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**Bola Agbaje's *Off the Endz*: Authentic Voices, Representing the Council Estate: Politics, Authorship and the Ethics of Representation**

**Abstract:** Amongst the many socio-political agendas that frame contemporary British theatre, there appears an overriding concern – in terms of the production of new plays - with the notion of ‘authenticity’ in the work of authors of new writing. This issue is related to politics as it resonates with contemporary concerns about the ability of individual citizens to have their ‘voices’ (Couldry 2010) heard within structures of neo-liberalism. In the UK, pioneering new writing theatres, most notably the Royal Court Theatre, run writing programmes which target economically disadvantaged and minority ethnic communities, and ask members of these groups to use their own experiences as a basis for storytelling. The plays produced from these programmes are often marketed using the ‘authenticity’ of the writer. Authenticity, in this definition, is synonymous with notions of personal experience. However, although a focus on authenticity in the framing of the work addresses postcolonial arguments regarding the ethics of representation, it also problematically suggests that personal experience is the basis for ‘authentic’ artistic output. This article examines the portrayal of council estates (British social housing estates) in contemporary play-writing, looking at the issues which might emerge from a commercial focus on the ‘authentic voice’. Drawing on the Royal Court’s recent production *Off the Endz* (2010), the article seeks to problematize the notion of the ‘authentic voice’ by considering the Royal Court as a public square, where the discourse of contemporary culture might be democratised (McCracken 2007).

**Keywords:** Council estates, authentic voice, social inequality, public sphere/square, Bola Agbaje, *Off the Endz*, Royal Court Theatre

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In the UK, pioneering new writing theatres, most notably the Royal Court, run writing programmes that target economically disadvantaged and minority ethnic communities. These programmes often ask participants to use their own experiences of a particular context as a basis for storytelling. Giving a voice to marginalised groups and individuals in this way addresses issues surrounding ethics and the right to representation – this is discussed in more detail below. New writing programmes that have sought to give a platform to minority groups include the Royal Court’s Critical Mass (now defunct) and Unheard Voices programmes;

Unheard Voices is marketed with the tag line “everybody has a story, what’s yours?” This emphasis on the writer’s first-hand experience, and the Royal Court’s influence on the new writing landscape across the UK, has led to a proliferation of plays written with what I will refer to as the “authentic voice.” This term is intended to encompass that body of plays written by playwrights about a context or environment with which they are signally familiar. Examples of plays written in the authentic voice include Andrea Dunbar’s *The Arbor* (Royal Court 1980), where she drew on her own experience of living on the Buttershaw Estate in Bradford, and David Eldridge’s *Market Boy* (National Theatre 2006), where he used his working class roots as a market boy in Essex to offer a narrative of British political history. In plays written in the authentic voice the playwright’s own experience and history becomes tied up with the perceived authenticity of the story and this authenticity is often used as a tool for marketing the production.

The authentic voice can be seen in a number of genres, but is especially common in socially realist works. Samantha Lay defines social realism as constituting texts in which “there is a high degree of verisimilitude, placing an emphasis on ensemble casts in social situations which suggest a direct link between person and place” (Lay 20). Socially realist dramas also tend to deal with social issues pertaining to structural inequalities related to class. As Raymond Williams notes, one of the defining principles of realism is that it involves “a conscious movement towards social extension,” where the lives of the working classes are represented (“A Lecture on Realism” 63). Seminal theatrical examples include productions such *Look Back in Anger* (John Osborne, Royal Court 1956) and *Saved* (Edward Bond, Royal Court 1965). The authorial “authenticity” attributed to such works might relate to the class, gender, race, nationality, ethnicity or religion of the writer or writers involved in the creation of the work.

Although there are undoubtedly benefits to the emergence of the authentic voice, and ethical reasons for its prominence in the new writing genre, I am interested problematizing the phenomena. This article offers an exploration of the authentic voice in relation to theatrical conceptions of the inner-city British social housing estate, otherwise known as “council estate.” I take this context as my focus because the conflation between the authentic voice and the authenticity of the theatrical story has a particular significance in the context of the council estate. In particular, the socially realist emphasis on the relationship between person and place is heightened in depictions of council estates, which, as I discuss below, already serve as iconic spaces of pathology in the British psyche. I propose that, most troublingly, the authentic voice in relation to the council estate works to co-opt playwrights

into reproducing existing narratives, so that the notion of authorial authenticity contributes to a dominant discourse where the council estate is represented and reified as dangerous, criminal and ‘other.’ This discourse intersects with discourses on race and gender in the inner-city in a way which shores up existing inequalities.

As playwright Arinze Kene (*Estate Walls*, Oval House 2010, *Gods Property*, Soho Theatre 2013) proposed in an interview with the *Guardian*:

A lot of writers like myself – young, from London – write ourselves into a corner. We write what is expected of us, and often what’s expected is knife-crime stories. [...] I can speak from experience and say that it’s easier to be listened to, to get your work on stage, if you depict the same old shit. (Kene in Costa NP)

Kene’s comment suggests that, rather than offering a platform from which playwrights from minority urban communities can write their own stories, the mainstream theatre industry structures opportunities for writers in a way that coerces them into producing texts that reinforce the dominant conceptions of inner-city urban life.

In this article then, after a brief introduction to the context of the council estate and an overview of the ethics of the emergence of the authentic voice, I examine the relationship between new writing and the representation of the council estate in three ways, using Bola Agbaje’s play *Off The Endz* (Royal Court 2010) as a case study. Firstly, by discussing how the Royal Court’s role as a “state of the nation” theatre contributes to its position as an instance of the “public square” – where public debate is never divorced from the structural inequalities that already exist in society. Secondly, by exploring how the “burden of representation” placed on writers leads to a conflation of first-hand experience and authenticity – which might work to both reinforce and resist problematic notions of council estate space. And thirdly, by discussing the ways in which the realist form of *Off the Endz* worked in correlation with the authentic voice to shape and influence possible readings of the performance.

## **1 The Council Estate in Contemporary Britain**

“Council estate” is term that is used colloquially and in the popular press to refer to social housing projects, which are prominent features of the urban landscape throughout the UK. For the first part of the twentieth century “council estate” accurately defined most social housing, as properties were usually owned and managed by the local council. However, since the introduction of the Housing Act 1980, ubiquitous changes to housing policy - including

the transfer of significant numbers of state subsidised housing stock to housing associations and arm's length management organisations, as well as the private purchase of properties by tenants - have significantly reduced the number of properties under the control and ownership of the council. Nonetheless, although the infrastructures that support state subsidised housing have changed, resulting in the term "social housing" more accurately defining these spaces, "council estate" remains dominant in much popular social discourse and so it is the term I have chosen to use here.

Council estates feature frequently in popular depictions of the British inner-city, in the newspaper press, on television (see for example, *Top Boy* 2011, *Run* 2013) and in film (*Fishtank* 2009 and *Ill Manners* 2012). These representations commonly focus on the council estate as a site of struggle and on its residents as poor, deprived and criminal. I propose that the representation of the council estate in the popular media – in perpetuating the image of the problem modernist building which academics, policy makers and social commentators have associated with crime, poverty and social depravation almost since their inception – has created the contemporary British council estate as what Eugene Victor Walter (1972) termed a "dreadful enclosure" (Walter 1972 in Damer 221). That is, the council estate has become an emblematic place of criminality, violence and the anti-social "other," which Walter argues exist in all societies, and that serves to define and normalise those outside of the "dreadful" spaces as much as to stigmatise those who dwell inside them. Politically, and I use the term political here to refer to what Grant Tyler Peterson has identified as "overarching arrangements of power" (386), the estate resident is marginalised in the contemporary discourse surrounding the council estate. This marginalisation is not least because they often (at least while living on estates) have no platform to participate in the media, academic and popular discourse surrounding their home space.

Council estate residents' lives are often reduced to the stereotypical negative depictions seen in popular representation which ignore, as Lisa Louise McKenzie (2009) points out, the complexities of the individual lives of residents which are layered with the same capacity for joy, fear, sorrow, celebration and fulfilment as any human life. As a 2010 report published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation revealed, the negative representation of estates has often had a damaging impact on the self-esteem and morale of estate residents, leading them to feel they have little control in effecting change in their own lives (Pearce and Milne 1). This is compounded by the fact that residents have a limited voice in terms of contributing to their own representation in the public discourse.

## 2 Ethics and the Authentic Voice

There are of course important ethical arguments for the presence of the authentic voice in contemporary performance. This ethical concern might be traced to notions of cultural appropriation in relation to colonialism; Kwame Appiah has pointed to the ethics of appropriation in relation to artefacts removed or displaced from their place of cultural heritage. He reminds us of the brutality to which many cultures have historically been subjected. As Emer O'Toole points out in relation to theatre practice, "the ethical dimension of [intercultural] practice is a source of controversy. Material inequalities and Orientalist relationships resulting from colonial pasts inform many meetings across cultures" (1-2). Under these circumstances – where so much has been taken already – stories, those intimate narratives by which a culture comes to know itself, are perhaps even more sacred. I would like to highlight the pernicious effect that the silencing of narratives from particular groups (including, but not limited to, colonised peoples) has had in erasing the stories of oppressed groups from historical accounts.

The silencing of voices has often led to claims of mis-representation from those silenced groups who have featured in performative representations. Rustom Bharucha's criticism of Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* in *Theatre and the World* is a pertinent example. In a more recent example, Richard Bean's 2009 play *England People Very Nice* was criticised for gross stereotyping of almost all the groups represented. In one scene pertinent to this council estate study, a disgruntled tenant smashes up a chair in a local authority housing office. Nicholas De Jongh argued that the piece featured the kind of "malevolent stereotypes and caricatures you find in *The Sun*" – and Bean was widely accused of insensitivity and the playing of stereotypes for cheap laughs. Issues of appropriation and representation that imbue intercultural and postcolonial discussions about theatre might be usefully transposed to discussions of council estate representation. This is both because the council estate is home to a diverse range of residents, including those, such as Agbaje, the black British author of *Off the Endz*, whose diasporic heritage is implicated in colonial and postcolonial debates, but also because these debates offer useful points of departure for considering representations of class. Paul Murphy argues that class has been neglected as issues of race and gender have become the focus of contemporary performance analysis (49). While Murphy's essay suggests the important work that might be born out of a renewed focus on class, arguments surrounding race and gender can usefully be borrowed in order to consider how concerns regarding ethics, appropriation and representation might also be positioned as central to discussions of class and space. Indeed, the "invented history" of council estates includes many stories of estate

life - of poverty, criminality and drug addiction - that have been exploited by the media and used as tools with which to further disenfranchise residents. This suggests a real need for oppositional narratives that cut across the dominant discourse of the council estate as dreadful enclosure. Thus, potentially, the authentic voice offers a useful tool with which to contest dominant, stigmatising representations.

### **3 The Public Square: The Council Estate at the Royal Court**

The Royal Court is a nationally important British Theatre institution and has a reputation for producing new plays that speak to contemporary social and political concerns. It is widely considered to be a pioneer of the new writing genre, promoting socially engaged, culturally relevant theatre and nurturing emergent writers. In his book tracing contemporary British political theatre, theatre critic for the *Guardian* Michael Billington proposes that the Royal Court's promotion of new writers and willingness to stage plays that spoke to the changing social and political landscape of twentieth century Britain, "extended the range of British drama" and contributed to the success of the National Theatre (Billington 120). At the time of writing, the Royal Court promotes its work as socially engaged and inclusive, and particularly emphasises the importance of the writer in this model.

The Royal Court is a useful example through which to examine the council estate and the authentic voice for a number of reasons. Firstly, because the Royal Court is positioned in many social and scholarly accounts (such as Billington, Kelleher, Sierz) as a central venue for British political theatre, a place where the "state of the nation" might be represented and arrangements of power critiqued. Secondly, because the Royal Court has a history of representing the council estate on stage; productions set on or around council estates include *Live Like Pigs* (John Arden 1958), *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (Andrea Dunbar 1982), *Redundant* (Leo Butler 2001), *Flesh Wound* (Ché Walker 2003), *Gone too Far* (Bola Agbaje 2007), *Off the Endz* (Agbaje 2010) and *The Westbridge* (Rachel De-Lay 2011). These theatrical representations usually focus on the lived experience of growing up or living on an estate, and commonly position the estate space and at least some of its residents as socially deviant and morally questionable. Thirdly, many of the Royal Court's estate plays have been written and developed with and by playwrights writing in the "authentic voice," who have, or are perceived to have had, personal experience of living or working on council estates, or with the economically disadvantaged and minority ethnic communities that are depicted as estate residents in individual plays (Bell and Beswick 2014).

The Royal Court's position as a nationally important institution, together with the dissemination of its work beyond the theatre by mass media, including newspaper reviews, published play texts, academic writing, and via the broadcasting of performance works - such as the adaptation of Debbie Tucker Green's *Random* on Channel 4's free internet streaming service 4OD - means that the theatre ostensibly operates as an instance of the public sphere. "Public sphere" is a term for the spaces in which the contemporary concerns of the nation are presented and debated in a potentially democratic space (McCracken 90). The Royal Court, in its earliest years, arguably operated within the democratic space of the public sphere. For example, the seminal production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* resonated beyond the Royal Court, with a televised reading of the work aiding the box office ticket sales and a Broadway transfer (1957) and later film adaptations (1959, 1980, 1989) disseminating the work beyond the Royal Court's audience. *Look Back in Anger*, according to some historical accounts, provoked public debate beyond the theatre and attracted an audience of young people who were interested in the way that the representation of the struggles of their generation had incited national interest (Little and McLaughlin, Billington). In recent years, however, there has been a tension between the ideology of the Court and the reality of the theatre's institutional context. This is partly because both theatre makers and the theatre's audience are perceived as being increasingly and dominantly white middle class.

The Royal Court does not disseminate detailed information on the class breakdown of their staff and audiences, therefore perceptions of the Court's demographic are usually based on anecdotal evidence, and are no doubt compounded by the Royal Court's location in the expensive and exclusive Sloane Square. The supposed middle class audience is often used as a point of comparison through which audience members describe the audience they were part of as typical or atypical. For example, when writing about his experience of seeing *Random* at the Royal Court, Joe Kelleher implies an atypical audience demographic, "a large proportion of the audience this evening are black people, which is not always the case" (20). In a discussion of the atypical audience base for *Random*, Kelleher proposes that staging the work of minority groups can act as a democratising process, while acknowledging that the audience for any particular performance is also a part of what Jen Harvie calls the "cultural commodification" of theatre (3).

Scott McCracken suggests that Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "public square" might usefully replace the "public sphere" in order to describe those spaces in which the problems of the democratic world are represented, but where "the inequalities of class and gender mean that a democratic world is never pre-existent" (90). I propose that because of the class

divisions that exist in wider society and permeate into public perceptions of the Court, and because of the institutional significance of the Royal Court in British theatre, we might more usefully consider it as an instance of the public square. This distinction is important because acknowledging the inherent inequalities that necessarily operate in an institution at the centre of the UK's theatre industry allows a critical breathing space. In such a breathing space we might consider how the structural inequalities that permeate British society at large are not necessarily diluted by the democratic space of the theatre. Rather, we can more closely understand how writers and theatre makers operate within and through existing structures of inequality and how existing structures of power might, albeit unintentionally, author theatrical work - shaping the production and reception of plays performed within a public square.

#### **4 Bola Agbaje, *Off the Endz* and “The Burden of Representation”**

*Off the Endz* was written by Bola Agbaje, a British woman of Nigerian heritage, who grew up on the North Peckham Estate in South East London; Agbaje has worked as a housing officer for a social housing association alongside her career as a playwright and screen writer. It was directed by Jeremy Herrin, an experienced white director, who is an associate director of the Royal Court. It was performed at the Royal Court Theatre's Jerwood Theatre Downstairs auditorium, in February and March 2010. The play is set on an unnamed, generic council estate; it addresses issues surrounding race, poverty and friendship. The narrative centres around David and his two friends, a couple named Kojo and Sharon. When he is released from prison, Kojo and Sharon agree that David can stay with them – however, they are under financial strain; in spiralling debt and saving for a mortgage. Midway through the play Kojo loses his job and David convinces him to form a partnership where they sell drugs together. However, a young teenage gang is also dealing drugs on the estate, and when they discover David and Kojo's plan the teenagers shoot Kojo. The play finishes with Kojo and Sharon ending their friendship with David and asking him to leave the estate. He refuses, arguing that 'these are my endz' (Agbaje 77) – he insists that the estate belongs to him and he will only leave on his own terms.

Due to Agbaje's position as a working class black woman *Off the Endz* was framed in the mainstream media and in the Royal Court's marketing as an oppositional text; offering a representation of the experience of the marginalised, from the perspective of a writer from a marginalised group. As Lynette Goddard has pointed out in relation to black feminist theatre, by virtue of a marginalised position in wider society a playwright's work can be read as

oppositionally political regardless of the ideologies which imbue their plays, or their effect on audience (Goddard 3). As a black, working class, woman Agbaje's work might be framed as oppositionally political because she writes from a marginalised position - although, importantly, she also addresses issues relating to that marginality in her work.

Agbaje was presented in the previews and reviews of the play as the sole author of the work and her first-hand experience of the estate was frequently highlighted. The media coverage of *Off the Endz* included very few mentions of the part the director played in the realisation of the work, and no reference to his background or expertise in the area of urban council estates, crime and poverty. Agbaje is identified by her marginalised position which is, in part, a label placed upon her by the media, the Royal Court and academic accounts such as this article by virtue of her class, race and gender. Nonetheless, it is also a reading of her position shared and articulated by Agbaje herself, at least in promotional interviews given during the publicity for *Off the Endz*. In an interview with online magazine *Spoonfed*, she described her position as a black estate resident as central to her identity and proposed that her marginality is precisely the essence of her work, stating, "I am who I am and I've got to where I am because of who I am" (Agbaje in Khan). However, as Shohat and Stam point out, the representation of marginalised groups is often complicated by the assumption that individual experiences are able to "stand in" for collective experiences (183). This assumption is known in black and feminist studies as the "burden of representation".

Because of the homogenising effect of representations of the council estate within the UK, where the ubiquitous representation of the problem modernist estate in the press and in fictional televised and filmic accounts works to create the council estate as "dreadful enclosure" in the public consciousness, *Off the Endz* as an oppositional text is situated in a public discourse which is loaded with problematic tensions. It is both platform from which a writer from a minority group is given a voice and, paradoxically, a representation that, to some extent, reinforces the dominant conceptions of council estate environments. Despite her position as an oppositional voice within an oppressive political landscape, Agbaje's work is subject to a "burden of representation" (Bell and Beswick 2014). This is because her class, race and gender and, importantly for this study, her position as a former council estate tenant and housing officer frames her as an authentic voice within and for council estate space. The Royal Court production thus raises questions surrounding the representation of minority groups in institutional settings, and around the representation of black urban life, which implicates council estate space.

### **5 Off The Endz**

*Off the Endz* offers a direct look at criminality and the lasting impact of childhood friendships. Within the story of the play, the estate, as home to Kojo and Sharon, serves as a figurative enclosure. It the embodiment of their social status, of the poverty which keeps them trapped in a cycle of aspiration, debt and criminal behaviour. In the 2010 Royal Court production, the council estate served to highlight the characters home-space as “dreadful enclosure” in a number of ways. The stage was operated on a revolve, and the set moved in a choreography in which scenery flats closed in on Sharon and Kojo’s flat to give way to the estate’s playground; the estate moved across the space to literally enclose the actors. Despite the fact that their flat was tastefully decorated, and included luxury items such as a flat screen TV, lurid graffiti from the “outside” estate space was visible during the “inside” scenes – a reminder that Kojo and Sharon are unable to escape from the estate that houses them.

Throughout the play, Sharon and Kojo’s attempt to get “off the endz,” to purchase a property somewhere else, is underpinned with allusions to opportunities and experiences that will be available to them, and particularly to their unborn child, once they move away from the Council estate environment:

**Sharon** Relax! Our dreams are coming thru

*Pause*

If someone told me I would be getting out of this place, I would tell them to stop pulling my leg...Oh yeah, I check out that school online and its one of the top schools in the country. Kids there have great grades. And before you say it yes, I know our baby don’t need to worry cos he or she will be smart just like their daddy. (Agbaje 43)

Sharon’s assertion in the section above, that their child is likely to have a better educational experience, and presumably greater social mobility than his or her parents in a school away from the estate, is problematically unexamined through the form or content of the play itself. The prevailing ideology that serves this assumption - that the council estate and its surrounding environment are necessarily and inherently related to the opportunities and attainment of estate residents - is not explored, contested or fully explained. The many complex structures of economic and social power which intersect with the council estate environment to produce limited opportunities for social mobility and educational attainment are ignored, and the notion that moving away from the pathological estate environment will in and of itself transform the lives of estate residents is left uninterrogated. Towards the end

of the play, when David convinces Kojo to sell drugs to pay off his debts, the estate serves as a metaphorical enclosure where the behaviour of the past is repeated and inhabitants are trapped in an endless cycle, predetermined by their social status, race and location.

The section of the play below takes place after David aggressively insults and threatens to attack a receptionist at his friend Kojo's workplace when she spurns his sexual advances. Kojo attempts to excuse his friend's bad behaviour by seeking solidarity with the receptionist, calling on their shared identity.

**Kojo:** You know how it is in place like this for people like us already, let alone –

**Keisha:** No, Kojo, I don't know how it is, cos my people who come to visit me act civilised.

**Kojo:** I didn't know he was coming.

**Keisha:** You are a grown man...who I thought was looking to go places...and you hang around lowlifes like that. You need to fix up...

**Kojo:** You don't understand. He is not –

**Keisha:** I do understand. I know people like him and I keep my distance. You should do the same.

**Kojo:** Come, Keisha, you can't even talk like that...You acting like you ain't from the endz. (Agbaje 15)

While the first line is ambiguous as to which part of their shared identity he is drawing upon (both are black, and it is easy to infer that he is referring to this as it is the more visible identity marker) by the end of the exchange, the line, "you acting like you ain't from the endz" reveals that he is referring not to their ethnic identity, but to the local, spatial identity they both share. 'The endz' is a slang term for a defined urban area which the speaker considers home, and is used by David and Kojo to refer to the council estate where they grew up, and where they play takes place. The exchange above is important because it reveals that the estate is acknowledged as a key component of the character's identities; indeed, within the play it is the estate which forms the most potent draw for David and Kojo, and which bonds them to each other, above and beyond their ethnic heritage.

When Kojo accuses Keisha of acting like she "ain't from the endz" he is calling upon her understanding of the practiced estate space in order to excuse his friend's behaviour; but this line also implies the difficulty that those from outside such an environment might have in understanding such behaviour. In this way the scene suggests something of the importance of experience in reading and interpreting representations of marginalised communities – as suggested by Chris Richardson and Hans Skott Myhre in their discussion of how life experience affects not only behaviour of individuals from particular social backgrounds, but

the interpretation of the behaviour of others from different social groups. They propose that there is a “difference between people in various communities and [a] conflict in the ways many of them see the world” (12). The final line of the exchange between Kojo and Keisha introduces the notion of authenticity, of *being from the endz*, as central to character’s identity, sense of community and comprehension of the behaviour of others in and from that environment.

### **6 Theatrical Form: Realism and Readings of *Off the Endz***

Goddard claims that “classic realism positions the spectator to identify with the central (white) male of the text”(51); she notes that black and feminist theatre theorists have argued that by placing a non-white person in a central role, by normalising the black experience, writers and theatre makers often experiment with naturalistic form in an innovative way and can create a “counter-aesthetics” that challenges dominant conceptions of gender, race and sexuality and can offer an alternative to socially constructed norms (50-54). In contemporary performance practices, where audiences are used to seeing a variety of protagonists depicted in “realistic” representations in film, on television and in music video, realist portrayals are often assessed by how accurately or not they reflect the reality of everyday life. This conflation between realism and the realistic is compounded by the proliferation of reality television shows and documentaries that make up much of the popular television schedule, resulting in a landscape of “realistic” representation. Thus, in some respects, realism is no longer a distinct form, but has come to dominate popular representational mediums to the extent that it is likely to be the standard form with which many television, cinema and theatre audiences are acquainted.

I suggest that the proliferation of realistic depictions of working class space across theatrical, filmic, novelistic and artistic representations means that stylistic experiments need to go beyond subversion of theatrical forms, which might be affected by replacing the middle class white male with a working class black male, in order to subvert the genre in any meaningful way. As Goddard proposes, “[p]lays presented with an awareness of content *and* form seem to hold the greatest possibilities” (53). Therefore, despite the fact that *Off the Endz* is, to some extent, an oppositional play, the relationship between form and content in the piece does not function as a conscious subversion of established realist forms in a way that allows the work to be read as radical. Rather, the play draws on a precise element of dramatic naturalism, one which Williams describes as the key feature of “high naturalism”: that the

environment in which the action takes place *produces* the characters and their behaviour (*Culture and Materialism* 127).

Christopher Innes proposes that “‘naturalism’ inherently expresses a philosophy of existence, and sets up normative assumptions” (4). This is especially the case when the representations offered in naturalistic or socially realist forms reinforce the kind of normative assumptions that already exist in dominant representations. In *Off the Endz*, the reinforcing of normative understandings of the council estate underpinned the national discourse surrounding the performance, via the realist form of the production itself, and its dissemination in reviews and across the mainstream media. The estate was presented as a familiarly racialised, criminal space where the dangerous energy of the poor is barely contained and threatens to infect wider society. This representation resonated with existing perceptions of estate spaces which exist in the wider British culture, and thus within the experience of the audiences who saw it.

## **7 Conclusion**

In an interview I conducted with Agbaje, she told me that she wrote *Off the Endz* to question some of the assumptions about the council estate, and to address the dominant assumptions regarding the impact of an estate environment on the development of character. Although the play text certainly raises the issues that Agabje wanted to explore, the formal conventions of realism in both the text and the performance, including the use of space, meant that in production, *Off the Endz* was unable to subvert or critique the representations present in the play. Rather, the council estate was depicted as a causal factor in the characters’ downfall with no counter-narrative or formal experiment to question this causality. The reinforcement of the play as “real” via the promotion of Agbaje’s “authenticity” in the marketing and dissemination of the production also contributed to the reinforcement of the dreadful enclosure narrative.

Interestingly, critics saw the piece as a morality tale cautioning against the easy criminal lifestyle readily available to black urban youth. Agbaje’s own “authentic” experience was much referred to in the media coverage. Her first-hand knowledge of the estate, and the widely reported fact that she had based the character of David on her brother, resulted in the perception that this piece was somehow conceived for the good of the urban youth represented. The play was seen as a warning about the very real traps which lay in wait for young, black council estate youth. Agbaje was framed as the central and single author of the work. Tellingly, in an interview with the director, Jeremy Herrin, recorded in the resource

pack documenting the performance and available on the Royal Court's website, he sought to shift the authorship away from himself to reinforce the "authenticity" of the production. Herrin argues that his own limited first-hand experience of the estate did not affect the authenticity of the work because not only was Agbaje's writing "authentic" but, "most of the actors came through a very similar social situation as the characters, you know grew up on estates" (Royal Court *Resource Pack*).

Using the critical breathing space afforded by the concept of the public square, it becomes clear that Agbaje's "voice", her life and experience, operate as just one author within a bigger institutional framework. This larger framework is made up of a variety of stakeholders, including the producers who selected the play for performance on the main stage, the director and the critics and journalists who disseminate the work within the mainstream media, who all act as authors of the work. Paradoxically, however it must be acknowledged that *Off the Endz* did offer Agbaje, who might be considered a marginalised individual due to her race, class and gender, an opportunity to speak and a platform for her work. The importance of enabling voice in the neoliberal landscape is, as Nick Couldry argues, essential to intervening in the social and political instability which exists when spaces places and peoples are marginalised. As McKenzie argues

For generations in the UK there have been boundaries drawn around certain territories: places where the poor live, places one should avoid going if at all possible not because of the poverty in that particular place but because of the behaviour of those that live there [...] These territories have been known as "unsafe", "poor", "slum district" and in recent years "sink" and "socially excluded council estates". (23)

Although the Royal Court have a history of engaging with council estate plays in an attempt to draw attention to the boundaries that McKenzie describes, too often the theatre's work focuses on representations of existing dominant narratives surrounding criminality and violence rather than providing a space where these representations can be troubled. An example of how such troubling might be effected exists in the Out of Joint production of *A State Affair* (Robin Soans, Soho Theatre 2000), a verbatim performance that, while focussing on the extreme behaviour of residents on Bradford's Buttershaw estate, contains a moment where Andrea Dunbar's daughter, Lorraine, directly questions the usefulness of negative of portrayals of the estate, such as those offered by her mother in *The Arbor* and *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*. Lorraine tells the audience that her mother "made herself look a right tart" and

suggests that a balanced view of life on the estate would create a more useful theatrical experience:

If I wrote a play I'd do it about the Buttershaw Estate. It'd show some people getting their lives together with a lot of courage and determination. But it would also show others going up a steep hill, into a big black hole. (Soans 134)

This moment of the performance undercuts the earlier negativity, and offers a space in which the “authenticity” of the representation that has preceded it might be questioned. In order to usefully rupture the perceived fixity of estate identity, theatres with a social agenda - that purport to create critically important work - and particularly theatres like the Royal Court with its significant national profile, might usefully deliver programmes of work in which a variety of voices serve to heterogenise narratives of estate space. Because the theatre is almost always a multi-authored medium, and because audience members bring their own experiences and prejudices to the theatre, in the end, offering a platform for single authentic voices is not a radical enough method to meaningfully intervene in wider political and social inequalities that exist between estate residents and other types of groups at and beyond the theatre.

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