'Metaphors of Collapse'. The Representation of the Adolescent Body and Youth Violence and Vulnerability.

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Introduction

In this paper, I shall discuss the representation of male adolescent identities in British plays of the 2000s and raise questions about ways in which dramatists represent the adolescent body.

This paper is informed by period of research for my PhD which investigated the representation of the male adolescent in British Theatre from 1900 to 2011. This research journey was prompted, in part, by the proliferation of plays about knife crime in new writing cultures of the 2000s. These plays offered provocative dissections of contemporary urban social conditions for young people. Tanika Gupta's *White Boy,* for example, explored the transnational cultural imaginary of young people in London, connecting an incident of knife crime to complex legacies of migration and war. They were also problematic from my point of view as an applied theatre practitioner in their representation of youth agency. To what extent did these plays reflect or challenge normative ideas of urban youth criminality?

A central focus of my study was the development of historic perspectives to illuminate these contemporary representations: comparative analysis, for example, between the English Riots of 2011 with the Industrial Riots of 1911 or between the representation of adolescent so-called 'Hooligans' in the 1900s with contemporary urban males generated new perspectives, identifying continuities in ways in which adolescent identities are constructed and debated in society and in theatre. I develop this argument here to challenge both the characterisation of the contemporary youth 'crisis' as unprecedented and normative associations of urban youth and in particular, the urban male and black urban male adolescent with violence. **I focus firstly on interpreting representations of the youth body and metaphors of collapse in relation**

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to the historic construction of adolescent identities and secondly on ways in which dramatists' connect these metaphors to wider social and historic perspectives. I hope to demonstrate how these interpretative frameworks can illuminate both the social conditions and forces which are shaping contemporary adolescent experience and inform our debates on precarity.

Continuities - Interrogating the 'Contemporariness' of Crisis

Provocation:

"a drugged adolescent in a modern inner city"

Picture of Oliver Letwin

In *The Purpose of Politics* (1992), a book of political philosophy published two years after he became an MP and a year before he joined the shadow cabinet, Letwin made comparisons between "a drugged adolescent in a modern inner city" and a medieval serf. Letwin argued that the former "shares only the values of his gang or if, as sometimes, deprived even of that solicitude, no identifiable values at all". These comments came back to haunt Letwin when cabinet papers were released in December 2015. Letwin quickly disavowed racist comments in his argument[1] . What interests me here is his characterisation of the urban young male as a reflection of normative ideas of adolescence. Letwin's use of the term points to a historic narrative shaped by the emergence of distinct theoretical ideas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Sociologist David Archard argues that, 'Something more is indicated by speaking

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[1] Zeffmann, Henry (2016) 'Oliver Letwin: inner-city youth 'more alien than the serfs' *The Guardian.* January, 2. 2016. Accessed at http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jan/02/oliver-letwin-inner-city-youth

of childhood and adolescence rather than simply children and young people... They suggest a certain formal and sophisticated understanding of what it is to be a child or teenager, one that abstracts from the particularities of day-to-day lived experiences. If a society is to possess a *concept* of childhood and adolescence rather than an *awareness* of young people, it is likely to be informed at some level by theory (1993:17).

Discussing the representation of the teenager in relation to sociological perspectives of the adolescent body can illuminate ways in which these early twentieth century theories of adolescence continue to shape contemporary discussions of the representation of the social identities of the young urban male. Fascination with the adolescent body and sexuality were related to a complex set of adult anxieties related to a period of rapid social change.

Recent social histories of youth identities, for example, Jon Savage's history of the teenager: *Teenage. The Creation of British Youth, 1875 -1945* (2007), illuminate the influences of late nineteenth century biological determinist views of the adolescence and how these ideas gained traction in the late nineteenth century. Rapid industrialisation and perceived inability to defend the British Empire during the Boer war were two factors which legitimised these ideas through increased legislative and educational controls. The adolescent body became a site for restraint and discipline that reflected these initiatives and fears surrounding a newly-emergent class of young people present on the streets of urban centres.

The pronounced differentiation of the adolescent as 'other' in the late nineteenth century co-incided with the systemic spatial separation of the adolescent from the adult in education, para-military social groups (The Scouts) and a rise in social anxiety about the presence of a distinct, potentially violent youth presence. Letwin's fear of the adolescent as a representative of the physical corruption of the urban class can be connected therefore to a historic narrative which 'others' the adolescent as precocious and violent, whose body is corrupted through inhabiting urban environments and whose social spaces must be policed.

Social histories of adolescence illuminate other similar continuities in the *cultural reproduction* of ideas of the urban adolescent as a delinquent, foreign 'other'. Pearson's influential study, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (1983) was prompted by the harsh tabloid responses to young people and the black community that followed the 1981 riots in British inner cities. His study draws attention to ways in which ideas of youth violence have been constructed *historically* through the operation of modern mass media and the creation of social panic through manufactured 'crises'. Pearson identified recurring patterns in the relationships between the media and ideas of youth violence, arguing that the panics which followed the 1981 riots and the characterisation of urban youth as 'alien' and the body of the urban adolescent as corrupt were 'convenient metaphor' that masked far more complex issues (p.230). In a reprise of his arguments after the riots in 2011, Pearson cites numerous examples of the association of the adolescent with fears of the urban young working-class male in post-war Britain, arguing that awareness of these continuities is necessary to guard against 'historical amnesia and a deep cultural pessimism' which may deter us 'in our attempts to fashion realistic responses to the current actualities and dilemmas' (p.45).

Pearson's perspective illuminates how fascination with adolescent violence and sexuality masks complex adult fears that emanate from periods of rapid social and technological change which challenge stable systems of the enculturation of the young. Two examples:

Closer analysis of government statistics of the 2000s reveals profound inconsistencies and paradoxes in the construction of political narratives of youth criminality. Incidences of knife crime do show an increase in the years 2005-2007 but this data is seldom contextualised within longer term trends which show sharp falls in overall rates of youth offending. Parallel trends are visible in the Edwardian era when demands for increased control of adolescent sexuality co-incided with a delay in the

marriage age. Detailed comparative analyses between Edwardian Theatre and Society and the contemporary are beyond the scope of this paper today but these two examples indicate the potential for contextualising our perceptions and interpretations of crisis within a longer historic trajectory, that acknowledges the anxieties embedded in the adult ideation of the adolescent.

As theatre historians David Wiles and Christine Dymkowski argue, historical perspectives can resist 'presentism' or a belief in the irrelevance of the past. Showing how the present came to be offers a way to resist contemporary orthodoxies of an 'overculture' and indicates ways we might change it (2013:8). One shared anxiety that can be identified in both periods of rapid or Heraclitean change is the issue of how to nurture and care for the young in era of rapid technological change, perceived national crisis and uncertainty about gender roles. This central anxiety can be traced throughout plays of the 2000s which represent the adolescent body.

Responsibility and Care (orphaning; crisis of fatherhood; masculinity)

How do playwrights understand their representations of contemporary adolescence in relation to historic and social forces?

The representation of the male adolescence in the 2000s is intimately connected to theatres of crisis. In her history of playwriting of the period, Vicky Angelaki has described how, 'in a number of contemporary plays capitalism and family are presented as closely interwoven narratives (2013:69) where we witness the vivid after-effects of the previous generation's failure to sustain the malfeasances of capitalism (p.70). Dysfunctional families and malignant adolescents indicate the absence of family care and nurture. Aleks Sierks theatre history, *Rewriting the Nation* (2010) described the return of the family play and rediscovery of conflicts between generations and divided loyalties. A wider historic view, I argue, can also discuss these crises in relation to the preceding Heraclitean period, the Edwardian era, where anxieties about social collapse and the rapid pace of change focused on the enculturation of the young and the

capacity of adults to nurture the young and transmit coherent values and beliefs.

Orphaning

    The metaphor of orphaning which haunts plays of the 2000s is one reflection, I argue, of this central and recurring pre-occupation with intergenerational rupture in Heraclitean periods. The exploration of rupture explored in Denis Kelly's *Orphans* or David Bartlett's *Manchild* reveals a wider breakdown in systems of authority, care and responsibility. The connections between orphaning and ideas of collapse in the capacity of society to maintain coherent narratives and values is implicit in the work of Simon Stephens who uses the school as a site to interrogate the *Zeitgeist* of the decade. Stephens uses the metaphor of orphaning to describe a time of intergenerational collapse where:

    a lot of the totems that we held up as being in some way parental, the totems of
    church, the totems of state, the totems of economics that would somehow take
    our hand and guide us through the mess of our lives, have gone..(2010a)

        While Stephens represents contemporary worlds, his use of language and metaphor create connections to ideas of historic loss and absence. In *Punk Rock* (2008), Stephens presents a drama that leads to a Columbine scenario of secondary school killing set within the library of a fee-paying grammar school in the North West of England. The representation of place within the play reflects a landscape of generational abandonment. His writing subtly places an investigation of schooling outside specific narratives of class, race and criminality to a more far-reaching discussion of what he describes as a phenomenon of 'the psychotic, linguistic spirit of competition and sexual despair' which extends into middle-class settings and private schools (2010a). The psychosis and internal dislocation of William, who conducts the killings, is contrasted with his precocious knowledge of history and his environment

to reveal a vulnerability and sensitivity to place. He is proud of his knowledge that the local deer park is medieval in origin. He knows that there is a second edition copy of Walter Scott's 'Waverley' in the library. He reaches for a sense of historical continuity in a social world that is devoid of intergenerational connection and nurture. Through this juxtaposition, Stephens invites consideration of the relationships between the historic and contemporary ideas of intergenerational responsibility. William's **final act, the shooting of his classmates, is followed by the act of enuresis, signaling both a release and a collapse of any ability to maintain a psychological or social balance.**

Metaphors of Collapse. Masculinity and The Abject

Acts of enuresis, or to use the vernacular of 'pissing oneself' reoccur throughout plays of the 2000s, for example in Polly Stenham's *That Face* (2007) or in Richard Bean's exploration of masculine identities and the vestigial cultures of Empire *Mr. England* (2000). These acts can be interpreted within different discourses as representations of both adolescent psychological breakdown and the wider collapse of stable systems of authority, masculine identity and social progression. Sociologist John Harrison's study of adolescence describes enuresis as an affective disorder connected with separation from parents (2009:113). One interesting historic example in relation to this interpretation is in Edward Bond's own recollection of his childhood bed-wetting as a wartime evacuee in rural England, separated from his parents.

Within contemporary interpretations of masculinity and performance, Fintan Walsh's analysis of *Male Trouble Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* offers a key perspective to interpret these acts in relation to ideas of the abject. Quoting Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: Essays of Abjection,* Walsh develops feminist theory and understandings of the Oedipus complex to discuss the relevance of the abject as that which disturbs identity and system order, drawing the subject to the place where meaning collapses (2010:23). These readings illuminate the potential of discussing the representation of the abject as 'disturbing the chain of Oedipal identifications' (p.23)

and the inability of the adolescent male to achieve symbolic realms of masculinity. This perspective, which I have developed through dialogue with Marissia, offers another means of connecting my charting of contemporary representations of the adolescent to the historic and in particular to twentieth century interpretations of the Oedipus myth. Bond's Oedipal plays *Saved* (1967) and *The Pope's Wedding* (1965) are two key examples which interrogate the legacies of the social violence of war on the working-class young where allusions to the myth raise wider questions about the relationships between adolescence, violence and intergenerational care. Similar preoccupations can be traced, too, in less well-known works of the Edwardian era, for example, Martin-Harvey's production *Oedipus* (1912) was directed at the Royal Opera House, London by Max Reinhardt, whose production was acclaimed by critics of the period as creating radically new performative possibilities for the representation of ideas of adolescence, masculinity and social order in a time of rapid social change. The dramatic thrust of Harvey's adaptation did not reflect a Classic model of tragedy – as contemporary critics recognised - where protagonists are punished for traversing the codes of society, but a far more complex modern portrayal of intergenerational betrayal and social confusion. Further interpretation is needed here to offer a more thorough analysis of continuities and ruptures in patterns of representation of the adolescent. I present them here as starting points which indicate the potential for linking interpretation of contemporary metaphors of social collapse and adolescent crisis both to theatre histories and to deeper analysis of the adult ideologies which construct adolescent identities.

The Representation of the Black British Adolescent

Stephen's work is one example of dramatists' questioning of the relationship of their subjects to historical forces. Research of historic interrelationships between ideas of masculinity and performance has had particular significance in generating new perspectives on the representation of adolescent black male identities. In an analysis which addresses the issue of the representation of youth criminality, Lynnette Goddard

acknowledges that plays about crime and violence have become 'the dominant theatrical stories of black British experience in the new millenium' (2013:333). She argues that these plays are at risk of ghettoising black experience and of 'perpetuating stereotypes about violent black masculinity for the delectation of predominately white, middle-class, audiences within their original mainstream theatre contexts' (p.333). Goddard argues that addressing omissions in discussion of historic forces that shape contemporary black youth experience can counter-act these power imbalances within cultures of new writing and elsewhere.

As Lynette Goddard identifies in her introduction to Adebayo's first volume of plays, Mojisola Adebayo's play *Desert Boy* (2010) offers one example of an imaginative engagement with the histories of black identity that creates a new perspective on contemporary identities.

The play's epic structure and wide narrative scope looks beyond urban dystopia to a historical view of Black British youth. The play's diachronic perspective juxtaposes the severely-wounded Soldier Boy on his sixteenth birthday on Deptford Beach in 2009, bleeding to death from a knife attack with the story of Desert Man, who transpires to be a seventeenth-century Malian ancestor, sold into slavery just before his rite of passage to adulthood. Desert Boy's history of slavery, displacement and the collapse of the familial order of his tribe, the Dogon, are compared with Soldier Boy's own childhood where he is abandoned by his father and raised by his mother, an alcoholic who works as a prostitute to survive. This historical perspective can, as Marissia identifies, be connected to geneaologies of black masculinity they also indicate how historical awareness can transform social identity. Soldier Boy begins a critical questioning of the forces that shape both contemporary and past black male attitudes to society and parenting.

Conclusion

Soldier Boy's final analysis and vision of the future returns me to the questions that troubled me in reflecting on plays about knife crime. The possibilities Adebayo identifies points to engagement of the young as co-constructors of their social worlds, engaged as makers, artists, potential architects like Stephen Lawrence. Adebayo also indicates the wider dramaturgical possibilities of historicising adolescent identities within discussions of the collapse of stable social orders of progression to adulthood and the importance of adult guides and mentors such as Desert Man to relate and navigate these histories.

Adebayo's dramaturgical structures illustrate how radical approaches to contemporary identities and interrogation of the past create new readings and understandings of the present. The final image of bridge-building, in memory of Stephen Laurence, is presented as a metaphor that connects the present with the historic forces that have militated against black youth.

Adebayo's analysis is rich and promising but within the often predictable and reductive dystopia of much contemporary representation of adolescence, her vision remains exceptional.