is no way she could understand the challenges faced by working-class communities in the city. Despite this, in what reads as a strong critique of the political geography of the UK, Theresa May (the character) is still content to dictate how Nora should run her business. When Nora's sole employee, the usually relatively retiring Aneta, slams down the phone, cutting Theresa May from the brewery off mid-sentence, then, her repudiation of the brewery's authority holds far grander implications, suggesting that Hull might benefit from being less deferent to its distant assumed betters in the government.

Indeed, the central action of the plot sees Nora, Aneta and Taylor, Nora's lodger, taking matters into their own hands in an attempt to save the pub financially without compromising on its social mission. Taylor is an ex-professional boxer whose career reached an early end when she failed to make the team for the 2012 Olympics and, disenchanted, fell into alcoholism, was involved in a drunken brawl and spent three years in prison (2017b: 6). Although the cast of *Mighty Atoms* have relatively equal stage time, it is Taylor's story which binds the narrative together. It is, for all intents and purposes, a redemption plot in which Taylor learns to believe in her own abilities once again. And, Taylor's redemption is also heavily geographically encoded.

When we first meet Taylor, she is, in her own words, 'back where [she] started' (2017b: 6), and she clearly sees her return to the estate where she grew up as a signifier of failure. To make matters worse, the estate is portrayed as a community where reputations stick and, in the shops or on the street, Taylor describes being unable to escape glances which remind her of her past as 'that

top woman boxer from here' (2017b: 6). At the opening of the play, Taylor thus has her mind set on leaving and is saving up to embark on a residential course in Cornwall to learn how to teach yoga (2017b: 6). In these early stages, the play looks like it might be preparing to follow the well-trod path of the "estate escape" play which, as Beswick describes it, operates on the principle that 'escape is possible and desirable and that those who don't "get out" have failed' (2019: 54). As it continues, however, this trope comes to be subverted.

Taylor's aspirations of departure take an early hit just prior to the interval when, aggrieved that Nora would let the pub get into such a terrible financial state that a simple boiler failure might put it in the red, she threatens to leave there and then. Nora responds to this threat by screaming that 'there is no Cornwall', finally forcing Taylor to come to terms with the fact that she has little chance of raising the required funds and that her delusions of escape are little more than fantasy (Whittington, 2017b: 50). From this nadir of failure, however, begins a process in which Taylor, realising that she is unable to leave the estate, begins to rethink her relationship with it. In her conversations with the women who join the boxing group she sets up, she comes to realise that, while she may not be boxing at the Olympic level, her skills enable her to give something back to her community. The conclusion of this process of learning to love The Six Bells, the estate and Hull more broadly comes in the final scene when a misaimed punch from Grace (Anna Doolan), one of Taylor's trainees, sees Taylor knocked to the floor. Whilst unconscious, she dreams that she fights with Barbara Buttrick and, when she comes around, the crowd in the pub are cheering her name (2017b: 6). Where, earlier, Taylor read the looks that she received from her neighbours as looks of mockery or *schadenfreude*, in this moment, she recognises that there is a



genuine pride that others living on the estate feel towards her achievements. Taylor then reflects this pride onto the women she has trained and praises ‘our city — our culture — our home — my home’ (2017b: 6). Rather than dreaming of departure or “escape”, she comes to value remaining and to love the city in which she lives.

The notion that Hull might occasionally be a hard place to live was not entirely absent from the promotional discourses surrounding the Hull 2017 event. A video released to publicise the initial bid for the title featured Hull-born actor Tom Courtenay reciting Philip Larkin’s suggestion that ‘people are slow to leave it/ quick to return/ and there are others/ who come for a year or two/ and stay a lifetime’ (Hull2017, 2013: 0:22). This correlates with Mark Featherstone’s suggestion that many in Hull feel a ‘negative civic pride, which takes the practical form of a sense of unity in social exclusion and marginality’ (2013: 182). Nevertheless, once the designation was secured, the discourses surrounding the event became almost uncompromisingly positive about the city. *Mighty Atoms*, by contrast, was unafraid to tackle the complex relationships that we often have with the places in which we live and to *re-place* Hull in a manner which suggests that it might be a tough place to fall in love with but that the journey to developing such a place attachment can increase its intensity.

### **Hull’s Sense of Place in *Mighty Atoms***

As mentioned above, *Mighty Atoms* pairs its examination of working-class life in Hull in 2017 with a consideration of the legacy of Barbara Buttrick, a boxer born in Cottingham who went on to be one of the world’s first women world champions. Buttrick appears regularly throughout the play as a ghostly apparition visible only

to Taylor. On one level, Buttrick serves as a personification of Taylor's now-abandoned personal dreams of Olympic greatness and, after Grace and Nora relay Buttrick's story to the rest of the group, as a source of inspiration to the women in the boxing group as they train. Nevertheless, Barbara's appearances also serve to draw a direct connection between the action of the play and the place memory of Hull. Buttrick's appearances therefore serve to both contextualise the relatively humble activity which occurs in the pub as a part of the wider ongoing story of Hull while also making a broader point about how those living in the city in the present day might find inspiration in its past.

The play also uses boxing as a metaphor for Hull. Kath Woodward has suggested that films centring on boxing often engage a 'trope of heroic triumph over adversity and especially economic disadvantage' (2014: 112). This has often found its way to the stage with productions such as Frantic Assembly's *Beautiful Burnout* (2010), written by Bryony Lavery, and Charlotte Josephine's solo show *Bitch Boxer* (2013) also following working-class protagonists who find success through the sport. While none of *Mighty Atom's* characters go further than participating in a single "fight night" at The Six Bells, the play engages with this trope of boxing as a means of overcoming economic disadvantage as a metaphor for Hull more broadly. Like the protagonists of numerous boxing films from *Rocky* (1974) onwards, it positions Hull as a definitively working-class city which has earned the international prominence it experienced during 2017 through hard work, grit and determination. This is made clearest in the closing moments of the play when Taylor declares that 'this is who we are... this energy, this nuclear energy... we're mighty, us... each and every one of us... Mighty Atoms!' (Whittington, 2017b: 6).

Nevertheless, the use of boxing as a metaphor for Hull has complex connotations. Though acknowledging its status as a 'working class sport', Gerald Gems has argued that boxing has long been utilised to instil a 'process of working class assimilation to mainstream middle class values' (2004: 89). Gems argues that boxing takes attributes such as physical strength and aggression viewed by middle-class society as negative or dangerous aspects of working-class masculinity and filters them through a set of rules which encourage discipline and restraint. Bringing this into line with some of the discussions in my previous chapter, James Rhodes has drawn on Skeggs' (1997: 1) notion of respectability to note the manner in which male working-class boxers are often represented as uniquely "respectable" in comparison to the rest of the working class who, by contrast, it is implied are not so (2011). There is an extent, then, to which the use of boxing as a metaphor for Hull implies that, rather than coming to celebrate its "working-class-ness" on its own terms, the city has simply learned to reframe that identity in a manner more acceptable to the middle-class gaze.

A similar dynamic is applied to the women in the play. This is most evident in Grace, the youngest of Taylor's trainees. The audience is first introduced to Grace when she breaks into the pub through a window to take part in the boxing group, knowing that, if she enters through the front door, she will be thrown straight back out again; Grace comes from a family notorious on the estate for their involvement in crime and Nora has banned them from the pub *en masse*. When she introduces herself to Taylor, Grace is positioned as not entirely dissimilar. She offers to recompense Taylor for the training sessions with drugs and states that she is only interested in learning to box so that she can be

'properly ready' for a fight with her cousin (Whittington, 2017b: 31-34). Throughout the play, Grace's attitude to boxing and to the world undoubtedly changes; as with all the characters, the sport provides her with a focus and allows her to develop discipline. Yet, as with the metaphor of Hull more broadly, Grace's redemption is one in which she "outgrows" what is implied to be a normative set of working-class practices which revolve around criminality and a lack of care for oneself and others. In doing so, *Mighty Atoms* follows a tendency identified by Siân Adiseshiah for plays which engage with working-class subject matter to 'inadvertently exceptional[ise] a working-class individual, leaving the dominant paradigm of a stagnant, wilfully ignorant, feckless working-class normative subjectivity intact' (2016: 160). Such a view is only further substantiated by the fact that Grace's family, who serve as a representation of those members of the working class unwilling to work towards being more "respectable", have the family name 'Idlewell' (Whittington, 2017b: 6). While *Mighty Atoms* celebrates Grace's dedication to boxing and her turn away from a potential life of criminality, then, it does so in a manner that further reifies perceptions of the rest of Hull's working-class residents as disproportionately susceptible to such activity.

In conceptualising what Hull's sense of place might be in the present day, *Mighty Atoms* thus foregrounds notions of self-reliance. Through invoking the memory of Barbara Buttrick, it recounts to the audience an instance in which someone born in Hull was, through hard work and perseverance, able to achieve great things despite their working-class background. It suggests, moreover, that Buttrick might provide a model for contemporary working-class Hull residents and for the city itself. Just as, in its *re-placing* of the city as locale, the play foregrounds the ability of Hull's residents to work together to support one another and make

the city a better place to live, *Mighty Atoms* implies that people living in Hull are filled with a latent potential to achieve great things regardless of the barriers which may stand in their way. Nevertheless, the play also suggests that, in order to act on this potential, the city's residents must overcome an innate tendency to do the opposite. Echoing dominant discourses surrounding the working class, *Mighty Atoms re-replaces* Hull as having the potential to become a place of global renown, but implies that, to do so, it must first make itself "respectable" in terms recognised by middle-class society.

### **Symbolic Capital in a City of Culture**

It is important not to overlook the significance of the decision by Whittington and those at Hull Truck involved in commissioning *Mighty Atoms* to draw attention to the experience of Hull's working class. As mentioned above, a clear goal of the UK City of Culture event more broadly was to *re-place* the city in a manner perceived to be more appealing to the middle class in the hope that it might lead to them relocating there. *Mighty Atoms* not only highlights the centrality of working-class people to Hull as a meaningful place but also draws the audience's attention to the precariousness of working-class life in the city in the present day. In addition to this, where the broader event sought to portray Hull as being on a trajectory of economic growth, *Mighty Atoms* complexifies this narrative, stressing that, for many, the past few decades have been typified by declining economic power and social atomisation.

In seeking to discuss how *Mighty Atoms* relates to the wider context of the Hull UK City of Culture 2017 event, it is insightful to draw on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital as developed in his 1979 book *Distinction* (translated into English

in 1984) and his 1986 article *The Forms of Capital*. With regard to the three forms of capital—economic, cultural and social—which he saw as central to class differentiation, Bourdieu argued that there is a clear ‘link between economic and cultural capital’ in which the acquisition of one usually makes it easier to acquire the other (1986: 246).<sup>68</sup> Though one might argue that it is most often the possession of economic capital which enables the acquisition of cultural capital, the UK City of Culture programme is explicitly presented as an opportunity for a city to use a celebration of its cultural capital (both that already present within the city and that which it acquires through visiting cultural works and the expansion of the means of cultural production within the city whilst holding the title) as a catalyst for the acquisition of economic capital (through both the short-term gain of encouraging tourism to the city and the long-term benefits of *re-placing* the city in terms deemed appealing to businesses and the middle class).

Nevertheless, Bourdieu also regularly refers to what he calls ‘symbolic capital’ (1984: 172). As Steph Lawler writes,

symbolic capital is not a different form of capital, but rather should be seen as the legitimated, recognised form of the other capitals. [...] Hence, educational credentials, for example—forms of institutionalised cultural capital—can work as symbolic capital because they are *recognised* as representing legitimate prestige. (2011: 1418, emphasis in original)

Symbolic capital thus refers to the ways in which economic, social and cultural capital are converted into subjective positions of notability. With this in mind, I would argue that Hull 2017 (and, perhaps, other manifestations of the UK City of Culture initiative) was not only an attempt to acquire cultural and economic

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<sup>68</sup> He argued that the same was true of the relationship between social capital and the other two forms as well, however that is less relevant to my discussion here.

capital, but also an explicit attempt to convert those capitals into symbolic capital.

Bourdieu argues that, for manifestations of symbolic capital to function as an indicator of prestige, ‘they should identify with the established (moral) order’ (1984: 219). To use Lawler’s example of educational credentials, while it would be possible for anyone to create a certificate celebrating their attainment of some skill or another, a homemade certificate is less likely to be recognised as a form of symbolic capital than one awarded by an accredited institution deemed “legitimate” by wider society. And, a similar lens can be applied to Hull in 2017. As discussed above, it is evident that, in converting the city’s economic and cultural capital into symbolic capital, the event’s organisers were keen to do so in a manner coherent with prevailing notions of what a “legitimate” city looks like. In short, they were keen to ensure that the city was *re-placed* as a “good” place to visit and live with reference to the dominant, middle-class understanding of what that means.

On one level, in its portrayal of a working-class community and its foregrounding of the economic and social hardships faced by such a community, *Mighty Atoms* seems to *re-place* Hull differently. Yet, while it may centre on working-class characters and while it may celebrate the resilience and tenacity of Hull’s working-class communities, it does so in a manner which equally coheres to a middle-class perception of “respectability”. The women boxers and the estate itself are presented as testaments to the ability of working-class Hull residents to work together to better themselves and their communities yet, as discussed above, it suggests that, in order to do so, they must overcome a tendency to drift towards criminality and idleness.

Like the Hull UK City of Culture event as a whole, *Mighty Atoms* therefore displays a desire to claim a semblance of symbolic capital for its working-class ensemble. However, in line with how Bourdieu argues symbolic capital generally operates, the play does so through deferring to culturally-legitimised notions of “respectability”. While the simple fact of its subject matter might seem relatively radical within the context of the wider event, *Mighty Atoms*’ celebration of Hull’s working-class residents does not celebrate them as they are but, instead, celebrates their ability to *change* and, as the organisers of the wider event hoped was true of Hull itself, their ability to overcome their “working-class-ness” in order to be viewed as legitimate by middle-class society.

### **The Hypocrite**

The cultural events which made up the programme for Hull UK City of Culture 2017 ran the gamut of scale from large-scale works of public art such as the aforementioned *Blade* and *Made in Hull* to more modest exhibitions by artists and workshops in schools. The theatre and performance element of the programme was no different. *The Hypocrite*, a new play by Richard Bean commissioned for the event, was, like *Mighty Atoms*, performed at and produced by Hull Truck Theatre. Nevertheless, *The Hypocrite* was one of several instances in which local arts organisations partnered with larger, “national” organisations. A co-production with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), the play followed its run in Hull with a three-week stint at the Swan Theatre in the RSC’s Stratford complex. It had, moreover, the full force of the latter company’s impressive production capabilities and monetary resources behind it, allowing for a multi-level set and a 19-strong cast including celebrity leads in Mark Addy and Caroline Quentin.



Where *Mighty Atoms* was a fairly routine addition to the year's programme, then, *The Hypocrite* was very much intended to be a "headline" event which sought to articulate a certain ambition through proving that work made in Hull could not only speak to the city itself but also be worthy of the UK's most revered companies and stages.

The scale of *The Hypocrite* and its centrality to the year's programme are worth noting. For, many of Hull 2017's "headline" events seemed to have been carefully curated in order to further propagate the *re-placing* efforts of the event's organisers. *Blade*, for instance, an installation which, as mentioned above, saw the 75-meter-long rotor blade of an offshore wind turbine placed across a city centre square, was a breath-taking intervention in the physical landscape of the city and the daily routines of those who previously might have passed through the square with little thought. Yet, its connotations were complex. The rotor blade itself was produced by a new Siemens factory which had opened in the redeveloped Alexandria Dock the year prior. While, in some regards, it could be read as a celebration of a revitalisation of manufacture in the city and the skills of the 700 local people the new factory had employed since opening, it was hard to ignore the potential alternative reading of the installation as a mere advert for one of Hull 2017's biggest sponsors.

*The Hypocrite* was more interested in Hull's past than its future. The play is a retelling of the 1642 Siege of Hull in which, after four months of growing tensions across England following the attempted arrest of four Members of Parliament, open hostilities first broke out between Royalists and Parliamentarians sparking the beginning of the English Revolution. Borrowing

heavily from both pantomime and farce in its form, *The Hypocrite* follows Sir John Hotham (Mark Addy), Governor of Hull, as he ponders whether to declare his support for Parliament or for the King. Keen to keep his head at all costs, Hotham's decision rests not upon the consideration of any grand moral or political conviction but, instead, on a calculation as to who is most likely to win the upcoming conflict. Unfortunately for the conflict-adverse Hotham, Hull is home to a considerable arsenal which is wanted by both parties. The main dramatic (and comedic) action of the play therefore sees Sir John attempting to convince both Royalists and Parliamentarians that he will shortly be declaring his support for (and giving the city's arsenal over to) their cause.

Despite its populist promotional photography featuring Mark Addy as a post-execution Sir John holding his own surprised-face-pulling head under his arm, *The Hypocrite* had some fairly sincere points to make about Hull and the city's relationship with the wider nation. The play drew attention to a moment in Hull's history which, in leading to the foundation of contemporary parliamentary democracy, not only had local consequences but significant reverberations across geography and time. This was exacerbated by the involvement of the RSC which, intentionally or not, positioned the production within the tradition of Shakespeare's history plays. On the face of it, this may seem as on-message for Hull 2017 as *Blade* or *Mighty Atoms* in taking an event which took place in Hull and celebrating it for the impact it had upon the world beyond the city itself rather than for its local impact. Nevertheless, on watching the production, it was clear that there was something altogether more subversive going on beneath the surface.

## Hull as *Locale* in *The Hypocrite*

In building out their fictional versions of the places in which they are set, many of the plays I discuss in this thesis largely rely on subtle exposition woven into the action of their opening scenes. Offhand remarks about a character's journey to their present location, say, are turned into an opportunity to reveal something about the physical architecture or normative geography of the place in question. Even if it wanted to (and its brash, farcical style suggests that it wouldn't have), *The Hypocrite* has no need to be so shrewd. The presence of the much-desired arsenal sees many characters who have never visited Hull before arriving at its gates and, with this, comes the opportunity for the play to initiate the audience into Hull's locale in a fairly blunt manner.

This roster of outsiders includes the play's protagonist, Sir John. Though only travelling the short distance from the more genteel town of Beverley and, moreover, being Governor of the city, Sir John is treated by Hull's permanent residents as a complete outsider. This is most evident in others' attitudes towards his desire to avoid conflict which, in a confrontation with Lord Mayor Barnard (Martin Barrass), a Hull local, is positioned as directly antagonistic to the normative geography of the city. When Barnard suggests that 'all that you care about is keeping your estates' (Bean, 2017b: 88), it is less the accusation of self-interest which shocks Sir John than Barnard's failure to couch his criticism in niceties. With Sir John insulted, Barnard explains that 'ull folk are direct. My truths, which you call insults, are the least of your worries' (2017b: 88). The "directness" of the characters from Hull and the way in which this distinguishes them from the arriving outsiders is something which *The Hypocrite* plays on frequently. Another scene sees Sir John perched atop the city wall looking down

at King Charles (Ben Goffe) below. Still keen not to declare his allegiance to either Parliament or the King, Sir John attempts to flatter the monarch whilst, at the same time, continuing to bar his entry to the city. The Hull garrison, however, has little time for such frivolities, instead mocking the King by referring to him as a 'little shit' and telling him to 'go wipe your arse' to the amusement of the gathered peasantry (2017b: 81). In contrast to the verbal perfidiousness of Sir John, then, Hull's residents are portrayed as pragmatic, plainspoken and honest to the point of offence.

In the above cases, this pragmatism and plain-spokenness may seem a virtue; the honesty of the Hull residents often punctures the polite yet deceitful verbosity of the nobles in a manner which makes the latter seem outright foolish. Nevertheless, elsewhere it proves more problematic. Sir John might be happy to stand out whilst in Hull and to have his position as Governor respected. As members of the royal family in a city currently held by Parliament, however, the Duke of York (Jordan Metcalfe) and Prince Rupert (Rowan Polonski) are keen to blend in. Smuggled into the city by Barnard (who, unbeknownst to Sir John, is a secret Royalist) at the opening of the play, the Duke of York and Prince Rupert are on a clandestine mission to rally the support of the peasantry (who they mistakenly presume to also be secret Royalists) and to 'storm the garrison [...] and invite the night watch to obey their King' (2017b: 46). On entering the city, however, they find themselves faced with several obstacles. Firstly, they cannot understand a word that Barnard, in his thick Hull accent, says. They ask to be directed to the alderman to which Barnard affirmatively responds: 'aye, I terldamer!' (2017b: 46) which, despite his multilingualism, fails to make any sense to Prince Rupert.

The main challenge that the Duke of York and Prince Rupert face, however, is not their need to, as Barnard encourages, 'lern [...] some 'ull' (2017b: 46) but to subdue their effeminate mannerisms. The nobles both dress in bright floral patterns and boast long, flowing hair. This clashes heavily with the drab, grey *mise-en-scène* of the rest of Max Jones' design. Furthermore, their flamboyant behaviour is at odds with the hyper-masculine military preparations and political proselytising that the ensemble is engaging in around them. Barnard is taken aback when he first meets the royals, remarking that he was 'expecting, you know, soldiers, not... I mean I wouldn't wear that 'at in 'ull' (2017b: 45). Although it is only later in the play that Prince Rupert reveals the extent of his fluid gender and sexuality, even in this first interaction, it is clear that such practices are not welcome in Hull. Alongside the aforementioned plain-spokenness and pragmatism, then, *The Hypocrite's* representation of Hull as locale comes to be defined by a certain heteronormativity and a scepticism towards anything which breaks from the city's strong and cohesive normative geography.

All of this is heavily bound up in class. It is not only noteworthy that the nobles and royals who descend on Hull during *The Hypocrite* are outsiders, but also *that they are nobles* in a city made up predominantly of peasants and a smattering of merchants. Against a backdrop of promotional discourses which sought to woo potential middle-class relocators, then, *The Hypocrite* celebrated Hull as a working-class city. And, unlike *Mighty Atoms*, it celebrated the city's working-class population precisely for their renunciation of middle-class notions of normative behaviour. Though recognising that this can sometimes be problematic and offensive, the play embraces what Simon J. Charlesworth

describes as a working-class 'freedom of expression that might be experienced as "honesty" but which is better characterised as forthrightness, a willingness to volunteer more than is required [...] that is often seen as weakness and simplicity by the petit-bourgeois' (2000: 215). In representing Hull as locale, *The Hypocrite* therefore not only seeks to celebrate the city's working class but to position its plain-spokenness and pragmatism as highly favourable to what it implies are the fundamentally deceitful social niceties of "polite", middle-class society.

### **Hull as Location in *The Hypocrite***

*The Hypocrite's* re-placing of Hull as locale is interesting in that, not only does it celebrate the practices of Hull's working-class residents, it also implies that, contrary to what we might expect, it is they who have the most sway over the city's normative geography. Largely due to their being so outnumbered, Sir John, Prince Rupert and the various other nobles and royals who arrive in Hull are all confronted by the norms of practice set by the city's peasantry. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Hull is impervious to the power dynamics of the wider nation. This becomes increasingly clear throughout the play as clashes between different modes of practice come to be compounded with clashes between political and cultural orientations. And, where differences of practice, mannerisms and clothing in *The Hypocrite* serve only to distinguish between those characters with place attachments to Hull and those with place attachments to elsewhere, many of these political and cultural antagonisms are very specifically geographically coded.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> This geographical coding of political orientations echoes that of *Labour of Love*, discussed in the previous chapter.

Following a pre-show sequence in which the peasant ensemble encourages the audience to subscribe to various religious and political movements, the very first words uttered on stage take the form of a slight against London. Connie (Laura Elsworthy), Sir John's servant and *The Hypocrite's* occasional narrator, quips that 'our play begins in London, unfortunately,/ A terrible place, unlike mi' cultured 'ull' (Bean, 2017b: 17). As well as eliciting an early laugh from the audience, this opening line is emblematic of the manner in which the production seeks not only to foster a more positive view of Hull among audiences but also to satirise the London-centrism of English economy, politics and culture.

Playfully responding to both the play's period setting and the involvement of the RSC in its production, these rebuffs of the self-importance of the capital often occur through a disparaging of the work of Shakespeare. During the scene mentioned above in which King Charles is made to wait outside the city gates, for instance, he cries that he 'will not reprise King Lear! Harassed from daughter to daughter, begging a meal'. Sir John is befuddled, and the reference has to be explained to him by a nearby soldier: 'King Lear. Shakespeare's old King. [...] The King goes mad and dies' (2017b: 99). Sir John is unimpressed with what he sees as a fairly thin and unengaging plot, with the soldier adding that its 'three and a half hours' of stage time might be a little excessive (2017b: 99).

This anti-Shakespeare sentiment finds further outlet later when Sir John's daughter, Frances (Sarah Middleton), returns home to Hull from a trip to London. The intention for the trip was for Frances and her mother, Lady Sarah (Caroline Quentin), to find a wealthy husband for Frances. Instead, Frances has, as Lady Sarah dryly informs the audience, 'discovered Shakespeare' (2017b: 26).

Inspired by a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1597), Frances declares that she will no longer submit to an arranged marriage but, instead, wants to 'choose, swoon, and be wooed' (2017b: 27). Like the Duke of York and Prince Rupert's physical affectations, Frances' swooning and sonnet-reciting sticks out like a sore thumb among the pragmatic orientation of Hull's normative geography, eliciting eye rolls from the peasantry. The work of Shakespeare therefore comes to be presented as indicative of how disconnected the London-centric nobility are from the everyday lives of the people of Hull.

Having some knowledge of the English Revolution, one could be forgiven for assuming that *The Hypocrite* would present audiences with a conflict between Parliamentary Hull and the over-reaching power of the Monarchy. However, it is not only the nobility who are presented as trying to impose their own, largely-unwanted culture on the people of Hull; a similar intention is ascribed to the more stoic Parliamentarians. Mirroring Frances' trip to London, Sir John's son, Durand (Pierro Niel-Mee), has recently returned to Hull from studying at Merton College, Oxford, where he has fallen in love with the law. And, his embrace of legalese presents almost the opposite problem to Frances' search for love in its prescriptivism and inflexibility. In one scene, Durand continually interrupts a conversation between Sir John and the local MP, Peregrine Pelham (Neil D-Souza), in order to explain how certain phrases have 'no inherent meaning' or to argue that Sir John's 'use of [...] solipsistic patter is lazy, vain and self-gratifying' (2017b: 62). Again, this pedantry clashes with the pragmatism that is attributed to Hull itself and those aligned with Parliament come to be presented as equally attempting to impose a London-centric (or, at the very least, *South East*-centric) set of values on Hull which are little more than irritating to all who are subjected



to them.

These clashes between the cultural values or orientations of the London-based nobles, royals and Parliamentarians and those of Hull itself are, for the most part, confined to subplots and passing jokes. Nevertheless, by association, they come to have a considerable influence on the central conflict of the play. As I suggested above, it would have been tempting for *The Hypocrite* to have aligned Hull and its people with one side of the English Revolution and to have presented the other as an external aggressor. Instead, the play presents both the Parliamentarians and Royalists among its cast as of an entirely different world to Hull's peasantry and merchant class.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, it regularly highlights their lack of interest in Hull as a meaningful place and suggests that the only reason they are anywhere near the city is due to its custody of the country's biggest arsenal. While celebrating the fact that an event considered to be of great importance to the nation and world happened in Hull, then, *The Hypocrite* questions how much the Siege of Hull actually had to do with Hull itself and how much its occurrence in the city was merely a matter of chance.

### **Hull's Sense of Place in *The Hypocrite***

In taking the Siege of Hull as its subject matter, *The Hypocrite* certainly sought to foreground the impact that Hull has had on the wider world. The notion that the events depicted within the play began 'the English road to parliamentary constitution' is repeated often (2017b: 131). In this, the play seemed aligned with the desire of the organisers of the wider Hull 2017 event to *re-place* the city as

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<sup>70</sup> This again echoes the geographical encoding of political orientations in *Labour of Love* in which those at both of the furthest poles of the Labour Party's democratic socialist-social democrat ideological spectrum were framed as being "other" to Nottinghamshire.

well-integrated into the wider nation and world. Despite this, as I began to discuss in the previous section, the play ultimately seems sceptical as to whether Parliament's eventual victory in the English Revolution and the later establishment of a constitutional monarchy had much of an effect on Hull itself. Although aware of the chaos of governance which surrounds them, the Hull peasantry show little interest in the conflict between Parliament and the King. Instead, pragmatic as ever, they are primarily invested in more material matters. Connie, for example, deems the enclosure of the common land on which her father used to graze animals by an act passed by parliament 'in which, without the vote, my father could not participate' to be of far greater consequence to her life (2017b: 104). And, though Sir John is adamant that he is witnessing 'enough revolution for one lifetime' (2017b: 104), such radical sentiment on the part of Hull's peasantry is a constant presence throughout the show.

Both the lack of a popular vote and the enclosure of common land become of further significance to the performance text when taken as subject matter for songs by the chorus of Ranters, Levellers and Diggers (led by Josh Sneesby) who intersperse the action of the production with sung interludes. While much of the play privileges the actions of the visiting royals and nobility, it is through these musical interjections that the concerns of those lower down the social hierarchy take centre stage. Most telling of these is a song which refers, in its refrain, to 'a world turned upside down' (2017b: 21). Originating in a folk song of the period, this phrase was used by Christopher Hill as the title of a book in which he argues that groups such as the Ranters, Levellers and Diggers can be viewed as a 'revolt within the revolution' (1972: 12). Though broadly supportive of deposing the monarchy, Hill argues that such groups gave voice to a desire for more extensive

reform than simply the replacement of a feudal political system with a bourgeois republic. Through these songs, this same critique of the Parliamentary cause is folded into *The Hypocrite's* representation of the people of Hull whom the play instills with the ideals of English radicalism.

Rather than seeking radical reforms due to a nascent idealism, when viewed in relation to the play's *re-placing* of Hull as locale, the radicalism of Hull's peasantry seems to stem simply from these issues being far more pressing to their livelihood than the preoccupation with who governs them. This becomes even more illuminating when one considers that *The Hypocrite* was performed less than a year following the UK's Referendum on Membership of the European Union. Here, the play seems to use the English Revolution as an allegory for that more recent political event. I have previously discussed the tendency, in some commentary following that referendum, to imply that people in working-class, post-industrial regions had voted to leave the European Union primarily due to an underlying social conservatism. I have also pointed to further commentary which framed the decision of some working-class voters to support leaving the EU as 'a protest vote by those left behind by modernisation and globalisation' (Kaufmann, 2016). In an interview with CNN following the referendum, one man from Hull agreed with this interpretation, suggesting that 'people like us, no one is listening to us, that's why [Hull] voted out' (Black, Mortensen and Di Virgilio, 2016). I do not wish to make any claims as to the validity of this analysis, yet it does seem that *The Hypocrite* is drawing upon a similar idea, suggesting that Hull's sense of place is one defined by a scepticism of political and economic elites and a desire, above all else, to be heard by a political system which often overlooks the concerns of the city's working-class population.

In this regard, it is notable that both the opening and closing lines of the play are delivered by Connie. Like the other peasants, during the main action of the play, Connie has limited agency. Early on, she airs her conflicted opinions surrounding the revolution, stating that 'Charles is a runt. If he'd been born a pig, he'd be in a pie. But he is God's choice' (Bean, 2017b: 23). For this, she is castigated by Lady Sarah who informs her that Sir John will decide which side of the conflict the household will support, and that Connie will abide by that decision. Nevertheless, throughout the play, it is Connie who is portrayed as the most salient thinker among the entire ensemble. In contrast to Sir John's simple self-interest, it is Connie who is often most able to sum up the political situation with the greatest eloquence. This, and the choice to have Connie open and close the show, encourage the audience to view the events of *The Hypocrite* through her eyes; we are encouraged to view the farcical disagreements of the aristocracy frustratedly, aware that the nobles' and royals' preoccupation with the matter of who should wield power over the peasantry is eliding the more fundamental question of whether either group has the moral legitimacy or the intellectual capacity to do so.

*The Hypocrite* thus ultimately *re-replaces* Hull's sense of place as being defined by a subjugation to "national" economic and political elites and, moreover, a desire to overturn that subjugation. Using the English Revolution as a cipher for the present day, it portrays the people of Hull as being consistently ignored, despite their above-mentioned pragmatism giving them considerable insight into political events. In direct contrast to the desire of the organisers of the wider Hull UK City of Culture 2017 event, *The Hypocrite* portrays Hull's sense of place as

being almost directly antagonistic to the preoccupations of the wider nation. In associating the city with the English radical tradition, it suggests that its residents might have had the wisdom to more successfully negotiate some of the social and political problems of the past and, by extension, might be better placed to solve the social and political problems of the present than those who seek to inflict power on the city from without.

### **Subverting Symbolic Capital**

In a similar manner to *Mighty Atoms*, *The Hypocrite* makes the case that power has consistently been inflicted on Hull from without and that this has held the city back politically, socially and economically. Where the former play focussed on the manner in which working-class communities have rallied in order to solve problems caused by the retreat of the state, *The Hypocrite* invites the audience to watch in frustration as the infinitely-wise Hull populace are dictated to by an incompetent elite. *The Hypocrite* portrays these “national” elites as farcically inept and implies that those with place attachments to Hull would be far more capable of looking after the city’s affairs.

*Mighty Atoms* primarily sought to claim symbolic capital for Hull through dramatizing the ability of its working-class residents to comply with dominant notions of “respectability” as perceived through a moralising, middle-class lens. As *Mighty Atoms* framed it, Hull’s claiming of symbolic capital required it to first overcome what it suggested was a tendency among the city’s working class to drift towards criminality and laziness. *The Hypocrite* does quite the opposite. Where *Mighty Atoms* predicated its suggestion that Hull could claim symbolic capital upon already dominant notions of cultural, political and practical

“legitimacy”, *The Hypocrite* upends the audience’s perceptions of what should be deemed symbolically valuable.

Throughout, *The Hypocrite* attacks the normative practices, aesthetic sensibilities and political ability of the English middle class and elite. Preoccupations with “politeness” are reframed as being inherently insincere; much-celebrated cultural texts are parsed as disconnected from the realities of the social world; legal frameworks are presented as needlessly complicated and convoluted; and the suitability of those who hold power is brought into question. Rather than simply waging a broadly-defined class war, however, *The Hypocrite* positions all of these traits as alien to Hull. The city is *re-placed* as almost homogeneously working-class and, as a result, as being home to an alternate set of practices, aesthetic sensibilities and approaches to governance. The play, moreover, presents these as infinitely superior to those of the “national” elite and as having only been side-lined due to the inequities of the English class system and political geography.

*The Hypocrite* therefore *re-replaces* Hull as an intrinsically subversive city, directly opposed to what it conceives of as a “national” elite. This subversiveness is accentuated by the play’s association of Hull’s working class with the radicalism of the Ranters, Levellers and Diggers. Rather than suggesting that Hull might lay claim to symbolic capital through adopting the “respectable” practices, political views and aesthetic sensibilities of the middle class, then, *The Hypocrite* suggests that it might do so through its refusal to be so deferent. In doing so, the play asks its audience to reassess what attributes it might deem to be symbolically valuable in relation to place and implores us to view traits already

present in the city as valuable on their own terms.

## **ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING**

*ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* was written by Luke Barnes with music composed by James Frewer. The play engages an Epic chronology to chart the changing fortunes and aspirations of its two protagonists: Leah and Chris. Born on the same day in 1987, Leah is raised by her working-class dad in a mostly happy yet financial precarious home whilst Chris, who is raised by his mum after his own father dies unexpectedly, is solidly middle class and wants for little. The play consists of three acts. Following a brief prelude which takes place in 1987, Act One takes place in 1997 when both characters are children living in Hull. Act Two takes place in 2007 whilst Leah is working at the local branch of Build-a-Bear Workshop and Chris is at university. Act Three takes place in 2017 (the year in which the play was initially performed), Leah having managed to secure a middle-class job in the energy sector and Chris having failed to fulfil his dreams of becoming a psychologist and grown unhappy in his marriage. In skipping across decades in this way, the play explores the possibilities for and experience of social mobility in contemporary Hull. Moreover, throughout, the play draws connections between Leah and Chris' changing hopes and fears for the future and broader social, economic and political trends.

Where *The Hypocrite* had institutional backing from both Hull Truck Theatre and the RSC, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* was produced by the then-nascent Middle Child Theatre and, where the former play boasted a large, celebrity-fronted ensemble cast, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* drew its six performers and creative team, including its writer Luke

Barnes, from the UK's lively yet often undersung fringe theatre ecology. Furthermore, where *The Hypocrite* was performed in two much-celebrated, established venues, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* premiered at The Welly, a popular Hull nightclub, before transferring to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and touring sporadically until November 2018. Although the play went on to garner considerable critical praise, it was therefore clearly produced with far less resource than either of the other productions discussed in this chapter.<sup>71</sup>

This was reflected in the production's form. The play is an example of what has come to be referred to as 'gig theatre', a term which, as Lynne Kendrick explains, 'refer[s] to performances that are a hybrid of theatre and a music gig' (2017: 47). Middle Child Theatre have been a key proponent of this genre, previously having described themselves as creating 'gig theatre for the gig economy' (n.d.). In this, the company express their identification of a relationship between this particular form and the economic realities of working-class life in England in the present day. While, on the one hand, experimenting with form, on the other, the company have often sought to tell stories grounded in a level of social realism. 2014's *Weekend Rockstars* (also written by Barnes), for instance, followed a young working-class man, Terry, as losing his job and girlfriend in the space of a week gave way to a quarter-life crisis and the recognition that his economic and social circumstances might preclude him from achieving all that he wanted in life. On their website, the company suggest that they 'brin[g] people together for a good night out with big ideas' (2018), intentionally placing their work in the tradition of working-class performance described and advocated by John

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<sup>71</sup> For examples of *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING*'s critical reception, see glowing write-ups by Annegret Märten in *Exeunt Magazine* (2018) and Will Ramsey in *The Stage* (2017).



McGrath in his 1981 book *A Good Night Out*.<sup>72</sup> McGrath wrote that he 'believe[d] that there is a working-class audience for theatre in Britain which makes demands, and which has values, which are different from those enshrined in our idealised middle-class audience' before proceeding to describe what he thought a theatre more orientated towards working-class audiences might look like (1981: 4). Middle Child's engagement of the gig theatre form is an express attempt to engage in issues surrounding working-class life in a manner perceived to be attractive to those for whom it will be most relevant.

Elements of popular, working-class culture were a constant presence throughout the production. Alongside the show being performed in a nightclub, the live music, composed by Frewer, borrowed heavily from the indie stylings of bands such as the Arctic Monkeys. Consistent with this, the set took on a "do-it-yourself" aesthetic, being comprised primarily of several scaffold platforms which were moved throughout the performance space. The audience, too, were free to roam and had frequent opportunities to visit the bar. In this, one can see a clear departure from the middle-class-orientated framing of the Hull UK City of Culture event more broadly. Where the broader event was largely used as an opportunity to *re-place* Hull for the benefit of a middle-class audience, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* was constructed from the ground-up with a working-class audience in mind.

### **Hull as Locale in *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING***

*ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* was, like *Mighty Atoms* and *The*

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<sup>72</sup> A blog on the company's website includes several references to McGrath. In an entry titled *Why Pantomime isn't Behind Us*, for example, they describe *A Good Night Out* as a 'timeless inspiration' (2017).

*Hypocrite*, heavily interested in Hull's past. In this case, however, the focus was more recent. As discussed above, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* is structured around three acts with each taking place in a different decade. Although beginning in 1987 with the birth of the play's dual protagonists Leah (Bryony Davies) and Chris (James Stanyer), the action of Act One proper takes place in 1997, with Act Two taking place in 2007 and Act Three in 2017 (then the present day). This structure enables the play to follow the varying fortunes of Leah and Chris from childhood through adolescence to young adulthood. In keeping with the company's core interests, at stake for much of the play is class mobility. Leah's working-class beginnings are a far cry from Chris' relatively affluent upbringing. Leah wants to rise above her father's socio-economic station yet lacks the economic or social resources to do so. Chris, on the other hand, finds his middle-class background stifling, recognising that having access to so many opportunities that others do not means that a failure to achieve his goal of becoming a psychologist could only be due to a lack of effort or intelligence.

In contrast to *Mighty Atoms* and *The Hypocrite's* re-placing of Hull as homogenously working-class, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING's* plot is therefore predicated on there being a degree of socio-economic diversity within the city. Throughout the play, the audience is invited to draw comparisons between Leah and Chris' lives and to question how their experiences might have been structured by class. Where *Mighty Atoms* and *The Hypocrite* both focussed on conflicts of practice between working-class Hull residents and elites with place attachments to elsewhere, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* draws our attention, instead, to conflicts of practice between different social groups *within* the city.

Leah and Chris are differentiated in terms of class early on in the play when the audience is introduced to their childhood homes. Though the sparse set means these are only ever described through monologue, the descriptions provide an insight into both the aesthetic stylings of each home and the practices which dominate within. Chris' house in the leafy Avenues is said to boast a constant aroma of lavender, an array of John Lewis furniture and a "Dream Wall" on which Chris has been encouraged to map out the many things he wants out of life (Barnes, 2017b: 14-15). In contrast, Leah's house is largely defined by what is absent; she bemoans, in particular, their lack of 'satellite TV and a computer with the internet' (2017b: 20). Later in the play, Leah shows further disdain at having to spend her birthday with her Dad eating 'oven baked smilies, chips and peas' (2017b: 59), something it is hard to imagine Chris' Mum, Kimberley (Emma Bright), serving. Both characters, therefore, begin the play with very different understandings of what constitutes "normal" practice.

Behind closed doors, these two modes of practice are able to amiably coexist within Hull. Nevertheless, when Leah and Chris age and come to transpose them into social settings, a clear power dynamic is revealed. The social spaces which dominate *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* are nightclubs. In this, there is a clear dialogue between what McAuley refers to as 'theatre space' and 'theatrical space' (1999: 24, 32), the former referring to the "real" space in which a performance takes place and the latter to the "imagined" spaces invoked in the text. Although the playtext specifies particular nightclubs as the settings for particular scenes, these distinctions are less apparent in the production in performance. This is partly due to them only receiving a fleeting

mention but also partly due to the compelling presence of the actual nightclub surrounding the performance; The Welly venue in which the audience is watching weaving itself into the performance text.

The locale of Hull's nightlife is described by the play's characters as being fairly unruly. This is established early in the play through references to Leah's Dad, Brian's (Joshua Meredith), job as a bouncer. The MC (Marc Graham), who serves as a narrator throughout the show, describes him 'hoping to God there won't be another fight, not tonight/ Just the usual girls in dresses split at the seams and boys off their tits on pills to escape their drifting dreams' (Barnes, 2017b: 21). Later, when Leah and Chris are old enough to go to these clubs themselves, they concur with this assessment. Leah pours scorn on who she describes as the 'wannabe wags/ In their super high heels and their Gucci bags' (2017b: 42) who populate these spaces whilst Chris describes the clubs as being a 'hustle and bustle of fists and pheromones' (2017b: 46). Again, this characterisation is not exactly contradicted by the performance space, The Welly being somewhat unkempt in its appearance.

Nevertheless, while Leah and Chris' descriptions of these spaces might initially imply a hatred of Hull's nightclubs and the practices which occur within, Leah, when challenged, defiantly defends her favourite club, declaring that 'This isn't shit./ This was Waterfront! It's where I had my first kiss with Tommy Grogan/ This room is full of memories' (2017b: 43). Where Chris largely disengages in each of the scenes where he finds himself in a nightclub, the underlying power dynamics of Hull's nightlife as represented by *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* become evident in Act Two when Leah bumps into a more affluent

friend from school, Holly (Alice Beaumont). Leah and Holly's meeting takes place whilst both are on a night out with their respective work colleagues. While Leah is having a genuinely enjoyable night out with her workmates from the local branch of Build-a-Bear Workshop, however, Holly is back visiting the city, having moved to Leeds for a corporate job in the energy sector. Holly tells Leah that she has brought her friends out to show them 'all the shit places [she] used to go' (2017b: 43). Leah and Holly are both partaking in the dominant practices of the nightclub, yet, where Leah is enjoying them with sincerity, Holly is doing so only ironically.

Both Holly's ironic enjoyment of Hull's nightclubs and Chris' disengagement with them is interesting in considering the power dynamics of practice in Hull. The tactics adopted by Holly and Chris both imply that the normative geography of Hull's nightclubs is so hegemonic as to be impossible to change. Yet, notably, it is the city's working-class population who have been able to shape what that normative geography is. Counter to what one might expect in a society in which working-class power is generally suppressed, it is the working-class "Build-a-Bear massive" and not Leah's middle-class entourage who have the upper hand in terms of practice within Hull.

Though stressing that there is a relative amount of socio-economic diversity within Hull, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* thus concurs with *Mighty Atoms* and *The Hypocrite* in suggesting that it is the city's working-class population who are more dominant in shaping the city's normative geography. Furthermore, that Holly and Chris find themselves in the same venues as Leah and her Build-a-Bear colleagues in the first place suggests a lack of more

“respectable” clubs with dominant practices more to their tastes. The play makes much of this integration of class groups within the city. Leah’s chance encounter with Holly leads to the latter offering Leah a job opportunity which no one within her current social group would have been able to offer. *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* therefore not only suggests that the dominance of the Hull’s working class leads to a greater degree of crosspollination between class groups within the city but also that this lack of class segregation can lead to working-class residents finding opportunities that they otherwise might be deprived of.

### **Hull as Location in *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING***

There are several moments in which *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* supports *Mighty Atoms* and *The Hypocrite’s* framing of Hull as having power inflicted on it from without. In the opening lines of the play, for example, The MC reports that ‘two weeks ago Margaret Thatcher won her third election as Prime Minister. Our longest serving leader although no one here voted for her’ (2017b: 11). The play here foregrounds Hull’s identity as a “Labour city”, all three Hull constituencies having consistently returned Labour MPs to Westminster since the 1950s. Nevertheless, as discussed above, despite references to Prime Ministers from Thatcher to Cameron, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* is primarily interested in exploring power relationships within the city rather than those between Hull and the wider world.

The foremost manner in which *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* re-places Hull as location is, instead, through the geopathologies

of Leah and Chris' migrations throughout the play.<sup>73</sup> In Act Two, Chris leaves Hull to study psychology at the University of Manchester whilst, in Act Three, Leah takes up Holly's offer of a job in Leeds. We do not see either character in these places, catching up with them, instead, on visits back to Hull (with Chris later returning to live in Hull once he has graduated). These arrivals and departures reveal a great deal about each character's changing relationship with their home city and, by extension, inflects the way in which the play *re-places* Hull more broadly.

The audience is made aware early-on of Chris' desire to follow in his father's footsteps by becoming a psychologist, and his enrolment at university is evidently a step towards this goal. In some regards, this move away from Hull and to Manchester therefore comes to represent a certain level of success; in leaving Hull, Chris has made some progress in achieving the goal he once stuck at the top of his Dream Wall. Nevertheless, despite his privileged upbringing and genuinely strong work ethic, when Chris arrives at university, he struggles to achieve the grades required to continue on his desired career trajectory. Chris' experience of moving to Manchester, and the impression of both that city and Hull which the audience gains from witnessing it, is thus complex. Though moving to Manchester represents some degree of success, it is implied that Chris' migration raises the stakes in his pursuit of becoming a psychologist. Along with potential dream-fulfilment, then, comes an increased pressure not to fail.

Within Chris' narrative arc, Manchester and Hull are therefore conceived of as opposites. Manchester represents the duality of the excitement of opportunity

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<sup>73</sup> For an explanation of Chaudhuri's concept of 'geopathology' (1997: 55), see my discussion of *Shebeen* in the previous chapter.

and the pressure of potential failure whilst Hull represents the opposite of both these things: mediocrity.<sup>74</sup> Though the audience is never directly privy to Chris' life in Manchester, in Act Two, we see that his experiences there have fundamentally altered his perception of Hull. On a night out with his school friends, Chris constantly parses Hull as being a warning, a place of mediocrity to which he might be condemned to return. He consoles himself for his less-than-perfect results at university through lashing out at those who chose not to leave in the first place. He says of his friend Tom that 'his mediocrity makes me sick because he hasn't even tried [...] him not trying is even more disgusting than me not succeeding' (2017b: 48). This perception of Hull as a place of mediocrity is only furthered in Act Three when, having "failed" to become a psychologist and now a counsellor, Chris marries Carly (Alice Beaumont), with whom he has a deeply unfulfilling relationship. Geopathologically, then, Chris' return to Hull completes a trajectory from mediocrity to potential success and back to mediocrity.

Where the play seems to agree with Chris' assessment of Hull as a place of mediocrity within his narrative arc, this tying of a lack of ambition to Hull is critiqued to some extent by Leah's experiences. In Act Two, Leah is incredibly positive about her job at Build-a-Bear and the friendship group she has built around that workplace in Hull. Yet, her chance encounter with Holly encourages her to reassess her life and to move to Leeds for a higher-paying job. Initially, then, Leah's experiences support the notion that "success" requires leaving Hull. Nevertheless, in Act Three, the play begins to explore how Leah's move to Leeds

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<sup>74</sup> The suggestion that to be in Hull is to be subject to "lower stakes" than to be in Manchester here mirrors a similar geographical coding of Nottingham and Hull in *Shebeen*, discussed in the previous chapter.



has impacted her personality. Her new job and social group have wildly altered her aesthetic tastes and understanding of what constitutes acceptable practice. It is here, for example, that Leah expresses her distaste for spending her birthday with her dad eating oven chips. She also begins to show a disdain for the nightclubs she once so passionately defended. Mostly, however, despite being far more financially secure than she was previously, Leah shows signs of being unfulfilled. And, when Holly leaves Leah on her birthday night out to meet up with someone she has met on a dating app, the play implies that Leah's social circle may also be less supportive than that which she had whilst working at Build-a-Bear.

Leeds and Hull thus come to be framed as opposites in a similar manner to Manchester and Hull were for Chris. Though Leeds represents success in a financial sense, however, it leaves Leah far less fulfilled than her old job and life in Hull. Leah's experience of first remaining in Hull and then leaving it therefore suggests that what Chris' narrative arc implied was a city defined by mediocrity is, in fact, a city in which success is measured along a different metric entirely. Where Leeds becomes connected to neoliberal notions of financial success, Hull becomes positioned in opposition to this as a city in which success is measured, instead, through the social bonds that one is able to build.

### **Hull's Sense of Place in *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING***

There are several moments in *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* in which characters make direct, dialogic appeals to Hull's sense of place. Early in the play, for example, Brian, Leah's Dad, consoles his daughter over their financial situation by encouraging her to view her life as a continuation of the

legacy of working-class Hull residents who have gone before. He tells her that 'all the ancestors you have looking down on you/ These are the same stars they saw in the same place like glue./ You're sharing the night with the fisherman and factory workers and farmers/ And they're saying:/ The good times are coming' (2017b: 20-21). Nonetheless, alongside such moments, the gig-inspired form of *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING*, particularly the inclusion of the character of The MC, allows for extensive use of direct address.

These moments of narration, alongside more playful interactions with the audience, enable The MC to insert more throwaway observations about Hull, which, despite their sparseness, have significant ramifications for the play's conception of the city's sense of place. There are, for example, several instances in which, alongside the narration of the story, The MC finds either correlation or counterpoint between the experiences of the play's characters and those of the city more broadly. In one instance at the opening of the play, he tells the audience how 'the smell of rain hangs like a memory as new life breaths into Hull./ But despite the rain giving an air of possibility Hull is full of negativity' (2017b: 11). In doing so, he extends moments which otherwise might have only held meaning for the individual characters present in a scene to be indicative of a wider sense of place within Hull.

This notion that Hull's sense of place in the 1980s might have been typified by negativity is notable. Particularly early on in the play, it is important to recognise that such moments are not there for the sole purpose of characterising what Hull's sense of place might have been at that period of time. As mentioned, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* adopts an Epic form, taking place

over decades. And this moment, and others like it, operate as a method of demonstrating a trajectory for the city over the three decades across which the play takes place. The notion that Hull was “full of negativity” in the 1980s is therefore included less because the play is interested in telling the audience this in isolation than because the supposed decline of the city during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is a necessary precursor to *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING*'s suggestion that the city has, of late, witnessed a civic resurgence.

This framing of the play's narrative, and Hull's sense of place, is made possible through the production's positioning of The MC as having the same relationship to the dramatic action as the audience. Rather than being involved in the lives of Leah and Chris, The MC is, instead, an outside observer. As the playtext states, 'he is in the same space with us, at this time, on this night' (2017b: 11). Often, when the central action of a particular scene is taking place on one block of moveable scaffold, The MC will be positioned across the room, looking-on from a distance. This distancing includes an awareness of the context of the event and the trajectory of Hull into the present day. Even early in the play, with the prologue just completed, he declares that 'this is the City of Culture. This is theatre like you've never seen it before. This is *All We Ever Wanted Was Everything*' (2017b: 13). Throughout the play, The MC constantly invites us to view past invocations of Hull in relationship to the city in 2017. This comes to a head in the opening of Act Three when The MC welcomes the audience back from the interval with the declaration that 'it's 2017 in Brexit Britain and Hull is the

UK City of Culture. Blades, blue people and belief' (2017b: 55).<sup>75</sup> As such, all previous decades are positioned as leading up to this one. And, while the reference to "Brexit Britain" may have been more divisive, in relation to Hull itself, all moments of supposed negativity in the past serve as a pretext to a present optimism within the city.

Given the importance of Hull's relationships with the wider world in the promotional materials surrounding Hull UK City of Culture 2020, it is also worth pointing to how *The MC* connects the historical highs and lows of Hull to more "global" histories. In this, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* goes further than even *The Hypocrite's* critique of the notion that an event deemed to be of national or global significance happening in Hull is an inarguable positive for Hull itself. The play's three time-jumps require *The MC* to regularly establish which year the play's action is occurring in. In order to do so, after each temporal leap, *The MC* provides the audience with some political and cultural context such as who the Prime Minister is and which bands are topping the charts. In addition to this, however, he also tells us of the changing fortunes of Hull City Association Football Club in the Football League and, in later acts, the Premier League. Partly, this serves to reinforce the city's trajectory of negativity to optimism as the team drops down the leagues in the 1980s and 1990s before successive promotion sees them rise from what was then Division Three to reach the Premier League for the first time in 2007. Yet, this repeated insistence on using the trials and tribulations of Hull City as a marker of time also makes a claim for the notability of Hull's place memory on its own merit. Whereas other productions

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<sup>75</sup> "Blades" and "blue people" are both references to other artworks which were presented as part of Hull UK City of Culture 2017, Nayan Kulkarni's *The Blade* and Spencer Tunick's *Sea of Hull*, both discussed above.

might have sought to make events in Hull seem more notable through their links to more “global” historical narratives, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* suggests that an aspect of Hull’s history which has only passing relevance to those without place attachments to the city might be used as an equally significant marker of time.

### **Re-valuing Symbolic Capital**

Like both *Mighty Atoms* and *The Hypocrite*, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* was expressly interested in claiming symbolic capital for Hull. This is evident in the play’s *re-placing* of the city as being on a trajectory from a supposed decline in the late 20th century to a renewed confidence and prominence in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>. Where early descriptions of the city frame it as rain-soaked and “full of negativity”, by the final act, Hull is depicted as having undergone a rebirth to be a city very much ready to celebrate itself.<sup>76</sup> And, while *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* does not seek to directly attack or satirise the practices or cultural affinities of the English middle-class in the same way that *The Hypocrite* did, it still seeks to break from the underlying logic of that value system.

As discussed in the previous section, this encouragement of the audience

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<sup>76</sup> This positivity is undercut slightly by a framing device which imagines an asteroid steadily heading to earth throughout the production. Both on paper and in performance, the asteroid reads as metaphorical rather than literal; none of the play’s characters other than The MC ever mention it. Instead, it serves to make textual the dramatic irony of the audience’s knowledge that, despite their optimism with regard to their dreams and aspirations in Act One, the economic circumstances of 2017 will very likely mean that Leah and Chris will not experience the same upward mobility as their parents and which their upbringing and education encouraged them to assume they would also experience. Nevertheless, this engagement with what Amy Hanson referred to in her review of the show as ‘millennial angst’ read as distinct from the production’s *re-placing* of Hull (2017).

to re-conceptualise their understanding of what is considered symbolically valuable is evident in some of the milestones invoked by The MC in providing historical context to each act. Invoking the successes and failures of Hull City AFC as a marker of time suggests that events unlikely to be deemed as relevant to those without place attachment to the city (and, indeed, markers of time most likely to be remembered by working-class Hull residents) are, in fact, just as significant as who was topping the singles chart. Where even *The Hypocrite* relied on an event already considered significant well beyond Hull for the impact it had on systems of government worldwide in order to bestow a sense of notability upon the city, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* implies that an event being locally significant is more than enough for it to be symbolically valuable.

Where *The Hypocrite*'s temporal setting meant that it could only ever allude to the present day through perceived similarities between the dynamics of the English Revolution and those of the UK's Referendum on Membership of the European Union, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING*'s contemporary setting also enabled it to engage more directly with the class dynamics of the present day. Rather than requiring the audience to transpose the relationships between the nobility and peasantry onto present-day tensions between the working class and elite, it directly explored the manner in which neoliberal conceptions of success, notability and symbolic value govern lives lived in the present.

This was evident in Chris and Leah's migrations to and from Hull. In both characters' narratives, the play acknowledges that Hull holds less economic,

cultural and social capital than other cities (here Manchester and Leeds). As a result of this, Chris chooses to move to Manchester to attend that city's "elite" university while Leah's pursuit of a higher-paying job sees her move to Leeds. As Bourdieu would suggest, this lack of economic, social and cultural capital leads to Hull generally being considered to have less symbolic capital than either of those other cities. Yet, as the play continues, it begins to critique this perception of Hull and the underlying logic of symbolic value. Leah's departure from Hull is ultimately unfulfilling and, as we witness her dejectedness with her new life on her return to the city, the audience is encouraged to question whether such conceptions of value are as inarguable as we might often be led to believe. While it is worth noting the manner in which *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* side-lines the fact that the acquisition of economic capital might have made Leah's life less precarious, the play suggests that Leah's acquisition of a greater amount of cultural capital might have made her something of a snob in her snubbing of her Dad's dinner of oven chips. Furthermore, it suggests that, though she might have gained social capital through gaining a social circle more likely to be able to offer her employment opportunities, these relationships are far less fulfilling than those which she previously had in Hull. In doing so, the play presents the neoliberal conception of "success" that Leah has left Hull to achieve as having little substance.

*ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* does not, therefore, seek to *re-place* Hull in terms that would allow it to claim symbolic capital within the dominant logic of English class society; it never implies that Chris or Leah could have achieved the same education or career in Hull as in Manchester or Leeds. Instead, the play asks the audience to question whether the forms of capital both

characters are able to acquire through their migrations to those cities are as desirable as we are often led to believe. It asks the audience to question whether both characters (but Leah in particular) might have found more fulfilment through staying in Hull where they might have been able to forge more genuine human connections. By extension, it also questions whether the contemporary *re-placing* of Hull in terms assumed to be desirable to the middle class and elite is a benefit to the city, or whether Hull might benefit, instead, from celebrating the solidarity and camaraderie which the play implies have long been present in the city. In short, the play suggests that Hull might lay claim to symbolic capital in a manner that directly contests the neoliberal conception of what that means.

## Conclusions

In their 2013 book *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Savage *et al.* write that,

in recent times classifications of class and space have become more loaded. The view from the educated media-dominated metropolis—quintessentially London—has more power in defining the deficiencies of other locations. London has become a magical and aestheticised city, its quality etched into its innovative-high-rise corporate blocks, such as the Gherkin, but with its aura extending to its murkier territories[.] (2015: 262)

Whilst spatial inequality within England has been a mainstay of my discussion within this thesis, my focus has primarily been on disparities of economic and cultural capital. Nevertheless, as Savage *et al.* attest in the above passage, the accumulation of the primary three forms of capital tends to result in a place accruing a degree of symbolic capital. To use the example of the capital, living in London can not only be a marker of class due to the potential that one earns more, is able to engage more easily with “legitimate” forms of culture or potentially



moves in more prestigious social circles but also because being associated with the city has itself become a form of class differentiation.

The rise to prominence of cultural planning methodologies of urban regeneration and development evidence the manner in which, in recent decades, other cities have become aware of the importance of not only accruing economic, cultural and social capital but also of converting those primary forms of capital into symbolic capital. While they are rarely described in such terms, cultural planning methodologies are, at their heart, an attempt to use the development of a vibrant cultural offer to *re-place* a city as symbolically valuable. This is even more explicitly the case in instances where a city does so through obtaining a title such as European Capital of Culture or UK City of Culture where the title itself bestows symbolic value.

Nevertheless, in such processes, the end goal is always economic capital. However much such an event may be predicated on a celebration of cultural capital, the desire is, through converting that cultural capital into symbolic capital, to attract businesses and the middle class to relocate to the city holding the title. Such a goal was evident in the promotional discourses surrounding Hull UK City of Culture in which, perhaps following the suggestions of Florida in *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2012), organisers sought to *re-place* Hull as a progressive, outward-facing city in order to lure wealthier economic actors to the city.

Hull, however, has long been predominantly working-class. For much of the 20th century, its economy was heavily reliant on shipping and trawling. From the 1970s onwards, both industries fell into steep decline and the city along with it.

According to *The Guardian*, by 2014, Hull was one of the poorest cities in Britain by multiple metrics. It had the 'lowest rate of employment', the lowest weekly wage and the 'lowest percentage of residents with NVQ4 qualifications or above' in the UK (English, 2014). Attempts to *re-place* the city in a manner assumed to be attractive to businesses and the middle class were always, then, likely to be in tension with working-class experiences of the city. An early sign of this was the manner in which the voting preferences of the city's population during the UK Referendum on Membership of the European Union punctured any attempt to portray the city as 'European', as Hull 2017 CEO Martin Green had once hoped (in Hull City of Culture 2017, 2015: 7). My interests in this chapter, however, have been far broader than this as I have considered three productions which were commissioned for and premiered during Hull UK City of Culture 2017 and considered how those three productions might have complemented or contested the middle-class-orientated promotional discourses surrounding the event.

All three performance texts I have discussed foregrounded working-class experiences of Hull and *re-placed* the city in a manner which further substantiated rather than cast-off a working-class place identity. Furthermore, where much of the framing of the UK City of Culture event was unapologetically celebratory, each regularly highlighted the existence of economic and social deprivation within the city. *Mighty Atoms* foregrounded the challenges that have followed deindustrialisation since the 1970s and suggested that, for many, the past few decades have not been ones of civic triumph but decline; *The Hypocrite* implied that the city has long had power wielded over it and been marginalised by "national" political and economic elites; and *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* attested to the manner in which economic gain (indirectly through

education or directly through securing a better-paid job) often requires leaving the city.

Nevertheless, each production differed in its assessment of how this economic capital (or lack thereof) related to symbolic capital. *Mighty Atoms* held that, despite the presence of great economic and social challenges within the city, Hull could still lay claim to symbolic capital through the ability of its working-class residents to come together to support one another. Yet, the play implied that doing so necessitated the city's working-class residents overcoming a tendency toward idleness and selfishness. The play invoked a moralistic middle-class perceptual lens which views working-class people as morally dubious and lacking in "respectability". It suggested that Hull's ability to claim symbolic capital was contingent upon the city overcoming tendencies towards self-interest, a lack of ambition and criminality and, by extension, that the city needed to change in order to be perceived as symbolically valuable to middle-class onlookers.

*The Hypocrite* and *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING*, in their own way, each critiqued the underlying logic of this worldview. *The Hypocrite* attacked the very notion of middle-class respectability. It reframed the practices and cultural affinities of the middle class as suspect in contrast to the more pragmatic approach to the world which it suggested was typical of working-class Hull residents. Furthermore, in relation to its suggestion that Hull has often had power wielded over it, it used this satirising of the English economic, political and cultural elite to question the legitimacy of this power dynamic, implying that Hull would be better off looking after its own affairs. Where *The Hypocrite's* engagement with notions of symbolic capital were primarily focussed on practice

and aesthetic orientations, *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* went further to explore how this might extend to how Hull is perceived by those beyond its city limits. Engaging with neoliberal conceptions of “success” and the terms on which a city might be conceived of as symbolically valuable, the play sought to suggest that the normative understanding of both is hollow. In this, it often read as a direct critique of the discourses surrounding the broader Hull 2017 event. *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* did not argue against the notion that Hull can lay claim to symbolic capital, but implied that there was a way of doing so which didn’t involve changing its place identity but, instead, celebrating attributes already present within the city, particularly those of solidarity and sociability.

Whether through obtaining a title such as UK City of Culture or more broadly utilising methodologies of cultural planning or place marketing, it is evident that, in the present day, being able to claim a degree of symbolic capital is of increasing interest to local governments and other elite urban stakeholders. Cultural activity, including the commissioning of theatre and performance, has often been seen as a method of *re-placing* cities in a manner which legitimates them in such a way.<sup>77</sup> *Mighty Atoms* evidences that this can prove problematic, framing pre-existing practices and experiences as being necessary to “overcome” in order for a place to be able to be seen as “legitimate” by middle-class and elite onlookers. *The Hypocrite* and *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING*, however, suggest an alternative approach which, rather than suggesting that a

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<sup>77</sup> This is perhaps evidenced by the huge number of cities (35 as of July 2020) which have commissioned Rimini Protokoll to develop an iteration of *100% City* (discussed in Chapter Three) in their city. *100% City* is presented almost as a “shortcut” (due to its use of a pre-existing “formula” for devising) to city governments and cultural institutions being able to engage in this form of *re-placing* through performance.

place has the ability to change, seeks to critique dominant understandings of what is considered symbolically valuable and works to foreground the manner in which existing practices might be recontextualised as valuable in and of themselves, in doing so, allowing a place to claim symbolic capital on its own terms.

## Chapter Six

# 'We're Not Giving Up Just Yet'

## Gentrification and Recuperation in Bristol

Of the three regions I discuss within this thesis, Bristol stands apart. Where Nottinghamshire and Hull tend to languish near the bottom of tables ranking UK regions and cities by various metrics, Bristol is a consistent competitor. In 2011, a report commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government praised the city's strong economic productivity which it suggested was driven by the relatively high proportion of Bristolians who hold degree-level qualifications (Experian plc, 2011: 21, 34).<sup>78</sup> Since 2008, the city has also slowly but surely been ascending the Global and World Cities Research Network's list of "world cities" which ranks cities based on their integration into the global city system, where it now sits comfortably alongside San Diego, St Petersburg and even some capital cities such as Wellington and Islamabad (2018). This strong economic performance and integration into the global economy led, in 2017, to Barclays declaring Bristol to be the UK's fifth most prosperous city (2017).

In a manner which provides further credence to my suggestion in the previous chapter that, as Bourdieu argues is the case with class groups, 'the accumulation of economic capital' in a place tends to correlate with an 'accumulation of symbolic capital' (1984: 286), Bristol has also more regularly been the subject of cultural representation than either Nottingham or Hull. The

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<sup>78</sup> The Department for Communities and Local Government has since been renamed the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

city has graced the pages of literature in novels including Angela Carter's "Bristol Trilogy"—consisting of *Shadow Dance* (1966), *Several Perceptions* (1968) and *Love* (1971)—, Jeffrey Archer's *The Clifton Chronicles* (2011-2016), Nathan Filer's *The Shock of the Fall* (2013) and Anna Freeman's *The Fair Fight* (2014). And, though filmic representations such as *Some People* (1962), *Radio On* (1979), *The Truth About Love* (2005) and the screen adaptation of David Nicholls' *Starter for Ten* (2006) have been slightly more sporadic (although still plentiful in comparison with Nottinghamshire and Hull),<sup>79</sup> UK television series' have, particularly in the past two decades, regularly set their action in Bristol with *Teachers* (2001-2004), *Being Human* (2009-2010), *Skins* (2007-2013), *Thirteen* (2016) and *Kiri* (2018) all being set and filmed in the city.<sup>80</sup>

In a slightly different mode, the city's vibrant music and arts scene has produced a plethora of work engaging with Bristol as a meaningful place. The early 1990s saw the rise of the "Bristol Sound" which, though rarely engaging lyrically with the city can, as Peter Webb has argued, be read as engaging with Bristol in the way the genre's stylistic influences reflect the city's ethnic diversity (2004). Emerging from the same milieu, the street artist Banksy has also regularly created pieces such as *Mild Mild West* (1999) and *Planning Permissions* (2011) which, as well as being physically linked to the city through using its walls as canvas, have worked to *re-place* Bristol through referencing events in the city or otherwise engaging with how it is experienced.

What is particularly striking about these representations is the

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<sup>79</sup> Where the novel is more elusive, the film adaptation of *Starter for Ten* definitively casts Nicholls' *alma mater*, the University of Bristol, as the story's primary setting.

<sup>80</sup> *Being Human* actually ran until 2013, however later seasons were set and filmed on the other side of the Bristol Channel in Barry, South Wales.

commonalities they share. In my previous chapter, I argued that the Hull UK City of Culture 2017 event sought to celebrate that city's cultural capital as a means to accruing economic capital. Without the need for any such catalysing event, cultural texts which have engaged with Bristol have consistently talked up its cultural offer. In particular, surveying the texts referred to above, what becomes apparent is a consistent portrayal of Bristol as a uniquely "counter-cultural" or "alternative" city. From the bohemian milieu of Carter's novels to the rave-seeking teens of *Skins* to the Molotov-cocktail-throwing teddy bear depicted in *Mild Mild West*, each *re-places* Bristol in a manner which foregrounds a disregard for bourgeois convention and the predominance of a broadly liberal or leftish politics. In this way, as *The Hypocrite* and *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* hoped might be possible for Hull, representations of Bristol have not only worked to establish a consistent and cohesive place identity for the city but, on first glance at least, have done so in a manner which breaks from hegemonic understandings of symbolic value and claims symbolic capital for Bristol on its own terms.

On the face of it, then, Bristol seems to have successfully acquired exactly the kind of symbolic capital that the English regions are often denied by the prevailing London-centric forces of English culture. Furthermore, Bristol's claiming of symbolic capital on its own terms and its seizing of an "alternative", "counter-cultural" place identity seems to have the potential to carve out the city as antagonistic to the neoliberal worldview often ascribed to the wider nation. Jonas Torrens *et al.* point to the presence of an array of 'alternative milieu[x]' and 'countercultural movements' in Bristol since at least the 1970s and those engaged in such practices would likely hope that such an identity might allow for alternative social and economic practices to flourish within the city (2018: 880).



The reality, however, is less straightforward.

In one of the earliest publications issued by the Situationist International, Guy Debord examines the manner in which, when faced with ideas which seek to challenge it, contemporary capitalism, rather than overtly suppressing this dissension through censorship or force, instead 'sees to it that subversive discoveries are trivialised and sterilised, after which they can be safely spectacularised' (2006a: 26). Debord later developed this concept of "spectacle" in his 1967 text *The Society of the Spectacle* in which he explains The Spectacle to be a dominant social relation based upon 'an affirmation of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances' (2005: 9). This divorcing of appearances from substance leads, among other things, to a society in which resistance to capitalism can be rendered 'purely spectacular' (2005: 29). Having been made impotent, such resistance can be allowed to continue without posing a material threat to the capitalist system; the aesthetics of resistance can be decoupled from their substance and, once "spectacularised", can become a lucrative business opportunity.

This process, which the Situationists referred to as *récupération* (sometimes translated into English directly as recuperation and sometimes, perhaps more accurately in terms of sentiment, as co-option),<sup>81</sup> can be seen in the work of Banksy which, despite its broadly anti-capitalist political leanings, has, as Paul Clements observes, been well and truly 'co-opted by the galleried art world'

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<sup>81</sup> Ken Knabb, whose translations of Debord's work, though not the earliest, have become the standard, uses "co-option" (2006, p. 482). Nevertheless, in this case, "recuperation" remains the most widely-used anglicisation.

(2011: 26).<sup>82</sup> Though often seeking to directly critique commodity fetishization, Banksy's artworks have become highly sought-after commodities themselves, traded by elites for millions of pounds. And, a similar lens can be applied to Bristol's place identity. Despite the subversive potential of the "alternative", "counter-cultural" place identity described above, perceptions of Bristol as, in the words of the official *Visit Bristol* website, 'a hotbed of artists and activists' (Destination Bristol, n.d.), have increasingly been packaged-up, de-politicised and used to promote the city's supposedly "alternative" lifestyle as consumable entirely within the logic of neoliberal capitalism.

A 2016 article in *The Guardian*, for example, suggested that 'Bristol's refusal to kowtow to the homogenising forces of modern capitalism is a visible, city-wide phenomenon manifesting in endless community groups and co-ops'. Reading beyond the suggestion that 'Bristol will fight any attempt to commodify its bohemian cool', however, one finds that same article to have been sponsored by Visit Britain, who were evidently attempting to do just that, promoting the city as a commodity to be consumed by tourists (Naylor, 2016). The article goes on to list several music venues, restaurants and bars where visitors can spend their hard-earned cash. Some of these might represent an at least capitalism-sceptic ethos, yet many are relatively recent endeavours which may be draped in an "alternative" aesthetic but, at their core, are profit-driven (and, for the most part, fairly pricey) institutions.

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<sup>82</sup> It can be argued that Banksy resists this recuperation. In 2018, they rigged the frame of a painting in their *Girl with Balloon* series with a shredder. After the hammer came down at Sotheby's auction house, the painting having sold for £1.02 million, the painting descended through the shredder, resulting in a half-destroyed work of art (the work of art itself and shredding event now referred to as *Love is in the Bin*). Nevertheless, intent is almost irrelevant here. So powerful are the recuperative forces of neoliberal capitalism that one valuation expert suggested that the value of the artwork may have been doubled as a result of its partial destruction (Loughrey, 2018).

Even more antagonistic to the surface-level connotations of Bristol's "alternative", "counter-cultural" place identity is the manner in which this identity has been used to stimulate processes of what Ruth Glass first described in 1964 as 'gentrification' (1964: xviii). Loretta Lees, Tom Slater and Elvin Wyly define gentrification as 'the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into middle-class residential and/or commercial use' (2008: xv). Generally, what is of concern in discussions of gentrification is the displacement of working-class communities from a certain area due to an influx of middle-class people able to pay higher rents than those already living in that area. As Ley reports, much has been made in the present literature (and in non-academic discourse) of 'the aestheticization of place' in contributing to gentrification (2003: 2527). This correlates strongly with the experience of Bristol. In 2017, Ajit Niranjana, a writer for the co-operative-run magazine *The Bristol Cable*, decried the manner in which 'estate agents from outside the city brazenly play off Ashley's alternative culture to target middle-class renters and buyers', describing as 'perverse' the manner in which subsequent rises in the cost of living eventually lead to 'the established communities and artists who created the area's alternative charm [...] being squeezed out' (2017).<sup>83</sup> In Bristol, as in many other cities, gentrifying processes have therefore gone beyond divorcing an "alternative" aesthetic from that which gave it substance and, in an almost too perfect example of recuperation, utilised the former in a manner which actively eviscerates the latter. This has not only led to the artists and activists who originated these practices being dispersed from the areas now considered alluring to incoming gentrifiers but also those who just happened to live alongside

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<sup>83</sup> Ashley is an area of Bristol located just to the north of the city centre.

them.

The recuperation of Bristol's place identity has not gone unnoticed by the city's residents. In 2017, frustrations among locals reached something of a head when *The Sunday Times* invoked the city's 'strong independence and unorthodoxy' in an article announcing it the winner of the paper's annual 'Best Places to Live' feature (Palmer, 2017). In the days following that issue hitting newsstands, stickers reading "Make Bristol Shit Again" were spotted adhering to lampposts and other street furniture across the city (Bennett, 2018). For some, the celebration of Bristol's "alternative", "counter-cultural" spirit by the organ of the very establishment the city was ostensibly opposed to seemed too much of a contradiction to bear.

In the following pages, I discuss three performance texts which, in their own way, intervene in discourses surrounding both the recuperation of Bristol's place identity by those seeking to commodify the city and the subsequent material processes of gentrification which it has engendered. Though only one could be described as a direct critique of gentrification, I argue that all three, in premiering between 2017 and 2019, can be read as in some way responding to these phenomena. Beyond this, I also consider how each might critique Bristol's "alternative", "counter-cultural" place identity itself and, without suggesting that it has no substance at all, question its uncritical application to the city as a whole.

## **WE ARE LIGHTNING!**

*WE ARE LIGHTNING!* was a collaboration between Bristol-based musician and performance artist Sam Halmarack and London/Melbourne-based performance

artist JOF (Joseph O'Farrell). The show was performed at the Trinity Centre in Lawrence Hill as part of the 2018 iteration of Mayfest, Bristol's most prominent annual theatre and live performance festival, and was developed with support from Creative Victoria, Melbourne's Arts House, Arts Council England and Burton Brewhouse. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* was framed in its promotional materials as a direct response to processes of recuperation and gentrification (Bristol Old Vic, 2018). Although, as discussed below, the production toured to several venues in both England, Australia and Ireland, in Bristol, *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* took the form of a closing party for the Trinity Centre itself. Within the world of the show (though not, for clarity, in real life), the Trinity Centre has been forcibly bought out by developers and marked for closure. The piece follows Sam and JOF, who both use their own names within the piece, as they attempt to curate and then compare the closing party in collaboration (and conflict) with several real-life community groups with longstanding connections to the venue.

While the Trinity Centre hosts performances and events of numerous artforms, *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* primarily foregrounds its function as a music venue. As such, similarly to *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* (discussed in the previous chapter), the production utilises the "gig theatre" form, combining dramatic, dialogic scenes with gig-style musical performances. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* also extends this aesthetic orientation into the arrangement of the performance space, with the audience positioned in the middle of the Trinity Centre's Main Hall space surrounded by four fixed stages upon which different musical acts perform. Throughout the production, the audience therefore not only observes a narrative taking place around them but are positioned in such a way that they become complicit in the unfolding action.

Despite being set and performed in the Trinity Centre during its Bristol performances, *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* is not truly site-specific but, like Rimini Protokoll's *100% Salford* (discussed in Chapter Three), what Hodge has termed 'site-generic', having been 'generated for a series of like sites' (in Wilkie, 2002: 150). Prior to and following its Bristol performances, *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* was performed in similar music venues in Burton-on-Trent, Melbourne and Dublin. Halmarack and JOF went to some lengths to tailor the piece to each location through amendments to the script and the inclusion of several musical ensembles from the communities surrounding each venue. That Halmarack is based in Bristol also likely means that, in devising the production, it would have been his experience of that particular city he would have been drawing upon. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!*, however, can certainly be interpreted as a show about recuperation and gentrification in "the city" as a generic spatial form rather than specifically in Bristol. I will occasionally foreground some of the tensions that this creates within the performance text. Nevertheless, in limiting my analysis to the production as it manifested in Bristol, I primarily approach it as *re-placing* that city in particular; I consider how *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* can be read as not only engaging with discourses surrounding recuperation and gentrification in a broad sense but as responding to the specific ways in which they have manifested in Bristol.

### **Bristol as Locale in WE ARE LIGHTNING!**

The very premise of *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* rests on an intensely spatial conflict. The Trinity Centre, and what Etienne Wenger might refer to as the 'community of practice' which surrounds it (1998), is introduced as under threat from the faceless, unfeeling forces of gentrification. Nevertheless, it is important to note

that this conflict is presented to the audience as inalterable; the developers are at the door and there is little to be done to stop them evicting the centre's present management and patrons. What is more revealing for my discussion of the production's *re-placing* of Bristol as locale is the subtler conflict that lies alongside this, one which explores what the values of the fated venue might have been and, in doing so, encourages the audience to consider not only *if* such venues might be saved but *why* we might want to do so.

The core action of *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* revolves around the attempts of Sam and JOF to organise and preside over a closing celebration for the venue. Each, however, has a slightly different view on what form the event should take. JOF sees it as an opportunity to celebrate the diverse community which has come to exist around the venue. In the first of a series of flashbacks to the planning of the event, we see him excitedly reveal to Sam that he has invited a teen indie band to take part; a performance which would be their first ever gig. For JOF, this represents 'an amazing opportunity' for the band to share their music (Halmarack and JOF, 2018a: 6:48). To Sam, however, this is 'disrespectful' (2018a: 6:07). As he sees it, the idea of taking a risk on an unproven group of teenagers presents an unacceptable threat to the solemnity of the event. Where JOF sees the event as the last in a long line of gigs at the Trinity Centre which celebrate risk, inclusion and amateurism, Sam evidently conceives of the closing ceremony in far more austere, reverential terms. Sam doubles down on this line of thinking later on when he describes the event as not just a gig but 'a performance workshop' and, furthermore, 'not an opportunity' but 'a professional engagement' which they, as professional artists, need to ensure retains a certain level of "quality" (2018a: 6:23, 6:48). In such a way, *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* comes to be about far more

than just eulogising lost music venues. Instead, it seeks to ask much more fundamental questions about what the normative geography of such sites could and should be. Sam clearly sees the venue as a platform for accomplished musicians to present "high quality" works of art, whereas JOF conceives of it as a community space, a platform in which everyone might have the opportunity to express themselves.

In some regards, this disagreement is simply a rehashing of longstanding debates over exclusivity and inclusion in artistic practice. Yet, that Sam and JOF clash over popular music rather than an art form traditionally conceived of as "highbrow" draws their bickering in line with contemporary discussions surrounding culture, class and recuperation. Savage *et al.* argue that, over the course of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, differentiations between "highbrow" and "popular" culture became increasingly less important as markers of class. They suggest that the institutions which act as guardians of "highbrow" art forms such as opera, theatre and portraiture have had some success in broadening their appeal, while the middle class and elites have come to embrace many "lowbrow" forms (including popular music) as "legitimate" pursuits. Yet, this has not led to an equitable plane of cultural engagement. Instead, Savage *et al.* argue that one's cultural capital has simply shifted from being defined by *what forms* of culture one engages with to *how* they do so (2015: 115). This is evident in *WE ARE LIGHTNING!*. While there is little difference in the style of music performed by Sam and JOF's professional band and that of the teen ensemble, Sam's scepticism towards the latter's involvement suggests that he considers himself to have, in Savage *et al.*'s words, 'a privileged understanding' of the form (2015: 118). While both bands might be creating similar music, Sam considers his



process to be more “legitimate” than that of the teen band. In this way, a great deal of the run-time of *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* is turned over to the exploration of the recuperation of popular music by the middle class.

Where *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* itself sits on this debate is clear. From the very beginning, Sam is painted as a well-meaning and talented yet ultimately slightly ridiculous character with more than a touch of ego. And, although, once the closing event itself begins, his all-black shirt and jacket combo (contrasting with JOF's more jovial, Americana-inspired outfit) implies that he still views the occasion as a solemn one, he gradually comes to accept the involvement of the teenage band and other community ensembles. This withering of Sam's ego is augmented by the visual dramaturgy of the gradual appearance of each community group. At the opening of the production, the audience is presented with only Sam and JOF on a small stage at one end of the performance space. By the time they have been joined by the teen band, a community choir, a brass band and a heavy metal duo, however, they are hugely outnumbered, and any claim Sam may have tried to make over the space seems increasingly ridiculous.

Alongside critiquing material processes of gentrification in contemporary Bristol, *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* therefore points to a more insidious formation in which popular culture, has, by way of professionalisation, been recuperated by the middle class. The show is primarily interested in how this might have manifested in the Trinity Centre itself. In this regard, what we see is that Sam's position (that such a recuperation might allow for a more “legitimate”, “high quality” closing event) is simply irrelevant. As we bear witness to the passion of the teen band and the community choir, it becomes evident that what makes the

Trinity Centre valuable to those who visit it and to Bristol as a whole is not the quality of its fare but, instead, its inclusivity. It is for this reason, suggests *WE ARE LIGHTNING!*, not the quality of the performances which take place there, that such sites are worth saving.

### **Bristol as Location in *WE ARE LIGHTNING!***

Although, as I have argued above, the impending closure of the Trinity Centre is not the central dramatic tension within *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* due to its inevitability, the developers who have bought the space are not an entirely benign force. Indeed, it is precisely through placing values of amateurism and inclusion under threat that the production stresses their importance. This is a common dramaturgical device. Many of the productions I have discussed in this thesis have similarly invoked an external threat in order to either draw out an audience's place attachment towards the region being *re-placed* or (if an audience member has no previous relationship with that place) to encourage them to develop at least a temporary sympathy towards it; the arrival of the Metropolitan Police in *Wonderland* (discussed in Chapter Four) and that of the Cavaliers and Roundheads in *The Hypocrite* (discussed in Chapter Five) both served such a purpose. The success of this narrative device perhaps confirms Marc Augé's suspicion that one of the reasons that place attachment is such a powerful force is because the continued existence of places, the fact they have been 'maintained against external aggressions' as well as 'internal splits' (1995: 46), infers a continuity to the order of things. By suggesting that the place in question might finally succumb to either, a performance text can thus provoke an audience to comprehend their place attachment in a more urgent manner than they might usually be inclined to.

While *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* does, to some extent, frame the unseen developers who have forced the Trinity Centre to close as alien to the values and interests of Bristol, the geographic source of these forces is not particularly clear. Both of the above-mentioned productions attributed their external threats specifically to London. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!*, however, seems alternately to attribute the closure of the venue to an abstractly-conceived global capitalism and something slightly more proximate. During one of the production's many songs, a member of the community choir speaks above an ethereal drone that 'we all hold the hammer for the places we've seen change' (Halmarack and JOF, 2018a: 46:56), implying a level of complicity from within Bristol itself. Rather than hypothesising the source of the threat facing the Trinity Centre, it is therefore more interesting to continue my discussion of what *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* suggests would be lost should the Trinity Centre close. For, as well as having repercussions for Bristol as locale, the production suggests that the evisceration of inclusive cultural practices would have an impact on the city as location too.

It is of note that Sam and JOF are implied to be visiting Bristol.<sup>84</sup> While the logistics are never fully explained, it seems that they have been hired-in to oversee the closing event rather than being members of the community which surrounds the Trinity Centre themselves. This adds a level of geographical coding to the tension between professionalism and amateurism discussed in the previous section. If Sam already comes across as imposing himself and his personal aesthetic orientations upon the community which surrounds the venue, this is accentuated by the fact that he is geographically "other" to it. A far greater

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<sup>84</sup> This despite Halmarack being based in Bristol in real life.

emphasis in *WE ARE LIGHTNING!*'s representation of Bristol as location, however, is put on the city's ability to distinguish itself in relation to other places and the broader field of space.

Though Sam and JOF remain at odds for much of the performance over what the role of the Trinity Centre should be, there is much they agree upon. In particular, they share a fear that, following its closure, the venue might be turned into a hotel. This becomes apparent in one of the few sequences in *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* in which we are transported away from the Trinity Centre. A flashback to Sam and JOF's preparations for the closing event sees JOF calling Sam from his ibis hotel room. Sam, who is also staying in the ibis, reluctantly plays along as JOF over-enthusiastically attempts to compare their rooms. JOF asks if Sam's room also has 'a picture of old school flowers above the bed [...] and, like, those curtains you can't quite close all the way' to which Sam exasperatedly replies 'yeah JOF, it's exactly the same' (2018a: 14:56). Their conversation then turns more wistful, with JOF wondering 'if this, like, used to be a music venue' (2018a: 15:48). In some senses, this is simply a nod to the number of music venues in Bristol that have closed due to noise complaints from hotels and residential buildings not even conceived till long after those venues were established (Pollock, 2015). By viewing this scene in relationship to Augé's concept of "non-places", however, it becomes evident that there is something larger at play here. JOF's comments do more than just project a possible future for the site. Instead, in contrasting the meaningful idiosyncrasies of the Trinity Centre with the simulacric vapidness of the identical hotel rooms, the production invites the audience to consider, in Augé's terms, places 'defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity' being supplanted by 'non-places' which,

instead, 'create solitary contractuality' (1995: 77-78, 94). Sam and JOF's shared fear of the site being transformed into an ibis is thus less about the spectre of a hotel specifically than it is about the replacement of unique places with which people are able to build meaningful relationships with replicable ones with which people's relationships are solely functional.

That *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* emphasizes the importance of Bristol retaining its idiosyncrasies is interesting given the piece's site-generic form; the "portability" of the production relies on there being commonalities between Bristol and other cities and towns. Perhaps, however, this further substantiates the point made by the show's representation of Bristol as location: that gentrification has not only threatened the continuation of the inclusive practices outlined in the above section, but also Bristol's distinctiveness from other places. Alongside an interest in the material plight of music venues, what emerges as a more pressing concern is a fear that, as one of the choir members suggests, Bristol might have 'watered down the difference till nothing left is strange' (Halmarack and JOF, 2018a: 47:09). In this framing, even the replacement of the Trinity Centre with a chain music venue might be cause for concern. One of the security guards reveals such a worry when he wryly suggests that 'there's always room for security [...] at other venues, you know: pubs, clubs, *Wetherspoons*' (2018a: 35:28, my emphasis), in doing so referencing the UK chain perhaps most widely associated with turning once distinctive venues into simulacra of their former selves. The implication is that, by way of gentrification, Bristol as a whole might be falling victim to a similar process, allowing its distinctiveness to be recuperated and channelled towards a fostering of near-total abstraction; its idiosyncrasies being watered down until there is little to distinguish it as a meaningful place from the wider field of space

at all.

### **Bristol's Sense of Place in *WE ARE LIGHTNING!***

As I have mentioned above, the closure of the Trinity Centre and the regeneration of the site on which it sits is presented throughout *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* as an entirely settled matter. From the opening scene, the moment in which the developers might have been turned back and the venue saved seems to be long gone. And, outside of Sam's personal redemption, there is something of a fatalistic undertone to the show. A sung refrain repeated throughout the performance laments that 'everything built just gets knocked down' (2018a: 55:46). Alongside suggesting that the Trinity Centre itself cannot be saved, this seems to present the gentrifying processes sweeping over Bristol as not historically-contingent but, instead, a regrettable yet inevitable outcome of some loosely-defined notion of "progress".

In the closing moments of the show, however, there are some signs of resistance. The closing event itself ends around halfway through the performance at which point the security guards emerge and usher the various music ensembles out the door. A sequence follows in which Sam and JOF haplessly attempt to retrieve a banner from the ceiling and the community choir reappear, apparition-like, holding shields which spell out "Bristol" to sing a mournful rendition of the American folk song *Shenandoah*. In this moment, all is seemingly lost for both the venue and the city. Then, a portion of the community choir descend from the stage and, dressed in glistening silk capes, surround the audience. Gradually being joined by the other musical groups, they sing two defiant final numbers.

The chorus of the first of these songs refers to them (and the audience) having 'let ourselves back in' (2018a: 48:28), initially seeming to imply a last-ditch effort to save the venue. While it's worth noting that the lyrics of these songs are not intended as the narration of a concrete plot, however, the verses suggest something less straightforward. The following songs confirm that the venue is beyond saving when they refer to the developers 'clos[ing] the doors/ to an entire universe' and mourn that 'the bands have all gone home/ for there's nothing to rehearse' (2018a: 48:06, 48:40). The cause for hope stems from the chorus' declaration that 'the rubble, it's in our blood, it's in our blood' (2018a: 48:28); the parting sentiment that *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* leaves us with being that, though the Trinity Centre itself may be lost, the participatory cultural practices which it fostered might yet persevere.

The sense of place which *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* ascribes to Bristol is therefore complex. There are echoes in these final two songs of the notions of civic defiance that I have argued were present in many of the productions discussed within this thesis. Here, however, that resistive sentiment is not framed as being a response to consistent marginalisation from mainstream "national" life but, instead, as the result of Bristol being self-assured in its "alternativeness" and "counter-cultural" orientation. Yet, *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* adds a caveat to this. As I discussed in the section on locale, the production implies that the city's embrace of cultural practices has been the result of an expressly inclusive approach to such endeavours which embrace the sentiment that, as one choir member puts it, 'there's a bit of a performer [...] in all of us' (2018a: 21:16). The overwhelming message of *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* is thus that the non-

professionalised genesis of this identity might have been forgotten and that it is only now, when the evisceration of such practices seems to be hollowing-out Bristol's place identity, that the city is beginning to acknowledge those origins.

*WE ARE LIGHTNING!*, therefore, engages with the recuperation of Bristol's "alternative" sense of place through emphasising that the meanings and values that have come to be associated with the city are not simply a discursive flourish but the result of specific practices; it works to emphasise the link between the city's sense of place and its locale. In many ways, the performance positions the city as at a fork in the road, one path of which leads back to the recognition of the practices which have informed the city's sense of place and the other to that identity being detached from its origins in the city as locale and entirely sanitised by urban developers. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* makes an urgent case for the former, suggesting that only a re-grounding of the city's identity in practice can ensure it is safeguarded from recuperation and the gentrifying processes which often follow not far behind.

### **Bristol: A Practiced City?**

*WE ARE LIGHTNING!* engages with concerns surrounding gentrification which are by no means unique to Bristol. That the performance is site-generic and has also been performed in Melbourne, Burton and Dublin evidences that the debates it intervenes in are relevant to places of various sizes and contexts in the present day. As I have mentioned, there is a degree of irony to the emphasis that the production places on defending the idiosyncrasies of Bristol given its own transferability. Nevertheless, perhaps as a result of being partly devised by an artist based in the city, the production did resonate with ongoing debates



surrounding gentrification and recuperation in Bristol. The fictional plight of the Trinity Centre echoed concerns that urban developers are preying on areas of the city perceived to have an abundance of cultural capital for economic gain. And, the production highlighted the manner in which attempts by developers to extract economic value from those areas often puts the very practices which have produced that cultural capital at risk.

In the introduction to this chapter, I argued that gentrification processes in Bristol have often been reliant on the recuperation and commodification of perceptions of the city as uniquely “alternative” and “counter-cultural”. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!*'s primary interest is the reliance of such processes on a decoupling of this place identity from the practices which gave it substance. The production implies that such practices are often the result of amateurs rather than professionals and have flourished due to the city's embrace of a participatory approach to cultural activity. It posits that, should the aesthetic of “alternativeness” or “counter-culturalism” be separated from those practices, the city would be in danger of losing its distinctiveness. The Trinity Centre is far from an anti-capitalist hub, yet, in its community-focussed ethos, it is at least partially antagonistic to the neoliberal logic which underpins processes of gentrification. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* questions whether such a venue could continue to exist in a post-gentrification Bristol but, perhaps more interestingly, also asks whether, if it did, a more profit-driven, professionalised version of the Trinity Centre would be able to maintain as diverse a community of practice as it does presently.

It is notable that, in journalistic discourses surrounding gentrification in Bristol, the prospect of the city losing its distinctiveness through the recuperation

of its “alternative”, “counter-cultural” place identity has often been articulated as a process of “Londonisation”. For many years, property features in the national media have promoted Bristol as a potential ‘London-upon-Avon’ (The Economist, 2016) or ‘London lite’, having ‘most of the benefits [of London] (cosmopolitanism, culture, decent jobs, nice little delis), plus a few of its own’ (Dyckhoff, 2009). Paul Dutton has argued that this framing might be more than a rhetorical flourish, writing that ‘dominant places such as London have become reference-points for marketing strategies for property developers and place engineers in other places’ (2003: 2561). In short, urban developers working in regional cities have often been influenced by place marketing strategies that have “worked” in London, with the result that the discourses which exist surrounding developments in regional cities echo those surrounding gentrified or gentrifying areas of the capital. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!*, however, refuses such a geographically-inflected framing which suggests that the threat of gentrification is something which flows from the capital. This is perhaps another consequence of its site-generic form; a structure which relied too heavily on there being a larger city influencing gentrifying processes would have been unlikely to cohere in Melbourne. Whatever the source of this decision, however, the result is a text which suggests that, though the values of gentrification may be alien to Bristol, there has been a level of complicity from within and that the city would benefit from reflecting on the manner in which actors within the city have allowed its place identity as an “alternative”, “counter-cultural” city to be recuperated.

### **Princess & The Hustler**

*Princess & the Hustler* was written by Chinonyerem Odimba and premiered in the Weston Studio at Bristol Old Vic in February 2019 before touring to six other

regional theatres across England. The play was commissioned by Eclipse Theatre by whom it was co-produced alongside Bristol Old Vic and Hull Truck Theatre. Set in 1962 in St Agnes, a tiny area of Bristol often considered part of the larger inner-city district of St Pauls, the play's central character is ten-year-old Phyllis "Princess" James whose dreams of beauty pageant glory come to be challenged by the white supremacist conceptions of beauty dominant in the society around her. The play pairs Princess' journey towards recognising her own beauty with a recounting of the events of the Bristol Bus Boycott in which Black Bristolian activists, represented on stage primarily by Princess' brother Wendell Jr., successfully campaigned for the Bristol Omnibus Company to overturn a ban on people of colour being employed as bus conductors.

As some of the journalistic sources that I have cited in this chapter have highlighted, the practices which have enabled Bristol to be conceived as "alternative" and "counter-cultural" have actually been highly localised within certain areas of the city. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* may have worked to remind its audience of the practical origins of Bristol's place identity, yet, perhaps as a result of its site-generic form, it did not critique the application of a place identity fostered through practices dominant in certain areas of the city to Bristol as a whole. The following two productions I discuss take a different approach. Rather than focussing on the emerging disconnect between this "alternative", "counter-cultural" aesthetic and the practices which gave it substance, they instead draw attention to areas and communities within Bristol which might not connect with that place identity at all. It must be said that neither engage directly with discussions surrounding gentrification and recuperation in Bristol. Nevertheless, their premiering against this discursive backdrop makes reading them in relation

to it highly illuminating.

A family drama set in 1962, *Princess & the Hustler* takes place decades before gentrification emerged as a pressing concern for Bristolians. Despite this, several elements central to the show bring it into direct conversation with contemporary gentrifying processes. Although St Agnes and St Pauls, the areas in which the play is set, were once seen as case studies of deprivation and economic segregation within Bristol, their convenient location between the shopping and leisure amenities of the city centre, vibrant nightlife of Stokes Croft and the city's "elite" university has led to them becoming increasingly attractive to those seduced into relocating to Bristol by its "alternative" place identity.

The consequences of such an influx of gentrifiers have been fairly predictable. When, in 2016, the property comparison website Zoopla drew upon Land Registry data to identify which council wards within the UK had witnessed the greatest increases in house prices over the previous five years, St Pauls found itself nestled between its neighbouring districts of Stokes Croft and Montpelier at number eight, with house prices having shot up 38.5% in comparison with a UK average of 22.8% (Shaw, 2016). When Zoopla updated this list in late 2017 (this time focussing on rising house prices over the course of a single year), St Pauls had leapt into the top three (Zoopla, 2017). As one might expect, such a colossal increase to both house prices and rents has led to long-term residents being squeezed out.

Alongside the class dynamics that such a process always has, gentrification in St Pauls has also had a racial dynamic, made all the more troubling by Bristol's

slave-trading past. To return to Niranjana's article in *The Bristol Cable*:

...the grand terraces that make up St Pauls were built by slave-trade era "merchants", abandoned after the Blitz, then repopulated by immigrants from Britain's colonies. They settled in the dilapidated townhouses that richer white people had fled. [...] Today, their descendants are struggling to cope with an influx of affluent white newcomers, many of them Londoners fleeing their own housing crisis, bringing with them higher incomes and expensive tastes. (2017)

In truth, as St Pauls' City Councillor Paul Smith told *The Observer* in 2016, although the ward has long been 'seen as an Afro-Caribbean area[, ...] it was always a majority white working-class area' (in Glaister, 2016). Geographers Tom Slater and Ntsiki Anderson concur, arguing that perceptions of St Pauls as a 'black ghetto' are little more than a fantasy of commentators and policy-makers seeking to racialize urban deprivation (2012: 535). Though residents of Caribbean heritage might be a statistical minority, however, their impact on the area has been profound. This is evident not only in the presence of the Malcolm X Community Centre or the numerous Barbershops and Caribbean restaurants but also in that of the annual St Pauls Carnival during which the district's streets are brought to life with dub music, steel bands, parades, barbecues and bars.

As both Niranjana and Smith articulate above, despite significant economic challenges, St Pauls has become home to a diverse yet cohesive community which, aided in no small part by the influence of Caribbean culture, has developed a strong sense of place attachment among those with meaningful relationships to the area. Both Niranjana and Smith, however, report a fear that creeping gentrification is leading to the dispersal of this community and, moreover, a paving over of its histories. Viewed against this context, whether *Princess & the*

*Hustler's* foregrounding of the lives of a handful of members of St Pauls' Caribbean community is an intentional intervention in process of gentrification seems something of a moot point; such a reading is almost inevitable amongst at least some audience members.

*Princess & the Hustler* was commissioned by Eclipse Theatre Company as part of their "Revolution Mix" programme of work. As mentioned in my discussion of *Shebeen* in the previous chapter, Black artists, Asian artists and other artists of colour working in the English regions face the dual barriers of regionality and structural racism. These barriers, moreover, not only intersect but compound, owing to the manner in which regional England is routinely racialised as homogenously white and is therefore assumed to not be home to (nor in need of) artists of colour or their work.<sup>85</sup> The 2001 *Eclipse Report* set out to identify how institutional racism manifests in (particularly regional) English theatre and to conceive of strategies to combat it. One outcome of the report was the founding of Eclipse Theatre Company which, as Goddard writes, was set up 'to produce middle-scale black plays in consortium with regional theatre venues' (2015: 216). The company's Revolution Mix programme is a more recent development of that work. Echoing Goddard's highlighting of a tendency of theatres (which are overwhelmingly run by white artistic directors) to commission plays by Black playwrights which engage with themes of 'crime and violence', thereby ignoring the diversity of Black British experiences (2015: 10), the Eclipse website introduces Revolution Mix by stating that 'the Black British story is more than just slavery, immigration and teenage gang crime', continuing that 'Revolution Mix

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<sup>85</sup> See, for example, the above-cited comment in Eclipse's 2020 *How to build magic beans AND build rockets to the moon* report which suggested that 'Black artists in the North were "hidden" within an assumption that Black artists, if they existed, lived only in London (2020: 8).

stories are the hidden histories that exist in a landscape of more than 500 years of Black British History' (Eclipse, n.d.). Describing the series of theatre, film and radio productions which constitute the initiative as a 'movement', the company's Artistic Director, Dawn Walton (who also directed *Princess & the Hustler*), recalled that 'conscious of a pervading erasure of Black British stories, I worked with a group of writers researching five centuries of this untapped vein of British history' (in Odimba, 2019a). The play's retelling of the story of the Bristol Bus Boycott thus seeks to draw attention to what was a pivotal moment in (Black) British history. Nevertheless, as I hope to show below, it can also be read through a geographical lens as a record of lives lived in St Agnes and St Pauls and of a community that is in danger of being erased.

### ***Bristol as Locale in Princess & the Hustler***

*Princess & The Hustler* shares some thematic similarities with Makubika's *Shebeen* (discussed in Chapter Four). They both centre on Black British communities of Caribbean heritage and are set less than four years apart. Many of the themes of inter-racial tension and systematic oppression which ran through that play are thus also present in *Princess & The Hustler*. Nevertheless, the two plays take very different approaches to engaging with those themes. In *Shebeen*, sustained, habitual injustices were a visceral presence from the very opening scene, with the resilient community which has emerged in St Ann's despite such marginalisation only being revealed gradually as the play proceeded. The protagonist of *Princess & The Hustler*, Princess (Kudzai Sitima), however, is far younger than *Shebeen*'s world-weary Pearl and George.<sup>86</sup> With her mother,

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<sup>86</sup> Although the published playtext for *Shebeen* lists Pearl and George as being in their late thirties and forties respectively (2018: ix), the actors who played the roles in the 2018 Nottingham Playhouse production were both in their late forties.

Mavis (Donna Berlin), attempting (with increasing futility) to shield Princess from the ingrained racism of the city around her, the play therefore holds such injustices at a distance for much of the first act.

Initially, the Bristol of *Princess & The Hustler* seems fairly amiable. When the audience is first introduced to Princess, she is stood in the cupboard of the James family's flat, dreaming of being crowned the 'winner of the [...] Weston-Super-Mare Beauties of the West Contest' (Odimba, 2019a: 6). A similar optimism-cum-naivety is present in her brother, Wendell Junior (Fode Simbo), who, along with his friend Leon (Romaine Andrews), seems perfectly happy to wander the city or 'hang by Queen's Square with [their] cameras' (2019a: 9). The James' white upstairs neighbour, Margot (Jade Yourell), moreover, seems to have integrated fairly well into this predominantly Black neighbourhood and is on good-enough terms with the James' to wander in and out of their home unannounced. Indeed, when Princess and Wendell Junior's estranged father Wendell (Seun Shote)—the "Hustler" of the play's title—first arrives in Bristol, he is taken aback by its social cohesiveness, remarking on returning from a nightclub that 'de club welcome everybody for sure./ Only inna Bristol yuh see so many different people in same place' (2019a: 68).

Despite limited means (highlighted by Princess when she observes the lack of presents under the James' Christmas tree in Scene One (2019a: 11)), it is heavily implied that St Agnes is an area in which people look out for one another. Margot explicitly praises Mavis for 'look[ing] after everyone' (2019a: 48) and we see this in practice when Wendell arrives with his (but not Mavis') daughter, Lorna (Emily Burnett), by his side. Though Wendell might find himself thrown back out



onto the street, Mavis' taking-in of Lorna comes across as second nature. Elsewhere, Wendell Junior explains to Wendell how, in his father's absence, 'Leon's daddy look[ed] out for me just fine. Lent me this camera. Said I could have it as Mummy dinned have enough... And gave me the paper round in his shop' (2019a: 51-52). At this juncture, then, the normative geography of St Agnes appears to be rooted in a predisposition to help one's neighbours in their hour of need.

Nevertheless, Princess is maturing fast, and it is not long before cracks begin to appear in this amiable facade. The audience is given the first hint that Bristol might not be as equitable or cohesive as it first appears when Margot offhandedly suggests that Mavis would be unlikely to disagree with their neighbour, Mrs Bowen, because 'you're one and the same so be a bit odd to be against your own' (2019a: 37). The presence of racism in the city becomes more overt when Princess returns home from school in tears, Lorna (whose mother is white and who thus has lighter skin than Princess) having been invited to a classmate's party to which Princess has not. What truly breaks Princess' heart, however, is her classmates' suggestion that she can never be 'the prettiest girl in the whole of Weston-Super-Mare' due to her curly hair and black skin's deviance from their racialised conception of beauty (2019a: 66). Concurrent with this, Wendell Junior learns from Leon's dad of the campaign to overturn the Bristol Omnibus Company's "colour bar" which bans people of colour from working as bus drivers or crew. Wendell Senior, too, has his earlier optimism about Bristol punctured by his increasingly-difficult search for work.

As the play proceeds, the initial image of Bristol as a relatively progressive,

racially-integrated city is therefore steadily peeled back. Revealed beneath it are a couple of instances of inter-personal racism—Margot’s offhand remark, for instance, or, later, Wendell Junior’s being set upon by a gang of white youths with bicycle chains (2019a: 79)—but also various forms of deeply-ingrained, structural racism. As I mentioned above, in some regards, this dramaturgical decision to first conceal and then gradually reveal the racist structures which limit the lives of the play’s ensemble allows us to share Wendell Junior’s perspective as he learns ‘what it means to be [...] a Black man’ (2019a: 50) in 1960s Bristol and that of Princess as she is first subjected to her classmates’ racist conceptions of beauty and then, eventually, in the words of the show’s marketing copy, ‘finds out what it really means to be black and beautiful’ (Bristol Old Vic, n.d.). When read in reference to the city’s contemporary place identity, however, it also infers that, not only might Bristol not be the progressive utopia that it is often presented as but that the racism which is present there within takes a particularly covert and insidious form.

### **Bristol as Location in *Princess & the Hustler***

Whatever injustices are faced outside of it, the James’ home is, for the most part, a safe and loving space. Though it witnesses some disunity following Wendell’s initial arrival, broadly speaking, it is a space in which all the play’s characters (Margot, Leon, Wendell and Lorna included) feel comfortable and secure. The worst that could be said for it is that, in its domesticity, it borders on the mundane. This is certainly the view of Princess who, by way of escape, has transformed a small cupboard in the flat into the stage for a perennial beauty contest inspired by the tales of pageants and pictures of elaborate dresses with which Margot has entertained her. Interestingly, as mentioned above, these dreams of beauty

queendom are specifically geographically tied to the nearby town of Weston-Super-Mare.

Although, like many seaside resorts, the emergence of the package holiday wounded Weston-Super-Mare's allure as a tourist destination (English Heritage and The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, 2003: 5), for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the town was a popular destination for working-class Bristolian families. Easily reachable from the city by train, attractions such as the Grand Pier and the Winter Gardens Pavilion provided audiences with cheap and vibrant entertainment. As it likely did for many working-class children in the 1950s, Weston-Super-Mare thus represents a utopia for Princess, a place not entirely out of reach which 'really is Magic. It has a beach and sand. Golden sand. [...] And everyone there is beautiful' (Odimba, 2019a: 42). That Weston-Super-Mare's beaches are often anything but golden, instead comprised of tidal mud from the Bristol Channel, does not deter Princess; physically locating her dreams of pageant glory in this way does not deflate their desirability, but increases the hope that this dream gives her through increasing its obtainability.

This geopathological device is established in the very opening moments of the show. As the house lights dim, a sign announcing the 'Beauties of the West Contest' is revealed above the stage and a voice booms from the speakers declaring Princess the winner (2019a: 6). Princess hasn't long to express her gratitude to the judges, however, before Mavis flings open the door and, through a change in lighting state, the stage reverts to the realism which dominates the majority of the production's aesthetic. In this stark transition, Princess' utopic fantasy world is punctured and the cupboard is revealed to be what Foucault

refers to as a 'heterotopia' which can only ever really be 'a space of illusion' and in which, despite her best efforts, Princess' escapist fantasies will always be ruptured by the comings and goings of the flat around her (1986: 27). The audience's immersion in Princess' daydream prior to the flat as it really exists being revealed therefore serves to accentuate the mundanity of the James' home.

As the play continues, Princess' daydreams not only come under threat from Mavis' exasperated summons to the dinner table but also the racialised conceptions of beauty—what Charles W Mills refers to as 'the white somatic ideal' (2003: 47)—expressed by Princess' classmates.<sup>87</sup> Where, previously, Princess had seen only glamour and aspiration in Margot's descriptions of beauty queens 'with perfect straight shiny hair all down to their waist' (Odimba, 2019a: 13), by Act Two she sees an ideal of beauty from which, by virtue of her racialisation, she is excluded. And, while Princess' cupboard heterotopia could withstand the habitual routine of the James household, her growing awareness of the white supremacist culture by which she is surrounded proves too much for it to bear. Taking her mother's tailor's scissors from the drawer, she cuts down the glistening ribbons and abandons her dreams of queendom.

Yet, this is not the end for the cupboard heterotopia nor Princess' dreams of Weston-Super-Mare. After an endearingly-pathetic attempt to run away from home (she makes it only as far as Margot's flat upstairs), Princess is embraced by Mavis and reassured that 'girls and women with our skin dark as the night,

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<sup>87</sup> In his book chapter *White Supremacy as Sociopolitical System: A Philosophical Perspective* (2003), Mills positions the propagation of 'the white somatic ideal' and the 'differential evaluation' of differently racialised bodies within the 'Somatic Sphere' of his conceptualisation of White Supremacy (2003: 46-47).

every shade of brown, glowing like fresh-made caramel, or legs spindly like a spider, we are everything that is beautiful on this earth' (2019a: 104). This motherly intervention provides Princess with the fuel she needs to resist internalising the racialised conceptions of beauty possessed by her classmates and, fed by a new self-confidence, she returns to the cupboard.

In the closing moments of the production, Princess' now-redeemed father, Wendell, crowns her the winner of the Beauties of the West contest and Princess invites him and the audience to 'watch everything beautiful in the world come alive' (2019a: 109). As she does, a group of Black women (community members recruited for the production) enter the stage in a celebration of beautiful Black bodies of all shapes and sizes. If, in the course of the play, the tension between utopia and reality in the heterotopic cupboard had been driven forcefully toward the latter by Princess' increasing awareness of her racialised subject position in society, here, it swings back towards the former with a startling velocity; Princess' vision of Weston-Super-Mare becomes unmoored from the oppressive limitations of white supremacy and, amid the aesthetic of the seaside resort, beauty is reconstituted as heterogeneous and defiantly inclusive.

If it is the case that all geopathologies are fictions that we tell ourselves—a geographical projection of personal or collective fears or hopes rather than any true reflection on the places which we draw upon in doing so—, this final moment celebrates the imaginative potential of such a way of thinking. Where, in many of the other plays discussed in this thesis, such geopathologies gradually withered away over the course of a performance text, leaving behind only the anxieties or aspirations they were used to process, in *Princess & the Hustler*, the act of

thinking geographically is celebrated for all its emancipatory potential.

### **Bristol's Sense of Place in *Princess & The Hustler***

*Princess & The Hustler* presents the audience with a highly complex representation of Bristol's sense of place. On the one hand, by placing the Bristol Bus Boycott at the heart of its dramatic action, it frames Bristol in a similar manner to *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* as a defiant city; it implies that Bristol is a city unafraid to stand up to injustice. The play not only celebrates the efforts of the Black British activists such as Paul Stephenson and Roy Hackett who led the boycott (2019a: 71) and the ordinary Black Bristolians who, like Wendell and Wendell Junior, pounded pavements and knocked on doors to shore up support, but also recognises the contribution made by the city's predominantly white student population in demonstrating their opposition to the colour bar (2019a: 65). Towards the end of the play, when the James' hear over the radio that the colour bar is to be lifted, the recital of Stephenson's statement thanking 'the many Bristolians who gave support and sympathy in [the] struggle against racial discrimination' further reinforces this parsing of the boycott as a city-wide effort to which Bristolians of all races contributed (2019a: 107).

Nevertheless, the audience is never given the impression that the colour bar is being imposed on Bristol by some outside force. Instead, it is the city's own bus operators who are defending the practice. Furthermore, it is evident throughout that there is much opposition to the colour bar being repealed among the city's white population. This resistance is given voice in *Princess & The Hustler* by Margot. Initially, Margot's scepticism towards the boycott shares much with Mavis' disinclination to have to walk 'up the hills by Totterdown' (2019a: 65);

Margot simply passes off the boycott as 'silly', warning Wendell that 'people trying to get along with each other. Nobody wants that kind of trouble round here' (2019a: 71). When Wendell is unmoved, however, Margot begins to ramp-up her rhetoric, telling Mavis and Wendell of her brother who has 'been working on them buses since he come out of school', protesting that 'some of them men depend on those overtime hours./ And you start giving those hours to other people, foreigners like, then well it's not going to go down well is it?' (2019a: 72-73). Margot is evidently not alone in this opinion. Later, although pleased that 'they were outnumbered', Wendell Junior reports that at least one pro-boycott march was met with counter demonstrators (2019a: 79). Furthermore, on his way back from the demonstration, he is attacked by a group of white youths with bicycle chains. Although it might be tempting to forget amid the play's celebratory denouement, then, the play does not shy away from the (sometimes violently) divisive aspects of the boycott, and the manner in which it split as much as united Bristol.

Similarly to *WE ARE LIGHTNING!*, *Princess & the Hustler* therefore refrains from portraying the play's antagonistic forces as originating entirely from outside Bristol. And, this acquiescence to the presence of resistance to progressive change from within the city makes for a far more complex representation of both the bus boycott and Bristol's sense of place. Because, in doing so, the play resists a reductionist retelling of the events of the bus boycott as the story of a radical city unifying to resist entirely alien practices of discrimination. Instead, it frames the boycott as a moment in which Bristol had to look itself in the mirror and ask searching questions about its identity. Discussing whether or not to let Wendell back into her life, Mavis asks Margot: 'if a whole city can try to change, why not

one simple man?’ (2019a: 84). And, although this line is intended to speak to Mavis’ relationship with Wendell far more than to the boycott, it has significant resonances for the play’s suggestions as to what Bristol’s sense of place might be. In such moments, *Princess & the Hustler* proposes that, as the play’s *re-placing* of Bristol as locale also implied, while Bristol might not be the wholly progressive city that other cultural and media representations have often suggested, its sense of place can be defined by an ability to ask such questions of itself and to change even when it is difficult.

### **Bristol: A Progressive City?**

*Princess & The Hustler* therefore intervenes in discourses surrounding recuperation and gentrification in Bristol in two key ways. First and foremost, it serves as a record of a community in the city which is presently under significant threat from gentrifying processes. It celebrates the camaraderie and community spirit that came to exist in St Agnes and St Pauls despite challenging economic and social circumstances. It is worth noting that the play does not subvert, beyond the presence of Margot, what Slater and Anderson argue is a false perception of St Pauls as homogeneously “Afro-Caribbean” (2012), yet there is a good reason for this. In his 2013 book *A New Kind of Bleak: Journey’s Through Urban Britain*, Hatherley argues that ‘Bristol is a famously multicultural city whose centre is strikingly white, and it’s also a working-class city whose centre is strikingly bourgeois and affluent’ (2012: 144). In this, Bristol city centre shares a lot with cultural representations of the city. For, though the cultural texts discussed in the introduction to this chapter do heavily frame Bristol as a city defined by “alternative”, “counter-cultural” practices, the characters they portray engaging with those practices are predominantly white and middle-class. *Princess & The*



*Hustler* thus uses its St Agnes setting in order to foreground the sizeable contribution that Black Bristolians have made to *re-placing* the city as politically progressive.

Nevertheless, in both its retelling of the Bristol Bus Boycott and Princess' struggle to resist internalising racist conceptions of beauty, *Princess & The Hustler* also warns its audience against uncritically accepting suggestions that Bristol is uniquely progressive. Much of the racism experienced by the characters of *Princess and The Hustler* works hard to hide the fact that it is racism at all. Margot, for example, considers herself well-integrated into St Agnes' predominantly Black British community and, moreover, evidently thinks of herself as far from racist. However, while it must be noted that she shows genuine affection for Mavis, Princess and Wendell Junior, even prior to her outbursts about the boycott, her racial tolerance reads as something of a performance. Often, her boasts about her racial tolerance read as indicative of a perception that she is, in fact, in some way superior to her neighbours. Furthermore, when she does later take exception to Wendell and Wendell Junior's activism, it is less a case of a suppressed racism being unleashed and more that of there being a limit to her solidarity. This is perhaps best articulated when she tells Wendell that 'people have to be accommodated that's for sure, and many people round here doing their best to be tolerating of youse, and your West Indian churches, [but] you've got to be mindful of *us*' (Odimba, 2019a: 71, emphasis in original). Not only does Margot's supposed progressivism belie a self-perception of superiority, then, but, when the structures which maintain her privilege come under threat, she quickly comes to their defence.

Though the play itself does not directly draw such a parallel, one is perhaps moved by this to consider whether similar dynamics might be at play in contemporary Bristol. Despite the image which has often been projected by cultural representations of the city and despite notable moments in its history, such as it becoming the first city in Europe to directly elect a mayor of African or Caribbean heritage when Marvin Rees beat incumbent George Ferguson in 2016 (Bristol247, 2017), Bristol is still rife with structural racism. Compiling a 2017 report for the Runnymede Trust, Farah Elahi *et al.* found that 'ethnic minorities in Bristol experience greater disadvantage than the national average in education and employment' highlighting a 'systemic institutional, social and cultural racism' in which school curricula and workplace environments were oriented so as to favour white, middle-class students and employees over their non-white and/or working-class peers (2017: 3-4). The physical space of Bristol also remains permeated by reminders of the city's slave-trading past, with the perpetrators of slavery honoured by statues and in the names of streets, schools and other institutions. Although there has been some discussion of how Bristol might come to terms with its past as a slave port since the toppling of a statue of Edward Colston by Black Lives Matter protestors in June 2020 (BBC News, 2020a), that such memorials to the orchestrators of the slave trade remained in the city despite campaigners agitating for this for decades (Webb, 2007: 45), further suggests that the city is not always as progressive as some would like to think. Just as Margot's allyship meant little when it really mattered, then, it is entirely possible to argue that Bristol has not always been as quick to enact progressive change as its contemporary place identity often implies.

Alongside preserving the memory of a community presently facing erasure

by gentrifying forces, *Princess & The Hustler* thus also works to critique the “alternative”, “counter-cultural” place identity which, by way of recuperation, has fuelled those processes in Bristol. It asks its audience to step back and consider whether that aesthetic of progressivism is truly borne out in practice. Yet, even so, the play does not deny that Bristol might have the ability to live up to that perception; throughout, *Princess & The Hustler re-places* Bristol in a manner which suggests that it is a city very much able to ask difficult questions about itself and, by extension, with the potential to put in the work which real change requires.

### **Junkyard**

*Junkyard* was written by Jack Thorne and is set in the working-class north Bristol suburb of Lockleaze. Inspired by Thorne’s father’s employment as a youth worker in the 1970s, the play focuses on a group of young people living in Lockleaze as they are recruited by youth worker Rick to build a playground out of scrap materials. Despite all of the young people being disaffected and unenthusiastic about participating in the playground project at the opening of the play, the undertaking gradually instils them with a sense of purpose and pride. A musical, the lyrics to *Junkyard’s* songs were written by Thorne and composed and arranged by Stephen Warbeck. *Junkyard* was a co-production between Headlong, Bristol Old Vic, Rose Theatre Kingston and Theatr Clwyd. It premiered in the main house at Bristol Old Vic in March 2017 before touring to each of the other co-producing venues.

Surveying media discourses surrounding gentrification in present-day Bristol, one would be forgiven for thinking that the experience of venues like the

Trinity Centre or areas like St Agnes and St Pauls are representative of the city as a whole. As I discussed in my introduction, Bristol is presently experiencing significant growth which has been compounded by the much-vaunted 'return to the city' (Rae, 2013): a broader cultural shift in which the middle class have been abandoning the suburbs in favour of city-centre living. Nevertheless, although house prices are certainly rising across Bristol, the reason that gentrification is such an acute concern in areas such as St Pauls and St Agnes is due to incoming gentrifiers' affections for those particular areas over other parts of the city. What, then, of the districts of Bristol which are both being abandoned by the middle class and ignored by urban developers?

As was perhaps implicit in Slater and Anderson's suggestion that St Pauls had previously been seen as 'a segregated "ghetto" of vice and dereliction' (2012: 530), Bristol has for a long time been a divided city. Anna Cento Bull and Bryn Jones suggest that it is 'divided almost in two by the River Avon. Areas north of the river are on the whole more affluent' whereas 'large tracts of south Bristol consist of sprawling post-war public housing estates, with few public or private amenities and limited employment opportunities' (2006: 773). While there is some truth to this claim, the reality is more complex. As the *Deprivation in Bristol 2015* report highlights, 'Bristol continues to have deprivation "hot spots" that are amongst some of the most deprived areas in the country yet are adjacent to some of the least deprived areas in the country' (Bristol City Council, 2015: 9). This dartboard-like pattern of affluence and deprivation is visible in both the north and south of the city. Media representations of Bristol as an affluent city with an alluring quality of life thus clearly only tell one side of the story with numerous areas throughout the city barred from experiencing the benefits of that prosperity.

Even beyond my discussion surrounding recuperation and gentrification, *Junkyard's* Lockleaze setting is notable. Cultural representations of Bristol have consistently tended to characterise the city in terms of its most affluent areas and, by extension, residents. Of those texts referenced at the opening of this chapter, the vast majority focus on the lives of those living in affluent districts such as Clifton or Bedminster with more than one taking as its cast students from the city's Russell Group university. Lockleaze, by contrast, is one of the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. Just as I have argued that some of the plays discussed within this thesis might work to contest the dominant cultural geographies of the UK as a whole, then, the setting of *Junkyard* subverts outside perceptions of the cultural geography of Bristol.

Although drawing focus to the plight of the victims of gentrification (both working- and middle-class), in retaining a focus on areas which are currently suffering due to Bristol's attractiveness to incoming gentrifiers, both *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* and *Princess & The Hustler* largely operate within the terms of dominant discourses surrounding gentrification in contemporary Bristol. In drawing attention to Lockleaze, *Junkyard* instead foregrounds a Bristol community which is frequently left out of such discourses. In doing so, it works to highlight how selective such discourses (and the underlying conception of the city as a whole as increasingly prosperous) really are.

### **Bristol as Locale in *Junkyard***

Themes of neglect and marginalisation are central to *Junkyard*. The play takes as its inspiration the true story of the building of the Lockleaze Adventure

Playground, a product of the Adventure Playground Movement spearheaded by Marjory Allen in the aftermath of the Second World War. The movement, which began among the ruins of post-Blitz London before being replicated in regional cities in the following decades, invited children to build their own playgrounds from scrap or discarded materials on disused land (Kozlovsky, 2007: 176). In the published playtext, Thorne fittingly describes the show as 'A Play about Junk. Featuring Junk Music played by a Junk Orchestra' (2017b: 1). It is not only in the composition and arrangement of the songs which punctuate the production that *Junkyard's* creative team found inspiration in the Adventure Playground Movement's transubstantiation of waste into wonder, however. Throughout, the play asks its audience to question presumptions of value not only in relation to the once-discarded materials which find new utility in the playground but also in relation to those who come together to build it.

The manner in which *Junkyard re-places* Lockleaze does not initially inspire affection. The production's set, designed by Chiara Stephenson, is, like the Adventure Playground itself, built entirely from scraps of wood, rusting oil drums, dirty rope, worn tyres and other refuse. The use of such items to construct the various locations we are privy to implies that Lockleaze too is architecturally wanting. Perhaps more importantly for the play's *re-placing* of Bristol as locale, however, the rough, sharp-edged "junk" which the performers are forced to navigate mirrors a set of practices which surround the play's characters and which it is implied they might equally want to avoid.

This, at least, is the view of Malcolm (Kevin McMonagle), the headteacher

of the school attended by the children who make up the play's core ensemble.<sup>88</sup> When he first meets youth worker Rick (Calum Callaghan) to discuss the playground-building project, Malcolm warns Rick that 'some of these students are not necessarily our best students' (2017b: 27-28). This lack of academic ability is, in Malcolm's assessment, a symptom of their home lives. Ginger's (Josef Davies) mother, for instance, 'is a prostitute' while 'his brother has a history of violence and has been in and out of borstal'. Tilly (Seyi Omooba), on the other hand, 'has a history of abuse'. Surmising, Malcolm warns Rick that 'everyone here, they've all got dark stories' (2017b: 27-28). This "darkness" does not only apply to their past and present; Malcolm suggests that all of the assembled children are bound for futures dominated by criminality, substance abuse and poverty.

While, as the chief antagonist of the play, Malcolm's assumptions are intended to invoke discomfort among the audience, *Junkyard* does not directly dispute such a sentiment. The play's depiction of Lockleaze does often channel mainstream characterisations of working-class estates as, in Beswick's terms, 'dangerous, inhospitable and violent: as corrupt and corrupting spaces' (2019: 2). When Fiz (Erin Doherty), Ginger and Debbie (Scarlett Brookes) first introduce themselves through song, for example, Fiz admits to being a borderline kleptomaniac, Ginger to intentionally getting himself thrown out of class and Debbie to regularly engaging in ill-advised sexual encounters (Thorne, 2017b: 9-11). Indeed, the more that is revealed about these characters' home lives, the more the play seems to concur with the notion that, for example, Ginger's rush to solve his problems with his fists, is a behaviour learned and encouraged by his

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<sup>88</sup> These children are, it is worth noting, all played by actors who are young adults.

social environment. Nevertheless, it would be reductive to suggest that this is the whole picture and, as the play progresses, *Junkyard* adds increasing texture to its *re-placing* of Lockleaze. A number of the play's narrative strands, in fact, directly seek to reframe some of the practices often associated with working-class neighbourhoods in a manner which directly subverts the moralistic overtones often present in mainstream representations of such sites.

Prior to the beginning of the play, for example, Debbie has become pregnant. We later learn that, in doing so, she has followed in the footsteps of her own mother who became pregnant with both Debbie and her sister, Fiz, at a young age. Also like her mother before her, Debbie does not know who the father is. There is, in this, certainly some suggestion that Debbie's social environment has driven her towards becoming pregnant at a young age. However, the play works hard to subvert the notion that this might be proof of some intrinsic moral deficiency. Fiz and Debbie's mother (Lisa Palfrey)—only ever referred to onstage or in the playtext as "Mum"—in many ways operates as a foreshadowing of Debbie's possible future; in the chorus to one song, Debbie reveals her fear that she is 'making the same mistakes as Mum' (2017b: 34). Nevertheless, though Debbie and Fiz's Mum might be prone to regularly falling for the charms of men who are alternately 'boring' and/or 'nasty' and who rarely stick around for longer than a year (2017b: 19-20), it would be hard to argue that she is anything but a good mother. All three celebrate their home as 'a tale of three women' who, despite their disagreements, are an incredibly close and supportive family unit (2017b: 19-20). Though Debbie might continue to have her doubts about motherhood, the play therefore critiques the notion that her young age means she is either destined to be a substandard parent or in any way morally-lacking.



Indeed, *Junkyard* re-replaces Lockleaze as decidedly matriarchal. The kids dedicate an entire song to their mothers who they admit might be ‘a little bit dumb’ and ‘not even the slightest bit scrummy’ but who, amid economic hardship, ‘gives [them] dinner most days’ and ‘even tries to give [them] praise’—an act which Ginger deems even more remarkable given that he’s ‘a wanker’ (2017b: 26-27). In fact, all of the children are initially reluctant to sign-up to the playground-building project and it is only through Rick’s wooing of their mothers that they agree to take part. Having been impressed by Rick’s flirtatious manner, the mums of the estate prey upon their children’s eagerness to please them in order to convince them to engage. This sequence does rely to some extent on a characterisation of working-class women as libidinous, yet it also celebrates the crucial role that these women play in this community and the empowering influence this can have upon their children.

In summary, there is a tension in *Junkyard’s* re-replacing of Lockleaze as locale. The play draws upon mainstream assumptions about estate life whilst subverting, reframing or contextualising others. It is worth noting, however, that leaning into such stereotypes, initially at least, might be a necessary part of the play’s dramaturgical structure. Channelling some elements of these dominant assumptions about Lockleaze (or working-class estates more generally) lays the groundwork for an exploration of how such places might sometimes work as a form of entrapment for those who live there but, also, might have the potential to be sites of meaningful resistance.

### **Bristol as Location in *Junkyard***

Uniquely among the plays discussed within this thesis, the characters of *Junkyard* show almost no interest in the world beyond their immediate surroundings. The extent to which their lives are both physically and psychologically confined to Lockleaze is stressed in an exchange between Debbie and Talc (Enyi Okoronkwo). Talc reminisces about his 'only real holiday' in which his 'mum took me to her mum and dad's./ They lived in Weston-Super-Mare'. There is definitely a hint of fondness in Talc's memories of this holiday; he reflects that 'I'd never seen the sea before and I loved it' (2017b: 59-60). Nevertheless, in stark contrast to Princess in *Princess & The Hustler*, who would happily have remained in Weston-Super-Mare forever, Talc recalls a discomfort with being away. By the time they returned, he remembers being 'quite happy to leave because I was worried about missing school and getting further behind' (2017b: 60). Although expressed as a concern for his academic progress, this statement has broader implications for how Talc (and the rest of the kids) view the world beyond Lockleaze. Despite the dangers it is suggested lurk within, they evidently feel a sense of safety and comfort when in Lockleaze that they do not feel elsewhere.

It is important to note that the geopathology which confines *Junkyard's* cast to Lockleaze differs to the feelings of 'imprisonment' or 'entrapment' which Chaudhuri suggests are experienced by the residents of Jim Cartwright's *Road* (1997: 49-50). Instead, the children's relationship with Lockleaze reflects a similar sense of resignation to that which Diane Reay and Helen Lucey found in their study into how children living on estates perceive their surroundings; they summarise their interviews with one participant's response that 'I don't like it here but I don't want to be anywhere else' (2000: 423). In *Junkyard*, this sentiment seems to stem from a fear of (or discomfort with) what lies beyond. Though they

may sometimes despise the area's dominant practices, within Lockleaze, the children are more than capable of conforming to its normative geography. To appropriate Bourdieu's terminology, venturing beyond the bounds of the estate, they feel they lack the 'ease' with which they see others operate (1984: 74). Initially, then, the kids' hesitance to leave Lockleaze reflects an uncertainty about the world beyond more than it does any strongly-felt place attachment towards Lockleaze itself.

The children's lack of interest in the outside world, however, does not mean that the outside world is not interested in them. And, while the central thematic arc of *Junkyard* focusses on the children finding agency and empowerment in their surroundings, the idea to build the adventure playground—the act which instigates this perceptual shift—is not their own. Instead, the project is facilitated by Rick, who is acting as a project worker for the London Adventure Playgrounds Association. In first introducing the project in a school assembly, Rick attests to the unfortunate naming of the association, only too aware of the scepticism it might foster in a community so wary of the outside world. He stresses that it is 'an old name—we're aware this isn't London' (Thorne, 2017b: 13). Yet, Rick's outsider status (he was born and raised in Walthamstow in London) is crucial to the play's dramaturgy.

In considering the difference between a visitor's perceptions of a place and that of a resident, Tuan has argued that 'the visitor is often able to perceive merits and defects in an environment that are no longer visible to the resident' (1977: 65). There is, however, a caveat to this privileged perspective. Tuan continues that 'the visitor's evaluation of environment is essentially aesthetic. [...] A special

effort is required to empathize with the lives and values of the inhabitants' (1977: 64). Such a duality is evident in Rick's relationship to Lockleaze and its residents. In some regards, Rick's fresh perspective enables him to locate traits such as leadership, 'integrity', charm and humour in the children where Malcolm could only see 'dark stories' (2017b: 23, 28). Yet, Rick's optimism and charisma do not shield him from accusations that his understanding of the challenges faced by those living on the estate might be superficial. He is asked on multiple occasions: 'why are you here' (2017b: 49, 64)? And, later, when the building of the adventure playground meets some resistance from Lockleaze residents and Fiz is violently attacked, a reprise of Fiz, Debbie and their Mum's song about the 'brave and not-so-brave men' who 'roam' into their lives 'and then run away again' positions Rick as a similarly self-interested interloper; their Mum sings 'Rick was a funny man/ Thought he knew what we were/ You're this. You need this' (2017b: 67). Rick's outsider status thus comes to raise significant questions about the ethics of and power dynamics inherent in social interventions such as those undertaken by the Adventure Playground Movement.

Ultimately, while the play does stress that the playground would not have been built without Rick's involvement, it is only when the children themselves come to take ownership over it that it truly gains its significance as a meaningful site. Indeed, it is Rick who eventually caves to pressure from Malcolm when, following the attack on Fiz, he tells the children that 'we're done. We tried. You tried' (2017b: 97). Fiz, surrounded by the rest of the children, then makes a stirring speech defending the project. She tells Malcolm to 'go off—run your school—but this bit—if you don't mind—leave this bit for us. Because this bit. It matters. To us' (2017b: 98). Thus, where the play might open as a story about a

well-meaning Londoner arriving in Lockleaze with the belief that he has the answers to these children's problems, by the end, it is a story of self-realisation and of a group of children who, through reclaiming an area of their neighbourhood, come to take charge of their own lives.

### **Bristol's Sense of Place in *Junkyard***

As I mentioned above, *Junkyard* regularly seeks to draw a connection between the inanimate “junk” which is used to build the adventure playground and the human “junk” which pieces it together. It is evident from our first introduction to Fiz, Ginger, Debbie and the rest of the ensemble that, not only are they marginalised from society as a whole due to their being residents of Lockleaze but, also, that they are held in little regard within the estate itself. To make matters worse, they are also acutely aware of others' perceptions of them. In the opening song of the production, the children sing that ‘Our life is shit/ And we know why/ It's cos we're kids, we're best ignored/ [...] Our life is boring, safely boring/ Always boring, fucking boring’ (2017b: 11). Each therefore frames their own misadventures—Fiz's habitual stealing, Ginger's misbehaviour in school, Debbie's promiscuity (2017b: 9-10)—as a way to stave off that boredom; as I discussed above, these activities are all framed as attempts to comply with the normative geography of Lockleaze. And yet, it is evident that none of the characters have been particularly successful in achieving this goal.

This failure to fit in does not only find an outlet in the play's dialogue and the lyrics of the songs which are featured throughout but also in the tonal qualities of the melodies which carry those lyrics. Stephen Warbeck's arrangement has a naive quality to it; half-sung, half-spoken, it is the antithesis of the soaring

melodies and catchy hooks employed by mainstream, commercial musicals. As one listens, one gets the sense that even the music through which these young people have chosen to express themselves has turned against them. Nevertheless, the children's continued determination to get their points across despite their vocal limitations (taken alongside their continued attempts to conform to Lockleaze's normative geography) only serves to amplify the intensity of their desire for a sense of belonging.

In a not dissimilar manner to *WE ARE LIGHTNING!*, the central dramatic conflict of *Junkyard* is therefore acutely spatial. Not only do the children lack the ease with which to navigate the world beyond Lockleaze but, compounding this, they also find themselves marginalised within their own community. Furthermore, their options for better conforming to the demands of those within their own community seem somewhat slim as the terms of their marginalisation are entirely hypocritical. The disregard which many of the children's parents and teachers show towards them seems predicated on a desire to claim a "respectable" image for Lockleaze. Yet, the practices for which the children are castigated—stealing, fighting, underage sex—are the very same as those in which those who are doing the castigating indulge (or have indulged). Faced with the duplicitousness typical of the manner in which notions of respectability are often wielded, the children's only recourse is thus to carve out their own space in which they can be free from the judgement of others and fulfil their desire for a sense of belonging on their own terms.

The process of constructing the adventure playground may open Fiz *et al.*'s eyes to attributes they were previously unaware they possessed. As important,

however, is the emancipation that comes with claiming a space over which they have control and, moreover, which can form the basis of a collective identity. The importance of the playground meaningfully representing the identity of those who built it is evident when viewed in relationship to Rick's early attempts to present the playground-building project in utopian terms. He suggests that 'this playground can be anything you want it to/ [...] I just want your minds free, to let them roam' (2017b: 30). Such utopianism, however, completely fails to inspire the young people and it is only when the playground comes under threat from vandals and from Malcolm that they grow genuinely enthusiastic about it. In their final showdown with Malcolm and the school's board of governors, the children sing that 'in here, is the best of us./ It's broken, it's shit, it doesn't fit./ As broken and shit as we know we are' (2017b: 101). In short, it is only when they are able to draw a meaningful connection between others' perceptions of the playground as a dangerous, badly constructed pile of "junk" and the similar terms in which they are perceived that it ceases to be just an abstract space and, instead, becomes a meaningful place with all the emancipatory potential which follows.

If, in *Princess & The Hustler*, Princess' cupboard heterotopia demonstrated the radical potential of thinking geographically, *Junkyard* thus shows us the radical potential of *acting* geographically. By reclaiming their marginalised subject position as a source of empowerment and instilling that identity into a physical space, Fiz, Ginger, Debbie and the rest of the children are able to fulfil their desire for a sense of belonging. If only for their small group, they transform the margins into an alternative centre and supposedly transgressive practices into a new normative geography.<sup>89</sup> Read in relation to media and cultural representations of

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<sup>89</sup> As with Gayle's reclamation of her ostracization in *Shebeen*, this echoes bell hooks' notion of 'choosing the margins' (1990: 145).

Bristol which have attributed an “alternative”, “counter-cultural” sense of place to Bristol, *Junkyard* thus asks probing questions about how such an identity might have come to be associated with the city. Mainstream discussions surrounding gentrification in Bristol have tended to suggest that it is the proliferation of practices such as graffiti, rave culture and the like. *Junkyard*, however, implies that it might not be those activities themselves that give substance to such a sense of place but, instead, the subversive intent which lies behind them; the emphatic reclamation of practices which are deemed to be, in Cresswell’s words, ‘heretical’ (1996: 11). Where *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* sought to reconnect aesthetic and practice, *Junkyard* therefore goes one step further, arguing that the aesthetic of a particular form or forms might be irrelevant and that Bristol’s sense of place, instead, lies in the city’s broader willingness to embrace that which is marginalised.

### **Bristol: An Affluent City?**

Commenting on processes of urban development and gentrification in Manchester, Young *et al.* write that ‘the construction of the cosmopolitan city centre relies on the devaluing of the suburbs as sites of humdrum mundanity and homogeneity’ (2006: 1709). In relation to Bristol, one could go further to argue that discourses surrounding gentrification (both supportive and critical) have largely ignored the existence of those areas which do not fit neatly into a narrative of an increasingly affluent city whose streets have become a series of highly contested spaces. As I hope is clear in the preceding pages, the displacement of working-class communities from the neighbourhoods to which they have developed a deep level of place attachment is a pressing issue; and yet the intensity of the focus on areas such as St Pauls often means that the challenges



faced by areas of the city which continue to be decidedly *not* affluent are often ignored.

Therefore, where *Princess & The Hustler* served as a record of a community which has come to bear much of the brunt of Bristol's gentrification, *Junkyard* draws attention to an area of the city which has often been left out of such discussions. Above, I cited Hatherley's suggestion that, despite the impression one might get from mainstream representations of the city, Bristol is predominantly working-class (2012: 144). Together, these two plays foreground a set of experiences which not only deviate from a tendency to focus on the practices of the city's more affluent residents but are likely also far more representative of the everyday lives of those living in Bristol, not only in the recent past but also in the present day.

In a similar mode, discourses surrounding recuperation in Bristol have largely focussed on the "alternative" or "counter-cultural" practices present in the city which have been deemed valuable by urban developers looking to profit from localised abundances of cultural capital. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* and *Princess & The Hustler* both critiqued this process by highlighting the manner in which it necessitates divorcing the aesthetics of those practices from the values and intent behind them. Not all practices, however, are deemed worthy of recuperation. On a very basic level, *Junkyard*, in its central analogy of the transubstantiation of the maligned and discarded into that of great value, foregrounds the subjectivity which lies behind such value judgements. Yet, more than this, in reframing Bristol's "alternative", "counter-cultural" place identity as less a result of specific practices than an orientation towards reclaiming that

which is marginalised, *Junkyard* suggests that resistance to the recuperation of that identity might not come from trying to hold on to those practices which have been subsumed by capital but, instead, from seeking out new forms which might still hold radical potential.

## **Conclusions**

Both the places I have discussed previously in this thesis, Nottinghamshire and Hull, have been the subject of relatively few cultural representations. This, I would argue, is the result of their marginalisation within the political, economic and cultural geography of England. Indeed, for the majority of my discussion in this thesis, being an English region has been synonymous with being marginalised from “national life” on multiple fronts. The experience of Bristol, however, does not quite fit this mould; on aggregate, it is relatively affluent and, moreover, has been the subject of a far greater number of cultural representations. In line with my discussion of the manner in which a place being in possession of an abundance of economic capital leads to it being perceived as possessing a similar abundance of symbolic capital, Bristol has also been represented in a consistently sympathetic manner; representations of the city have drawn far more heavily on actually-existing practices present within the city rather than, as was the case with Nottinghamshire, simply drawing on reified perceptions of a vaguely-defined regional working class. Even so, in a manner which directly exposes the core-periphery logic of the English spatial imaginary, Bristol has still come to be conceived of as fairly homogenous. Despite it being a far more competitive participant in the global city system, Bristol is still denied the heterogeneity of representation that is regularly afforded to London.

The majority of the productions that I have discussed in previous chapters, in *re-placing* the regions they engage with, have foregrounded aspects of the region which distinguish it from others. In places which, due to numerous economic, political, social and cultural factors, have been denied the opportunity to formulate and communicate a contemporary, post-industrial place identity, *re-placing* a region in a manner which foregrounds its distinctiveness was often deemed to have a radical, emancipatory potential, sometimes even as having the possibility to subvert the underlying logic of symbolic value as it relates to English geography. The case of Bristol, however, reveals that the propagation of an overly cohesive place identity can serve to erase experiences of a place which fall outside of that identity. Moreover, it evidences the manner in which expressing too cohesive a place identity can open a place up to processes of recuperation. Materially, this can manifest in the arrival of developers who prey upon that cohesive identity as a shortcut to extracting profit. Yet, as I hope to have shown in my introduction to this chapter, the regularity with which the promotion of Bristol to incoming gentrifiers has hinged on its perceived similarities and differences to London suggests that such cohesive place identities can also provide a means for places to be re-subsumed into the very London-centric spatial imaginary they were formulated to contest.

The three productions I have discussed in this chapter each, in their own way, engage with material processes of gentrification in contemporary Bristol. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* and *Princess & The Hustler*, despite being set 50 years apart, both provide an insight into what the city stands to lose if action is not taken. The former engaged with such issues fairly overtly, dramatizing the manner in which urban developers, in pouncing upon areas deemed to have an

abundance of cultural capital in order to extract monopoly rents, often end up eviscerating the very practices which gave the symbolic capital attributed to those areas substance. *Princess & The Hustler* is more tangential in its relationship to gentrification; it instead memorialises a community which is being displaced by such processes. Where both these productions confined themselves to channelling dominant discourses surrounding gentrification in Bristol, however, *Junkyard* drew its audience's attention away from inner-city districts such as St Agnes and St Pauls which are suffering due to the city's increasing affluence and towards a community which has, instead, been largely ignored by urban developers and neglected by local government.

Beyond this, all three of these productions dig beneath the material repercussions of gentrification in order to critique the very "alternative", "counter-cultural" place identity which, by way of recuperation, has served as its fuel. *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* did so in two key ways. Firstly, it foregrounded the hollowness of any aesthetic of "counter-culturalism" which is not backed-up by substantive practices. Secondly, cognisant of the professionalisation of cultural practice implicit in urban development strategies which seek to establish a city as a "creative city", the production foregrounded the role of inclusivity and amateurism in the establishment of Bristol's present place identity and implied that the end of such practices would place that identity under threat.<sup>90</sup>

*Princess & The Hustler*, on the other hand, had much more to say about the political connotations of Bristol's place identity. While attesting to the fact that Bristol has often been at the forefront of radical and progressive change, the play

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<sup>90</sup> For further discussion of discourses surrounding the "creative city", see Chapter Five.

critiqued the notion that this is the result of the city being somehow homogeneously progressive. Indeed, it inferred that an aesthetic of progressivism can often belie deeply-ingrained structural racism and classism in Bristol. Nevertheless, it also celebrated the manner in which such structures had been overturned in the past and suggested that the city might be celebrated not because it finds progressive change easy but precisely because it has often found it hard. Again, it sought to reconnect that perception of progressivism not simply with a finished aesthetic but with an ongoing process of a city asking searching questions of itself and being willing to admit its own flaws. In a similar foregrounding of process over end result, *Junkyard* questioned whether Bristol's "alternative" or "counter-cultural" place identity was truly a result of the prevalence of particular cultural forms in the city (such as graffiti or the "Bristol Sound") or, instead, that of the less-well-defined orientation toward reclaiming marginalised practices as sources of empowerment.

It is perhaps useful here to return to my analysis of representations of Nottinghamshire in Chapter Four. My critique of *Labour of Love's* reliance on reified perceptions of the regional working class was not underpinned by the view that these were definitively wrong but that they were partial. Just as *Shebeen* (and, to a lesser extent, *Wonderland*) sought to add complexity to these simplified perceptions of that region, so too do the three productions discussed in this chapter make the case for a more heterogenous view of Bristol. They rarely suggest that dominant attributions of meaning to the city are outright wrong but add caveats or point to experiences which an overly homogenous place identity might erase; they *re-place* Bristol in a manner which not only contests the city's dominant place identity but also the very notion that the city can be *re-placed* in

a cohesive and homogenous way at all. In doing so, each of these productions serves to resist recuperation. For, a place identity which coalesces around process rather than finished aesthetic is far harder to recuperate.

## Chapter Seven

# Conclusions

In this thesis, I hope to have contributed to the ongoing project set in motion by Chaudhuri when she challenged theatre scholars to ‘theorise a geography of theatre’ (1997: xi). Inspired by my experiences of watching Glen Waldron’s *Forever House* re-place my home city of Plymouth, my goal has been to develop a critical understanding of how theatre practitioners have engaged, and are engaging, with regional England in their work. My main focus has been on contextualising these acts of what I have called *re-placing* and on considering how stage representations of regional England are informed by, respond and otherwise relate to various political, cultural, economic and theatrical contexts. In this chapter, I draw together some of my findings, restate the core arguments of this thesis and make some suggestions as to what the implications of this study for future research might be.

### ***Re-placing Regional England***

#### ***Defiant Regions***

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that, when analysing performance texts set in the English regions, it is vital to take into account the context of the material London-centricity of English theatre production and the broader London-centricity of English politics, economy and culture. This was most evident in Chapter Four, in which I argued that London’s domination of the theatre industry encourages even theatre-makers based outside the capital to ensure that the performance

texts they create are readable by a metropolitan audience. A sense of marginalisation and of being “ruled over” by London, however, has appeared throughout the productions I have discussed. *Labour of Love*, *Wonderland*, *Mighty Atoms*, *The Hypocrite* and *Junkyard* all explicitly engaged with the notion that the English regions are disempowered and are often dictated to by the capital.

What is particularly interesting is how resolutely these productions tied the disenfranchisement of regional England to class. Throughout, London has typically been *re-placed* as the locus of the middle class and elite as a counterpoint to the *re-placing* of the region in which a production is set as predominantly working-class. Adiseshiah (2016), Beswick (2019) and Sierz (2011) (among many others) have highlighted that theatre’s engagements with working-class subject matter have often encouraged audiences to judge working-class characters against what Beswick refers to as ‘middle-class modes of respectability’ (2019: 100). However, many of the plays discussed within this thesis celebrated “working-class-ness” and interpreted a working-class place identity as a strength.

On occasion, this involved attacking or ridiculing a perceived London-centric elite. In Chapter Five, I foregrounded *The Hypocrite*’s framing of the practices and aesthetic orientations of what it suggested was a London-centric middle class and elite as insincere and detached from the realities of the social world. This found echoes in the cabinet members of *Wonderland*, Rick in *Junkyard* and “Theresa May from the Brewery” in *Mighty Atoms*. Each of these plays not only acknowledged the centre-periphery power dynamics of English political



geography but sought to “speak back” to the centre on behalf of those in the margins, in doing so inverting dominant, London-centric spatial imaginaries. These moments of satirising a supposed “metropolitan elite” likely took some inspiration from the post-Brexit spatial imaginaries that I discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Where discourses surrounding the “metropolitan elite” and the “left behind” regions have been rhetoricised in recent years in order to make spurious claims about the class identities, lifestyles and political desires of those living in both the capital and the regions, however, these plays generally drew upon them to highlight very real, material inequalities between London and the rest of England.

Notably, few of the plays discussed in this thesis made the case for a role-reversal of relations between London and the regions. In Chapter Five, I argued that *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* worked to expose the subjectivity of normative understandings of symbolic value in relation to places. And, similar themes were present in other plays too: *Labour of Love*, *Wonderland*, *The Hypocrite*, *WE ARE LIGHTNING!*, *Princess & the Hustler* and *Junkyard* all encouraged audiences to rethink why they might be inclined to view some places as more “legitimate” than others. Beyond simply questioning the dominant view of London as inherently more significant than any other place in England, there were therefore attempts throughout these performance texts to question the very notion of differential spatial significance.

### ***Haunted Regions***

In making the case that the places in which they were set were equally as notable, “legitimate” and worthy of representation as the capital, many of the plays I have

discussed drew on what Lewicka refers to as ‘place memory’ (2008: 211). In fact, *WE ARE LIGHTNING!* is the only play discussed in this thesis which did not make any appeal to the history of the place in which it is set.<sup>91</sup> *Wonderland*, *Shebeen*, *The Hypocrite*, *Princess & the Hustler* and *Junkyard* were all set entirely in the past; *Labour of Love* and *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* utilised an Epic chronology; and *Mighty Atoms* was “haunted” by the 1970s. It is interesting to return here to the idea of hauntology, which I invoked in my discussion of *Mighty Atoms*. In building on Derrida’s concept, Fisher pairs it with Franco Berardi’s notion of ‘the slow cancelation of the future’ (2011: 18). Berardi argues that the 1970s marked a ‘turning point’ in which the advanced capitalist nations ‘abandoned’ the ‘illusion’ that the future had the potential to be better than the present (2011: 24-25).<sup>92</sup> Instead, argue both Berardi and Fisher, a broad pessimism about the future became pervasive in the dominant culture.

Fisher, in particular, ties the “slow cancellation of the future” in Britain to ‘the election of Margaret Thatcher’ and the ‘end [of] the uneasy compromises of the so-called post-war political consensus’ (2014: 8). As I noted in my introduction, what Hall has called the ‘neoliberal revolution’ was a key moment in the relationship between London and the English regions (2011: 705), accelerating, as it did, contemporary deindustrialisation processes and shaking the foundations of the economies and cultural identities of regional, industrial England. What Fisher might refer to as the ‘spectres of lost futures’ “cancelled” by deindustrialisation haunt many of the productions I have discussed (2014: 27). Fisher’s assessment of such hauntological elements in contemporary culture is

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<sup>91</sup> This was perhaps a further result of its site-generic genesis.

<sup>92</sup> Berardi chooses 1977 in particular as the year of this cultural turn in perceptions of the future; the year in which the Sex Pistol’s released their single *God Save the Queen*, which ends with Johnny Rotten sneering “No future, no future, no future for you”.

bleak: he recalls a ‘feeling of belatedness, of living after the gold rush’ (2014: 8); more than just a nostalgic ‘longing for the past’, he argued that they evidenced ‘an inability to make new memories’ (2014: 113). Yet, perhaps influenced by the post-Brexit privileging of regional England or perhaps by what Alexander Zevin has argued is a broader ‘crisis of liberalism’ which has shattered many of the certainties of the hitherto dominant neoliberal consensus (2019: 18), the productions discussed within this thesis often went further than simply longing for either the past or for futures that have been taken away. Instead, throughout, the past was drawn upon as fuel for a desire to see solidarities between neighbours, pride in place and radical regionality rekindled. Against the backdrop of a highly centralised politics, economy and culture, the performance texts discussed in this thesis were permeated by the notion that the future can be better for the locations they *re-placed* than the present and that a more equitable settlement might be reached between the regions and the metropole; with the past serving as both inspiration and proof that such self-determination and self-actualisation can be achieved.

### ***Diverse Regions***

Entangled with all of this have been frequent attempts to critique reified perceptions of both “regional Englishness” in a broad sense and the specific external perceptions of the location which a given production *re-placed*. I have cited several times Savage *et al.*’s suggestion that London’s relative wealth and power in comparison to the rest of England leads to other sites within the nation being ‘moralised through the lens of the London worldview’ (2015: 323). I have pointed to a longstanding assumption that London (and that which occurs within it) is inherently more “legitimate”, sophisticated and symbolically valuable than

any other site in England, arguing in my introduction that this London-centric view of the country permeates the post-war dramatic canon. I have also foregrounded the emergence of a set of “post-Brexit spatial imaginaries” in which regional England has been rhetoricised as a privileged site in political discourse yet often in a manner which associates the regions with reactionary sentiment. Many of the productions I have discussed within this thesis have, in some way, sought to contest these discourses and the reified perceptions of regional (usually working-class) life which they rely upon.

I gave the greatest emphasis to this discussion in Chapter Four, in which I argued that *Wonderland* contextualised the practices which form the basis of the contemporary vision of the “left behind” regions and that *Shebeen* directly attacked it, *re-placing* Nottinghamshire as a site home to heterogeneous cultures and practices. Similar attempts to critique external perceptions of the places being represented on stage, however, could be found in Chapter Five, with *The Hypocrite* implying that working-class people who voted to leave the European Union may not have done so out of ignorance but out of a desire to be heard and *ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING* contesting views of Hull as homogenously working-class. *Princess & the Hustler* and *Junkyard*, discussed in Chapter Six, also worked to complexify the audience’s perceptions of Bristol by foregrounding the experiences of those who are at risk of displacement due to gentrification and those who are left out of debates surrounding development (and the related view of Bristol as uniquely “alternative” or “counter-cultural”) in the city entirely. More than simply encouraging audiences to view the places with which they engaged as “legitimate”, there has therefore been, throughout the plays I have discussed within this thesis, a consistent attempt to critique a

tendency within England's London-centric culture to *re-place* the English regions (or particular sites within the English regions) as homogenous and, instead, to celebrate them as infinitely diverse.

### **An Original Contribution to Knowledge**

It is in my focus on regional England and my consideration of how contemporary stage representations of the English regions relate to the material and textual London-centricity of English theatre that this thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge. As I discussed in Chapter Two, there has been a tendency within scholarship on British theatre to privilege work created in London. In 2007, Robinson wrote that 'the provincial British local [...] has a long history of neglect, having historically been marginalised in writing about British theatre' (2007: 237). In recent years, steps have been made toward amending this. Several scholars, primarily theatre historians, have, as Cochrane describes, 'attempted to redress the balance of attention between the metropolitan and avant-garde and the quotidian experience of the average regional theatre goer' (2013: 304). While I would contest the suggestion that theatre and performance produced in the regions is less likely to be at the cutting edge of artistic practice, I have been driven by a similar impulse to draw attention to and critically interrogate regional English performance practices.

Alongside giving greater emphasis to performance analysis and the present day, I have argued for the importance of viewing this work as *regional*. Reflecting on their research surrounding performance in Cardiff, Pearson and Roms have written that it is the city's 'relative insignificance that makes this city interesting in our eyes' (2014: 121). Although I have attempted to trouble dominant

understandings of geographical significance, I have similarly positioned the fact that the regions *re-placed* by the performance texts I have discussed are marginalised within dominant political-geographical discourse at the heart of my analysis. Central to my study has been the consideration of how performance texts produced in the English regions might be informed by, respond and otherwise relate to dominant discourses which hold those sites to be “other” to a supposed metropolitan “norm”. I have emphasised that the analysis of contemporary theatre and performance which engages with regional experience requires contextualising that work within the dominant London-centric spatial imaginaries which surround it. Doing so has enabled me to highlight how such productions conform to, contest or otherwise engage with those spatial imaginaries both as they manifest in the *theatrical geographies* of the metropolitan selective tradition and in popular discourse.

### **Some Areas for Further Research**

My study points to several areas for further research. In my introduction, I undertook a brief survey of some canonical plays from the post-war period, in doing so arguing that the London-centricity of English New Writing has been reflected in the texts that industry has produced. Much could be learned from reading the existing canon through such a geographical lens attuned to the London-centricity of the dominant English spatial imaginary. Robinson’s *Theatre & the Rural* has shown how an interrogation of such texts with reference to rurality can provide a new way of understanding the *theatrical geographies* of such work and a similar study which considers how existing texts embrace, elide or otherwise engage with regionality might provide a new way of viewing the canon. Similar to how I have undertaken my analysis with constant reference to the

London-centricity of contemporary theatre production in England, such a study might also benefit from considering how changes in the *geography of English theatre production* (and broader shifts in the nation's political, economic and cultural geography) might have been reflected in the *theatrical geographies* of the texts that industry has produced.

Two further areas for future research relate to contemporary and potential future formations with regard to *theatrical geographies*. Firstly, the manner in which playwrights and other theatre-makers might engage (or presently be engaging) with the new spatial imaginaries which Sykes has suggested have emerged in England following the UK's Referendum on Membership of the European Union certainly warrants further investigation (2018). As I have discussed several times within this thesis, the 2016 referendum had a sizable impact on how English geography is spoken about in political and cultural discourse. In this thesis, I have discussed several examples of performance texts wrestling with this new geographically-inflected discourse. Further early work on this topic has been undertaken by Sierz (2017) and Gemma Edwards (2020). Nevertheless, since I began my PhD in 2016, this geographical view of the nation has become an ever-greater presence in English political discourse and the consideration of how theatre and performance might have engaged with these spatial imaginaries is, I believe, a question to which significant attention should be diverted.

Secondly, during the final few months of writing this thesis, much of the world was put on pause by the COVID-19 pandemic. Measures to contain the virus have involved the closure of every theatre in the UK. The complete inability

to earn revenue through ticket sales or the sales of drinks, programmes and merchandise has placed even the most financially buoyant of institutions in a difficult financial situation. In May 2020, Nuffield Southampton Theatres announced it was to go into administration, citing “severe cash flow issues” as a result of cancelled performances and a collapse in bookings for future productions (BBC News, 2020b). A following investigation by Will Gompertz for the BBC suggested that the reasons for the venue’s closure may have been more complex, difficulties surrounding moving to a new building and a sudden withdrawal of support from Arts Council England both likely having played a part in the organisation’s demise (2020). Nevertheless, there has been a steady trickle of announcements of redundancy consultations. In a bleak call-back to the opening of this thesis, in June, Theatre Royal Plymouth announced that it would be entering into redundancy consultations, with ‘more than 100 jobs at risk’. Among those who lost their jobs were the entirety of the venue’s artistic team. As Lanre Bakare wrote in *The Guardian*, ‘the proposal would essentially turn the theatre [...] into a commercial receiving house which no longer produces its own work but instead relies on touring companies’ (2020). Whether the current financial inertia will see similar cuts to artistic departments in other regional theatres remains to be seen, yet it is evident that the pandemic will have a seismic impact on the English theatre industry, including on its geography. Whatever the impact of the present crisis, there will be much research to be undertaken into both the *geography of theatre* and *theatrical geographies* which emerge on the other side.

## **Closing Thoughts**

I opened this thesis by describing my experience of watching the 2013 Theatre



Royal Plymouth production of *Forever House* by Glen Waldron. I reflected on the sense of unease that I had been left with by the way that play *re-placed* Plymouth, the city in which, despite a brief interregnum which I spent in other parts of South West England, I was living when I began this research and am once again living as I write these closing thoughts. While noting the sense of recognition I had experienced upon seeing my home city represented on stage, I recalled the bitter taste that had been left by the play's implication that lives lived in London were intrinsically more exciting, more notable, more "legitimate" than those lived in Plymouth. I am endlessly grateful to have had the opportunity, through this PhD, to seek answers to some of the questions that watching that show raised for me.

It is evident that the sense of unease that I experienced watching *Forever House* was a result of the particular perspective I brought to that play. That I lived in Plymouth and have a strong sense of place attachment to that city ensured that my interpretation of that play was likely very different to that intended by the London-resident creative team behind it; it is possible that their own place attachments to the capital meant that they would barely have given a second thought to some of the elements of the play which dominated my reading of it. Central to my argument in this thesis has been the notion that English theatre often tends towards representing the English regions as if viewed from the metropolis. Many of the observations that I have made in the preceding pages have, yes, been informed by the work of the scholars who I have drawn upon in constructing my theoretical framework, but also by the regional perspective my chance birth on the South West peninsula has given me. This is, of course, not a unique perspective; it is shared by countless others from Penzance to Newcastle and everywhere in between. Yet, as I hope to have shown, it is a perspective

which is often marginalised by a theatre industry so heavily concentrated in London and one which theatre scholarship has not always taken account of either.

As well as identifying other instances of performance texts channelling this London-centric spatial imaginary, writing this thesis has given me the opportunity to discover and highlight several productions which challenge these perceptual dynamics. In auditoriums from the South West to the North East, I have witnessed theatre foregrounding issues of economic, political and cultural spatial inequality while also laying claim to symbolic capital on behalf of those living in places often marginalised by the prevailing national spatial imaginary. More than anything, I hope that this thesis serves as a critical record of productions which may otherwise have been viewed as marginal to theatre's engagements with life in contemporary England and makes a case for the radical and emancipatory potential of work which brings that regional perspective to bear on our understanding of it.

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